

# A 'Modern' Official Art: The School of Rome

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*While art history writing, including most selected texts in the present anthology, has long focussed on the avant-garde when studying the interwar decades, the essay below revisits another, less-discussed current of interwar art and culture. It was only in the past ten years or so that the existence and near-equal relevance of neo-Classicism, neo-Realism, and similar traditionalist tendencies have also earned the attention of scholars in East-Central Europe. Their explorations propose that both the avant-garde and its counterpart had a wide transnational reach, both with a range of local variations, traditionalism growing to be the de facto artistic mainstream of the period. The Hungarian art historian Julianna P. Szűcs was an early harbinger of the research direction investigating conservative aesthetics in the 1920s and 1930s. Her writings on the School of Rome date back to the 1980s, and the essay selected for our reader was originally published as 'Egy "modern" hivatalos művészet: a római iskola', in Valóság 5 (1981): pp. 35–44. The School of Rome designates a group of artists who held scholarships from the Hungarian state to spend a year or two at the Palazzo Falconieri, the Hungarian Academy (Collegium Hungaricum) in Rome, from the late 1920s on. (BH)*

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The debate is naturally always the same: should politics manifest itself in art, or should art enter politics?

Giuseppe Bottai, Italian Minister of National Education, 1941

Giuseppe Bottai's question was one frequently asked in interwar totalitarian dictatorships. It was a logical consequence of the historical role adopted by organisations that controlled culture in non-bourgeois democracies, Fascist states, and states in the process of becoming Fascist. In 'ideal circumstances' then, art and politics would mutually influence one another. The annexation of Trieste was not only celebrated by black-shirt loyalist Futurists; the March on Rome was itself a Futurist gesture. And it was not only three-storey statues by Adolf Hitler's official sculptor Josef Thorak that outgrew the traditional size of memorials; earlier ceremonial conventions were also surpassed by the Nuremberg Party days' *Gesamtkunst*-style mystery plays.

And what of the visible memories of Admiral Miklós Horthy's reign, 1920 to 1944? Events commemorating the 1526 Battle of Mohács, the nine-hundredth anniversary of the death of Saint Imre in 1930 to 1931, or the Eucharist World Congress of 1938? Precisely! According to contemporary sources, artistic representations were homogenous neither in the post-Trianon state nor within the church of that state, often referred to as the 'Country of Holy Mary'.<sup>1</sup> The reason behind this was the pseudo-aristocratic taste of a neo-Baroque society, a chauvinist atmosphere that fostered an artificial feeling of community, and, most of all, a sort of conservatism that forced stylistic backwardness on the fine and applied arts, especially in comparison to other art forms.

The official art of counter-revolutionary Hungary was pluralist. Therefore, if we wish to examine the fate of the School of Rome (Római Iskola), the official art that appeared the most modern in Hungary at the time, we also need to reckon with the *whole* within which it was created, in which it flourished, and in which it fought for its existence. The School of Rome represented, in the eyes of many contemporaries, an art that was part of a 'universal' phenomenon emphasising a new consciousness above and beyond the nation, a new European attitude towards life; it stood against both liberal bourgeois cosmopolitanism and the internationalism of revolutions. The body of this 'new Europe-consciousness' was the Latin legacy, its spirit was Christianity, and it operated through the rehabilitation of traditional values. This qualified as the tendency's relative stylistic unity.

The School of Rome had to struggle for its existence, fighting against art representing the wealthy class (*art pompier*); against the art of revolutions (avant-garde); the representational regimes of the 'historically-dominant classes' (academic art, neo-Baroque); and, later, against the nationalistic representational forms of Turanism emphasising racial characteristics.

It was largely in retrospect, in compendiums published in the 1930s, that the School of Rome was referred to as a school. Crucially, however, this designation as a school meant more of a tendency, rather than an association or group of people. Moreover, it was a consciously-constructed tendency, one that demonstrated a relative stylistic unity on the one hand and, on the other, an aesthetic platform that had repercussions for the oeuvres of individual artists. Its main characteristic was thus the artists' behavioural and methodological affinity. The circle of artists around the school was, however, not identical to those who had been awarded fellowships in Rome. The School of Rome was a consciously-built, institutionally-sponsored tendency, not the result of any spontaneous gathering.

The 'career history' of this official art cannot have been as bright as the politicians, ideologists, and cultural critics imagined it, due in part to the fact that only one side of Bottai's question was applicable in Hungary under the circumstances: politics manifested itself in art. But the art discussed here did not enter politics, or not directly. The following study analyses whether this was unfortunate or lucky.

