

Strand 2: The Decorative Programmes of Buildings (Homes, Hospitals, Factories, Institutions, etc.)

Between Secession and Modernist Architecture - Stylised Ornaments of Folk Art on István Medgyaszay's Buildings

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Abstract

The architecture of István Medgyaszay indicates a turning point in Hungary's tendencies at the dawn of the 20th century. From the cradle of the Vienna Secession he became an influential architect, designer, teacher, author, inventor, and a pioneer of reinforced concrete. The moment when historical decorative tradition was questioned by the new generation of architects and theoreticians was one of the most pivotal ones in regard to the modernist movement's birth. The Viennese connections, the engineering practice in Paris and the Hungarian vernacular experience all condense in Medgyaszay's oeuvre, offering versatile layers of interpretation. Budapest City Archives is on a mission to help safeguard a collection of European significance. This study attempts to put the newly revealed parts of the artist's heritage in a narrower and broader context through the lens of ornamentation.

Keywords: Hungarian, pre-modernism, folk art, vernacularism, Arts and Crafts, Wiener Secession, folk motifs, minimalism, ornament, study trips

“The life and value of architecture as an art manifests in its ethical effect to its own era: One unintentionally admires the indication of nature's eternal powers and laws in a proper artistic form, and so our soul ascends to their majesty. On the other hand, the masterpiece in its repercussion to the era and humanity as a whole awakens, universalizes, and empowers the sovereign ideas expressed in it, the sovereign worldview.”¹

¹ István MEDGYASZAY. “A vasbeton művészi formájáról”, *Művészet* (ed. Károly Lyka), vol. 8, No. 1, 1909, p. 30.

The art and œuvre of István Medgyaszay (1877–1959) is a remarkable and influential phenomenon in Hungary’s 20th century architecture. His work echoed loudly in the circles of the international professional community, whilst always remaining the advocate of Hungarian folk tradition and the national idea. As the son of an architect-teacher he was born into the ruleset and practice of Historicism and acquired skills in masonry. This education resulted in an impressive and successful application to the *Wagnerschule*, with the design of a Baroque park gate in 1899.² He visited Vienna just at the right moment to absorb the stream of thought addressed as Modernism, mediated, and hallmarked mainly by the mastermind of Otto Wagner. After years of travel through Europe (Germany, Italy, France) he returned to Budapest around 1910 and started a fruitful, manifold career, and continued to work almost until the day he died in 1959.

The imprint of this adventurous life journey got preserved thanks to his ancestors in the family house in Budapest. Incomparably to any other creator’s heritage in Hungary’s architectural history of the period, this collection remained intact and provides the researchers a detailed picture of not only the artist himself, but of the whole milieu he was active in. Beyond the drawings, architectural plans, documentations, letters, photographs, photo negatives and postcards, the family home is full of original furniture, memorabilia, and fascinating artefacts, like taxidermied crocodiles and weapons from his hunting trip to Africa, or a tea kettle and furniture from India, just to mention a few peculiarities. A life-sized *Wunderkammer*, so to speak. However, this material remained hidden for decades, revealed only to certain researchers, accessible to a limited degree. This careful and certainly well-intentioned treatment resulted in the preservation of the collection, nevertheless, it also lacked professional environment and handling.

In 2020 Budapest City Archives was honoured to be given the opportunity by the heirs to transport the archival part of the collection to the repository, and thus the scientific work could begin again. This way new and rarely or never published blueprints, diaries and sketches came to light, offering a new wave of chance to processing and rescuing the material. The first task was to arrange the material and to prepare it for restoration and digitization. The result of archival work is approximately 5000 files of digital material produced by the spring

² A version was published under his birth name Benkó in the journal *Der Architekt*. István BENKÓ (MEDGYASZAY). “Parkthor”, *Der Architekt*, 1901, vol. VII. p. 15., fig. 17.

of 2023, but the majority of the task is still ahead of us. With the help of newly discovered facts, sources, and illustrations, my goal is to provide insight into István Medgyaszay's approach to the theory of ornament. As an artist between two movements, his work creates a bridge from Historicism through Vienna Secession to the minimalist concept of modernists. Simultaneously, he incorporated the most recent findings of engineering and thrived to exploit all the potential of the early ferro-concrete.

