

Derkovits: The Artist and His Times

Introduction

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Fade-ins: The Art of Gyula Derkovits and Interwar Hungarian Social Photography

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Although Gyula Derkovits has long been considered an important artist of interwar Hungary, literature on him is scarce both in Hungarian and other languages. His explicitly Communist conviction both benefitted and compromised the reception of his oeuvre in his lifetime and after. Derkovits's art drew on Expressionism, Cubism, and Constructivism until, towards the end of his short life, he created a style of his own uniting strict composition and lyrical colours with portrayal and depicting radical social subject-matters. A monographic exhibition of his oeuvre in the Hungarian National Gallery in 2014 set out to revisit Derkovits's creative output from a variety of disciplinary and methodological approaches; the curators' 'Introduction' to the catalogue, re-printed below, details the general aims of the show. Enigma, Hungary's leading journal of art history and theory also accompanied the exhibition with a two-part 'reader'; the essay by Ágnes Kusler and Merse Pál Szeredi, discussing the integration of photographic vision in Derkovits's painting, was selected from this issue. (BH)

Derkovits: The Artist and His Times

Introduction

From the mid-1980s onwards, the Hungarian National Gallery held a series of monographic and epochal exhibitions on the great figures and phenomena of nineteenth- and early twentieth-century Hungarian art. Therefore, the exploration of the interwar period now became a timely task, the due overture of which is the show on Gyula Derkovits, a prominent artist of that era. The duties of a museum include the introduction of younger generations to the emblematic figures and great accomplishments of Hungarian fine arts through their constant reinterpretation. At present, Hungarian art history writing aspires to connect to advanced research done on the period in the related disciplines of history as well as cultural and literary history, and the exhibition organisers indeed intended to draw on such scholarly models. Beside presenting Derkovits's outstanding work from an aesthetical perspective, the exhibition also provides an opportunity to address how the evaluation of his art has changed over time.

Derkovits's significance was already recognised by the critics and middle-class art collectors of his time; at the same time, he also received support and commissions from the illegal Communist movement. The artist, too, professed his political commitment to Communism and himself contributed to his own mythicised image of a destitute proletarian artist, even though his exhibitions enjoyed great success and offers of help came pouring in. However, posthumous debates about Derkovits became pronouncedly polarised, one-sidedly valuing or criticising either the aesthetic value of the oeuvre or the painter's political commitment only, and this sort of pigeonholing has persisted until today. Although Éva Körner's 1968 monograph still remains an inevitable starting point for discussions of Derkovits, a critical reevaluation of this study, written almost half a century ago, is nevertheless required since it too is part of the history of Derkovits's reception.¹

More broadly, our show attempts to grasp the unique characteristics of Derkovits's art, which both conform to and transcend the painting of his time. Although he is one of the few Hungarian artists of this period whose work has been indexed in a catalogue raisonné, our exhibition does not present his work in its entirety. Accordingly, we do not intend to publish an updated version of the catalogue raisonné from Körner's monograph in our own volume. Instead, we present Derkovits's most notable works, grouping together and commenting on the pieces in a way that gives a clear insight into their novelty and special quality that not only won over eminent experts of his time, but also engaged the artists and art historians who defended him in the post-1945 debates. The show is not about a lonely genius or autotelic primordial talent, but a well-informed creator who was versed in the fine arts of his time, and who consciously drew from both contemporary and traditional sources. Derkovits was unique in incorporating

the tools and ways of seeing from the visual culture of his day—photography and film, caricatures and posters—into his painting and graphics. For the viewer of today, and especially the younger viewer, an awareness of Hungary's interwar historical background makes it easier to understand Derkovits's work. This is the reason why our monographic exhibition draws on approaches that are increasingly widely accepted in Hungarian art historical research, such as reception theory and the mapping of the broader cultural context.

The structure of the exhibition and the choice of works are not broken up into typical chronological-stylistic or thematic blocks. Our point of departure is that the strength of Derkovits's works lies not in their stylistic or thematic innovation, but in the unique way he addressed the viewer by adopting the characteristic modes of artistic expression in use at the time. Here we rely on a twentieth-century adaptation of the theory of the modes, a concept from antiquity later revived in the seventeenth century. The theory of the modes applied concepts initially used in literature and music to describe the fine arts so that the moral intention and rhetorical character of a picture is easier to grasp. Accordingly, our show is constructed around identifiable tonal modes in Derkovits's works. We use literary terms as titles to define the characteristics of each section of the exhibition and catalogue, where the accepted terms from art history would be rather onerous and imprecise.

Using this approach, we can identify five modes in Derkovits's life work: elegiac, dramatic, satirical, essayistic, and hymnal. These literary expressions designating the tone of the works are not strict technical terms, but are rather used as metaphors to better facilitate an understanding of the impact of the artist's intention and artistic tools. Derkovits's typically Central-European oeuvre is characterised by a frequently-overlapping use of the widest possible range of styles, also seen in the Cubo-Expressionism of the Hungarian Activists, the neo-Classicism and Verism of the 1920s, the spatial exposition of Cubism and Constructivism, or the kind of pictorial conversions in Post-Impressionism. In Derkovits' work, the unique fusion of earlier painting and graphic techniques is heightened by the visual world of caricature, newspaper cartoons, political agitation, and social photography, and their ability to address the viewer directly. We have shaped the main chapters of the exhibition and catalogue around the five modes, within which we define thematic groups. This classification allows for a more refined exploration of what Derkovits's world was like: through his paintings, we come to know the society in which he lived, the metropolitan working class and the impoverished peasantry, the middle classes and the artist, work and poverty, Budapest, the outskirts, and the Danube.