Part of the generation of artists that came of age after the 1920 Treaty of Trianon loathed all forms of revolution or avant-garde. Yet the style of 'yesterday' did not fit their worldview either: they rejected both the *Kunsthalle* type of painting and the neo-Baroque, associated with the Habsburgs. Rather, they sought traditional values, a search typical across Europe at the time.

Art history has regarded the neo-Classicism of the 1920s as a universal phenomenon, one that relied on the continuity of traditional values on the one hand, and on the other, certain proto-avant-garde currents that had not yet radically demolished centuries of aesthetic conventions. In France, neo-Classicism emerged partly from synthetic Cubism and partly under the influence of Art Deco, a style fundamentally more respectful towards tradition. In Germany, neo-Classicism trickled down on the figural accomplishments of the Bauhaus and manifested itself as an outcome of New Objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*), and Classicist tendencies could be found in the art of almost all European countries at that time.

These tendencies were most prominent in Italian art, in the style comprehensively referred to as Novecento. When launched in 1926 by Massimo Bontempelli, *Novecento* as a journal and movement declared a 'return to order', and while its tone resembled the manifestos of the 'isms', it attempted to convene post-revolutionary cultural forces amenable to the reactionary consolidation underway. Their anti-Bolshevism remained in the shadows for a long while, producing no authentic or impressive official art. Following the Fascist takeover, for some years still, the spectacular battles continued to be played out between Futurism and Ottocento (in other words, between revolution and tradition). But as the Mussolini regime accomplished its finest move of 'modernisation' and made its pact with the church and even its European competitors, neo-Classicism could be immediately promoted into the ranks of official art.

The Italian example of accommodating a certain form of modernism held special significance for Hungarian official art. On the one hand, it was tempting to take the art of a country also 'betrayed' by the 'Trianon Peace dictators' as a cultural political reference point, notwithstanding that the former was their ally.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, Italian modernity was particularly adept at counterbalancing another type of modernity, the one committed to Socialist revolution. However self-evident this thesis may seem, the administrators of Hungarian art world only start to rely on it belatedly and even then inconsistently. It took a long time, essentially the entire 1920s, until any other tendency than the one represented by the Fine Arts Society and *Képzőművészet* (*Fine Arts Journal*) could come to represent official Hungarian art.

The first moment of this change in attitude was undoubtedly expressed by Tibor Gerevich's writing, notably in 1922: 'At the Venice Biennale opening in May, let us be prepared to encounter a completely different Italian art than the one we knew before the war. Let us endeavour to use what we learn there to the advantage of Hungarian fine arts, because we are not setting off for Venice just for prizes ... but also to learn for ourselves'.<sup>3</sup> It should be noted that, at this point in time, private collectors and official representation still demanded both conservatism and the peacetime norms of the *fin-de-siècle*, even if the liberal bourgeoisie, the state, and the church

understood these differently. Gerevich had identified the weakest link in this chain of demands: the church. The economic and moral basis of Horthy's Christian Socialist counterrevolution was in the hands of the Catholic church. This was the era of de-secularisation: church investments rose significantly in Budapest and elsewhere, particularly to the west of the Danube, although this was not, however, accompanied by an improvement of the quality or quantity of religious art, where skill levels stagnated throughout the 1920s. It is only in this context that we can understand how the School of Rome, the style and aesthetics of which formed alongside secular and Fascist Novocento, eventually turned into a religious and bourgeois trend in Hungary.

Initially, the notion of the School of Rome was an undoubtedly 'administrative' one: its founders meant to integrate all those who had studied in the Palazzo Falconieri into a coherent group. One indicator of Hungarian-Italian political and cultural cooperation was the re-opening of the Hungarian Academy in Rome. The building fell under Italian ownership after the Treaty of Trianon, and was later returned to Hungary by Benito Mussolini as a friendly gesture in 1923. In a similar gesture of friendship in 1927, the year of the agreement between Mussolini and Hungarian prime minister István Bethlen, the Hungarian Academy was officially opened as a permanent facility for postgraduate academic and artistic training. But, as a newspaper critic pointed out, artists who benefitted from this opportunity to experience art not only via an intermediary, but to actually see the cultural monuments produced and developed by Italian civilisation, did not start out as equals among themselves. This diverse group included established painters such as István Szőnyi; artists who had already abandoned avant-garde influences despite their Parisian education, for example Jenő Medveczky; and recent graduates of the Budapest Fine Arts Academy, such as László Rozgonyi and György Kákay-Szabó. The selection was heavily influenced by elements of cultural policy. The Italophile Gerevich, a devotee of sacred art, wished that 'the foundations [would] begin concurrently in every field (architecture, sculpture, painting and applied arts), in parallel and interwoven with one another, so that the desired new style and new spirit will take shape from mutually influencing branches of art'.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, the occasional differences in style among the grantees of the first years were irrelevant. Vilmos Aba-Novák and Károly Patkó may have painted in the spirit of Paul Cézanne, and Gyula Hincz may have had to be 'rescued' from 'excessive Parisian and Berlin trends', just as goldsmith Mária Molnár's over-adorned Hungarian style may have been reminiscent of the bygone *fin-de-siècle*: all were selected in the hope that they would become the creators of a new *Gesamtkunst*.

