

# Hungarian Rhapsody

FROM ANTIQUES TO AVANT-GARDE, BUDAPEST'S ART SCENE IS LIKE NO OTHER CITY'S. BY CAROL KINO



Many cities around the world have had the dubious fortune of living through “interesting times,” as the old saying goes. But what makes Budapest unique is that its tumultuous past is still writ large across the city’s face. Forged in 1873 from Buda and Pest, two separate towns that faced each other across a bend in the Danube, practically every vista in this beautiful metropolis seems to offer a lesson in cultural history.

Amid the frilly Gothic architecture of Buda’s hilly Castle District, one can still find Roman ruins and traces of Turkish buildings—the latter a legacy of the Ottoman Empire, which ruled Hungary from 1541–1699. Meanwhile, east of the Danube, Pest is filled with fin-de-siècle squares and avenues, laid out during the so-called “golden age” of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, when Budapest and Vienna were joint capitals of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Walk down a single street here—like Andrassy Avenue, a tree-lined boulevard known as the Champs-Élysées of Budapest—and you might see an ornately decorated Art Nouveau cafe, a neoclassi-

cal apartment building, a Bauhaus-inspired hotel or a facade pockmarked with bullet holes from the revolution of 1956.

Budapest’s art-historical legacy is a similarly complex amalgam. “Hungary has its own version of every Western art movement, from Impressionism to Art Nouveau to Bauhaus,” says Andras Szanto, an expatriate cultural journalist who now teaches at Sotheby’s Institute of Art in New York. “All of these movements have been absorbed by Hungary, but it’s a little like the butterfly effect; they’re all changed in the process.”

Indeed, Hungarian artists have long focused on fusing Western art trends with their own Magyar identity. Today the best known are those who were active in the late 19th century—Tivadar Csontvary, a mystical eccentric who made expressive, Symbolist landscapes, and Mihaly Munkacsy, whose lushly romantic brand of figuration won him celebrity in the Paris salons. By the turn of the century the dominant trend was plein air painting, as artists gathered to work at colonies outside Budapest, such as the Nagybanya, often dubbed the Hungar-

ian Barbizon. In the 20th century Hungarian art was influenced by just about every modernist movement, from Secessionism and Cubo-Futurist abstraction to Constructivism, Dada and Surrealism.

During the political upheavals of the 20th century, many major artists were forced to leave Hungary, including Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Victor Vasarely, Andre Kertesz and, later, Judit Reigl, who is now based in Paris. For this reason and because those who stayed often worked in relative isolation, non-Hungarians often don’t realize that Budapest continued to have an avant-garde. “Hungarian cuisine and folk art, vernacular costumes and gypsies—that’s all anyone knows,” says Laszlo Jakab Orsos, director of New York’s Hungarian Cultural Center. (To rectify the situation, throughout 2009 he is running a year-long festival, Extremely Hungary, which has already brought a wealth of Hungarian art, photography and music to audiences in Washington, D.C., and New York.)

But the avant-garde did continue. Between the wars artists congregated at coffee houses, like the Gresham Group, sometimes referred to as the “post-Nagybanya school,” whose members gathered at the cafe of the Gresham Palace, a glorious 1904–06 Secessionist office building that is now a Four Seasons hotel. And under Communism, when the “official” school was Social Realism, avant-garde artists continued working and showing in secret, making abstract paintings and experimenting with mail art, Fluxus and conceptual photography.

To get a sense of Budapest’s art scene, past and present, the best place to start is probably the down-at-heels Hungarian National Gallery in Buda Castle, which has an expansive collection of work by Hungarian artists, including Csontvary and Munkacsy, as well as Karoly Ferenczy, a leading Nagybanya artist, and Lajos Kassak, a member of the avant-garde. It also

Above: Budapest, looking across the Danube from the Pest side; a Zsolnay vase with rooted stems and bunched flowers, 1898–99.

has offerings from artists who work in Budapest today, like abstract painters Istvan Nadler and Imre Bak.