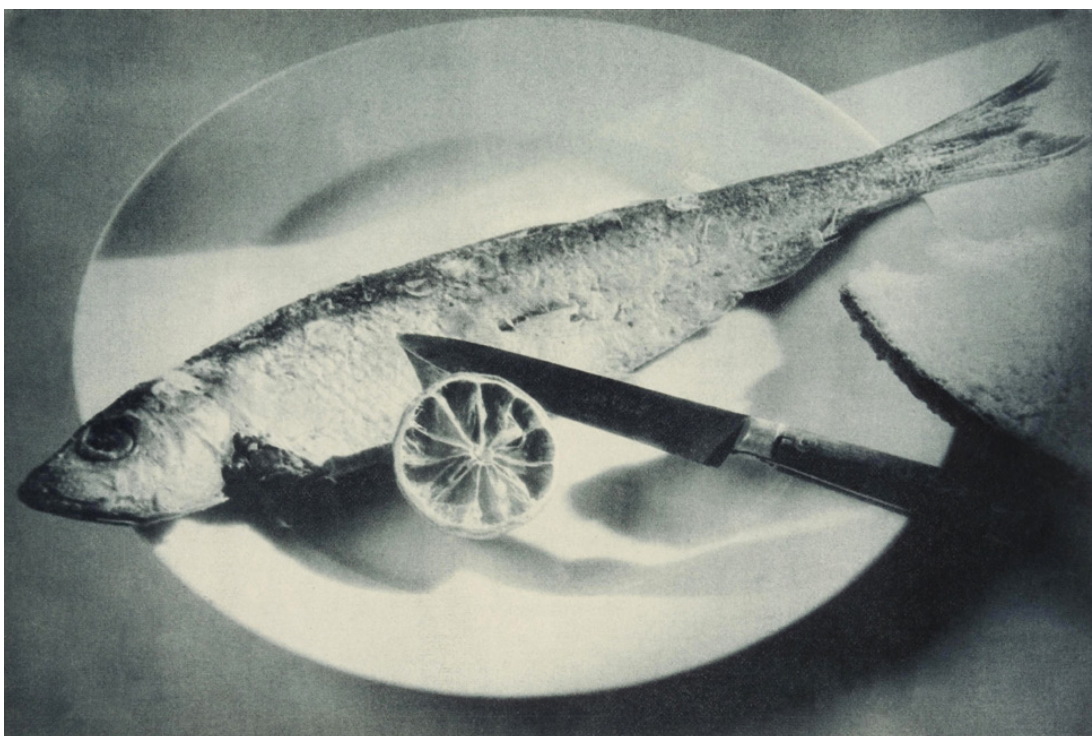
First, Derkovits's early paintings and drawings, deriving from his experiences at the Nyergesújfalu free school, express the absence of and desire for harmony through the melancholic voice of *elegiac* poetry. In these pastoral compositions, the motifs of music and bathing appear alongside the idyll of peasant work. These are followed by depictions of war and everyday struggles in explosive, dynamic works imbued with exceptionally *dramatic* tension. The figures in these pictures are refugees, mourners, the lamenting masses, labourers at work, and peasants, while the stage is the city, the teeming main streets, the coffee house, the railway, the embankment, and the suburban cinema. The *satirical* works make it particularly clear that Derkovits was not a passive observer of life, but rather its relentless critic. His targets were the wealthy middle class, the priesthood, gendarmerie, judges, executioners, and prostitutes. The *essay* uses the expressive force of literary language, but above all the intellect and the laws of logic, to uncover contradictions, clarify thoughts and draw conclusions. Montage offered Derkovits, as a painter, a similar tool for illustrating complex correlations. A *hymnal* voice characterises the life-affirming pictures of Derkovits's last period depicting the most familiar everyday scenes—such as work, the marketplace, the wintry street, railways, or a mother embracing her child—in an exalted, celebratory tone.

As well as emphasising Derkovits's individuality, we also show the many ways his works connected to the art of his time. His works are therefore exhibited alongside similarly-inspired graphics, paintings, and photographs by his contemporaries, while emblematic examples of contemporary official and avant-garde Hungarian art are presented in a separate section as analogies or counterpoints. The broader Central-European context is provided by German,

Fig. 15.1. Gyula Derkovits, *Still Life with Fish I.* (*Halas csendélet I.*, 1928). Mixed media on canvas, 42 x 57.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, inv. no.: 56.246 T. © Museum of Fine Arts / Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2018.



Fig. 15.2. József Pécsi, *Fish with Lemon* (*Hal citrommal*, 1928). Oil press on paper, 37.6 x 26.7 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét, inv. no.: 69.133. © Hungarian Foundation of Photography, 2018.



Austrian, Polish, Slovak, and Czech paintings and graphics. Turning the unfavourable layout of the Hungarian National Gallery's 'A' Building to our advantage, and rather than following a linear structure, we envisage a show organised by modules. Using both levels of the exhibition space, we dedicate a separate section to the *Dózsa* series, Derkovits's 1928 graphics exhibition held at the Etchers' Association, and a selection of documents presenting the life and cult of the artist. Each modal chapter in the series encompasses an emphatic unity organised around a key work. Directly next to them are graphics and photographs from Derkovits's contemporaries. Documentary and biographical films and photos illustrate the history and visual culture of the era, as well as the afterlife of Derkovits's oeuvre.

The accompanying catalogue follows the structure of the exhibition. From the outset, we have endeavoured to forge a form of cooperation with the contributing experts that is closer than usual, with frequent meetings to exchange information, and participants presenting their thoughts and research findings to a broader public. These debates and feedback also helped shape the final form of the exhibition.

The two-volume reader, a special issue of the journal *Enigma* represents a further stage in the years of academic work to prepare for the exhibition. It is the first time that these sources, documents, contemporary writings, and press reports, which have offered us new observations and helped enrich our image of Derkovits and his era, have appeared in print.

Fade-ins: The Art of Gyula Derkovits and Interwar Hungarian Social Photography²

One evening in March 1928, I bought a smoked fish for supper. I laid the table with a clean tablecloth and set out the plates, the knife and the fish. In the lamplight, the scales of the fish glowed golden from the smoking process. Gyula gazed transfixed, and I could already see in his eyes that he was composing a work.

