

# Functions of artworks – here and now

## The Experiences of a Hungarian Visual Art Research

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In Hungary, which was biased for different reasons in the 20th century, an institution whose buildings are outstanding in visual arts was created. Szent István University started its operation in the building of the Premonstratarian Saint Norbert Monastery and Secondary Grammar School which was founded in the 1920s. Premonstratarian teachers considered the visual education of students important, therefore they invited the best artists of the country to prepare wall paintings of Biblical messages. This is how the history of these artworks started. The creation of mural artworks continued for years, despite the change of the owner of the institution. Due to this intention, couple of artworks precious and unique globally were made in an institution which was fundamentally not a visual art school. These artworks survived three changes in the political systems, some of them were destroyed. Art historian, artist, economist, sociologist, philosopher participated in this research studying the circumstances of the birth and the survival up to present day of these art works. *Key words:* aesthetic, visual art, culture of environment, politics, function of art, reception

## Preamble

Since the beginning of cultural history people have been looking for the aesthetic value and the possibility of creation, in which the architecture has an essential role. The wall of a building, as a screen, both inside and outside suggests the possibility of decorating. So the genre of artwork on wall is born like this. Its name emerged in the context of the history of art and science and comes from the takeover of the Italian word *il muro*. First, the cave drawings

and paintings were displayed *as murals* in the prehistoric art, although in that case the artist was not primarily motivated by aesthetic purpose, but rather by planned hunting dramaturgy. On the other hand, the eternal, masterful execution of artworks went far beyond its primary function. After a few thousand years, humans – taking advantages of the cave endowments and later abandoning them – built houses independently. Initially, they were used to supply the most basic needs but later became personalized for their own image and at the same time, their materials were continuously improved, and in the following several thousands of years they made fired clay brick from branch braids plastered with clay of mud-flake naturally occurring rough later with carved-polished stones. By fired clay brick, a flat surface can be formed, which is excellent for decoration, and it raises more complicated issues.

## All around us

“Architecture – by its technological and aesthetic laws – is an inspiration, protector and bearer of the creations of fine arts and applied arts related to the building. In this historically changeable mutual association, a harmony which emphasized the virtues of other elements was realized between a variety of artistic disciplines – sculpture, painting, ceramics, metalwork, etc. – and architecture, however a variety of materials: wood, stone, glass, iron, paint were also used to meet the needs of people. True, the harmony helping each other has not always been smooth, and this is the case even today. Because of social, economic and aesthetic reasons, there has always been a gap between the natural harmony of needs and decoration. Clearly there is a discrepancy between puritan compliance with the functional and the decoration needs, but “the creeds” of those who emphasized the exclusivity of one or the other side, sanctioned such practical and attitudinal mistakes, which removed from each other essentially matching art branches, isolated the creative activity. Both functionalism, which does not honour a man as a personality, chastens the community violently, and it is aridly puritan and aesthetically, economically unjustified, pointless flamboyance lead to extremes.”<sup>1</sup>

In the early 20th century, on the one hand, neutral, sombre public buildings, nondescript homes, workplaces, and street images were born, and secondly, an antipode to this, there was a demand for flamboyance, building facades with stucco, and other spaces absorbing sprawling solutions that might not harmonize with the interior design. If there is no form and content connection between architecture and fine and applied arts, it is not possible to create full unity in related arts, the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, which flourished during the Art Nouveau over the last period. So, by the first third of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the tear affecting the visual arts makes uncertain the dialogue between

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1 BEREZKY L. (1978) *Muralia Hungarica*. Budapest. Helikon. 5.

architecture and fine arts and applied arts. As soon as this process became palpable, the conscious action in which the mural art was transformed into the substantial segment of the environment culture during theoretical and practical analysis was inevitable. The architect, the artist, the sociologist, the economic expert and above all *the political situation* affects this aesthetic problem that goes beyond culture and it is not just an aesthetic problem. Functional and innovative architecture is also indispensable to shaping the environment which serves both the individual and the community, as well as it is logical, aesthetic, and fits in the context manifestations of the fine and applied arts.