I will not follow a strict chronological order in the presentation of certain objects, instead, I aim for a typological overview of ornamental elements used on Medgyaszay's existing buildings. Evidently, his definition of style underwent certain organic changes throughout his career. From a modernist, "Wagnerist", experimenting, adventurous approach before World War I he moved to a more traditional, robust architecture with the generous use of wood and stone in the interwar period.

This study undertakes to unravel the main inspirational sources of István Medgyaszay's work. Further on it concentrates on the manner, how his buildings mirrored some of the theories he elaborated on paper. István Medgyaszay's personality and work unfolds as a theoretician, artist, and teacher. The interdisciplinary nature of his practice therefore is not limited to architectural planning. Although his character as an artist is connected to many different schools and ideological groups, he cannot be strictly classified as a representative of any of them. From an admirer and chronicler of folk architecture, from a curious young researcher, he became a conscious advocate of a new and unique style. The framework of this study allows me only to endeavour to capture the moments that influenced him the most in creating his own way of architectural ornamentation – a "language of form".³

International and National Tendencies

Theories on ornament offered influential reference points in the stylistic discourse of the late 19th century. They resulted not only in analytical debates, but also were followed by the spreading of pattern collections, published as reproduced graphics, used widely in the

³ About the linguistic analogies of architectural theory of the Austro-Hungarian Empire see Dániel VERESS. "Fin de Siècle Architecture as a Global and Vernacular Language. A Comparative Analysis of Four Programmatic Essays from the Austro-Hungarian Empire", *Strike 2. – Nyelv [Language]* 2:1, 2014, p. 64–81.

professional community, often for educational purposes in particular. The modernist movement was striving for a large-scale redefinition of style and envisaged the future mission of architecture. In this discourse between old and new currents, ornamentation resurfaced as one of the arguments. Vienna and especially Medgyaszay's *alma mater* the Academy of Arts was the centre of novel ideas. With the leading figure of Otto Wagner, the artists' collective articulated directives that defined architectural thinking for the following decades.

“The Modern Movement proceeds impressionistically in the use of sculptural and ornamental decoration and employs only those lines whose definite visual effect can be predicted. As a result, there is in the new style a merging (convergence) of tectonic and sculptural form, a minimal use of sculptural decoration in general, an objection to the arrangement of portrait statues as tectonic building elements, a clarity of ornamental form, and so many other things.”⁴ – wrote Wagner in *Moderne Architektur* addressed to architectural students.

Wagner reflected on the philosophy of the most influential 19th century theoretician in this area: Gottfried Semper (1803–1879)⁵. Although Wagner acknowledged the legitimacy of Semper's line of reasoning, he did not agree with the master on all domains.⁶ Reviewing him from the technical point of view of the fin-de-siècle, he found it necessary to make certain amendments. In his interpretation, the ornamentation and stylistic formation of a building are linked more strictly to the structure. Semper was emphasising the importance of handicrafts and tradition. This also correlates with his basic theory about the material- and structure-driven nature of ornamental development.

Meanwhile, (even though he referred more frequently to Semper) Medgyaszay's views on the underlying universal symbolic values in folk art stand closer to the idea of *Kunstwollen* by Alois Riegl (1858–1905). By criticising Semper he articulates this theory in his influential 1893 essay titled *Stilfragen*.⁷ Folk art motifs were attributed a mediating role through which the fundamental laws of nature are revealed. Wagner endowed “The Artist” with a certain heroic mission that can only be earned by a highly educated individual. Medgyaszay on the

⁴ Otto WAGNER. *Modern Architecture: A Guidebook for His Students to this Field of Art*, (ed.: Harry Francis Mallgrave), Getty, 1902 (Vienna, 1896), p. 83-84.

⁵ Semper's most influential essay on ornamental theory is *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten oder die praktische Aesthetik*, Frankfurt a. M., 1860.

⁶ Béla KERÉKGYÁRTÓ (ed.). *Otto Wagner. Írások, tervek, épületek*, Budapest, Terc, 2012, p. 31-32.