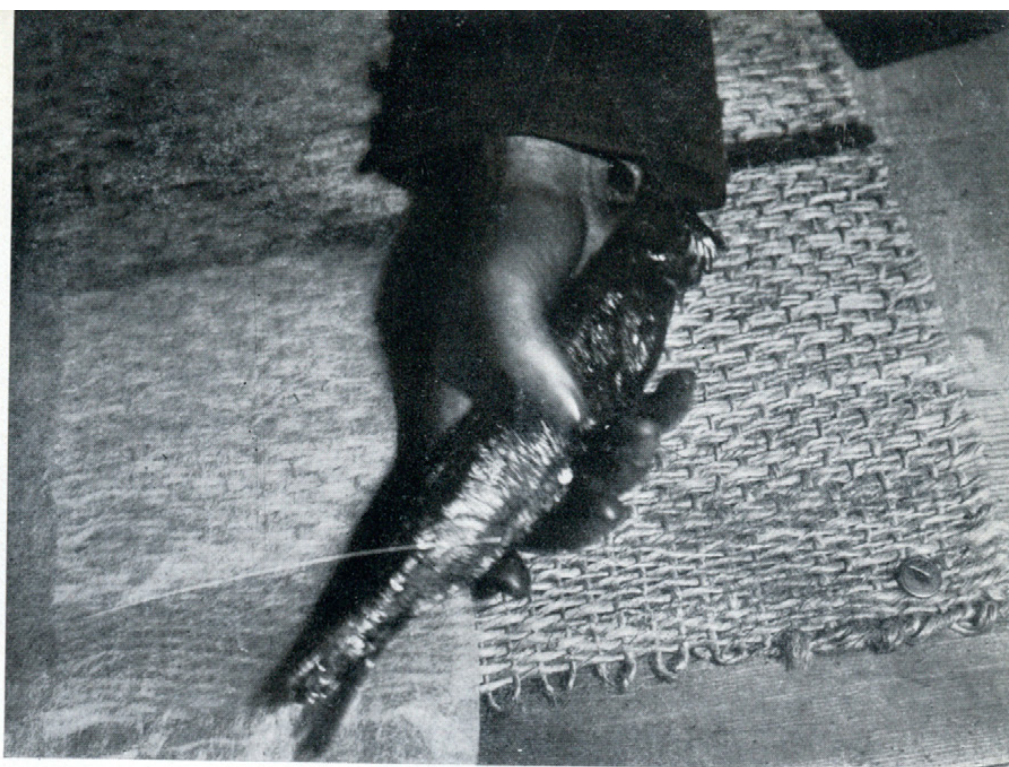
Viktória Dombai, Gyula Derkovits's wife³

One of the most striking figures of interwar Hungarian painting, Gyula Derkovits, painted his *Still Life with Fish I (Halas csendélet I)* the same year as József Pécsi's well-known photograph *Fish with Lemon (Hal citrommal)* (Figs. 15.1 and 15.2). Although Pécsi was barely five years older than Derkovits, he enjoyed a much greater degree of existential security. At first glance, the similarity between the motifs and composition of both works is striking.⁴ The fish provides promising material for the artist; the play of light on its scales interests the photographer as much as it does the painter. The configuration is practically a matter of course, yet there are substantial differences between the two pictures. The fish with lemon in the photograph is a gourmet dish which, following its careful studio presentation, may not have ended up in a human stomach. By contrast, the fish on the Derkovits' table ended up 'modelling', never turned into supper, and instead the couple ate salted bread with paprika, the symbolic cliché of the worker's existence, the fodder of the poor man. However, their comparison is not arbitrary. The works demarcate two poles, perhaps the most dissimilar poles in terms of the artistic tools used that year to elaborate on a motif. Their juxtaposition reveals differences not in form, but rather in artistic approach. From among countless similar compositions, we shall select yet another iconic item: Lajos Lengyel's photograph from the photo-book *From Our Life (A mi életünkéből)*, published by Lajos Kassák's journal *Munka (Work)* (Fig. 15.3).⁵ Cut off at the wrist, a hand lies on rough cloth, cramped yet lifelessly clutching a tiny fish. Here, the fish motif is even more forcefully associative, a symbol of the painful struggle for existence. Although we find no clear-cut similarities in the configuration, the unspoken, obvious conceptual bond between Derkovits's painting and Lengyel's photograph is much closer than with Pécsi's photo described above.

The example above poses a whole set of questions, first raised by Éva Körner in her 1968 monograph on Derkovits. In Körner's opinion, Derkovits's last, socially-aware works from around 1930 until his death in 1934 were unmatched in contemporary Hungarian painting, although they did have analogies in the 'more trivial, more brutal branches of representational art forms', primarily photography.⁶ Körner here emphasises the primary influence of social photography, which not only 'sought the same raw material as Derkovits', but at the same time pursued 'the demand to explain', thus yielding a great similarity between their works. The photographers and the painter 'often coincided not only in their choice of subject matter, but also in an astonishing correspondence in their compositional solutions'. This study aims to concentrate on the last four years of Derkovits's life in order to explore and structure the proposition raised by Körner: the parallels between Derkovits's painting and Hungarian interwar social photography.

Although we cannot talk of a documented relationship or any consciously-absorbed influence, nobody among the Hungarian artists of the interwar period lends themselves better to such a juxtaposition than Derkovits. To the best of our knowledge, his working methods did not include the use of photographic prototypes, and we have no evidence that would suggest that he visited photography exhibitions. Körner mentions two examples: the photo-reporter Károly Escher, and the social photographers in Lajos Kassák's Munka Circle. These two examples indicate the major directions of our enquiry: the illustrated press and avant-garde-influenced early photography, whose 'fade-ins' justify a more concentrated analysis. Our aim however is not to register the formal similarities, but to seek visual parallels that also connect to Derkovits's painting on a conceptual plane: cases in which the struggle between 'emotion and reason' in tackling social issues resembles that of Derkovits.⁷

The last four years of Derkovits's life and creative work were defined by sensitivity towards social issues, which entailed the visual mapping and artistic depiction of the problems and pains of those at the edges of society. Around 1930, the spectacle of devastating economic crisis, unemployment, and material and moral exploitation that kept Derkovits in a state of distress induced an ultimate transformation of his value system. On 1 September 1930, a large workers' demonstration was held in Budapest, and one year later, he experienced a personal tragedy of eviction and condemnation; both exerted a catalysing influence on his work.⁸ Abandoning his earlier formal repertoire and subjects, Derkovits embarked on a new path, submerging himself in the 'fated life structure of the suffering parts of society'.⁹ In his pictures, one sees 'not human examples of harmonic beauty, but worn-out proletarian women and the unemployed', who do not stand for their own fates alone.¹⁰ The artist's aim was rather to typify, to seek symbols,¹¹ to establish on the basis of the 'individual' the 'truths and laws that apply to the whole'.¹² According to Körner, Derkovits had 'no models who spontaneously presented themselves', but rather 'repeating types', which he shaped 'according to their social role'.¹³ We feel, however, that the 'individual' can nevertheless be found in the works from his last period. One senses the hesitating uncertainty of the first glance in his mature paintings, the fruits of multiple compositional variations. Péter Molnos argued that 'one of the inimitable virtues of Derkovits's work is inspirational



