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## A National Historical Narrative in Universal Context – The Historical Mural Cycle of the Hungarian National Museum

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### Abstract

The earliest modern museum building in the Austrian Empire was the Hungarian National Museum in Pest, Hungary. The classicist building was constructed between 1837-47 after the plans of Mihály Pollack and followed the concept of the important museums of London, Berlin and Munich. The decoration of its staircases was executed in the 1870s, they represented the cultural history of Hungary in the path of the tradition of the murals of Peter Cornelius in Altes Museum, Berlin. The murals created not only the frame of interpretation for the earliest exhibitions of the museum but they also interpreted the history of Hungary in the context of European and especially Austrian political history.

Side by side with the creation of modern museums, the universal exhibition was a typical phenomena of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Its appearance followed in a short time the spread of modern museums in the early 19th century. Both the museum and the universal exhibition were conceived as useful tools for the self-representation of the state in economic and cultural fields. In terms of state representation the Hungarian political elite pursued one major political goal during the time of the Austro-Hungarian Empire (1867-1918): the creation of the image of an economically and culturally independent country. Hungarian sections at universal exhibitions served the cultural and political representation of the country, which appeared as a new political entity in the 19<sup>th</sup> century globalization only after the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867. The first manifestation of its political goals were of mixed character: the cultural history of Hungary was represented through politicized historical paintings at the Hungarian fine art section of the Vienna universal exhibition in 1873, especially the preparatory drawings of the mural for the staircases of the Hungarian National Museum.

The first part of this paper analyses the political aspects of the historical narratives in the Hungarian National Museum depicting national cultural history. The second part of the paper concentrates on the sketches of the mural of the National Museum exhibited in Vienna in 1873, their original meaning, the change of the program and their interpretation.

The murals of the Hungarian National Museum can be interpreted in the context of the contemporary mural cycles in German speaking countries from the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Hungary, as a non-German speaking political nation of the region, was governed from 1867 onwards by its independent government and state administration. Thanks to the outcome of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise, foreign affairs, finances and defense matters were held jointly controlled by the Austrian and Hungarian governments, but all other areas, including cultural issues and their administration were considered of national competence. After 1867 the direction of the Hungarian National Museum was placed in the hands of the Hungarian Ministry of Religion and Education. The Hungarian National Museum was, at the time of the creation of its mural cycle (1867-1875) the only institution collecting artefacts of Hungarian national history.

National museums responded to different political and cultural needs in every country where such institutions were created in the late 18<sup>th</sup> early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Whilst 18<sup>th</sup> century museums may have served firstly as places of representation and delight, increasingly the act of museum foundation came to be part of nation building process. The necessities of court representation were at the heart of the foundation of one of the richest fine art collections, the Small Hermitage in Saint Petersburg, created by Catherine the Great in 1765. The same leitmotiv can be detected behind the foundations of the Fridericianum in Kassel, opened in 1769, with the explicit goal of preserving regional cultural heritage and the encouragement of science: the Fridericianum housed an open library of the state of Hesse, collections of antiques and natural history; weaponry; astronomy and physics. The encouragement of scientific research (and the intention of ensuring the unity of his collection) lead Sir Hans Sloane's intentions to offer his natural history collection to the nation in 1753 thus to the foundation of the first modern museum, the British Museum. Modernization of the society and the democratization of the knowledge played a crucial goal in the case of the Königliche Museum (Altes Museum) in Berlin and the Hungarian National Museum in Pest (Fodor, I.-Lengyel, Cs. B. 1992). The latter was conceived from its foundation as a treasury of *Hungaricas*, objects and documents related to the Hungarian, therefore national, history.

A complete analysis defining what the term *national* in the context of museums at the 18-19<sup>th</sup> century meant is beyond the scope of this short study. However I might specify what I consider a *national* museal institution in this paper: all those museums which were founded in the period between 1753 to 1830 for the benefit of a large public and that were financed either from aristocratic/monarchic or central/governmental budget. Museums with fine art collections will be considered as first specialised, art gallery type institutions created in some cases independently from national museums. Art gallery type of museums were created in a similar institution-creation process, but as first specialized public museums they presented in their collections works of art historical value. Such museums will became by the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century the second pillar of national museum system.



