

## **THE ROLE OF VIENNA IN THE LIFE OF MIHÁLY MUNKÁCSY, THE FIRST WORLD FAMOUS HUNGARIAN PAINTER**

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### **Abstract**

This paper deals with the early stage of the career of Mihály Munkácsy, who was a Hungarian painter living in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Our work analyses Munkácsy's stay in Vienna that is largely neglected or even ignored in the existing literature. This is the first attempt to document the year 1865 in Munkácsy's life on the basis of personal letters of the painter. This paper summarises three years of research in archives in Vienna and Hungary. But this paper is of interest not only as a contribution to the existing literature, but also because Mihály Munkácsy was the first Hungarian painter who became world famous in his time.

**Keywords:** Mihály Munkácsy, Hungarian painting, Vienna, Venetian school, Carl Heinrich Rahl

**JEL Classification:** Z, Z0

### **Family background and Munkácsy's first master**

Munkácsy Mihály was the first Hungarian painter, whose paintings allowed the European and American arts world to learn about the existence of the Hungarian national culture. His paintings combined what he learned from his masters, his determination and the love of his work. He combined these elements with the help of his fantasy either in a visible way or only hidden in his works. Munkácsy's art career is very unique, since after his father's death in 1844 he lived and worked as an apprentice carpenter until he was 15 years old. It was thanks to his first master, Elek Szamossy that he developed an interest in art and made his first steps towards becoming an artist. He cannot be called as a „self-made man“ because he could not have achieved the high level of art represented by his paintings without the help of his mentors and masters. Elek Szamossy, a Hungarian painter, who was called the soldier painter, used the knowledge obtained in Carl Heinrich Rahl painting school in Vienna (which advocated the teaching methods of old renaissance era) to help emerge Munkácsy's „Naturtalent“. Munkácsy's achievements prove the well-fundeness of Rahl's teaching methods. Based on the recommendation of Szamossy, the Hungarian Art Society patronised the young painter and beside his first master (Szamossy), other Hungarian followers

of Rahl including Mór Than and Károly Lotz, famous Hungarian painters of the time, supported him. Members of the Hungarian Art Society joined forces and helped selling his first paintings, which made it possible for Munkácsy to enroll in the Academy of Vienna to pursue his studies in a more institutionalized framework.

### **The importance of Vienna in Munkácsy's career**

During the year he studied in Vienna, Munkácsy acquired the basics of painting art at the Academy and at Carl Heinrich Rahl's private painting school. After he learned the background painting technique of the Venetian school conveyed by Rahl, and very much fascinated by Ludwig Knaus, he pursued his artistic career in Munich after the death of his beloved Viennese professor. After that he moved to Düsseldorf to learn from Ludwig Knaus. The "Naturtalent" brought to the surface by Rahl's teaching method followed his own way in the frame given by the academies. The pacified genius attained the recognition of the critiques and artists with his painting exhibited at the Paris Saloon in 1870. His painting, which received a gold Medal, laid the foundation of his artistic fame and reputation.

Europe's largest and most famous exposition halls opened their doors to the works of the young Hungarian artist, which found a buyer in the painter's atelier. The Austro-Hungarian Monarchy also expressed his recognition. This is shown by the very unusual way of how Munkácsy obtained a title of Hungarian nobility. He visited Vienna several times during his career and in 1886 and 1887, he painted the fresco, commanded by the Emperor, and entitled Apotheosis of the Renaissance, of one of the domes of the Museum of Fine Arts in Vienna (*Kunsthistorisches Museum*).

Several monographs have been thus far published about the life of Mihály Munkácsy, but without touching his studies in Vienna. This paper tries to fill this gap and emphasizes the outstanding importance of Carl Heinrich Rahl on Munkácsy's artistic career. Professor Rahl has received only one or two paragraphs in the existing literature on Munkácsy. Rahl influenced Munkácsy not only directly but also indirectly through the teaching and guidance of his students, the Hungarian Rahl followers. Munkácsy was very attached to Rahl's teaching method and his background painting technique during his whole life.

### **The sources of the research**

I provide additional new information to the existing literature on Munkácsy, give precise sources for some of the information and dismiss some mistakes, treated as factual thus far and which were mostly based on anecdotal evidence. I use

unpublished letters, for instance letters written by Munkácsy to his nieces, to show that Vienna had a tremendous impact on the young Munkácsy.