⁷ Alois RIEGL. *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik*, Berlin, 1893.

contrary found value and creative power in the “wild” and “untouched” character of the anonymous artists.⁸

Wagner constantly revised his own theoretical writings, and as a designer, his style gradually abandoned natural, organic forms and turned towards a more geometric decoration. In the first decade of the 20th century this geometric simplification was a strong direction for designers. This surfaced as an urge for the reduction of ornament, and one of the reactions to this motion was the formation of *Wiener Werkstätte*. Besides, another extremity arose in the discourse with the provocative voice of Adolf Loos. He joined the Viennese circle of architects only around 1910, and published his controversial views with a radical rejection of ornaments.⁹ Though many interpretations of Loos’s architecture have been published since his active years,¹⁰ even by himself, his buildings undoubtedly speak of a strictly minimalistic approach.

From the Hungarian professional circles Medgyaszay’s most significant role model in the systematic research of national ornamental folk tradition was József Huszka (1854–1934). As an ethnographer, Huszka also visited small villages of different Hungarian regions and collected a set of ornaments in pattern books. In the focus of his work stood mainly textiles, furniture, household items and artefacts, however, he did not disregard the forms of architectural elements either. In anticipation of Medgyaszay, he travelled Transylvanian villages from the 1880’s and depicted the famous Szekler gates on a number of occasions. These collections became a basis for the architects of Hungarian Secession. He prefigured, or at least to a certain extent, inspired visual elements on the buildings of Ödön Lechner, Gyula Pártos, Albert Kőrössi, Marcell Komor and Dezső Jakab, just to mention a few. Huszka did not concentrate on the architectural heritage, nevertheless he regarded folk art as a whole, as an unconscious *Gesamtkunstwerk*. In this system, material culture, applied arts, textile art, and

⁸ For a more elaborate study on the scientific theories in the 19th and 20th centuries see: Katalin SINKÓ. *Ideák, motívumok, kánonok*, Budapest, Hungarian National Gallery, 2012. p. 242-275.

and

Júlia KATONA. *Az ékítményes formanyelv. Ékítménytan, mintakönyvhasználat, forma- és stílussteremtési kísérletek*, Doctoral dissertation, Budapest, 2017. (Online:

https://edit.elte.hu/xmlui/bitstream/handle/10831/33344/tezis1_katona_julia_filozofiatud.pdf;sequence=2
Consulted on 05/10/2023)

⁹ Adolf Loos’s *Ornament and Crime (Ornament und Verbrechen)* was presented first in 2010, published in 1913, (falsely dated to 1908). J. KATONA. *Az ékítményes...* p. 13.

¹⁰ Christopher Long’s profound publication reveals important perspectives about Loos and the circumstances of *Ornament and Crime*. Christopher LONG. “The Origins and Context of Adolf Loos’s *Ornament and Crime*”, *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 2009, 68 (2) p. 200-223.

woodworking were all equally important. Some of his architectural plans communicate his views on the Far Eastern origins of Hungarian motifs. The pursuit of an organic merge of Hungarian and Eastern elements are articulated by him to underpin a supposed relation between Hungarian motifs and Indian, Persian architecture.¹¹

What differentiates Medgyaszay and his fellow researchers from other contemporary artists is the working method Huszka initiated. Although study trips, excavation visits and the practice of Grand Tour in particular were common in the European artistic society, these collecting trips of folk motifs are uncommon for western professionals. The pattern books are either the artist's own artworks derived from natural forms (like the well-known art of William Morris), or collections of ancient art, e.g. Greek, Roman, Celtic, mediaeval or Eastern – Arabic, Indian and other “exotic” cultures – sets of motifs and geometric design (among the representatives of the latter we find Gottfried Semper himself, Karl Bötticher, Jules Bourgoïn or Owen Jones). Medgyaszay followed another practice, initiated and mostly defined by József Huszka, when he surveyed the architecture of the people, with motifs still in use, still alive, and created by unknown individuals he not only admired through the fog of time or pathos, but also someone who he met and spoke to. Although some intellectual difference was undeniable between the researchers from the grand city of Budapest and the “simple people of the village”, he eagerly spoke to them in their own language. The personal connection with them affected him deeply in appreciating the results of the field trip:

