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The Metamorphoses of Folk Culture

*The emergence and influence of ornamental folk culture and
craftsmanship in Hungarian fine art*

DLA-dissertation thesis

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Folk culture has continuously influenced Hungarian fine art in a referential way. In my dissertation, I demonstrate – through examining and discussing the oeuvre of certain Hungarian artists – the way in which Hungarian folk culture has become incorporated into “high” art. How can one deploy the traditions of folklore within an autonomous artistic language in the process of finding one’s own way?

In my dissertation, I discuss the folk art references that emerge in Hungarian fine art, examining the work of artists who blend folk art and modernity preserving its constant, changing and timely nature in a co-temporality.¹ The analytic way of thinking that defines these artists, provoked a certain distance from the original sources, but the qualities of folk art also gave them „immunity in a positive and also in a negative sense.”² The list of examples in my dissertation is not exhaustive, as I decided to primarily choose artists from the area of Hungarian painting (with one exception) whom inspired me such as the artists of Gödöllő, István Csók, Anna Lesznai, Lajos Vajda, Dezső Korniss, Béla Veszelszky, Mihály Schéner, Géza Samu, Ilona Keserü, Imre Bak, István Nádler, Győző Somogyi and Imre Bukta. These twelve artists and one art school incorporated the traditions of folk culture into their respective artistic practices in distinct ways. In one case folk art appears as a tradition that is hereditary – connected to childhood and upbringing – while in the other case we can speak of a mediated tradition of folklore, where the artists choose to take on the complex and archaic qualities of folk culture after a prolonged formal investigation. Their approach is exemplary for me, as their venture is a difficult and respectable one, where the artist has to take a number of aspects into consideration, which could potentially impede or even side-track the artistic process. One has to grapple simultaneously with the framework of contemporary art and also preserve the expansive, sacred and ornamental nature of folk art, that takes on the full scope of life.³ The abundance of oeuvres where references to folk art appear in different modalities could provide the bases of further research.

Half of the chosen artist had the chance to experience the craftsmanship and the spiritual-philosophical background of folklore only second-hand. This was due to

¹ Cp. Bak, 1977. p. 30.

² Cp. Menyhárt, 1981. p. 34.

³ Cp. Szabados, 2015. p. 1.

https://www.art.pte.hu/sites/www.art.pte.hu/files/files/menuk/muveszetiszemle/PDF/szanto_istvan_szabados_a_150430.pdf (16.03.2019.)

the fact that in the period after the First World War, the peasantry in Hungary had already partially lost its rites – that were previously imbedded in every aspect of existence –, and artists could only synthesize traditions and modernity based on secondary experiences. Thus it was and still remains a difficult undertaking for an artist to turn back to these original sources, where “... great changes in genre and form have already taken place.”⁴ Among the artists I have chosen in my dissertation there are some who appropriated folk art motifs that they could combine with their autonomous artistic endeavours. Often instead of taking into account the given motifs’ spiritual-philosophical qualities, these artists appreciated the distinct utilisation of colour, form and rhythm that is representative of folklore. This attitude is not without example in the international art scene either: the painter Francesco Clemente did not intend to decipher Indian traditional painting or Indian culture at large, but chose instead to utilise certain elements which he could fit into his autonomous artistic vision. There are certain artists, however, who have strived to go beyond the sheer formal language and aesthetics of folk art, researching the sacred and cultic aspect of these motifs to form a relevant relationship between art and folklore, simultaneously also charting the motivations behind the initial creation of these motifs.

My dissertation consists of three chapters. In the first unit, I discuss the notions of folklore and tradition, as these are concepts that have to be defined to enable the observation and discussion of the referential use of ornamental folk art. In the introductory chapter, I additionally discuss the logic of ornamentation as it is deeply linked to the abstract-constructive process that informs ornamental folk art. In the second chapter of my academic writing, I examine the artists I have chosen in broader detail, for whom the influence of folk craftsmanship is prominent. At the end of my dissertation, I present my own artistic practice, discussing the important influence of local traditions that surface in my work, and the systems by which I design and construct my motifs and motif-systems.

