

Hungary

II. Stages of Art Collecting

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

If we consider this recent development over the past quarter-century a rapid but evolutionary process, then it is wise to break it down into shorter periods. Art collecting picked up from the middle of the 1980s onwards – when ideological control of the old regime had become nominal – in early modern art. Under Communism, museums and art historical scholarship had downgraded most proponents of classical modernism, provoking a re-assessment of these painters, sculptors and designers by the newly-opening galleries, buyers and younger art historians keen on fresh research.

Established as the centre of plein-air painting in Hungary in 1896, the Nagybánya Artist Colony was thus re-discovered almost a hundred years after its heyday. Even the Hungarian National Gallery felt compelled to join, staging a grand exhibition at the centenary of the colony in 1996. Prices of the works skyrocketed, having mainly to effects. First, the number of fakes rose alarmingly; second, fewer buyers were in a position to afford this kind of classical modern painting. Both effects implied a shift towards later trends of modern art. Demand focused on the avant-garde of the early 20th century, then on art deco. Subsequently further inter-war waves of modern art were re-appreciated, and slowly interest solidified for post-War (late modern) art, being next door to contemporary.

Although the process was not that didactic and chronologically strict, it was an ongoing sequence of learning for all actors involved, from the dealers to the buyers, not forgetting the many art historians active in the background. Broad attention to contemporary art could not be observed before the Millennium. From 2000-2002 on, however, each year brought an apparent growth in the contemporary art market: more galleries, more buyers, wider media coverage, attempts at establishing contemporary art fairs, various publications on the collections – as we shall see in detail in due course.

This underlines that the turn to contemporary art was 1) a gradual process, and 2) enforced by the problem of fakes, rising prices and a few other factors (see next sub-chapter). In fact, within this recent shift towards the contemporary, we can identify several stages. First, living classics were sought after: the same kind of secure choice as icons of earlier modern art, but with the advantage that the originality of the works could be checked, and prices were lower. Second, mid-generation, and then young artists moved to the focus. It is only recently that graduation exhibitions at the art academies and other shows of emerging artists are packed with gallery managers, collectors, and investors.

There are two further recent developments to note here. An elite group of no more than 10-20 collectors have begun over the past 3-4 years to visit art fairs abroad, acquire works by international artists and attempt to position their collection beyond national borders. We shall return to the reasons for that later; for the moment it is essential to pin down that a “critical mass” of collecting had had to be reached in the Hungarian art market locally, in order to press a few collectors in this new direction.

The other new development is the turn towards conceptual art. Be that classic conceptualism or recent neo-conceptual positions, for the sake of our argument here it suffices that as a result of rising demand, the local art market had been swamped by traditional media of contemporary art (mainly painting). This slowly opened the eye of select collectors for less established forms of expression. The international and the conceptual turns overlap, and reinforce each other: collectors going international realise faster how narrow the dominant Hungarian taste is; and vice versa, those rearing a liking for experimental works are more likely to want to break free of national constrains.

In short, the seemingly brief period (the past decade, at most) of the flowering of contemporary collecting in Hungary comprises several sub-chapters, with many of today’s pioneering collectors having gone through several stages over the 10-15 years. We can highlight at least three aspects according to which contemporary collecting has taken twists and turns recently: 1) the epoch sought after, 2) the media, means of expression and materials preferred, as well as 3) the international context provided for Hungarian art. The recent economic crisis has hit this blossoming severely, yet it is early to say whether its lasting effects will entail a complete setback, a long-term turn away from the progressive edge, or only halt and slow down this process for a year or two.

III. Motifs for Collecting Contemporary Art

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Ákos Birkás, The Maize, 2008, oil on canvas, 160x170 cm, courtesy: collection László Gerő



Ákos Birkás, Rote Fahne, 2007, oil on canvas, 2 parts each 200x140 cm, courtesy: collection László Gerő

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