“I travelled across the country to catch a hold of the manner in which the artists of our sensible, honest, jovial people solve their challenges. Not with ornaments or impossibly curved structures but in healthy, wide planes, straight, structural lines and, above all, mass. All this is charmingly simple, but all the more noble in its proportions. These carpenters had become my masters.”¹²

It is important to mention, that in the recent decades, numerous studies captured this tendency on a wider spectrum of Central-European research on folk art associated with architecture in

¹¹ Zoltán FEJŐS (ed.). *Huszka József, a rajzoló gyűjtő*, (exhibition catalogue, Museum of Ethnography, 2006), Budapest, Museum of Ethnography, 2006, p. 254-255, cat. Nos. 394, 395.

¹² István MEDGYASZAY. “A Szt. Gellérthegy kiképzése és a nemzeti pantheon”, *Városi Szemle*, No. 7-8, July-August 1909, p. 544.

the turn-of-the-century.¹³ The so-called vernacularism was highly represented in the interest of theoreticians from small Central-European nations, such as the Polish, the Slovaks, and the Czechs. The phenomenon can be explained by the political situation of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the rise of national movements that had led to the outbreak of World War I. Whilst this method in the search of national style has a regionally specific character, it is also integrated in a general discourse around Art Nouveau's role in the definition of national identity.

Theory of Ornament Underlying in István Medgyaszay's Work

Medgyaszay did not specifically elaborate on his statements around the question of ornamentation as a manifesto. However, in some of his theoretical essays he mentions suggestions on the “tasteful” and “harmonious” ways of decoration. His essays usually focus on a higher principle of building, and the artistic values he was following and recommending to the next generations. He did not identify completely with any of the above-mentioned currents, neither with the international voices, nor the Hungarian ones. Though as an accomplished, well-educated and interested intellectual, his readings and professional connections influenced his architectural practice.

Medgyaszay's years spent in Vienna undoubtedly determined his artistic approach for life, and the experience had also been influential to his personal connections. He supposedly met Ferenc Sidló sculptor at the Academy of Arts,¹⁴ who later introduced him to the artists' colony in Gödöllő. The group drew inspiration from the views of British Arts and Crafts,¹⁵ – John Ruskin and Walter Crane both visited Transylvania, there was a lively and fruitful conversation between the artists of the Hungarian pre-modern movement and the English

¹³ Katalin Keserü in a 2005 introduction compares architectural texts revealing this tendency. Katalin KESERÜ, Péter HABA (eds.). *The beginnings of modernism in Central European architecture: Polish, Czech, Slovak and Hungarian architectural writings at the turn of the 20th century*, Budapest, Ernst Museum, 2005. p. 17-24.

¹⁴ Sidló also studied at the Academy in this period and had family connections in Gödöllő. He was the creator of the angel statues of the first reinforced concrete church in Hungary, the Saint Elisabeth church in Rárósmulyad (today Slovakia) by Medgyaszay.

¹⁵ John Ruskin and Walter Crane both visited Hungary (at different times) and Kalotaszeg in particular. The church tower became the symbol of the entire movement.

theoreticians and artists. Medgyaszay and Ede Toroczka Wigand (1870–1945) represented the Gödöllő school in the domain of architecture.¹⁶

The studio houses of two Gödöllő artists, Sándor Nagy and Leo Belmonte were both designed by Medgyaszay around 1905–1906. These two buildings are practically the first representatives of modernist thinking in Hungary. The family homes use little but significant decoration, the one of Sándor Nagy's namely in the diverse use of brick as a material and some lightly carved woodwork with sophisticated indications of folk art motifs – hearts, stylized capitals, serration of beams (Fig. 1). The form of windows (one round and a large one for the atelier) enhances the overall modernist impression. The house of Leo Belmonte adds the Mediterranean element of pergolas with carved beams to the equation.