Figure 1: Hungarian National Museum, by the architect Mihály Pollack (1837-1847) (© The Author)

## The Hungarian National Museum – the institution and the building

The Hungarian National Museum and the National Library were founded by the donation of count Ferenc Széchényi (1754-1820) in 1802. The official act of creation of this very first modern national cultural institution of the country was voted in 1807 by the Hungarian Diet (legislative institution at that time assembled in Pozsony, today's Bratislava, in the proximity of the Vienna). The original donation of count Széchenyi consisted of his library, original historical documents and different type of objects (11884 imprints, 1156 manuscripts, 142 volume of maps and engravings, 2019 coins, other antiquities and some portraits). The museum collection was later enlarged by the donation of the mineral collection of Széchenyi's wife, countess Julianna Festetics (1753-1824) who was the daughter of György Festetics (1755-1819) the founder of the first modern Hungarian agricultural education school, the Georgicon (1797), in Keszthely, Hungary. The character of the core collection of the Hungarian National Museum manifested similarities with the first European national museums of its time: the British Museum (1753) was founded on the basis of the *naturalia* collection of Sir Hans Sloane and Sloane's own library. The nucleus of British Museum later importantly enlarged not only by the acquisition of fine art works as the Elgin marbles (1816) but by the donation of King Edward IV of his father's library in 1823. The King's Library marks also the very beginning of the construction of the British Museum's quadrangular building by Robert Smirke (1823-1827). The Prado Museum, another example of an early modern museum, was originally conceived as a Natural History Museum when Charles III ordered its construction from Juan de Villanueva in 1785. It became the New Royal Museum of

Painting and Sculptures only under the influence of Queen María Isabel de Braganza (1797-1818), wife of Ferdinand VII (1784-1833).

The Hungarian National Museum's collection was housed first in the building of the Pauline Order in Pest and later in the mansion the Batthyány family, which stood on the terrain of the current site of the museum. A new and adequate building was required due to the museum's extensively growing collections. The planning of a new and adequate building for housing the library and the museum was ordered by Archduke Joseph, Palatine of Hungary (1776-1847), great modernizer of the city of Pest, in 1836 from Mihály Pollack (1773-1855), the country's most fashionable architect by that time. Pollack's museum is among the oldest models of such buildings in Europe and is certainly the earliest in the former Austrian Empire (built between 1837-1847). Its neoclassical shape, elevated podium, frontal stairs, Corinthian headed columns in the exterior and the two wing-placed exhibition rooms and its rotunda-shaped central room in the interior proves a direct lineage to the ideal museum plan of the French architect and teacher Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (1760-1834) (Durand 1809, Vol. II. P. 56, pl. 11). As a new building type of the 19<sup>th</sup> century together with prisons, railway stations and department stores, the museum needed to respond to the challenge of the secularized bourgeois society in terms of education and display facilities. The same idea can be traced in the modern museum buildings on the continent such as in London's British Museum (Sir Robert Smirke, 1823-1852) or National Gallery (William Wilkins, 1832-1838), or Berlin's Königliches Museum (Karl Friedrich Schinkel, 1823-1830).

## **Historical Narratives in German and Austrian Museums in the mid 19<sup>th</sup> Century**

Historical murals depicting universal moments of the history of mankind constituted an important part of museum decoration since the appearance of the first examples of modern museum buildings. The murals of Peter von Cornelius in the Munich Glyptothek represented battle scenes of the Greek mythology with an allusion to the Bavarian-Prussian struggle for leadership among German dukedoms. The internal decoration of the edifice complemented the narrative of the museum itself: the intention of the Bavarian king, Ludwig I was to establish the story and thus illustrate the continuity of classical sculpture from ancient Greece up until his own era. The collection reached its peak with the works of contemporary artists Bertel Thorwaldsen and Antonio Canova.