In my dissertation, one of the most often deployed notions is folklore. This fact already proves the burdened nature of this concept – in other words “our era’s most fashionable international” notion – which has many variations, shades of

⁴ Cp. Katona, 1998. p. 26.

meaning and definitions.⁵ In my dissertation, I identify the term folklore with folk art, more precisely with „ornamental and representational folk art”.⁶ Hungarian folk culture informs the key symbols of my personal cultural identity, which also materialises in my artistic practice, as it is through the invocation of the knowledge of the peasantry that I can define my relationship to „an experience of a certain »spatial connection«”.⁷ Hungarian folklore provided me with a platform to find the formal elements that I could use in my distinct, authentic and contemporary art. Apart from the precise elaboration of the term folklore, the re-definition of the notion of tradition is also important, as folk art is typically a “phenomenon of tradition”⁸, in which the variable elements, such as history, art history and autonomous expression appear marginally, and where – due to this – there is a growing emphasis on “... the understanding of reality as unified whole, as statutory, as constant.”⁹ The notion of tradition is one of the most complex scholarly and everyday terms we use,¹⁰ as it is not just connected to ideas of the past in a constructive correlation but also holds a continuous connection to the present as well as providing a platform where the future can form.¹¹

As previously folk art has been mislabelled as simply ornamental or decorative art¹², and because the emotional identification with the rhythmic repetition of visual decorative elements¹³ appears in the case of all of the artists whom I discuss in the dissertation, I will examine the origins, theoretical background and systems of ornamentation at the end of the first chapter of my dissertation. Ornamentation has always been around in every culture in distinct forms – contextualised within various rates of social approval –, and surrounds us today in our everyday lives. According to Wilhelm Worringer the “essence of ornamentation” is that it is the most elemental, clear, unadulterated and basic form of “kunstwollen” in folk art and reveals a great deal about the given culture’s spiritual world view and

⁵ Cp. Katona, 1998. p. 15.

⁶ Cp. *ibid* p. 16.

⁷ Cp. T. Kiss, 2008. p. 140., <http://mek.oszk.hu/08200/08200/08200.pdf> (04.11.2018.)

⁸ Cp. Bak, 1977. p. 30.

⁹ Cp. *ibid*

¹⁰ Cp. Balatonyi, 2017. p. 25–28.

¹¹ Cp. Jan Assmann: A kulturális emlékezet (egyetemi segédanyag), p. 2., http://www.banki.hu/~tk/segedanyagok/valaszthato/7_A_kulturalis_emlekezet.pdf (12.12.2018.)

¹² Cp. Ormos, 1981. Ornamentika, <http://mek.oszk.hu/02100/02115/html/4-216.html> (15.09.2018.)

¹³ Cp. Ormos, 1981. Ornamentika, <http://mek.oszk.hu/02100/02115/html/4-216.html> (15.09.2018.)

“aesthetic practice”.¹⁴ Visually speaking, ornamentation is a bound and structured system of motifs that appears unconcealed, and in its completeness. The part and whole construction of ornamentation can be analysed most precisely by deploying systems of symmetry, due to this observation I utilised the symmetry-typology of the ethnographer Imre Gráfik for the examination of regular motifs.¹⁵