This bears witness to the life event that happened at the same time when he was contacting and befriending the Gödöllő artists' colony. Medgyaszay got an offer in 1904 from the writer, art historian and ethnographer, Dezső Malonyay (1866–1916) to join a group of researchers in a project to explore and document the art and architecture of Hungarian villages. Recent findings show that Medgyaszay's family connections lead him to Transylvania as well, since his father, Károly Benkó worked for one of the noble families (Teleki) by the reconstruction of their mansion. Besides Szeklerland and Transylvania they also visited Transdanubia and other Hungarian regions in the period between 1904–1906.¹⁷

Numerous drawings and writings got preserved by his family, many of which got published in the grandiose series of books titled “The Art of the Hungarian People”. It ran under the name of Malonyay, hardly any credit was given to the individual researchers, who added their work to the five tomes of the series. Their names were listed in the introduction, but the authors of the exact articles and illustrations were not given consequently.¹⁸ Even so, Medgyaszay's authorship can be identified in the case of numerous texts and drawings. This visual collection is a snapshot capturing the details and reality of the pre-war rural architecture in Hungary. Many of the buildings documented are in ruins, completely

¹⁶ The other group largely influenced by the British movement gathered around architect Károly Kós (1883–1977), and proclaimed a slightly different stylistic approach.

¹⁷ The great-granddaughter of Medgyaszay studied the circumstances of this project in a 2010 essay. Emese LÁDONYI. “Are you from Pest? Never mind dear, just as long as you are honest and healthy.” István Medgyaszay “in the field”, *Néprajzi Értesítő*, vol. 92, 2010. p. 164-192.

¹⁸ István Medgyaszay complains about this negligence in a letter to his colleague, Elek Koronghi Lippich. *Letter of István Medgyaszay*, manuscript, 23. March 1908, National Széchényi Library, Collection of Letters. E. LÁDONYI, “Are you from...” p. 183.

restructured or demolished today. Adverse and challenging circumstances of the two World Wars and political changes after it condemned folk architecture of the country (and its former parts) to damnation.

The attentive study of Hungarian rural building and gaining experience in the Parisian office of François Hennebique (in 1907) converged in his first monumental public building. The theatre of Veszprém, Hungary in 1907-1908 reflected the essence of what he considered the new path towards a unique and expressive national style.¹⁹ Whilst the Wagnerschule defined itself as a full contradiction of Historicism and tradition (at least on the surface), this is the crossroad, where Medgyaszay's credo starts to develop its own path. He stood far from the denial of ancient legacy, and at the same time felt the urge to step away from the constant repetition of a predisposed set of classical elements. To put it simply, he tried to catch hold of the essence of vernacular architecture and used its stylised elements as quotations, visual directives for citizens to lead them back to what he believed was the natural and peaceful way of living. The exact manner he applied the "quotations" stemmed in the above-mentioned philosophy of Gottfried Semper, who considered matter and technique the primal indicators of ornament. In the details of the Veszprém theatre, such as the consoles of balconies, his aim was to "demonstrate the forces of nature". Reinforced concrete as a material defines the visual expression of static properties.

"If we would like to resolve the structural elements with the least possible material, then we place structural iron only in the drawn parts, so that the cross-section of the compressed parts will be on average twenty times greater than that of the drawn parts. Thus, the compressed part will be squat, stocky and bulky, while the drawn part will be narrow and slender. This is our first principle. This is a quality that characterises ferro-concrete alone."²⁰ – These statements also give evidence of his consciously economical way of design, which is one of the lessons learned both from vernacular building and Arts and Crafts.

He presented these views quite early in his career, in 1908 at the VIIIth International Congress of Architecture in Vienna. His widely influential speech, "The Artistic Form of

¹⁹ He worked together with another member of the artists' colony of Gödöllő, Sándor Nagy.

²⁰ I. MEDGYASZAY, "The Artistic Form...", p. 35. English translation in: K. KESERÜ, P. HABA. The beginnings..., p. 173.

Reinforced Concrete” (published as an essay in 1909)²¹ displays an accordance to the “tectonic” way of thinking that after Semper, Otto Wagner followed as well.