LENGYEL LAJOS

Fig. 15.3. Lajos Lengyel, *Still Life with Fish* (*Halás csendélet*, 1931). Reproduced in Lajos Kassák (ed.), *From Our Life. The First Photo Book of Munka* (*A mi életünkéből. A Munka első fotókönyve*) (Budapest: Munka Folyóirat, 1932), Figure 38. Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no.: KM-2979. © Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, 2018.

uncertainty, the productive confusion of interpretation'.¹⁴ In this sense, Derkovits's paintings are photographic, or more precisely, they are composite snapshots compiled from mosaic fragments of reality through the use of montage. Derkovits created a spectacle that appears genuine, yet the moment depicted is typified by subordination to its own symbolic system. One of the most striking manifestations of the painter's revised perspective is his lower point of view. In the 1920s, he still depicted the maelstrom of Budapest from some distance above,¹⁵ whereas in 1930, he paced the city's streets and placed the paintings' perspective at eye level, forming compositions from the experiences of his cultural, anthropological meanderings.¹⁶ The characters lined up in his earlier paintings as reference points in the maelstrom of the street became the permanent personnel of Derkovits's symbolic microcosm. They can be seen as the main actors of their own stories in compositions created as part of a socially-committed painting project. The characters typifying the middle class and proletariat come to life in close-up before appearing again, broken into pieces in montages projected onto a plane. However, there is a fundamental difference between Derkovits's photographic way of seeing and the reality segment inherited from the camera's objectivity. 'By virtue of its nature, the photograph maintains a close relationship with constantly changing reality,' wrote the Hungarian photography theorist Iván Hevesy in 1934, 'and thus finds it difficult to condense that relationship into figurative meaning'.¹⁷ In Hevesy's opinion, photography 'must be content with the picture-like statement and recording of signs and phenomena', and could only express openly 'social content by emphasizing certain motifs in the picture'.¹⁸ The photographer has no opportunity to condense snapshots dramatically, to transform them into composites. Hevesy recognised that the photographer had two options: to record reality by following the whirl of events, or to give up the appearance of spontaneity in favour of emphasising the message of the symbolically-composed photos.

When systematically comparing Derkovits's art to contemporary photography, it is worth starting with the works that immortalised the most important moments in his socially committed turn: the drawings and paintings of the great Budapest workers' demonstration of 1930. The protest against general poverty ended in a clash between the authorities and demonstrators; during the scuffles, many were injured and one worker died. The gendarmerie's violent charge left a strong impression on the history of the Budapest workers' movement. Derkovits's works are reportages in which mental images are developed into a montage.¹⁹ None of the well-known photographs of that day's events contain such dramatic force as Derkovits's paintings.²⁰ The painter's point of view is much closer than that of the reporters: the pictures memorialising the horrors come alive on his paper with photographic focus, while he stands at the epicentre of events. In *For Bread (Kenyérért)*, a mercilessly-verist depiction of a victim of oppression, the snapshot quality combines perfectly with forceful symbolic content.²¹ The picture is a memorial to a constructed moment. It is as if we, fleeing the chaos of the clash between protestors and gendarmerie, see the unforgettable tragedy through a pair of eyes looking at the ground. At the same time, the artist renders this as timeless, completing it with the static figure of a soldier representing oppression, and a loaf of bread signifying the reasons for the riot.

It would be difficult to find similar motifs and ideals in Derkovits's paintings and 1930s Hungarian press photos. A brief survey of the illustrated press, which primarily served the purpose of entertainment, reveals that the number of pictures on social themes is insignificant. According to Béla Albertini, Hungarian illustrated magazines covered topics 'from American actresses, shapely legs, and charming viscounts, to a *völkisch*-romantic image of Hungary, to popularising technical innovations, sport and fashion'.²² Pictures of working-class daily life captioned by the photo-reporter only rarely transcended the level of illustration. When this did happen, it was in the service of left- or right-wing political propaganda. In 1930, the *Nemzeti Magazin (National Magazine)*, a supplier of conservative propaganda to the Horthy regime, published photos of a cartman snoozing on the street and an American construction worker smoking under the caption 'sweet idleness' (*dolce far niente*), even though it was obvious that the workers were not enjoying a rest during the economic crisis, but waiting for day-labourer jobs.²³ The prime example of social photography being subordinated to left-wing propaganda is the prodigious output of

photo-reporter Árpád Szélpál, published every week in the social democratic daily paper *Népszava* (*People's Voice*) from 1929 to 1939. Szélpál sought his subject matter with a social sensitivity resembling Derkovits's, however, unlike the painter, he did not intend to make symbolic use of his subjects. He documented acute problems: poverty, exploitation, and social injustice. His pictures accompanied suitably raw and acerbic reports in the opposition dailies, and complemented the emphatic nature of the texts with their visual shock impact.²⁴ Szélpál's true ability lay in his capacity to perceive destitution almost everywhere; his approach was therefore opposite to Derkovits's. There is a striking difference in their approaches to the subject of disabled war veterans, for example. Much like in the paintings of Berlin by George Grosz and Otto Dix, the streets of Budapest were full, even in the 1920s, of crippled, blind, and amputee veteran soldiers. In his 1930 etching *The Unknown Soldier* (*Ismeretlen katona*), Derkovits placed the exposed veteran at the centre of a complex symbolic system.²⁵ The blind newspaper-seller stands on Heroes' Square in Budapest, where governor Horthy had unveiled a monument to First World War victims the same year. This 'heroes' memorial stone' then became the site of regular, pompous state commemorations that naturally excluded the suffering, destitute survivors. By contrast, Szélpál published portraits of invalids and an anti-militarist propaganda report in a photo-report on 1 November 1930, the day of the dead, entitled 'Living Corpses'.²⁶ In a later interview, Szélpál emphasised that 'the camera filled exactly the same mission in my hands as the pen'. In other words, he regarded photography as a tool of journalism, just like the left-wing photo-reporters who worked for the Weimar-era German *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung*: 'I photographed reality, which is not a "model", but "material"', noted Szélpál.²⁷