The Domokos Kosary Library at the university.  
On the wall is one of the most interesting mural in the history  
of the building by Andor DUDITS:  
King Otto II see the first Premonstratensions<sup>2</sup> in Hungary (1926-28)

## Experiences of the research

Research project at the Szent István University entitled *Visual arts and community space – the presence of 20th-century murals of the Szent István University Gödöllő Campus* selected nine opuses for processing from huge work of art-band which is unique in international context, too. The circumstan-

<sup>2</sup> **Premonstratensions** are a Roman Catholic religious order of canon regular founded in Prémontré in the early 12<sup>th</sup> century by Saint Norbert.

ces of creation of artworks, as well as their existence, non-existence, removal, destruction, transfer in the political systems in the last decades or birth raise many complex issues. Their afterlives are worth analysing both from the theoretical and empirical perspectives by experts of philosophy, sociology, history of arts and economy. All creations – be it art, science, or any other content – are exposed to the interpretation of “consumers” as they are published by their creator. Remember *The war of the worlds*, the famous radio drama by Orson Welles, which made thousands of radio listeners in the US feel panic in 1938, because they interpreted the events in the artwork as an actual fact. In this sense, all creation is ‘free prey’ of the recipients. This is especially true for artworks which communicate, convey the artist’s intention which may not be a reflection of reality and true concepts, but also the artist’s mental and emotional associations with life-generating means. The fate of the creators’ message is determined by literacy, openness and everyday experience and background of the recipients, and even by a number of influencing factors too, such as the social environment in which the work is displayed and in which the recipient lives. So there may be a break between the function of artworks, the destiny of their birth time, and the intention of their artist.

Our research at Szent István University has found several examples to prove this. Elek Babó, who worked at the excavation and restoration of Béla Kontuly’s murals, said the following about this situation: *“The restored image regained its former glory, but its original function disappeared, so it lived on in a foreign environment. It was a grotesque situation: the University leadership and party leadership permeated with Marxist spirit sometimes held their deliberations in a hall depicting a biblical scene. / We are still in the eighties / “And this does not only mean that the university placed the pictures in a very different environment compared to the Norbertine past but the whole zeitgeist was changed as well.*

The techno-optimism, whose main standard-bearers were the contemporary research institutes and universities both in East and West, soared in the fifties and sixties. As if Jeremy Rifkin<sup>3</sup> had wanted to illustrate just this change when he wrote sarcastically about the change of values in the American society: *“Christian clerics held out the promise of eternal salvation in the heavenly kingdom. In the modern age, the idea of a future technological utopia has served as the guiding vision of industrial society. For more than a century, utopian dreamers, men and women of science and letters have looked to a future world where machines would replace human labour, creating a near-workerless society of abundance and leisure.”*<sup>4</sup> This spirit, the promise of science creating paradise on earth defines contemporary scientific strength,

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3 We would like to prove with American writer’s words that the presented spirit of the age was not limited to the East or West, but it was characteristic of one phase of industrial civilization everywhere.

4 RIFKIN J. (1995) *The End of Work. The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era*. New York. G.P.Putnam’s Sons. 45.

and this is reflected in modern mosaics at the University, primarily in the works of Ernő Fóth and László Paizs. Then, another change occurred, and we illustrate it with Rifkin's words again: "When the Challenger crew plummeted to their death in a fiery crash, as millions of schoolchildren looked on in disbelief, the great promise of modern science and technology was put into doubt as never before, and with it some of the hopes and dreams of a generation that, up to then, had believed wholeheartedly in the vision of a future techno-paradise."<sup>5</sup>

The sustainability paradigm, which was born in the eighties and nineties and which was taught and researched in depth, affected the scientific perception of the University (then it was an agricultural university). So Communism (sometimes referred to as Post-Communism) attributed new ideas to these mosaics irrevocably, due to the new technological revolution in Hungary which occurred in Communism. The visual appearance of the new spirit was discovered in the tile pictures of István Pekáry, although at the time of their birth (in 1950) it did not mention the words like environment or sustainability. The naïve romanticism of the pictures gives a sense of detachedness from 'industrial agriculture' to some of the observers. Today's functions of the artworks



Endre DOMANOVSKY: Vintage (1967) glas tessellation

often break away from the intentions of their creators and their destiny planned at the time of their creation. In principle, it would be nice if the artworks representing universal values could find their way into the recipient's heart regardless of time and space.

5 RIFKIN J. (1995) *The End of Work. The Decline of the Global Labor Force and the Dawn of the Post-Market Era.* 55.

Some of the artworks included in our study bear the stamp of the circumstances of their birth to the extent that the recipients are unwilling or unable to disregard them. The artworks provoked revulsions but they rarely caused anger, and only one of the artworks was intended to be destroyed ("Agriculture" by Ernő Fóth) and only one responder wanted it. *"It is an industrialized agriculture which subjugated the nature/ there is not a green blade of grass in the picture. /It should be demolished."* – wrote an infuriated visitor. His interpretation shows he found the message of the mosaic injurious not its style.

