

Hungary

I. Historical Background

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Hungarian Private Collectors Turn International. A Case Study of Private Engagement in Contemporary Art in East Central Europe.

In the 19th century, when much of the cultural network of modern Hungary was born, art collecting had been an aristocratic pastime for long, which was, however, to spread to wider layers of society soon. While the National Museum was established by Count Ferenc Széchenyi in 1802, its subsequent major benefactor, Miklós Jankovich came from the landed gentry (1832). Although the revolution of 1848 failed, the Compromise with Austria paved the way for political and economic development (1867). The rising new middle and upper classes swiftly turned to culture for creating an identity, with prosperity resulting in a Golden Age of art collecting in Hungary from the 1880s until the outbreak of the Great War.

Several aristocrats (e.g. Count Gyula Andrássy) continued to collect, and ventured into the domain of modern art, buying as a matter of course nationally and internationally. Figures of the new, non-hereditary nobility (e. g. Baron Ferenc Hatvany) followed suit, promoting modern painting within the country, as well as purchasing advanced works from Vienna to Paris. Among the self-made entrepreneurs, let us mention Marcell Nemes, who achieved – without completing proper education – international fame with his collection ranging from El Greco to the Post-Impressionists.

The disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the lost World War I, and prolonged economic and political demise during the inter-war period forced art collecting into decline. Few (e.g. Mór Herzog and Bertalan Naményi) were able to maintain the international scope and progressive taste of turn-of-the-century Hungarian collectors; and most of these holdings dispersed in what art historians today call the Sacco di Budapest between 1938-1949. International isolation, modest economic means, and a general turn away from the avant-garde called, however, a new phenomenon of collecting into life in the 1920s and 1930s. People of erudition and of means (but of no proper wealth) turned to collecting Hungarian art of the day. These professionals – from Béla Radnai to Lajos Fruchter – befriended each other and the artists, setting up, for instance, the Gresham Circle, a society of painters and patrons with regular meetings in prestigious Café Gresham. Most of these collections failed to reach beyond national limits and a refined yet restrained taste, but they propelled a new model of art patronage and collecting, which lived on after World War II.

Seizing power by 1949, the Communist regime put art collecting into a position worse than before. The Versailles Treaties of 1919 and the slump of 1929-1933 decimated the economic fundaments of Hungarian collectors, while the persecution of the Jews from the late 1930s onwards made the group of society most active in collecting perish. Finally the losses in art collections through the war and subsequent spoilage amounted in some sections up to 90%. Now the Soviet-type administration introduced new hindrances to collecting.

Albeit not prohibited, private ownership of artworks was severely restricted, and between 1949-1956 auctions and other channels of the art market were suspended. Instead of collaborating with collectors, museums assumed functions of authority, overseeing and administering those parts of national cultural wealth that were held in private hands. The one-party-state shifted public taste and the canon of modern art towards conservative values, relegating progressive artists and their not too numerous supporters to the periphery.

Nonetheless, art collecting continued, re-establishing itself gradually after the Revolution of 1956, when the regime opted for a more pragmatic course, and allowed for wider liberties in culture. The Gresham model asserted itself again: physicians and various intellectuals arranged direct contact with artists and each other, setting up circles of art friends, collectors clubs and related schemes of what we today call civic engagement in art. Some of these collections (e.g. that of Ernő Kolozsvári) professed allegiance to truly avant-garde priorities. Even the many navigating along more mainstream modern and contemporary art aspired to a mission of utmost importance, by reviving the urban, bourgeois habit of civil society to voice their taste independently, against a conservative and oppressive state.

For progressive artists, this moral and financial by-stand often meant the bare means of intellectual and physical survival, as museums shunned them, public commissions and purchases preferring those colleagues that jumped on the bandwagon. Beyond intellectual freedom, and symbolic resistance to the authoritarian regime, for the buyers of the works, art collecting provided also a form of investment. Prices were low, alternative options for preserving the value of money or spending it on consumption were hardly available, whereas an art collection offered aesthetic and financial rewards.

The art market resumed, the 1960s and 1970s witnessed lively auctions – even though within the framework of the monopoly of the State Consignment Company (BÁV) only. International contacts had come to an almost complete still-stand. The once active participation in the European art market had terminated for most Hungarian artists and collectors, re-opening from the mid-1960s for very few and highly selectively. Having hit the bottom during the central decades of the 20th century (mainly the years 1939-1946 and 1949-1956), some of the mechanisms of art collecting remained operative even at the worst times, and were increasingly re-animated under “goulash Communism”.

It is critical to see that the proper rebirth of art collecting from the 1980s onwards was not an unexpected, new phenomenon, but rather the acceleration of a slow evolution being in course by then for about two decades. The re-activation of collecting is not the result of the fall of the Wall, but a logical conclusion of the political and economic thaw of the Soviet-type power in Hungary, which allowed for a stepwise revival of entrepreneurial patterns in art. Naturally, the fall of the Wall greatly catalysed these changes, letting the scene of collectors grow into one of the most dynamic segments of culture in today's Hungary. As we now turn to these recent developments, we shall identify a number of achievements and just as many paradoxes, adding up overall to a promising view into the future.

II. Stages of Art Collecting back



Csaba Nemes, Red, 1998,
c-print, 100x143 cm, courtesy:
Somló-Spengler collection

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