However, the communication and acceptance of this endeavour did not proceed smoothly. While exhibitions counted on the presence of middle-class buyers, sacral commissions were issued as a result of skirmishes between the conservative but quality-oriented Central Bureau of Church Art (Egyházművészeti Hivatal) and the equally conservative but less quality-conscious clergy. With the exception of Béla Rerrich's plans for the cathedral square in Szeged and the 1926 *Exhibition of Christian Art (Egyházművészeti Kiállítás)*, hardly any initiatives of the 1920s could provide inspiration for a reinvigorating religious art. (The 1926 exhibition did feature, however, new talents, such as Pál Molnár C., Henrik Heintz, György Kákay-Szabó, and many iconographical elements that would later become central for the School of Rome.) Apparently, the new creative tendency could only gradually fill the airless vacuum that had existed before.

Tibor Gerevich, as Biennale commissioner, first introduced the fellows of Palazzo Falconieri on the international stage in Venice. In 1928, he only displayed works from a few promising artists. These included Vilmos Aba-Novák, the envisioned headmaster (or *caposcuola*) of the guild-like school; István Szőnyi, the promising neo-Classicist; and Kálmán Istókovits, a flexible continuer of earlier traditions. In 1930, however, an unexpected opportunity provided itself to Gerevich, the school's convener: that year the Biennale's general programme ran under the title *Italian Influence in the Art of Various Nations*, and this allowed for a more complete presentation of works by the first years' intake. Alongside recurring Biennale participants such as Lipót Hermann, Béla Iványi-Grünwald, and Adolf Fényes, a group of young artists also now appeared, whose new voice struck a sharply-different tone from the masters of pre-war, liberal, *grand bourgeois* Impressionism. The press focussed mainly on works by Vilmos Aba-Novák, Jenő Medveczky,

Pál Molnár C., Dezső Erdey, and Ernő Jalics, and questioned the justification for the selection. A statement from Nándor Gyöngyösi, representing the journal *Képzőművészet* in particular, and the conservative Hungarian art scene in general, is a case in point: 'We would be most delighted had Professor Tibor Gerevich been able to assemble such a good survey of the works of Collegium Hungaricum fellows that merits the distinction. As every visitor could have seen at first glance, however, young art students were disproportionately represented'.<sup>5</sup> In 1930, the group appearance and the accomplishments of the School of Rome still upset the old-school representatives of art administration. The successes in Italy, the praise regularly published in *Popolo d'Italia* (*The People of Italy*), or the generous analyses in Gio Ponti's paper *Casabella* (which resembled the Hungarian *Tér és Forma* (*Space and Form*)), were not yet sufficient to provide a basis for securing commissions. The first cohorts were mainly characterised by their indisputable anti-conservatism; this in itself aroused expectations among a more open-minded section of the Hungarian middle class, and animated a relatively large band of artists ... If we examine the list of students from the first three years, it becomes clear that the only thing they shared was a lack of commitment towards artistic trends. Their attraction to religion, Italian Fascism, or spirituality was a mere consequence of an overall feeling of uncertainty and non-belonging.

At the same time, they could not possibly extricate themselves from the spirit of Rome. Excerpts from various progress reports read as follows: 'Under the influence of old and new classical art, the light-dissolving technique of painter Vilmos Aba-Novák became more enclosed and plastic'. It was written of Alfréd Bardon that 'as well as ancient monuments, he also studied modern Roman architecture'. The sculptor Livia Kuzmik made busts of Mussolini and Monti, and 'the Italian Prime Minister honoured her on many occasions by sitting for the bust'. Pál Pátzay's work 'made room for a calm, expansive, minimalist, almost Classicist concept under Roman influences'. The ceramicist Ferenc Szuchy aimed to 'gain an understanding and practical mastery of contemporary Italian majolica methods as well as those of the Etruscans, the ancient Romans, and the della Robbia family'.