The emphasis of the paper is an in-depth and encompassing analysis of documents from Munkácsy's time, including material from Austrian and Hungarian archives, press products and Munkácsy's first, German and in Gothic written monograph. Existing monographs concentrated only on the main stages of Munkácsy's career (Düsseldorf, Paris and Luxembourg). But it is very legitimate to overview Munkácsy's stay in Vienna, which proved a milestone in his career. The questions we asked are as follows: What were the main drivers at the beginning of Munkácsy's artistic career? What motivated the young painter? Which paintings could he see in Vienna's exhibition halls? Who were his friends? Which persons did influence his unfolding talent? Why did he move from Vienna to Munich and then to Düsseldorf?

### **Main questions and answers**

The first part of my research seeks to answer the following questions:

- 1.) the origins and financial situation of the family of Munkácsy,
- 2.) the sources of his patriotic feelings that accompany him during his whole life, and
- 3.) the extent to which he spoke German before he started his studies at the academy in Vienna.

### **The origins and financial situation of the family of Munkácsy**

With the help of the painter's autobiography and the earnings of his father, we show that the family was well-off. This question is clearly answered. We then classify the family into the stratum of 19<sup>th</sup> century Hungarian society. After his father's death, the loss of financial stability had a dramatic impact on Munkácsy, who was still a child at that time. But besides the misery, the new situation had also good sides, which appeared from time to time in the painter's realist paintings.

### **The sources of Munkácsy's his patriotic feelings**

The Vienna Exposition of 1873 tested the patriotic feelings of Munkácsy. He took advantage of the opportunity and exhibited his works in the Hungarian section. With his gold medal he did not only contribute to Hungary's position in the medal ranking but also increased the narrow circle of the Hungarian painter elite. The sources of his patriotism, which came to light during the Exhibition can be found in his childhood memories, the family background of his early career but

also in liberal thinking of his wider environment. Another source is the revolutionary past of his first important master, the Hungarian Rahl follower Elek Szamosy, his enthusiastic supporter, Antal Ligeti and professor Rahl and his students such as Mór Than and Károly Lotz.

### **His German knowledge**

After his studies at the Academy of Vienna, Munkácsy must have spoken German. According to some sources, his German was poor. But this observation can be put into the context. Clearly, Munkácsy's language knowledge could not compete with the native German of painters who were raised by native speaker nannies. But we also show the German origins of Munkácsy's family: F. Walter Ilges, a friend of the family and the most credible biographer of Munkácsy writes about the Bavarian origins of the family on the basis of discussions with the painter. These facts suggest that Munkácsy's German knowledge was appropriate. But these facts also emphasise that the hypothesis, according to which the family has its origins in Upper Hungary, is erroneous.

### **The Hungarian Art Society and Mihály Munkácsy**

The Hungarian Art Society played a crucial role in Munkácsy's career. Against this background, we review the birth of the Society. Our work clarifies the origins of the Hungarian art society, which can be traced back to the English, German and Austrian art societies and not to the French one, as voiced in the Hungarian literature. We provide an overview on the birth of the German art societies. We then show how far cultural life in Hungary was lagging behind by comparing the circumstances of the birth of the Hungarian and Viennese Art Societies. We show document using the Ungarische Oesterreichische Revue as a source when the Hungarian Art Society was born. We also show how much interest it attracted by displaying a chart on the number of shares issued by the society.

We emphasise the role of the emerging wealthy bourgeoisie in promoting arts – a fact that was downplayed in the earlier literature. As a matter of fact, the mécénat was viewed by many wealthy bourgeois as a way to integrate in the upper classes of the society that also acted as a financier of the arts. Indeed, beside the Hungarian Art Society, the first persons who purchased Munkácsy's paintings provided a crucial financial support for the young painter.

But why did these people buy these paintings after all? Did the fashion of the Viennese (painting) salons have an influence on the purchasing habits of the Hungarian aristocracy? How were the Hungarian painters considered, who had a poor training, mainly because of the lack of the institutionalized art education?

Did the emerging upper class follow the artistocracy's mostly ad hoc habits regarding art purchases and patronage.