In the main body of my dissertation, I discuss those artists who influenced me: artists who followed the visual legacy of folk culture and its typical ornamentative-decorative thought process, also taking into consideration the spiritual-philosophical and religious aspects of folk culture. These artists enabled the uninterrupted progression of folk culture by examining the associations connected to folk motifs and by further reconstructing and rethinking ornamental folk structures. The chronologically initial artists – among the artists I discuss – emerge from the last quarter of the 19th-century. In my dissertation, I arrive step by step to contemporary art. Through the conclusions I have reached during my research process, my hypothesis – that folk art has always been a part of Hungarian art – has been verified. In the opening speech of my exhibition at the Nádor Gallery Art&Med Cultural Centre of Pécs, Árpád Szabados explained that according to his opinion the incorporation of folklore into “high” art did not have a chance to happen in the case of Hungarian fine art: „folk art (...) did not incorporate into high art in a natural way.”¹⁶ While I respect the opinion of my master, I feel that I have to state – according to my research - that this incorporation has happened in Hungarian fine and applied arts, and that we can not just speak of a connection between folk culture and „high” art, but a closer incorporation, a symbiosis. All of the artists that appear in my research have vitalised folk art, striving to incorporate the integrateble elements into their respective artistic practices, while others went deeper and tried to excavate the original layers of meaning that folklore contains. Regardless of the exact path that these artists chose, they pursued a complex idea, one that is difficult to undertake, as they defined their possible modernity with the help of „a phenomenon

¹⁴ Cp. Worringer, 1989. p. 45.

¹⁵ Cp. Gráfik, 2008. p. 105-117.

¹⁶ Cp. Szabados, 2015. p. 1.

https://www.art.pte.hu/sites/www.art.pte.hu/files/files/menuk/muveszetiszemle/PDF/szanto_istvan-szabados_a_150430.pdf (16.03.2019.)

of tradition”, with folk art.¹⁷

The chronologically first artist I examine in my dissertation is István Csók. His artistic practice took place in the middle of a paradigmatical shift when the 19th-century scene-painting tradition took a turn and artists started to depict scenes from folk culture with ethnographic precision. At this time, however, a complex interpretation of folklore was still non-existent. The artists who follow Csók in time are the artists of the Artcolony of Gödöllő and Anna Lesznai. In the visual world of these artists the ornamental qualities of folk culture, its symbolical systems and beliefs have already surfaced, but there was still an emphasis on the decorative and on a certain “folklorism”. After examining the ornamental world view of Lesznai – and her inclination towards an applied art that supported homecraft – and the folk art analysis conducted by the artists working at Gödöllő, the art of Dezső Korniss and Lajos Vajda proved to be an important stepping stone in Hungarian culture, as it was first in the work of these two artists, that folk art musters and patterns become the starting point for autonomous artworks. The two painters, exemplary in their own right, created autonomous compositions based on the formal language of ornamental folk art and both of them reacted to Béla Bartók’s investigations in the area of music as well. The influence of folklore can be easily detected in the substantial oeuvre of Dezső Korniss. This is very apparent in the title of the exhibition – “*Just from clear sources*”¹⁸ – that was organised at the Hungarian National Gallery to celebrate the 110th anniversary of the artist and presented the whole scope of his oeuvre. After the influential period of these two artists working at Szentendre, which defined their generation, the influence of folk art was still apparent in the Hungarian art scene. Even after the Second World War folk art always found its timely and contemporary form. In the neo-geometrical painting of the 60s a new referential alternative of folk art surfaced, which was apparent in the work of Ilona Keserü, Imre Bak and István Nádler. In the pictures that referenced folklore in the 60s, it was not folk ornamentation that appeared directly, but instead the inner organising motivations and structures of this ornamentation. Imre Bak utilised the band-like structures of folk embroidery and the “ancient cultic sign material”¹⁹ of the ornamental motifs of

¹⁷ Cp. Bak, 1977. p. 30.

¹⁸ In Hungarian, the word “*forrás*” means spring and source simultaneously.

¹⁹ Cp. Bak, 2018. p. 95.