In terms of subject choice, there is a connection between one of Derkovits's paintings and Szélpál's report on the melon season by the Danube banks.²⁸ Greengrocers at the central market hall in Pest would throw out the leftover melons at closing time; for many unemployed, this would be their only daily bite to eat. They ate the melons on the riverbank, throwing the skins into the water. In his report, Szélpál presents the melons as the most wretched fodder. Yet Derkovits and his wife had often visited the riverbank when they were unemployed, and their experiences form the basis of *Melon Eater* (*Dinnyevető*).²⁹ In Körner's analysis, the painting was the 'low point of degradation', a key work in Derkovits's plan that took shape in 1932 to contrast 'humiliated destitution' with 'humanity bourgeoning through work'.³⁰ The emaciated worker on the steps became a topos of Hungarian socio-photography, appearing in countless pictures. A photograph by Sándor Gönci-Frühof with a similar composition appeared in the first Hungarian socio-photography album mentioned earlier, *From Our Life*. Gönci-Frühof asked in one of his theoretical texts why it was the urban unemployed who were most frequently portrayed and elevated to an iconic level among socio-photography circles.³¹ The urban destitute, beggar, or navy had already lost his pride, wrote Gönci-Frühof, and was thus easy to photograph in his everyday life, since his misery was already publicly visible on the streets. By contrast, slum dwellers were mistrustful. Fearful of official organisations and repeated evictions, they chased away any photographer attempting to document their lives. It is no coincidence that we only know of these settlements' micro-worlds through pictures taken by photo-reporters who accompanied the police during official raids.

Since Derkovits the painter had declared loyalty to the proletariat rather than the middle class, he also often ended up at the other end of the reporter's lens. The best-known portrait of Derkovits was taken by photo-reporter Károly Escher for a 1931 interview (Fig. 15.4). The reason for the interview was not an exhibition or a demonstration, but because the painter and his wife had recently been evicted for accumulated rent arrears.³² The photograph exemplifies our assertion well, since the photographer took his portrait of the starving painter, turning him into a popular subject for the gutter press, with exactly the same curiosity with which he shot his other photo-reports from around the same time. One of these reports presented the middle-class readers of the *Pesti Napló* (*Pest Journal*) weekend illustrated supplement with the faces of homeless night-shelter dwellers in Budapest.³³ Visiting eviction sites provided Escher with a number of outstanding subjects. One series on the tragedy of an unemployed family living in the Mária Valéria colony also



Fig. 15.4. Károly Escher, *Gyula Derkovits* (1931). Silver gelatine print, 18 x 24.1 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét, inv. no.: 2004.7756. © Hungarian Foundation of Photography, 2018.

documented the direct precursors to their state of affairs; his photograph mirrors their resignation and hopelessness.³⁴ The photographer Escher did not take a portrait of Derkovits as an artist, but degraded him into an element of sociological measurement. He could not have done any differently: Derkovits was accompanied by this time of his life by the public image of a 'self-aware defiant worker' with an 'arrogant aloofness' who rejected all offers of help out of 'pathological suspicion'.³⁵ It is well-known today that this became some sort of role for Derkovits, who was 'deliberately destitute so that his life and art would become one'.³⁶ His asceticism was largely self-imposed, much like Franz Kafka's starving artist in *A Hunger Artist* (*Ein Hungerkünstler*).³⁷ At the allegorical climax of Kafka's short story, a new spectacle appears in the dead artist's cage: a young panther surrounded by a throng of viewers, even though they can 'barely stand his gaze'. In 1934, at the lowest point of his destitution, Derkovits painted a self-portrait that was later destroyed, the inspiration for which could just have been Kafka's piece. According to a contemporary description of the painting, it depicts 'a tiger greedily and happily guzzling a piece of meat. Before the tiger's cage stands the painter, we see his pale face, his burning eyes mesmerised, jealously eyeing the meat'.³⁸

Of all the 1930s Hungarian photo-reporters, only Károly Escher stands out today for his social sensitivity and unique way of seeing. Although Éva Körner also emphasises the similarity between Escher's photography and Derkovits's painting, we must admit that, in retrospect, we are somewhat irritated.³⁹ Escher is best known today as a socio-photographer, yet this is based on a distorted, selective presentation of his work, typical of photo history produced in the

state-Socialist era. First and foremost, it was Ernő Mihályfi, who had worked with Escher for the largest bourgeois newspaper publishers during the interwar years, who then tried (in part also to legitimise his own work) to establish Escher's photo-reporting as socially committed, declaring him to be a 'revolutionary without wanting to be one, and without knowing that he was one'.⁴⁰ Escher's most dramatic, socially-sensitive pictures were not printed in the 1930s, since *Pesti Napló* only published pictures of workers in entertaining montages. Although Escher was interested in social themes, we still cannot unambiguously call him a socio-photographer. In Iván Hevesy's definition, socio-photography is 'the photographic expression of the life, figures and faces of the peasant and proletarian, the rural and urban workers'.⁴¹ Depiction of these themes, he continues, 'only qualifies as socio-photography when the pictures captivatingly manifest the photographer's solidarity and spiritual identification with the people he depicts, their feelings and fates'.⁴²

Nevertheless, Derkovits and Escher's pictures do complement one another well. At the end of the 1920s, both had discovered the compositional possibilities in the rhythmic movements of workers.⁴³ Furthermore, Escher's famous portrait *Banker at the Baths* (*Bankigazgató fürdik*) is a relative of the full-bodied, grand-bourgeois that Derkovits often pictured from 1930 to 1931 either in comic or dramatic contexts.⁴⁴ Throughout the 1930s, Escher's photo-reportages on the Horthy regime's 'neo-Baroque' celebrations frequently portrayed the same figures as Derkovits's satirically-inspired series of drawings: from uniformed gendarmes, marching nuns and fat capitalists, to conservative functionaries strutting in traditional Hungarian dress.⁴⁵ Even if Escher's pictures are quite remote from the disillusioned Derkovits's biting satire, their gentle humour was driven by similar impulses. Although Escher did not have the classic formal techniques of caricature at his disposal, his unexpected juxtapositions and choice of perspective—perfectly exemplified by his well-known 1937 photograph *Sitting on the Fence* (*Várakozási állásponton*)—nevertheless achieved the desired impact.⁴⁶ At the same time, like Derkovits, Escher was struck with empathy and lyricism by the sight of a female beggar camped out on the street with her children.⁴⁷ But Escher was not political; he only showed, and in this sense, he was not an ally in Derkovits's analytic, value-assigning social art.

