Hungarian "Vie Bohémè" demythologized

Art. Szivos organizes her analysis of this social phenomenon into three sections.

The first section is an overview of the relevant literature both in Hungary and the rest of Europe. Szivos deconstructs the romantic myth of the artist in the European context and lays out her rationale for doing this in the Hungarian case. She also concisely outlines her basis for comparing Hungarian and European art institutions and economic milieux.

The second part of the book attends to the meat of Szivos's argument and stands as the main contribution of her research. The romantic myth of the starving artist actually masks a much more interesting social transformation of the fine artist from a tradesman and small businessman into a professional and member of the middle or even upper middle class. Equally noteworthy is her discussion of the place of women in the art world and their ambiguous status as amateurs or professionals.

The third section analyzes the relationship between the artistic community and Hungarian cultural, social, and political institutions. As this part of the book makes clear, the state played a significant role in Hungarian artistic life during the Dualist era. Given the underdeveloped private art market from the mid to late nineteenth century, the Hungarian Ministry of Culture served as the main patron for the fine arts in the Dualist Era. They also provided funds for art education, stipends for young artists to study at art academies abroad, and money for the construction of two significant buildings in Hungarian artistic life, the Exhibition Hall (Múzeum) and the Museum of Fine Arts. The history of the first decades of the twentieth century became one where the artists pushed for more autonomy from the state, while still seeking to retain its substantial financial and social support.

Szivos's methodology is the book's greatest strength, and her analysis of the primary sources is her most significant contribution to the literature. In terms of methodology, Szivos explicitly foregoes the formal analysis that characterizes the majority of art historical scholarship. In fact, she doesn't examine specific works of art. Instead, Szivos systematically analyzes the different dimensions of the artist's cultural, social, and economic status. The book unfolds as a social history, where the relevant quantitative analysis is supported and illustrated by the telling detail or anecdote.

Evidence is a great strength of the book. Szivos includes a terrific mix of both quantitative and qualitative materials. Her statistical analysis rests on a variety of interesting sources. The main ones are: the Artists Encyclopedia (Művészet Lexicon), published between 1964 and 1968; a set of completed questionnaires from 1908 created by Gyula Szentvárinyi and János Szendrei for an earlier, but uncompleted, encyclopedia project; completed questionnaires from a survey by the Ministry of Culture in 1939. These questionnaires, combined with memoirs, letters, and comparative evidence from other scholars form the basis of Szivos's qualitative analysis.


The book's discussion of professionalization makes a significant contribution to the social history of Hungarian professionals and the middle class of the Dualist Era. It easily connects with the work of Mária Kovács, Liberal Professions and Illiberal Politics (1994) and János Mazzu, The Social History of the Hungarian Intelligentsia (1997). By dismantling the myth of the starving artist, and showing how the fine arts became professionalized, Szivos has expanded the size of the East Central European bourgeoisie.

Finally, although it is not the central focus, Szivos's book also functions as a work of urban history given the large role of the capital city in creating and sustaining the Hungarian art marker. This book could be profitably read along with Robert Nemes, The Once and Future Budapest (2005) and Gábor Gyánti, Parlor and Kitchen (2002). Graduate students and established scholars alike will find Social History of the Fine Arts in Hungary an interesting read and a useful starting point for further research.

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