Medgyaszay’s artistic use of reinforced concrete got under the radar of the international professional audience when Francis Onderdonk repeatedly referred to his statements in his book “The Ferro-Concrete Style”.²² In his chapter dedicated to “concrete tracery” Onderdonk introduced the phenomenon (and brought an example by presenting one of Josef Hoffman’s villas) how modern architecture had been operating visually with larger plain surfaces with smaller ornaments and decoration. He acknowledged this as a problem to which the solution he found in this specific use of the material, rooting back to Gothic architecture. The transitional tracery of windows and the parapets in particular, became one of the most significant elements of Medgyaszay’s façades.

As regards the details of ornamental tradition he captured, many visual sources are available in the heritage. József Huszka already drew attention to the symbols of the Szekler gate and was looking for supposed connections with Indian architecture.²³ Medgyaszay followed these views and was familiar with the literature that tried to underpin it. Later in his career, when he became a teacher of architecture at the Hungarian university of technology (as a private tutor from 1927), he used slides of Huszka’s drawings for his lectures about folk art. As already mentioned, Huszka concentrated on the ornamental palette of textiles and smaller artefacts. These types of motif studies and collections are less common among Medgyaszay’s drawings, but not unprecedented. Moreover, he probably adapted Huszka’s ornament collections, to develop the subtly decorative ceramic appliques. These serve as a visual frame for his plain surfaces, frequently used in his earlier artistic period, on theatre and school buildings and tenement houses.

²¹ István BENKÓ-MEDGYASZAY. “Über die künstlerische Lösung des Eisenbetonbaues”, in *Berichte über den VIII. Internationalen Architektenkongress Wien 1908*, Vienna, A. Schroll & Co., 1909, p. 538. Published also as: István MEDGYASZAY. “The Artistic Treatment of Reinforced Concrete (Die künstlerische Lösung des Eisenbetonbaues)”. *Beton und Eisen*, April 23, 1909. Serial, 1st part. No. 4899. First Hungarian publication: István MEDGYASZAY. “A vasbeton művészi formájáról”, *Művészet [Art]*, 1909, vol. 8, p. 30-37.

²² Onderdonk spent twenty years in Europe before 1918 to study architecture. During the time he spent in Vienna, he came in contact with Medgyaszay. Francis ONDERDONK. *The Ferro-Concrete Style: Reinforced Concrete in Modern Architecture*, New York, Architectural Book Publishing, 1928. p. 134-138, 246-248.

²³ He also collected the motifs of archaeological findings and came to controversial conclusions about the origins of Hungarian ornamental tradition. Medgyaszay was amongst the researchers who identified the living rural decorative practice as the pure revival of ancient tribal ornamentation. See Katalin SINKÓ. “Historizmus és a magyar ornamentika. Az etnográfia tárgyainak művészi szemlélete” in: Z. FEJŐS (ed.). *Huszka József, a rajzoló...* p. 278-281.

Alongside the details of Szekler gates, the delicately carved beams, wood grave markers and carved fence motifs also inspired him deeply. He depicted many of these in great detail, and yet he never copied them one-to-one on his own designs. (Fig. 2) The carved wooden parapets of the church towers in Kalotaszeg return in many forms on his buildings later. In some cases, he paraphrases them as pierced concrete walls, as by the first reinforced concrete church in Hungary, the Saint Elisabeth Church in Rárósmulyad, today *Muľa*, Slovakia, built in 1909. Later he returned to this aesthetic at his largest reformed church building in Budapest, Kelenföld (built in 1928-1929) and the mass of the Saint Emeric Church in Balatonalmádi (built in 1930), also with a hint of Mediterranean impression, – as it is a popular destination at lake Balaton. A more traditional, wooden formulation of the tower appears at the church of Ógyalla (today Hurbanovo, Slovakia, built in 1912) and Püspökladány (1921). Details of his church interiors also reflect on the woodwork of the people. Organ cases, choir armrests, almost every visible beam structure bears the taste of what the architect experienced during the study trips to the countryside. The church nave in Balatonalmádi revives the coffered ceilings of Transylvanian sacral architecture, with the elegantly articulated recurrent motif of a symbolic fire flame.²⁴

The so-called “buttoned arch” is a specific form, also rooted in wooden structures. They appear on the façades of peasant houses and on porch beams as well as on Szekler gates. He introduces them back in the form of interior design on his pavilion decoration to the 1906 Milan International Exposition, which is his first folk art inspired design (Fig. 3). Furthermore, it defines his airy pergolas (wooden or ferro-concrete) on plans and final constructions as well.