This new voice, new subject matter, and most of all the new approach to art made their debut for the Hungarian audience at the 1931 National Salon (Nemzeti Szalon). The opportune timing of the joint appearance was corroborated by reviews in the liberal press. In this era, a particular emphasis was still discernible: 'Italophilia', 'Catholicism', and 'modernity' coincided in the works of the best artists in a way that could win praise from both the bourgeois liberal intelligentsia and circles closer to the establishment. This shared position was mirrored in the moderate *Pesti Hírlap* (*Pest Journal*), in which László Kézdy-Kovács wrote that 'those who left for abroad, worked honourably for Hungarian culture. Many of them also reaped great success'.<sup>6</sup> But he also warned: 'We must nevertheless take care that the "Roman regulars" also make space for new talents'. The critics in *Újság* (*The Newspaper*) and *Budapesti Hírlap* (*Budapest Courier*) dispensed with even such subtle objections, stating that the School of Rome's debut was indeed a revelation.

What drove observers of these emerging new values into the same camp when it came to the School of Rome? First and foremost, it was the aforementioned relative stylistic unity. In what was now an 'ism'-free Hungarian art world, Aba-Novák's city sketches were intriguingly novel; albeit carefully, and somewhat idiosyncratically, they utilised techniques pioneered in post-Futurism, the dubious innovations of the Aeropainters (*Aeropittori*) who painted 'from aeroplanes'. Pál Molnár C.'s *Annunciation* (*Angyali üdvözlés*) captivated both viewers who had not yet experienced first-hand a graceful ease in painting like Raoul Dufy's, and those fascinated by the depiction of deserted cityscapes reminiscent of Giorgio de Chirico's works (Fig. 20.1). Ilona Vég's gently S-shaped *Woman in Bathing Suit* (*Fürdőruhás nő*), wearing the neo-frivolous facial expression in vogue at the time, equally won over critics who missed the Art Deco elegance of the 1920s in the works of other School of Rome pupils, and those who regarded neo-Gothic Lehmbruck-style proportions as the only path to be followed. This duality was integral to the sociology of the School of Rome's reception, which reflected the taste of a disorientated Hungarian interwar middle class, yearning for refreshment, rather than the actual character of the works themselves, the latter being far more complex.



Fig. 20.1. Pál Molnár C., *Annunciation* (*Angyali üdvözlés*, c. 1940). Oil on canvas, 100 x 70 cm. Gallery Kieselbach, Budapest. © DACS 2019

In most cases, the public encountered double-layered works. Paintings by more significant artists (such as Aba-Novák's *Musica in piazza* and *Circus* (*Cirkusz*), Károly Patkó's *Motherhood* (*Anyaság*) and *Still Life* (*Csendélet*), István Szőnyi's *My Mother* (*Anyám*) and *Bathers* (*Fürdőzők*), and Pál Pátzay's successful *Dada* (*Nanny*) and *Sadness* (*Szomorúság*)) represented, on the one hand, the virtues bequeathed by Cézanne and Aristide Maillol's neo-Classicism to Hungarian art scenes deprived of a revolutionary left, 'going as far as possible' in an era of institutionalised conservatism and, on the other, virtues that were the result of 'studying the Italian Trecento and Quattrocento, an advanced depiction of space, the elevation of vital aspects of reality, solid plasticity and healthy formalism' (Fig. 20.2).<sup>7</sup> Yet the selection and organisational concept of the National Salon could only mirror a retouched and one-dimensional image of the School of Rome.

Nevertheless, this balancing attempt itself was capable of breaking up prejudices. For the purposes of a new emerging official art, the close connection between Italianness and Futurism had to be eliminated, the connection between Italianness and sacred art established, and finally the notions of the church and modernism entwined. These unnatural acts of loosening and tightening won support from both Tibor Gerevich and Minister of Culture Bálint Hóman. The first major step was the strong representation of School of Rome apprentices in the 1931 Padua *International Exhibition of Modern Sacred Christian Art*, which also brought the first international recognition for Aba-Novák (grand gold prize) and Pál Molnár C. (graphics prize). In the wake of this exhibition, Gerevich could claim for the first time that modern art was 'creative and not imitative, spiritual and not materialist', and that religion would play a new, larger role in modern art 'not only because tormented humanity yearns for God, but also because in today's global economic crisis, the church will become the main patron of the arts once again'.<sup>8</sup> From here on it was only a small step to Tibor Gerevich's 1932 statement in the *Nemzeti Újság* (*National Newspaper*):

Fascism has done away with not only the politics but also the entire ideology of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth, and liberated the Italian spirit from the rule of alien, materialist, positivist and Marxist theories ... It was clear from the start that Fascism would seek rapprochement with the church, because both are based on the principle of authority and fight for spiritual and moral ideals.<sup>9</sup>

The 'de-ideologisation' of modernism was officially acknowledged by Minister of Culture Bálint Homán himself, directly upon assuming office: 'I find it desirable that our artists pursue their activities in any artistic field united in respect for the great traditions of the past ... There is no direction towards left or right, only art'.<sup>10</sup>



Fig. 20.2. Károly Patkó, *Motherhood* (*Anyaság*). Tempera, board, 90 x 66 cm. Gallery Kieselbach, Budapest.