By contrast, the activities between 1930 and 1932 of the Munka Circle of photographers offer a salient analogy to Derkovits's paintings, both in terms of concept and form.⁴⁸ The Munka Circle was formed around the independent left-wing journal *Munka* published by the avant-garde poet and writer Lajos Kassák from the late 1920s on. Their photographic work enjoyed great publicity even when compared to other contemporary photographers who also systematically tackled social themes in the service of the new spirit of photography that originated at the Bauhaus.⁴⁹ Körner wrote that Derkovits was captivated by 'characters afflicted with depression, hunger and problems', yet 'he was drawn to his subjects by some restless will within'.⁵⁰ It is precisely this tendency that we also recognise in the Munka Circle's socio-photography. They were not satisfied with presenting poverty merely as a tool of political propaganda, but just like Derkovits, set about creating symbols.⁵¹ In Lajos Kassák's words, 'they were not pursuing atmospheric pictures with their cameras, but striving for conscious composition and solutions to formative tasks'.⁵² One of the most important theorists of the movement, Lajos Gró, wrote in his first manifesto that a workers' photographer 'must record the phenomena of everyday life from a Socialist point of view' so that these photos would become 'the expression of a new human vision', 'tools of class war', and 'historical documents of the workers' movement'.⁵³ In a text introducing the Munka Circle's third exhibition, Gró later wrote that the 'aim of workers' photography is to uncover some deeper truth and increase the power of the proletariat'.⁵⁴ The May 1932 photo album *From Our Life* was a lionised montage of the working class and 'the worker', drawing on aspects of sociography, avant-garde formal techniques and New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). The album registered symptoms of the economic crisis at the same time as presenting possible ways out, aiming to 'encourage the viewer towards their own class consciousness and strength ... and help the reader to "see"'.⁵⁵ A duality of poverty / oppression and liberation through work defines the sociographic montage of pictures that speak for themselves even without titles or commentary. In his introduction to the album, Lajos Kassák situated photographic technique, the most fitting

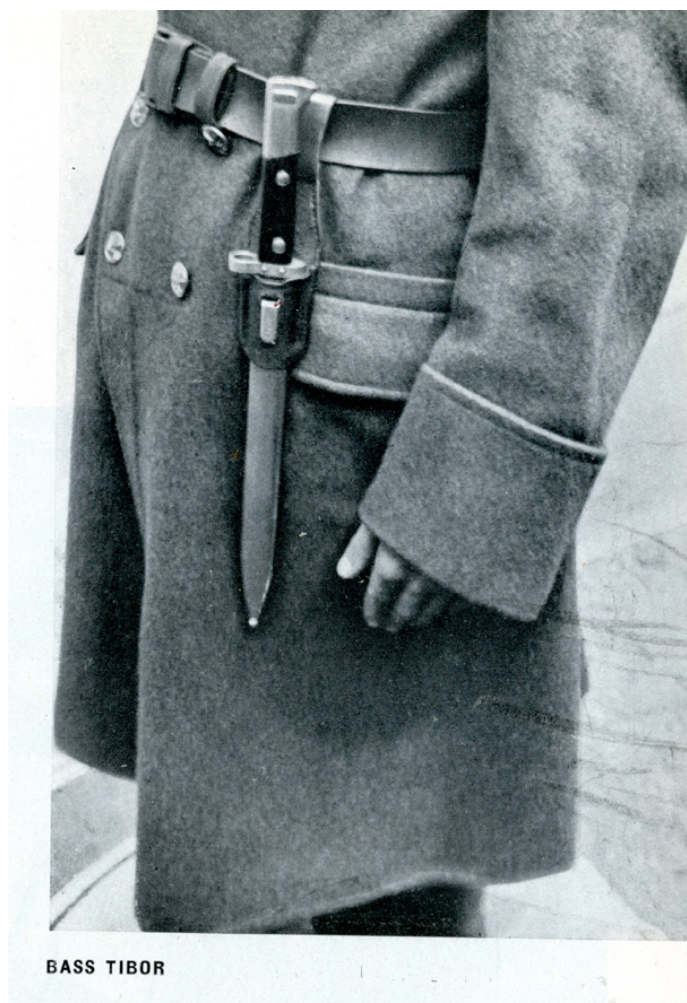


Fig. 15.5. Gyula Derkovits, *The Hungry in Winter* (*Éhesek télen*, 1930). Oil, tempera and silver dust on canvas, 76 x 64 cm. Gallery of Szombathely, inv. no.: K. 76.57. © Gallery of Szombathely, 2018.

representative of the 'new civilisatory era', above 'individualist' painting. According to Kassák, photography as a tool was much better suited to documenting an era striving for 'collectivity and strict constructivity'.⁵⁶ Yet Kassák also emphasised that the composition resulting from the creative process not only documents, it also analyses and characterises; in other words, Kassák and Derkovits used an identical scheme to think through their worlds, which were identical, too, since they were based on shared class belonging. The photo-montage quality comes across most strongly in Derkovits's 1930 painting *The Hungry in Winter* (*Éhesek télen*), certain details and reality elements of which correspond to photographs in *From Our Life* (Fig. 15.5).

The proletarian mother protecting her child also appears in many photographs, while Tibor Bass's photograph *Torso of a Soldier* seizes the uniformed figure from almost exactly the same perspective, and in the same configuration: faceless, with only the lower quarters of the body depicted (Fig. 15.6). In the photos included in *From Our Life*, the Munka Circle's symbolic vision is perhaps best exemplified when representatives of oppression are being portrayed. The cavalry in Lajos Lengyel's photo *Violence* (*Erőszak*) right on the first plate, or the frequently-captured silhouette of nuns (also one of Derkovits's frequent motifs) are cases in point, and while these are subjects Escher typically addressed as well, the context, motivation, and eventually the choice of viewpoint strengthen the critique in the former cases. The mother figure, a desired ideal exalted as the Madonna, was a frequently-recurring topos both in socio-photography

Fig. 15.6. Tibor Bass, *Torso of a Soldier* (*Katonatorzó*, 1931). Reproduced in Lajos Kassák (ed.), *From Our Life. The First Photo Book of Munka* (*A mi életünkéből. A Munka első fotókönyve*) (Budapest: Munka Folyóirat, 1932), Figure 32. Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, Budapest, inv. no.: KM-2979. © Petőfi Literary Museum / Kassák Museum, 2018.