“The wall plate of the steeple – or as they say around here – the “footboard” is carried by carved pillars. These are held together with small diagonal binders to be steadier and organic, thus the arches of the belfry become rounder, and this arch invigorated with three buttons is the most beautiful and most characteristic form of Kalotaszeg”²⁵, – he writes in admiration while observing the architectural details of the church.

²⁴ Though it is questionable why he did not choose to reflect on the folk art of the Balaton region at this church building, whilst he published articles about it frequently.

²⁵ István BENKÓ (MEDGYASZAY). “Kőrösfő”, *Művészet* [Art], 1905, no. 4, p. 250.

When searching for the origins of this visual solution, he drew a comparison with Indian architecture. He visited India in 1932 to look for analogies with Hungarian folk art, to visit places in the footsteps of the Hungarian orientalist, Sándor Kőrösi Csoma and to hold a lecture on the invitation of a friend.²⁶ This comparison was one that József Huszka already made at the end of the 19th century, and that was adapted by Ödön Lechner, to underline their theory about the ancient connections between Hungarian culture and several oriental ones. Not only Indian, but Persian/Iranian and Babylonian analogies also emerge in this discourse. These theories were soon considered unscientific, but were influential enough to inspire a whole generation of artists.

Buttoned arches on Szekler gates transform into forms similar to round windows above the smaller portal of the construction. This opening combined with Gothic rose windows likely initiated the unique reinforced concrete round windows which appear as dominant and instantly recognizable elements on his churches, theatres, tenement buildings and schools. He develops it further into an elongated shape, which also recalls tall windows of Gothic architecture.

The house of Jakab Ruzs (in Gyöngyös, built in 1922) is a particularly delicate example of how he adapted forms and ornamental approach from folk art to the specificities of a private assignment. The details of the winemaker's house (today in a ruinous condition) follow a grape-themed program. (Fig. 4) Small sketches of ornamental studies tell stories of how he experimented with faunal and floral motifs to shape them in the manner of vernacular art. A simple gutter hook thus becomes an ornamental grape leaf, in harmony with the concrete column heads of the porch.

Another common decorative piece appeared on the façade of the winemaker's home: the sgraffito. Medgyaszay began to use this type of design element on the façade of the Veszprém theatre, with Sándor Nagy's grand image depicting the "The Legend of the Magic Stag", which is a Hungarian national origin-saga. At the Ruzs house two frames contained figures in traditional folk clothing, holding tools of harvest. Choosing this technique is also a nuance that made his buildings easily recognizable and individual. Some of them were drawn by the architect himself, in other cases he involved other artists. The images usually depicted legends

²⁶ On the Hungarian-Indian connections in architecture see: Katalin KESERÜ. "Magyar-indiai építészeti kapcsolatok", *Néprajzi Értésítő*, 1995, vol. 77. p. 167-182.

and scenes from Hungarian history, genre paintings of country life or allegorical figures. The latter is remarkably represented by the sgraffito of Baár-Madas Reformed High School, that depicts “The Life and Vocation of a Woman”.

Lastly, in addition to the column heads of the Ruzs House, a remarkable evolution can be detected in his use of columns. As by the stylistic definitions of historicism, columns and column heads represent a statement, rooting back to the column heads of ancient cultures, above all, the Greek ones. Formation of columns thus appeared in the context of national architecture, too, when Frigyes Feszli (1821–1884) experimented with column heads on the Vigadó (“Palace of Merriment”, built in 1859, in Budapest). He also tried to develop an actual “Hungarian order”, visionary use of peasant figures as caryatids on drawings was the farthest he got in this attempt.