On the Pest side of the river, there's the encyclopedic Museum of Fine Arts in Heroes Square, which has the country's most important historical collection, as well as work by Hungarians, like the post-Impressionist painter and ceramicist Jozsef Rippl-Ronai, who spent years working with the Nabis in France. Next door, the Palace of Art, one of Budapest's many *kunsthalls*, organizes temporary exhibitions, often of modern work. Don't confuse it with the all-contemporary Ludwig Museum, founded 20 years ago with a big donation from the Cologne collectors Irene and Peter Ludwig, which is located closer to the Danube in the new Palace of Arts.

Many of Budapest's museums qualify as artworks themselves, like Mai Mano House, which holds the Hungarian House of Photography. Erected as a home and studio in 1894 by the 19th-century society photographer Mai Mano, its tiled neo-Renaissance facade is covered with gilded, camera-pointing putti. After spending decades as the headquarters of the Hungarian Auto Club, it is now restored and offers temporary shows of Hungarian photography. Then there is the miraculous Museum of Applied Arts, designed by Odon Lechner, known as the Gaudí of Hungary. Although its collection of applied arts ranges from the Middle Ages to the present, it nearly pales by comparison to the building itself, which boasts a spectacular domed roof covered with Hungarian folk-art motifs, made from green and gold ceramic tiles by Zsolnay, a technologically ground-breaking Austro-Hungarian company that still produces pottery today.

While Budapest's cultural legacy is longstanding, its art market is clearly in its infancy. Under Communism art sales were handled by the auction house BAV, whose initials stand for "State Consignment Company," according to Orsós. Founded in 1774 during the reign of the Hapsburgs, it was nationalized in 1948. Today, while BAV is still said to be a great place to find furniture and tchotchkes, the real art market action is taking place at two new auction houses

in Falk Miksa Street: Judit Virag Gallery, founded in 1998, and Kieselbach Gallery, founded by the dealer Tamas Kieselbach in 1997, eight years after the fall of Communism, directly across the street from BAV. "It's symbolic that Kieselbach opened there," says Orsos. "It's the old world and the new world—they're announcing the new era."

Unlike their New York and London counterparts, Budapest auction houses tend to hold only three or four sales a year; the rest of the time, they function as galleries. "In Budapest, gallery and auction houses can coexist in the same venue," says Virag, because "it is very difficult to sell paintings from a gallery." Though they do most of their business in prewar Hungarian painting, Virag also handles early Zsolnay porcelain and Art Nouveau sculpture, while Kieselbach sometimes shows photography, and both have begun making inroads into contemporary art. Kieselbach has also published several encyclopedic books on Hungarian art history, all of which can be viewed on his website.

"Before World War II, this was a very rich country—there were great collections of art and objets d'art," says Gabor Einspach, a partner in Kieselbach. "But during socialism the market was monopolized. The new era started at the beginning of the 1990s." Since then the market has expanded exponentially. In 1991, according to Einspach, the total take for the Hungarian auction market was about 240 million forints (about \$4 million); by 2008, that number was over 8 billion forints (about \$36 million)—and more than half that business is done by Virag and Kieselbach. The bulk of the buyers are Hungarian, and the most desired periods are the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The two record prices are held by Csontvary's circa 1902 *Rendezvous* (230 million forints, or about \$1 million, achieved at Kieselbach in 2006) and Munkascy's *Dusty Road I* (220 million forints, or about \$963,000, in 2003 at Judit Virag.)

The other thing Budapest offers in abundance is decorative arts and furniture. "It's still a place where you'll find the 188-piece silver set with somebody else's monogram



on it," says Szanto. Locals usually shop at Ecséri Market on Saturdays; get there by 5 a.m. and be prepared to bargain, advises Orsos, adding that "you have to really have to be careful and know what you're looking for." However, finds can also be had in Falk Miksa Street.

Eleni Korani, the co-owner of Ernst Gallery, which specializes in decorative arts as well as painting, says the city is still a treasure house for Biedermeier, Art Nouveau and Art Deco furniture and objects, usually for a fraction of the price that they'd cost in Vienna or New York. One can also find early modernist pieces by Hungarian Secession and Bauhaus designers, such as the architect Lajos Kozma and the ceramicist Istvan Gador, who worked with the



A 1902 Zsolnay vase with poppies.