### **Munkácsy's first master: Elek Szamossy**

We then also deal with the role of Elek Szamossy in Munkácsy's career. Beyond the simple observation of the literature that Szamossy was the first teacher of the later world famous painter, we emphasize that Elek Szamossy taught Munkácsy using one the most recent teaching method of the time, the method of Carl Rahl, which Szamossy learned in Rahl's school. Apart from the studies at Rahl's school, Munkácsy's first master was an autodidact during his whole lifetime. In accordance with Munkácsy's memoirs regarding the courses of Szamossy, Szamossy's teaching method was based on Rahl's methods, which later was also officially recognized by the Academy of Vienna. Munkacsy was very grateful to Szamossy, which he expressed on February 21, 1882 in the following way: "Szamossy recognized my talent sooner than myself, so I can thank him for becoming what I am<sup>1</sup>."

### **The importance of Carl Rahl in Munkácsy's career**

Carl Rahl's importance in the history of Hungarian painting arts cannot be ignored because an important majority of Hungarian elite painters studied in his private school in Vienna. Munkácsy met with Rahl's background painting method in Szamossy's atelier, also picked up by F. Walter Ilges. Carl Rahl's Hungarian followers (and former students) laid the foundations of large-scale fresco painting in Hungary and helped improve the general quality of Hungarian painting arts. In the group of painters decorated by medals at the World Exhibition of Vienna can be found Rahl's most talented former students, including Mihály Munkácsy.

We uncover that Munkácsy was not an 'official' student of Carl Rahl at the Academy, as stated in most Munkacsy biographies, because he was attending the preparatory class of the academy (Vorbereitungsschule). Contrary to the thus far prevailing view, his admission papers testify that he was thought in the preparatory class by Professor Wurzinger. He was not a student of Professors Führich and Zimmerman, as mistakenly claimed in the literature. He got in touch with Professor Rahl in Rahl's private school. According to the memories of a former Rahl student, August Georg Mayer, Munkacsy was one of the students who were carrying their dead professor's coffin to the cemetery, an honour given only to a few privileged. This moment clearly shows that Munkácsy was in very good terms with Rahl and that he studied in Rahl's private school.

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<sup>1</sup> ILGES, 1899. 27. „Szamossy, der mein Talent früher erkannte, als ich selbst, ihm verdanke ich, was ich geworden bin!"

We also shed light on the fact that contrary to claims proposed in the literature according to which Munkácsy did not like Vienna, the personal correspondence of Munkácsy with his nieces witnesses the joy with which Munkácsy spent his time in Vienna, despite the financial problems he had at the beginning of his stay. In reality, thanks to his wealthy friends, Munkácsy had a great time during the 1865 ball season.

The reason why he left the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna were not financial difficulties to pay the tuition fee, a claim formulated in the literature. The administrative papers of the Academy of Vienna concerning Munkácsy evidence that he enrolled for the semester, but that he was deleted from the list of students on July 17, 1865. Further information can be gained from the letters written to Antal Ligeti, which clearly show that Munkácsy came under the influence of Ludwig Knaus' painting called "Gaukler" and he did not want to stay at the academy. After the death of Carl Rahl, nobody wanted to hold him back. In his letters addressed to Ligeti, he was asking for a recommendation letter to Knaus, and he was willing to pursue his studies at the Academy in Munich following lengthy persuasion. But he did not renounce to learn from Knaus, which was the driving force of his stay in Düsseldorf. According to Munkácsy's letters, the role of Ludwig Knaus was much more important for the early career of the young artist than thought earlier in the literature.

### **Vienna's role in Munkácsy's late career**

Vienna became important for Munkácsy not only via his participation at the world exposition where he declared himself officially as a Hungarian artist, notwithstanding the fact that he was living abroad for many years, but also because he received a number of high rewards – including the title of nobility – from the Austro-Hungarian emperor. He was in charge of carrying out the task of painting the ceiling fresco of the Museum of the History of Arts in Vienna, an ultimo privilege of the Emperor. Nevertheless, while the literature views Munkácsy's ceiling paintings as expressing artistic virtuosity, original documents studied in this dissertation show that Munkácsy had to use the outlines of the painter Hans Makart.

### **Concluding remarks**

The year 1865, which Munkácsy spent in Vienna, can be viewed as a milestone, which had a considerable impact on his artistic career. He learnt about the technique of Rahl, visited courses at the academy and spent time in Viennese galleries to copy paintings. It is clear now that Munkácsy's talent came to surface thanks to Szamosy, who relied on Rahl's teaching method. We also documented

that Munkácsy pursued studies at secondary school, proven by exam certificates, which helped prove his appropriate knowledge, opening the doors of the academy.

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