Here we have to return to his 1909 essay on reinforced concrete, where he describes his second primary principle:

“Let us imagine now that we overload a column of supple material and it finally collapses. The one directly before it is slightly crushed, and its material tries to deviate in every direction: it bulges. The cylindrical body protrudes. This moment and this form characterise the pressure. If we draw apart a cylinder of buoyant material, before breaking it is slightly elongated. The mass of material remains almost constant: i.e., it becomes thinner, more concave along the greater length. This moment and this form characterise the tension. [...] In our case, some six times the small surface is necessary for the bearing of the upper ferro-concrete, as the lower distribution of the load on the capital. The protruding forms of the capital express the pressure, while the contractile transverse ribs convey the tensile immobility of the ferro-concrete.”²⁷ This theory on columns is transferable to every beam and even for smaller structural elements made of reinforced concrete.

“The bearing surface is only as big as the pressure to be absorbed requires.”²⁸ The structural properties of the mixed material are visually demonstrated by the tapered connective parts between the column head and the beam. The column heads usually bear simple motifs printed in the concrete, or in the case of the Veszprém theatre, bronze appliques, crowning elements.

²⁷ MEDGYASZAY, “The Artistic Form...”, p. 36-37.

²⁸ Ibid.

The use and predominance of these principles is generally determined by the financial circumstances and the scale of each project. Public assignments and grandiose constructions provided more space to creative solutions, but the indicative placement of decoration is typical on almost every standing building of Medgyaszay.

Conclusion

Although Medgyaszay's architecture enjoyed a more or less positive and inquiring reception amongst contemporaries, especially at the beginning, it did not attract any direct followers. Some houses in Budapest and country towns flash impressions of his "concrete trceries", but his architecture remained to be an extraordinary gem of the 20th century. Medgyaszay's views became widespread within the framework of the discourse about Hungarian Secession and the nationalist currents in architecture. This reached the critics' field of vision in the context of the so-called Turanism, which was a highly disputed orientalist branch of historiography.

Because of his relation to the nationalist governance, his buildings had to endure a lot of maltreatment during the almost 50 years of socialism in Hungary. Some of the atrocities continued after the 1989 change of regime until today. Problems in heritage protection were partially caused by the material itself that was once considered modern, cca. 100 years later seems less sustainable. Teething troubles of early reinforced concrete affected the lifespan of the buildings and their ornaments. Small ceramic ornaments and sgraffito as a technique all require special measures in monument protection, which is not provided in most of the cases. The digitisation and restoration of the paper-based sources of his architecture offer a new and easily accessible basis to facilitate authentic reconstructions. With the help of this material, complete restoration can be an option, down to the smallest details.

Despite all the controversy and challenges, alongside Ödön Lechner and Károly Kós, István Medgyaszay's figure became a reference point to the architects of the organic movement in the 20th century. György Csete (1937–2016) reflected on him as a master, and he also followed the practice of the form-seeking process we have seen on Medgyaszay's

sketches. Imre Makovecz (1935–2011) rethought one of his most famous and symbolic visions, the National Pantheon,²⁹ which was supposed to be a symbolic embodiment of the Hungarian national ideal on Gellért Hill. These grandiose dreams never came true. However, the movement initiated by István Medgyaszay still fuels young architects today to study and read the architecture of old masters, and to combine the traditional building modes of our country with the technological acquis of the modern days.

Curriculum Vitae

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Bachelor's degree in Liberal Arts at Eötvös Loránd University, with the thesis on hotel architecture of spa towns in the High Tatras at the turn-of-the-century. Master's degree in Art History at Pázmány Péter Catholic University with a thesis titled 'Prayer Hewn in Stone - The Sacral Architecture of István Medgyaszay before 1918'. Between 2018-2021 she conducted research (funded by the fellowship program of the Hungarian Academy of Arts) to explore in detail the private collection of István Medgyaszay's legacy. From 2018, she has been working at the Department of Architectural Plans and Maps at Budapest City Archives responsible for the documents of Budapest Monument Protection Inspectorate. Expertise: architecture of the fin-de-siècle, early modernism, architectural plans as heritage, cultural heritage studies, architecture in archives, digitization and processing of paper-based heritage.

²⁹ Medgyaszay's original plans date back to 1902-1903 and a rethinking was created in 1906. Makovecz's plan was published in 2007.