Hungarian folk art, István Nádler built on the rhythmic qualities of movement²⁰ in the case of his petal motifs, Keserü used an amalgamation of distinct object making traditions to create a symbiosis of individual art and folk culture. The difference between the three artists is that in the oeuvre of Ilona Keserü we find more apparent implications to the immediate referential quality of folklore, as in the case of the works of Bak or Nádler. In the case of the „twins”²¹ the pictorial function of the folk traditional motifs is much more „reduced” and humble,²² furthermore this period – when there was an apparent reflection on the referential use of folkloristic elements and when the source of the pictorial systems deployed by the artists is clearly in the form of signs and ornamentation of an „earlier era’s of cultural history, mainly Middle-European archaic cultures²³ – takes up only 7-8 years from the oeuvre of István Nádler for example. Nádler and Bak differentiated themselves from the international hard-edge art scene by building on associations connected to ancient traditions and thus raising the thought of cultural continuity.²⁴ In the exhibition titled ÖN-ARC-KÉP²⁵ that took place in ACB Gallery in 2017, Imre Bak exhibited the visual system behind his folklore-inspired band-like structures and the visual construction of two of his paintings done in the 70s titled *Sun-man-face* (1976) and *Sun-bull-man* (1976), showing by this gesture that the influence of ornamentative folk art and the dedication to evoking archaic imagery built on the polysemic and homonym analogies so typical of the pictorial representation of folklore is still central in the oeuvre of the artist.²⁶ In the middle of the 70s, a number of exhibitions stood as evidence for the intense presence of art using folklore as a source, such as the representative exhibition Folk art-Contemporary Art I-II. organised first in Debrecen (1978) and then in Budapest (1979). The concise almanac of *Művészet* also stood firmly by the inspiring influence of folklore. The calendarium published articles with the titles of *Paths from Folk Art*, *Folk Art – Contemporary Art*, and presented artists who utilised the formal treasures of folk art, such as Sándor Nagy,

²⁰ Cp. Hegyi, 2001. p. 35.

²¹ Géza Perneczky coined the term „twins” for Bak and Nádler due to the parallel course and similarity of their artistic careers. Cp. Perneczky, 2001. p. 10.

²² Cp. Hegyi, 2001. p. 35.

²³ Cp. *ibid* p. 31.

²⁴ *ibid* p. 23.

²⁵ The title “ÖN-ARC-KÉP” is not translatable. The words when read together mean self-portrait, while the individual parts, separated by the hyphens mean “self”, “face” and “picture” respectively.

²⁶ Cp. Fehér, 2016. p. 56.

Iлона Keserü, Jenő Szerváciusz, Lajos Vajda, Mihály Schéner. The latter presented his folklore inspired works at the beginning of the 70s. Mihály Schéner originates the motivations behind his honest, narrative-creating, visionary and playful objects and paintings from his childhood. According to László Menyhárt, Schéner found a common denominator between pop-art and folk art: his objects used folk art as a starting-point, but during the process of analysis, they became alienated from the original source. By this method, he reconstructed the unified world view of folk culture in his work, and also mirrored the art of his time, which was dealing with the issues of community.²⁷ Similar rural childhood experiences informed the sculptural practice of Géza Samu, who made his work based on folk object-making and also used the materials of folk art. Samu made new objects based on ancient, traditional folk techniques evoking folk culture and its authentic environment. In the first part of the artist's oeuvre, there is an apparent influence of the object-making culture of folk art. This first period took place between 1969 and the middle of the seventies. Samu interpreted his own work in this period as the instalment of a "Middle-European Hungarian language" in fine art, a gesture similar to what Bartók and Kodály previously established in the area of fine music.²⁸ Other fine artists were inspired by the remains of the culture of the peasantry in the middle of the 20th century apart from Samu: for example Imre Bukta, who also was influenced by the visuality and experience of rural life as a child. But while in the works of Samu an archaic-pre-classical formal language and the influence of traditional folk object-making appears, Bukta turns towards folklore in a more resigned and conceptual manner.²⁹ In the case of Bukta one can not speak of the indirect analysis of the culture of folk art. While some traces of the requisites of traditional object-making folklore appear occasionally in his images, the loss and absence of this culture and the reflection on the social and communal problems connected to this absence is more at the core of Bukta's practice.