As contemporary sources reveal, the National Salon exhibition could only present one side of the School of Rome: the stylistic affinities. This was a moment in art history when a form of relation could be posited between the illustration-like affectation of Ferenc Dex's *Self-Portrait*, for example, and Béla Kontuly's *Street Dancers in Tivoli*, and which brought Kákav-Szabó's cool-mannered *Portrait of Miss Signorelli* into proximity with Pál Molnár's *Portrait of Lady Amalfi*. However, the confines of an exhibition that otherwise observed bourgeois structures allowed no room to reveal anything beyond stylistic resemblance. The aspiration towards total art could only come forth in larger scale commissions that could testify to the existence of the trend more effectively than occasional shows abroad, temporary exhibitions, and theoretical articles. Therefore, the most important junctures in the history of the School of Rome were commissions for churches and their interior design, or the participation at festivities which exceeded the possibilities offered for the average middle-class artist.

The first impressive proofs to testify to the viability of the propositions of the School of Rome were the Heart of Jesus church and the Saint Antal church, in the Budapest districts of Városmajor and Pasarét, respectively, as well as the chapel at Balatonboglár. All three buildings (erected in 1932) represent symptomatically-fleeting moments in the history of official art. In one sense, they clearly demonstrated the sort of stylistic shifts that could be mastered while in Italy; their relative isolation, however, suggests that this type of 'Europeanising' Novecentism found it difficult to put down roots in Hungary. We should not forget that Mussolini's Italy could rightly claim to have mastered modernism, just at the time when the 'Soviet style' started to elicit negative assessments. Theorists also drew on the formal experiments imbued with new content. In this respect, we should note Tibor Gerevich's art historical overview in the volume *The New Paths of Hungarian Historiography (A magyar történetírás új útjai*, edited by Bálint Hóman): 'Naturally, the Russians' Soviet official art is first and foremost a propaganda art, it is conservative, the most outdated and boring academic art; while in anti-Communist Italy, Futurism is the government-fostered official art, its political arsenal, so to speak'.<sup>11</sup> In this sense, Futurism was meant to be used as a collective term for modernism, just as Constructivism had been used earlier on the political left. Another article contrasting the 'Italian style' with 'Soviet style' was penned by Virgil Bierbauer in his journal *Tér és Forma*, an author who was also first to defend the related outputs of a total art.<sup>12</sup>

What were the decidedly 'de-ideologised' modern properties of the churches built? First of all, the basic cuboid form of the building. So much so that the consecration of the Városmajor church in 1932 provoked a press debate over its 'almost Soviet' style, while the Pasarét church prompted parliamentary interpellations. Only one of the Városmajor architects, Bertalan Árkay, had received a scholarship to Rome. The other architects, Gyula Rimanóczy and Iván Kotsis, at best comprehended the spirit of Italian architecture which 'allowed artists to use decorative statues and wall paintings, and to give expression to such skills'.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, all three architects built decidedly-Mediterranean-style buildings, with Italianesque bell towers and window shutter structures, and even more Italianesque interior decor. As accomplishment, the Városmajor church was of the highest quality, not only because it was designed by father and son, Ákos and Bertalan Árkay, or because Róbert Folly's novel, reinforced concrete construction was itself one of the most remarkable achievements of Hungarian interwar architecture, but also because the School of Rome disciples regarded it as their own and, with their contributions, endeavoured to retain its stylistic unity. Upon encountering Pál Pátzay's statues of the Apostles, Lili Sztehló's stained glass windows for the apse or, a few years later, Béla Ohmann's *Saint Ladislaus Altar (Szent László oltár)*, Aba-Novák's panel and shrine paintings, and István Pekáry's decorative works, the general public first grasped that 'the transformation and the new way of life demands a new art, even if official circles keep dreaming of a Hungarian baroque'.<sup>14</sup> These sacral compositions enjoying a permanent public made it clear—clearer than the School of Rome's temporary exhibitions (*New Art from Rome*, National Salon, 1936, or the *8 Painters–8 Sculptors* series)—that the dry painting style, the primacy of content over emotions and the various archaic exercises dressed in modernist garb would only truly bring home their message when they could unfold outside the constraints of genres catering to traditional middle-class demands.





Fig. 20.3. Vilmos Aba-Novák, fresco for the church of Jászszentandrás, Hungary (1933). Photograph © Zoltán Bagyinszki.