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and in Derkovits's last period. We know the 'proletarian' Madonna from Károly Escher, and the host of picturesque 'village' Madonnas, but the Munka Circle's 'Angyalföld' (a working-class district in Budapest) Madonna also serves as an outstanding example.⁵⁷ Moreover, countless thematic and concrete formal parallels can be found between Derkovits's last great project, a lionised, monumental depiction of work and the worker, and pieces by the Munka Circle as well as socially-sensitive modern Hungarian photographers. The depictions of the hopelessness of poverty and urban destitution in *From Our Life* are defeated by proletarian labourers at work. Derkovits's *Bridge Builders* (*Hídépítők*) and Sándor Gönci-Frühof's *Glazier* (*Üvegező*) are notable analogies, but figures of construction workers, day labourers, quayside workers, and coal-carriers span both *From Our Life* and Derkovits's entire life work.⁵⁸ The figure of the proletarian is elevated into a timeless symbol: the composition of *Danube Sand Carriers* (*Dunai homokszállítók*), the apotheosis of Derkovits's depiction of workers, finds a direct formal and ideological analogy in the Munka Circle's socio-photography.⁵⁹

Departing from propositions raised by Éva Körner, we have traced a number of compositional and conceptual synapses in our exploration of the hypothetical connection between Derkovits and photography. Finally, we posit the possibility of his life 'fading in' into that of another well-known artist, one who has not yet been mentioned. André Kertész was born the same year (1894) as Derkovits and, like the painter, he volunteered as a young man to fight in the First World War. Like Derkovits, he soon left the war following a serious arm injury that would impact his entire life and impede his creative work, and he too pursued his (photographic) art almost as a deflection mechanism. However, their lives parted ways in the first half of the 1920s. Both left Budapest: Derkovits went to Vienna for a short time, where he had several successful exhibitions, before returning to Budapest. Kertész travelled further and built his great international reputation in Paris. Kertész's path led him to the Pantheon of photographers, while Derkovits ended up

as a ‘hunger artist’. Kertész’s world existed very far away from Derkovits’s. This was also even the case when both men documented a world they found alien: the circus.⁶⁰ Derkovits immediately identified with his subjects, and through incorporating a self-portrait, himself becomes a member of the circus troupe, while Kertész views the audience from far away beyond the fence. The latter uses the crowd to create a distance between himself and the milieu which Derkovits inhabits and which brings to mind, even if voluntarily, the dual watchword of the ancient proletariat: *panem et circenses*.

Translated by Gwen Jones

- 1 Éva Körner, *Derkovits Gyula* (Budapest: Corvina, 1971).
- 2 This essay summarises the research conducted around the Hungarian National Gallery’s 2014 exhibition *Derkovits: The Artist and His Times*. It was originally published in Hungarian in the journal *Enigma* 20/74–75 (2013): pp. 60–73. The complete illustrations accompanying the essay as originally published are available in the online version of the journal at <http://real.mtak.hu/10421> (accessed 30 October 2019). Subsequent references to images in notes below refer to this issue of the journal and the corresponding URL.
- 3 Viktória Dombai, *Derkovits Gyuláné: Mi ketten: emlékezés Derkovits Gyulára* (Budapest: Képzőművészeti Alap, 1977), p. 54. First edition: Budapest, 1954.
- 4 Lenke Haulisch, ‘Pécsi József életműve’, *Fotóművészet* 13/3 (1970): pp. 46–7; Mihály Simon, *Összehasonlító magyar fotótörténet* (Kecskemét: Magyar Fotográfiai Múzeum, 2000), p. 143.
- 5 Lajos Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből. A munka első fotókönyve* (Budapest: Munka Folyóirat, 1932).
- 6 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 175.
- 7 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 174.
- 8 Péter Molnos, *Derkovits. Szemben a világgal* (Budapest: Népszabadság Zrt, 2008), p. 54.
- 9 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 202. See also: Katalin Bakos, ‘An Œuvre with the Power to Engage’, in Katalin Bakos and András Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits. The Artist and His Times*, exhibition catalogue, Hungarian National Gallery (Budapest, 2014), pp. 26–47; Anna Kopócsy, ‘Inside and Outside. Gyula Derkovits’s Mature Period’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 76–87.
- 10 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 222.
- 11 György Várkonyi, ‘“Hagyomány” és “lelemény”. Archetipikus elemek Derkovits késői korszakának kompozíciós megoldásaiban’, *Janus Pannonius Múzeum Évkönyve* 40 (1995): pp. 185–210.
- 12 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, pp. 202–203.
- 13 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 280.
- 14 Molnos, *Derkovits*, p. 58.
- 15 For example: Gyula Derkovits, *Street (Ucca, 1927)*. Oil on canvas, 148 x 144 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table II.
- 16 Derkovits’s widow wrote that he often took long, exhausting walks. Viktória Dombai, *Derkovits Gyuláné: Mi ketten*, pp. 81–82.
- 17 Iván Hevesy, *A modern fotóművészet* (Budapest: Athenaeum, 1934), p. 63.
- 18 Hevesy, *A modern fotóművészet*, p. 63.
- 19 Gyula Derkovits, *Demonstration (Tüntetés II, 1930)*. Indian ink on paper, 18.4 x 24 cm. Hungarian National Museum, Budapest. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table VII.
- 20 See for example: ‘A véres szeptember 1.’, *Tolnai Világlapja* 32 (1930), p. 37. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table VIII.
- 21 Gyula Derkovits, *For Bread (Kenyerért I. (Terror), 1930)*. Tempera, paper, 46.5 x 53.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table IX.
- 22 Béla Albertini, *A magyar szociófotó története a kezdetektől a második világháború végéig* (Kecskemét: Magyar Fotográfiai Múzeum, 1997), p. 43.
- 23 *Nemzeti Magazin* (6 July 1930): p. 16.
- 24 Béla Albertini, *Szélpál Árpád, a szociófotós* (Kecskemét: Magyar Fotográfiai Múzeum, 2005).
- 25 Gyula Derkovits, *The Unknown Soldier (Ismeretlen katona, 1930)*. Etching, paper, 12.4 x 10 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See also: Katalin Bakos, ‘The Unknown Soldier’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 212–15.
- 26 Árpád Szélpál, ‘Élő halottak’, *Népszava* (1 November 1930): p. 10.
- 27 Béla Albertini, ‘Levél-interjú Szélpál Árpáddal’, *Fotóművészet* 26/2 (1983): p. 10.
- 28 Árpád Szélpál, ‘Dinnyeszüret a Dunaparton’, *Népszava* (2 August 1931): p. 10.
- 29 Gyula Derkovits, *Melon Eater (Dinnyevő, 1932)*. Tempera, paper, 69.9 x 50 cm. Private collection. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table XV.
- 30 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 196.
- 31 Sándor Gönci-Frühof, ‘Munkásfotó’, *Munka* 3/19 (October 1931): pp. 525–526.
- 32 Ernő Mihályfi, ‘Művész az uccán. Derkovits Gyula és a háziúr elmondja egy szomorú kilakoltatás történetét’, *Magyarország* (26 August 1931): p. 7.
- 33 Károly Escher, ‘Fejek a budapesti éjjeli menedékhelyen’, *Pesti Napló képes melléklete* (24 January 1932), pp. 6–7. Reprinted in: *Enigma* 74–75: p. 66.
- 34 ‘Gyermeknyomor a két világháború között. Escher Károly szociófotói’, *Budapesti Negyed* 1/:1–2 (2002): 45–67.
- 35 See multiple testimonies by Lajos Kassák, Aurél Bernáth, Ernő Mihályfi, and György Bálint in the ‘Derkovits-Reader’ of the journal *Enigma* 20/74–75 (2013).
- 36 Péter Molnos, ‘Success and Money in the Life of Gyula Derkovits’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 88–105.
- 37 Franz Kafka, *Ein Hungerkünstler. Vier Geschichten* (Berlin: Verlag Die Schmiede, 1924).
- 38 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 201.
- 39 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 175.
- 40 *Exhibition of the photographer Károly Escher, Hungarian National Gallery, 1965*. Introduction by Ernő Mihályfi. Budapest: Kossuth. On the Socialist-era analysis of Gyula Derkovits’s art, see: Éva Standeisky, ‘Appropriations. Derkovits in Times of Change’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 122–135.
- 41 Iván Hevesy, *A fényképezés nagy mesterei* (Budapest: Hatschek és Farkas, 1939), p. 126.
- 42 Hevesy, *A fényképezés nagy mesterei*, p. 126.
- 43 Gyula Derkovits, *Carrying Plank (Gerendacipelők, 1926)*. Indian ink, paper, 48.8 x 28.6 cm. Szombathely Gallery, Szombathely; Károly Escher, *Migrating Builders (Kubikusok, 1930)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 39.4 x 28.5 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XIII–XIV.
- 44 Károly Escher, *Banker at the Baths (Bankigazgató fürdik, 1938)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 17.9 x 23.6 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét. Inv. No.: 65.120; Gyula Derkovits, *Telephone (Telefon, 1931)*. Tempera, gold and silver paint, paper, 52.7 x 43.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. Inv. No.: 10.035. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XIX–XX. See also: Katalin Bakos, ‘The World of the Powerful’, in Bakos and Zwicck (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 200–205.