Among the artists discussed in my dissertation, Béla Veszelszky emerges as the artist with the most unique way of thinking and constructing images. In his oeuvre, the unified and complex worldview of folklore appears, through which he

²⁷ Cp. Menyhárt, 1981. p. 32-34.

²⁸ Cp. Makky, 2015. p. 6.

²⁹ P. Szabó. 2015. p. 24.

wished to depict the totality of life. Veszelszky was drawn to the universality, transcendentalism of folk culture, and was further intrigued by the „...simple clear...” mathematic form of the cross structure.³⁰

The way the latter two artists construct their images, use materials and make objects did not influence my own artistic practice in a relevant way, but their relationship to folklore and folk culture is inspiring for me. Additionally to these two artists, one can associate here to the work of Győző Somogyi as well, who did not use the source of his childhood’s rural experiences but affirmed the cultural life of the peasantry both in his everyday life and his art. In the work of Somogyi, apart from the local-historical-cultural quality, the sacred meanings of folk culture appear. Somogyi, with his unique take on folklore, recreates the possibility of an authentic folk tradition and does not only position traditional folk culture as something one can desire but actively strives to find its adequate form in the 21st century. In my research process, I experienced that the creative powers that inform the formal language of folk art appear in the work of many Hungarian artists, but I chose the artists in my dissertation who actually motivated me with their way of thinking or creative process. I also took into consideration when compiling the list of artists, that I wanted to research artists who incorporate folk culture “into high art in a natural way.”³¹

In the third chapter of my dissertation, I examine the importance of folklore references in my own artistic practice. I also give a detailed description of how I design and construct my artworks and how I organise and structure my motifs, as well as listing my works according to the subject matter.

My connection to the qualities of folklore were affirmed in the autumn of 2019, when I was residing abroad. The experience of cultural belonging became definitive for me, as I intuitively experienced that „the individual as part of a national community” can only reach „individual self-knowledge through national self-knowledge.”³² After this impactful experience, I was searching for motifs originating from national folklore, which I could utilise in my artistic process, in order to create

³⁰ Körner, 1997. p. 65.

³¹ Cp. Szabados, 2015. p. 1.,

https://www.art.pte.hu/sites/www.art.pte.hu/files/files/menus/muveszetszemle/PDF/szanto_istvan-szabados_a_150430.pdf (10.09.2018.)

³² Szabadi, 1987. p. 8.

a connection between folk art and the movements of contemporary sensual art.

Through the use of Hungarian folklore references I wanted to show my cultural identity and my connection with the local traditions, and at the same time to take into consideration my philosophical-spiritual position, which I do not want to position as something that stands in contrast with our contemporary time, or that glances back into the past.³³ Rather, I wanted to follow the line of thought proposed by Imre Bak: „tradition and modernity is not a question of this or that, but a complete union.”³⁴

In my dissertation – where I examine the emergence and incorporation of folklore into “high” art – there are elements of the academic perspectives that folklore-studies, cultural history and art history have to offer. This complexity mirrors my way of thinking and in general how a painter tries to find connections and inspirations from distinct disciplines, to further complete and strengthen what he has to say. My dissertation was written from the perspective of a painter, for whom the referential qualities of folklore act as a source of inspiration. In my dissertation I did not strive to describe artworks in detail, instead, I put the emphasis on understanding the attitude of the artists who turned towards folklore. This way I also had the chance to find further support for my own visual thinking. Furthermore, the goal of gaining proof of the incorporation of Hungarian folk culture into “high” art was important while conducting this complex research.

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³³ Cp. Ludo Beheydt: A holland kulturális identitásról (a mondializáció tengerében), <http://www.c3.hu/scripta/lettre/lettre46/beheydt.htm> (22.12.2018.)

³⁴ Cp. Bak, 1977. p. 30.

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