Such a *pro forma* anti-bourgeois stance was a constant feature throughout the history of the School of Rome. Both painters and sculptors could fall back on it, since the general poverty in which artists lived, regardless of whether they were left-wing or not, turned young talents against bourgeois patrons. It also worked well for the school administrators, since this anti-liberal phraseology echoed that of Italian Fascist art. Finally, it could also speak to certain cultural politicians whose opinions on artistic representation differed from those of their predecessors. Nevertheless, the three churches mentioned earlier, the Klebelsberg memorial exhibition's interior design (1933, also delivered by Roman fellows), and Aba-Novák's controversial frescos in Jászszentandrás (1933), were still too richly imbued with precisely those modernist stylistic characteristics that filled non-bourgeois commissioners with anxiety (Figs. 20.3 and 20.4).



Fig. 20.4. Vilmos Aba-Novák, fresco for the church of Jászszentandrás, Hungary (1933) [detail]. Photograph © Zoltán Bagyinszki.

For the time being, commissioners granted larger projects to artists like Andor Dudits and Gáspár Fábián (frescoes at the National Archive and the church on Budapest's Lehel Square, respectively), rather than to the 'Romans' who tended to sidestep the bureaucratic procedures of the Central Bureau of Church Art. Somewhat dissenting from the school's founding concept, these artists exhibited at the National Salon and Ernst Museum between 1931 and 1932 (including Pál Molnár C., Vilmos Aba-Novák, Károly Patkó, Pál Pátzay, György Kákay-Szabó, and others), already attracting a new group of buyers with their more acerbic, drawing-like, mythical panel paintings rich in neo-frivolity, or with their heavily outlined woodcuts and voluminous copperplate etchings. (Whereas Károly Patkó, the Basilides brothers, Kálmán Istókovics, and the artists who would become regular members of the artists' colonies of Szolnok or Zebegény generally remained on conventional terms of artist-audience contact and the corresponding, supposedly traditionally-'Hungarian' forms of expression.)

The controversial churches, the new and excessively bold frescoes, and a religious art decried as 'liberal' could only gain acceptance in Hungary with support from an indisputable authority. Such an opportunity presented itself at an exhibition in Rome that was meant to reflect Pope Pius XI's edicts on Christian art, and, for similar reasons, the Hungarian hall at the *Second International Exhibition of Sacred Art (II mostra internazionale d'arte sacra, 1934)* could win cultural political significance, even if the works on view were not necessarily among the most important of the respective oeuvres. The Italian press highlighted Béla Ohmann's *Crucifix (Kereszt)*, Vilmos Aba-Novák and Ferenc Chiovini's fresco design for Jászszentandrás, and Lili Sztehló's *Annunciation (Angyali üdvözlet)* (the latter purchased by Mussolini himself).<sup>15</sup> The same unified style was represented by Ernő Jeges and Béla Kontuly, Lívia Kuzmik and Aurél Emőd, and, the most modern of all, Jenő Medveczky and László Mészáros.

But it was not individual accomplishments that caused a sensation. Having garnered international experience with the Padua exhibition, Tibor Gerevich had a compact environment designed within which samples from the commission-hungry Hungarian pack would be displayed.

It was thus Bertalan Árkay's design of an imagined, ruined, Roman chapel that finally secured the success and authority required to overcome remaining opposition and procure commissions to construct new churches in the countryside towns of Csorna, Győr, Mohács, or in Budapest's Pozsonyi Road. This was the turning point that also brought individual recognition for some Roman scholarship holders. From 1934 onwards until the end of the Second World War, Budapest's József Ferenc prize was awarded grantees of the Roman scholarship almost every time.

A gradual reassessment of the School of Rome as phenomenon dates back to this time. As relative stylistic unity receded, an aesthetic programme came to the foreground around which formed the base of cultural political intentions and which, however, the artists themselves did not quite fully recognise. The first half of the school's history was characterised by a decidedly international style, a formal language that also raised high expectations among quality-conscious observers of any new endeavour. They hoped that the 'objectivity and concrete language' that this style possessed 'would gradually improve the relationship between the art work and its public'.<sup>16</sup> The harvest was eventually reaped by those who managed to combine, and even occasionally substitute, neo-Classicism with the requirements of monumentalism. This was the reason why, in the second half of the decade, Szőnyi, Pátzay and others who had only occasionally received a share in large-scale state and church commissions parted with the school's conceptual framework. Meanwhile the school's core disciples now had to conform to the specific demands of the official commissioners.

This new demand became visible on several occasions: in 1937 at the Hungarian Pavilion of the Paris International Exposition of Art and Technology in Modern Life (decorated by School of Rome apprentices) and at the *Modern Monumental Art (Modern Monumentális Művészet)* exhibition of the National Salon; at the visual arts programmes of the festivities around the Year of Saint Stephen or the Eucharistic Congress (both in 1938); as well as in the 1941 *Exhibition of Hungarian Church Art (Magyar egyházművészeti kiállítás)*, where the relative stylistic unity of the school became ultimately subordinated to the dictates of cultural policy.