Wiener Werkstätte, often priced between a few hundred and a few thousand dollars. And because some Viennese Secessionists had their work manufactured in Hungary, says Korani, it is also possible to find work by Adolf Loos or Josef Hoffman, though occasionally an especially rare piece can't be exported because of heritage laws.


Over the past 10 years Budapest has developed a crop of contemporary galleries, many of which are also clustered around Falk Miksa Street. Others are gathered near Buda Castle, on Franz Liszt Square just off Andrassy Avenue, or around Raday Street, near the city's extravagantly tiled Central Market Hall. Most seem to specialize. Varfok Gallery, the first to open, specializes in Hungarian modern masters and mid-career artists, like Nadler. Erika Deak Gallery, another early outpost, often shows international, mid-career and emerging artists, including the highly regarded young figurative painters Alexander Tinei and Zsuzsa Moizer.

Hungary is also known for its important

contributions to 20th-century photography, and the scene there remains lively. Vintage Gallery handles modernist and contemporary work, as well as photo-based conceptualism made between the 1960s and 1980s. While work by expatriate 20th-century masters like Kertesz and Brassai is long gone, says Vintage co-owner Attila Pocze, it is possible to find work by their lesser-known peers, like Martin Munkacsy, or those who stayed, like Imre Kinszky and Jozsef Pecsí. Vintage also represents several 1970s conceptual photographers, like Dora Maurer and Hajas Tibor. The city's other major photography outpost is Nesim Gallery, and 2007 saw the opening of Hungary's first and only media arts gallery, Videospace Budapest.

Another way to see art is to contact artists directly. "It's still fashionable in Hungary for people to go to studios," says Deak. "Hungary is very small, so if you meet one person then it's very easy to get into the whole art circle. And if you like one artist, you might find that artist in three different galleries." Asking a dealer like Deak to take you might be the best bet, since many artists don't speak English. Or, if you have an interpreter, suggests the artist Nadler, you can try to contact them directly. "All Budapest artists have websites," he says. (He spoke through an interpreter.)

Nora Winkler, a television personality who hosts a weekly cultural program on Hungarian public television and moonlights as the auctioneer for Kieselbach, suggests finding openings that will give you the chance to socialize, like the ones at ACB Gallery, which hosts a presentation and a party every time a new young artist is introduced. "The wine is always great there, and these nights usually finish at 3 or 4 a.m.," says Winkler, who also publishes a bimonthly art magazine. "Usually it's a day lost after an opening, and you need to drink lots of water, but it's really nice." (To secure an invitation, write and ask to be added to their mailing list.) Winkler also likes Lumen Gallery, which shows young and emerging photographers. Located on a charming square in Pest, it is run by the gallerist and his brother, and "when you

go there mid-day," says Winkler, "you get super soups and fresh bread and coffee, and if the weather is nice you can sit outside on the street in the sun." Combined with Budapest's incredible ambience, who could wish for anything more? 

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**ACB Gallery**

36.1.413.7608 acbgaleria.hu

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**Deak Erika Gallery**

36.1.302.4927 deakgaleria.t-online.hu

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**Ernst Gallery**

36.1.266.4016 ernstgaleria.hu

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**Extremely Hungary, New York**

212.750.4450 extremelyhungary.com

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**Hungarian National Gallery**

36.1.356.0049 mng.hu

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**Judit Virag Gallery**

36.1.312.2071 mu-terem.hu

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**Kieselbach Gallery**

36.1.269.3148 kieselbach.hu

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**Ludwig Museum**

36.1.555.3444 ludwigmuseum.hu

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**Lumen Gallery**

photolumen.hu

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**Mai Mano House of Photography**

36.1.473.2666 maimano.hu

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**Museum of Applied Arts**

36.1.456.5107 www.imm.hu

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**Museum of Fine Arts**

36.1.469.7100 szepmuveszeti.hu

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**Varfok Gallery**

36.1.213.5155 varfok-galeria.hu

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**Videospace Budapest**

36.20.984.3669 videospace.c3.hu

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**Vintage Gallery**

36.1.337.0584 vintage.hu

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