45 Katalin Bakos, “Proletarian, how long will it remain this Way?!” in Bakos and Zwickl (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 206–207.

46 Károly Escher, *Sitting on the Fence (Várakozási állásponton, 1937)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 17.8 x 13 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét.

47 Escher's photographs are reprinted in *Budapesti Negyed* (see note 37); Gyula Derkovits, *Trouble* (Gond, 1932). Tempera, paper, 96.8 x 72.3 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image table XXII.

48 On the Munka Circle of socio-photographers, see: Béla Albertini, ‘The Munka Circle and Hungarian Social Photography’, in Jorge Ribalta (ed.), *The Worker Photography Movement 1926–1939: Essays and Documents* (Madrid: Museo Centro De Arte Reina Sofia, 2011), pp. 284–303.

49 The most important source for the theory and practice modern photography is László Moholy-Nagy's concept of ‘new vision’ (*neues Sehen*). See: László Moholy-Nagy, ‘A fényképezés megújulása’, *Munka* 1/2 (October 1928); pp. 45–7; Ferenc Haár, ‘A Munka fotókiállításához’, *Munka* 3/17 (February 1931): p. 470.

50 Körner, *Derkovits Gyula*, p. 196.

51 Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből*, pp. 9–10.

52 Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből*, p. 7.

53 Lajos Gró, ‘A munkásfényképész’, *Munka* 2/14 (June 1930): p. 425.

54 Lajos Gró, ‘III-ik fotókiállításunk’, *Munka* 4/22 (February–March 1932): p. 623.

55 Gró, ‘III-ik fotókiállításunk’, p.623.

56 Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből*, p. 8.

57 Gyula Derkovits, *Anyá* (1934). Oil, silver paint, canvas, 64.5 x 56 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest; Sándor Gönci-Frühof, *Exasperated / People–Destinies 2 (Elgyötörve / Emberek-sorsok 2, 1930)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 13 x 18 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét; Gyula Ramháb, *Maternal Joy (Anyai boldogság, 1935)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 29.9 x 40 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XXV–XXVII.

58 Gyula Derkovits, *Bridge Builders (Hídépítők, 1932)*. Oil, silver paint, canvas, 119.2 x 82.5 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest; Sándor Gönci-Frühof, *Glazier (Úvegező, 1930)*, as reproduced in Kassák (ed.), *A mi életünkéből*, Figure 7. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XXVIII–XXIX. Further examples of such subjects include: Gyula Derkovits, *Stevedores (Rakodómunkások (Zsákolók), 1932)*. Lino cut, paper, 15.3 x 9.2 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest; Lajos Lengyel, *Loading Coal (Szénbordók, 1932)*. Gelatine silver print, paper, 12.9 x 17.6 cm. Hungarian Museum of Photography, Kecskemét. See: *Enigma* 74–75, image tables XXX–XXXI. See also: Anna Kopócsy, ‘The World of Labour’, in Bakos and Zwickl (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 256–261.

59 Gyula Derkovits, *Danube Sand Carriers (Dunai homokszállítók, 1933)*. Oil, canvas, 148 x 142 cm. Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest. See also: György Várkonyi, ‘Sand-Carriers on the Danube’, in Bakos and Zwickl (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 262–263.

60 Károly Tóth compares the two respective works: Gyula Derkovits's *Circus Artists (Artisták, 1933)* and André Kertész's *Peeking / In front of the Circus at Népliget (A népligeti cirkusz előtt / Leskelődők, 1920)*. See: Károly Tóth, “Yet suffering is also life”, in Bakos and Zwickl (eds.), *Derkovits*, pp. 250–255.