One may think that if the emanation of an artwork is more universal it is understood and accepted by various spectators more easily. Amerigo Tot's relief proves that this is not the case; the recipient's soul also has to be receptive to the universal values. The recipients were looking for more exact and specific visual interpretation in it, and when the relief failed to meet their expectations they took a position more confused, sometimes explicitly as an enemy. Another revulsion was formulated against the sacred artworks (*"I'm not interested in the saints"*). It was only one response, but this opinion does not go until willing of destruction. Others perceive the content of religious artworks, even if they are not familiar with the story depicted, but appreciated the abstract message or style of the picture. (*"I'm not religious, so apart its beauty of the artwork it does not mean anything to me"* - wrote one respondent). The lack of biblical literacy some of them did not understand the original sacred mission of artworks, and on the basis of today's intended purpose of this building, they have created them a new didactic function. *"It is a good-related work ... to the agriculture, it displays the symbolism of product manufactured [viz. food]"* – wrote one respondent about "The Wedding of Cana" picture. Circa one-third of the survey respondents supposed some didactic or explicitly agitative function in the interpretation of the artworks. In order to find it, they tended to ignore even clear attributes, like the glory. One example of this is the interpretation of "Wonderful fishing": *They are loaded into the net on the boat. Do not give me fish, teach me to fish!* The knowledge of the Bible is missing from major part of people's culture: they are not able to identify the stories of attributes, so they replace them with profane interpretations. The collision of sacred topics and secular interpretations raises questions in them. *"Biblical scene. Consumption of food and drink - Choice referring to the university's profile"* – wrote one respondent about "The Wedding of Cana". Shall we be glad that a non-religious person has good feelings and secular interpretations despite the lack of biblical literacy? Or shall we be sad because of the lack of knowledge? Other respondent also wrote about "The Wedding of Cana": *"I do not know [what it is], but I'm glad that it has revealed because it is very nice get a clue."* Shall we write the source of the scene depicted, a brief summary of the biblical story and the symbiology of the visible attributes on the small information board beside the artwork? Then, will the artwork get a new interpretation in a today's viewer? We have already written: the "beauty" of what "good to look at," even if I do not know exactly what it is, it represents

a value. The majority of the world's artistic heritage has not provided mission for a long time for public, that the artist originally intended for them. Who knows whether the Venus of Willendorf was portrayed originally a goddess, or a particular woman, or an abstract person of the artist's desire? We repeat: all works are free preys of recipients. They see into a function that is considered to be good.

But when they had to answer in general terms, according to them what could be the function of an artwork in a higher education institution, then the "culture-shaping" and "culture-transfer" function received the highest marks. The "teaching function" only appeared in the middle range, the function of creating a pleasant homeliness or emotional reactions were explicitly laggard in the average of the grades. However, if they had to declare about a particular artwork, there was typically the opposite sequence in the interpretation and evaluation of the respondents. If the public could receive information on the author, title and, the theme of the artworks, it would not endanger the freedom of the feature-attribution and interpretation, but it would serve their deeper understanding. A so-called QR code (a two-dimensional bar code) would be placed next to each artwork. They would contain online availability of information relating to the artworks. QR Code can be read at any time by cell phone and using a proper application. After the coding, a web site link appears which can be open via the Internet, so you can read more about the artwork. This system may be suitable for virtual guided tours.

## Artworks and financial valuations

We would like to compliment the topic of this chapter with a thought: the estimated financial value of the artworks is very far from the reality (for example, István Pekáry: 1 billion euro; Amerigo Tot: 1.3 billion euro; Ernő Fóth: 3.3 billion euro), even if they are intended to be included in the cost of technical implementation. Such a ballpark estimate can be understood as if the respondents wanted to express the boundless if the prices (many of them wrote "priceless" instead of numerical value), or at least to their inaccessibility of them. It does not necessarily mean the envy of an average man although it also occurred (such as *"overpaid bored artist's artwork"*). We assume that rather a sense of inaccessibility can be detected in these valuations. Those who took bids lower value of magic limit than one million forints (3.334 euro), the vast majority of them had devastating opinion about the artwork, and wanted to indicate it with such amount. The respondents probably started out in their estimates from exorbitant sums (artworks of celebrity-creators in the great art dealer firms' auctions), but they surpassed those record prices in this questionnaire too. We assume that these people had never bought a "real," or professional artwork. They probably do not even dare to enter a serious

shop of artworks – and probably will not later – because this type of aesthetic value seems unattainable for them. This is not a good news for the artists.

## Conclusions

In a comprehensive analysis throughout the whole century the databases limiting the circumstances exactly may be incomplete, so we could not strive the entire exploration. However, during its preparation and collection of data revealed that processing of archival documents can also be found, extends far beyond the original research plan, and suppose further analytical work, which does not allow for the extent of this publication.

This study brings together several disciplines, a curiosity in the international field by its purpose and results, however, it raises the possibility of a continuation respect to artworks forming the visual intelligence of the community.

## References

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