At the start of this deterioration, Vilmos Aba-Novák, Pál Molnár C., and Jenő Medveczky's Parisian panels seemed to illustrate the demise of art for art's sake and other gratuitous experiments unfolding in front of our very eyes: the various branches of decorative painting and sculpture are about to triumph, and they are consigning to the background the type of easel painting and sculpture that lacks large, unifying tasks and relies instead on the artist's fleeing inspiration. Works like the ones depicting *Franco-Hungarian Historical Relations (Francia-magyar történeti kapcsolatok)*, *The Land of Trianon (A trianoni ország)*, or *Hungarian Agriculture (Magyar mezőgazdaság)* announced that they were 'preserving the good international reputation of our art and culture and even elevating us higher: promoting the sons of the little country and oppressed nation into the ranks of the fortunate, happy sons of the great powers living in prosperity'.<sup>17</sup> For the time being, Hungarian attributes attached to an international neo-Classicism still proved sufficient to accentuate the national element.

This 'national turn' in the School of Rome's style and the ambition to represent the state were first clearly seen at the National Salon in 1937. This show still included familiar altar paintings by Pál Molnár C. deploying Trecento and Surrealist overtones (*Madonna*), and artistic sculptures for church use with fine drapery and an archaic smile (Jenő Grandtner's *Saint Elizabeth of Hungary (Magyarországi Szent Erzsébet)*). Novelty, however, was to be found in other works. 'The absorption of folk-like elements is one of the most pressing questions of modern Hungarian art, to which the exhibition offers healthy answers', as Zoltán Nagy wrote.<sup>18</sup> Examples included works by School of Rome pupils who did not limit themselves to mastering the Italian lesson, but went on to adapt and re-invent the principles of neo-Classicism for the Hungarian context: István Pekáry, Antal Diósy, and Hajni Kontuly. Beside applied arts, a number of sculptors also struck a new tone. Among them, perhaps the strongest personality was Zoltán Borberek-Kováts, in whose style 'we find no trace of the influence of either ancient Roman and Italian, or modern Italian sculpture'.<sup>19</sup> Instead, exhibition-goers could encounter those proportional and iconographic shifts which could authentically express, as it were, the alleged racial characteristics of the Hungarians.

A pure form of Novecentism proved equally unviable when included in auxiliary artistic programmes celebrating the marriage between church and state. Ensembles marking the Year of Saint Stephen already sought to display Christianity furnished with vernacular motives a sort of Christian-Hungarian archaism. The stylistic attributes of neo-Romanticism were now discernible in the reconstructed ruins of Székesfehérvár (Géza Lux's work), on Dezső Erdey's statue *Captain Varkocs* (*Varkocs kapitány*), or on the memorial for *Domonkos Kálmáncsehi* (by Béla Ohmann), as well as in many other works produced for the anniversary, such as Károly Antal's *Saint Stephen Relief* (*Szent István relief*) in Esztergom, Endre Domanovszky's tapestry in Pécs, and Ferenc Dex's fresco in Komárom.

During this period, the Rome fellows enjoyed a sizable portion of church and state investments. They produced not only Eucharistic memorial altars, but also smaller-sized graphics, medals, nativity cribs, and posters in line with Gerevich's original vision. True, later scholarship holders in Rome no longer fed on that form of orthodox neo-Classicism that had so captivated their predecessors. They had neither the authority nor the experience, and in line with domestic expectations, they relied on emphasising Hungarian elements, adopting at best a handful of compositional schemata learned in Italy, from Ferruccio Ferrazzi's frescos, to Ercole Drei's sculptures, and the Italy-wide popular Mannerism of the Scuola d'Arte (Béla Czene, János Czene, Erzsébet Hikády, Mária Kovács, Frigyes Matzon, and Eszter Mattioni).

This loss of direction and malleability of style were mirrored in the great church art exhibition of 1941, even if it is remembered today as the School of Rome's most convincing success. Unmistakable Árkay-style church interiors were still present, as well as a number of 'Italianesque' sculptures, but these were supplemented by other sorts of endeavours. Alongside Classicist works that already seemed to belong to art history, the younger generation showcased a *Hungarian Pietà* (*Magyar Pietà*, by Zoltán Borberek-Kovács), *Hungarian Madonna* (*Magyar Madonna*, by Ilona Szörédy), and even Hungarian vestments from the Kalocsa Folk Art House collection.

