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Semi-abstract socialist realism in Hungary – the case of Gyula Hincz

Gyula Hincz (1904-1986) was a Hungarian painter, printmaker, book illustrator and sculptor, who had a highly productive and successful career from the 1920s until the 1980s, yet he remained a relatively underrated figure in today's Hungarian art historiography.

He was trained at the Painting and Graphic Art Department of the Hungarian Academy of Fine Arts between 1922-1929. Coming from an indigent background he sympathized with the poor and the working class, which manifested in his art too, alongside with other leftist issues such as supporting the ideology of peace and freedom, fighting against unemployment and searching for some sort of utopian “new word”. Since his early career he was lucky enough to travel abroad quite often – supported by private collectors at first, and by state scholarships later on – and see the works of some of the most influential avant-garde artists. In the mid-1920s he saw Rodchenko, El Lissitzky and Severini at the Venice Biennale, while in Paris he studied the works of Léger, Braque, Picasso and others in the Rosenberg Collection, as well as the art of Brâncuși and André Breton's *Manifeste du surréalisme*.

From the 1950s on he received state prize after state prize, while also receiving numerous state commissions to design large scale decorative pieces (murals, mosaics, tapestries, stained glass windows, etc.), mostly for newly founded and erected university and school buildings, and houses of culture around the country. In the meantime he had also been teaching at the Academy of Fine Arts as well as at the Academy of Applied Arts, of which he directed the latter from 1958 to 1963. He was an influential professor-figure - among many others - to certain members of the neo-avant-garde generation, such as János Fajó or István Nádler.

His visual language had always been relatively adaptive, starting with a mixture of constructivist and surrealist forms, later incorporating expressionism and realism as well. By the late 1950s his language became more and more accustomed to the dominant “semi-abstract” socialist realism that fit quite well into the visual program of the current cultural / political regime. This hybrid language - spoken, among others, by Jenő Barcsay, György Kádár, Endre Domanovszky - was way closer to Western modernism than to the orthodox socialist realism; however, the human figure remained present and very much in focus within these works.

In the presentation, my aim is to first define some key elements of this so-called socialist modernism, and by doing that, highlight the ways in which (Hungarian) art historiography is dependent on and inseparable from the political (context, interpretation, background, ideology), especially in the second half of the 20th century.

By choosing a monographic approach my intention is to follow along the process of becoming a successful artist in a highly politicized historical period, gaining professional recognition not only on a national, but - to a certain extent - on an international level as well, still eventually becoming obsolete with the regime change of 1989. I am interested in the entanglements of places and ways art appeared in the post-1956 era, as well as the actors and theories that formed the public opinion on contemporary artworks and artists in this period. From the perspective of my PhD research (and of my research position at the Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences) I am also very much interested in how this period appears, disappears and reappears in the post-1989 Hungarian art historiography (and museology) - to which, the case of Gyula Hincz serves as a great example.