Monumentalism and neo-Classicism had ultimately parted ways. This was partly due to the fact that an orientation towards Germany had eclipsed the focus on Italy, that the most prominent masters died unduly early (both Vilmos Aba-Novák and Károly Patkó died in 1941), and that nationalist attacks were on the rise: the original 'stylistic unity' of the School of Rome came under fire from both the left (as in Ernő Kállai's articles in *Korunk Szava* (*Voice of Our Time*)) and the right. In the notorious far-right periodical *Egyedül vagyunk* (*We are Alone*), Tibor Gerevich's work was judged excessive in its efforts to promote the often pretentious artistic positions of a neo-Classical painting school that imitatively rehearsed the formal language of Trecento and Quattrocento. The individual successes enjoyed by some of the new church artists and new monumentalists also indicated that innovation-thirsty Christian art and new monumentalism did not exactly take shape according to Gerevich's ideals. The most representative attainments of the 1940s, such as Béla Kontuly's frescos in the Domonkos church, or the many works in the 1942 group exhibition, already bore witness to the neo-neo-Baroque and neo-folkish upswing (Fig. 20.5).

Although naming one year as the endpoint of the School of Rome would be just as arbitrary as marking its birth, and although the impact of neo-Classicism would be felt in Hungarian fine arts for decades to follow, it is fair to assert that the School of Rome ceased to exist as a cultural-political and complex art historical phenomenon at the start of the 1940s. It was not made to disappear by administrative means; rather, time ran out for the representational regime it subscribed to. Official art no longer aspired to tame the avant-garde or use it for its own ends, but to exploit the possibilities offered by emerging folkish and national endeavours.

*Translated by Gwen Jones*



Fig. 20.5. Béla Kontuly, fresco for the Assumption Cathedral, Vác, Hungary (1947). © DACS 2019. Image courtesy Globetrotter19 / Wikimedia Commons.

1 The Treaty of Trianon (1920) regulated the status of the Hungarian state after the First World War. It left Hungary as a landlocked country, covering barely one-third of the territory of the pre-war Kingdom of Hungary (the Hungarian half of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy). It lost more than thirteen million inhabitants and 31% of Hungarian nationals were left outside the borders of post-Trianon Hungary. Five of the pre-war kingdom's ten largest cities were drawn into other countries. (*The Editor*).

2 Italy joined the Allied Powers in the First World War at the last minute, hoping to gain land after winning the war. Yet, it had a weak position at the peace conference and failed to achieve most of its major war goals. (*The Editor*).

3 Tibor Gerevich, 'A modern olasz művészet', *Új Nemzedék* 3 (1922): p. 19. (On Gerevich's activities, see also Kinga Bódi's essay in this volume – *The Editor*).

4 Tibor Gerevich, 'Római magyar művészek', *Magyar Szemle* 11 (1932): pp. 235–40.

5 Nándor Gyöngyösi, 'A velencei nemzetközi kiállítás', *Képzőművészet* 9 (1930): pp. 164–67.

6 László Kézdy-Kovács, *Pesti Hírlap* (12 May 1931).

7 Tibor Gerevich, 'Római magyar művészek', *Magyar Művészet* 4 (1931): pp. 189–212.

8 Tibor Gerevich, 'Újabb egyházművészeti törekvéseink a páduai és nürnbergi kiállítás tükrében', *Nemzeti Újság* 9 (1931): p. 17.

9 Tibor Gerevich, 'A fasizmus szellemi élete', *Nemzeti Újság* 4 (1932): p. 14.

10 Statement published in *Magyar Művészet* (1932): pp. 314–15.

11 Bálint Hóman (ed.), *A magyar történetírás új útjai* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1931).

12 Virgil Bierbauer, 'Sztálini architektúra', *Tér és Forma* 6 (1938): p. 2081.

13 Virgil Bierbauer, 'Új építészet Olaszországban', *Magyar Művészet* 11 (1935): pp. 330–38.

14 János Jajczay, *Mai magyar egyházművészet* (Budapest: Révai, 1938).

15 Mario Meneghini, 'Le Cosidette Arti Minori alla II. Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Sacra', *Osservatore Romano* 4 (1934): p. 12; Leone Gessi, 'La sala dell'Ungheria alla Mostra d'Arte Sacra', *Illustrazione Vaticana* (1934): pp. 206–8.

16 István Genthon, *Az új magyar festőművészet története* (Budapest: Magyar Szemle Társaság, 1935), p. 273.

17 Jenő Kopp, 'Művészeink a párizsi világkiállításon', *Pesti Napló* (1937): pp. 328–32.

18 Zoltán Nagy, 'Modern monumentális művészet', *Magyar Szemle* (1937): pp. 329–36.

19 Zoltán Nagy, 'Az "1942" csoportkiállítás', *Szépítőművészet* 1 (194): pp. 85–7.