The Neues Museum built by Friedrich August Stüler between 1843-1855 in Berlin, the capital of protestant Prussia, was decorated by Wilhelm von Kaulbach, the pupil of Peter von Cornelius. He prepared the sketches of the six large-scale (and twenty smaller) paintings depicting the History of Mankind (1866). The narration of Mankind started with the representation of the *Tower of Babel* and lead the visitor through the *Destruction of Jerusalem* and the *Battle of the Huns* to the *Age of Reformation*. The original idea was to represent not simply a historical narrative, but the main agents of the civilization and their work (Sinkó 2000).

The frescoes decorating the Arsenal of Vienna, the former barrack and military center built between 1848-1856 as a consequence of the March Revolution of Vienna in 1848, were commissioned by Emperor Franz Joseph I. He specified that only military events from the seventeenth to the nineteenth century of the Austrian army as such "truly worthy of fame" could

be represented. The time and topic frame given of the emperor clearly indicated the Austrian national framework of military history for the murals.

## Mural cycles in the Hungarian National Museum

As institution and as a building the Hungarian National Museum created the framework for the illustration of the Hungarian history in at least three ways: first, through the conservation of the material memory of the country's history, secondly in the National Portrait Gallery and finally through the murals that depict the cultural history of Hungarians.

Inside the museum a U shaped staircase organized the circulation of the visitors between the ground floor and the first level of the museum. The painted decoration of the staircase was already conceived when the building was under construction, but the post-revolutionary political situation – the political oppression in Hungary in the 1850s - made their realization impossible. The idea for a narrative cycle depicting Hungarian Cultural History was developed by Rudolf Eitelberger von Edelberg (1817-1885), one of the first art history professors in Europe by 1863. It was Mór Than (1828-1899), pupil of Rahl Carl at the Vienna Academy who suggested the museum as a suitable place for such narrative (Basics 2004: 145). Mór Than cooperated with Károly Lotz (1833-1904) in the painting of the murals.

Rudolf Eitelberger von Edelberg (1817-1885) was a late representative of imperial patriotism, supporting the political agenda of the Hapsburg Empire created after the Napoleonic wars with the aim of unifying, both culturally and politically, all the nations of the Empire's vast territories. As an ideologically engaged intellectual Rudolf Eitelberger intended to create a mural series depicting Hungarian cultural history as narrated from a point of view that would be acceptable from the perspective of the Hapsburg Court: the *al secco* murals described in a continuous narrative the role of leaders and kings in Hungarian history, their role in civilizing the Hungarian people (Honismertető 1873: Appendix 1-12). The representation of the figures included among others the monastery and school foundation activity of St. Stephan, first Christian king of Hungary; the reign of Béla III initiator of the new written administration of the country and the implementor of the latest achievements of Western art in Hungary; Queen Elisabeth as the patron of the arts; King Matthias surrounded by humanist scholars; and the defenders of the Christian faith: governor János Hunyadi and the priest János Kapisztrán fighting against the Turks, and the principal actor of the counter-reformation: Péter Pázmány, founder of the university in Nagyszombat (1635) consisting of faculties of theology and humanities. The representatives of the protestant movement and the leaders of the first independence movements against the Hapsburg Court were represented together with the Queen Maria Theresa, the modernizer of the country's educational system in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. What the representation of these figures had in common was the emphasis on their political, religious and educational activity in the aim of strengthening Hungary and modernizing the country. The closing pictures of the mural referred to the contemporary phase of modernisation in the country's development and its main actors: one shows the very moment of the foundation of the museum, entitled *Pannonia Crowning the Genius of the Science and the Art* and the last one illustrates all the main actors whose political activity contributed to the process that lead to the Austro-Hungarian Compromise: among others István Széchenyi, son of the founder of the Hungarian National Museum and the initiator of the creation of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences as an

independent public body in 1825, Lajos Kossuth, governor-president of Hungary during the independence war of 1848-1849 and finally Ferenc Deák, the main negotiator of the compromise with Austria. In the original sketches the activity of István Széchenyi and Lajos Kossuth exemplified new cultural achievements. The final mural was conceived to illustrate the continuity of the narration of the cycle. The act of the Austro-Hungarian Compromise was accompanied by the crowning of Franz-Joseph as king of Hungary. This moment was afterward considered as the second foundation of the Hungarian state (the first being the crowning of St. Stephen in 1000) (Basics 2004: 147-150).

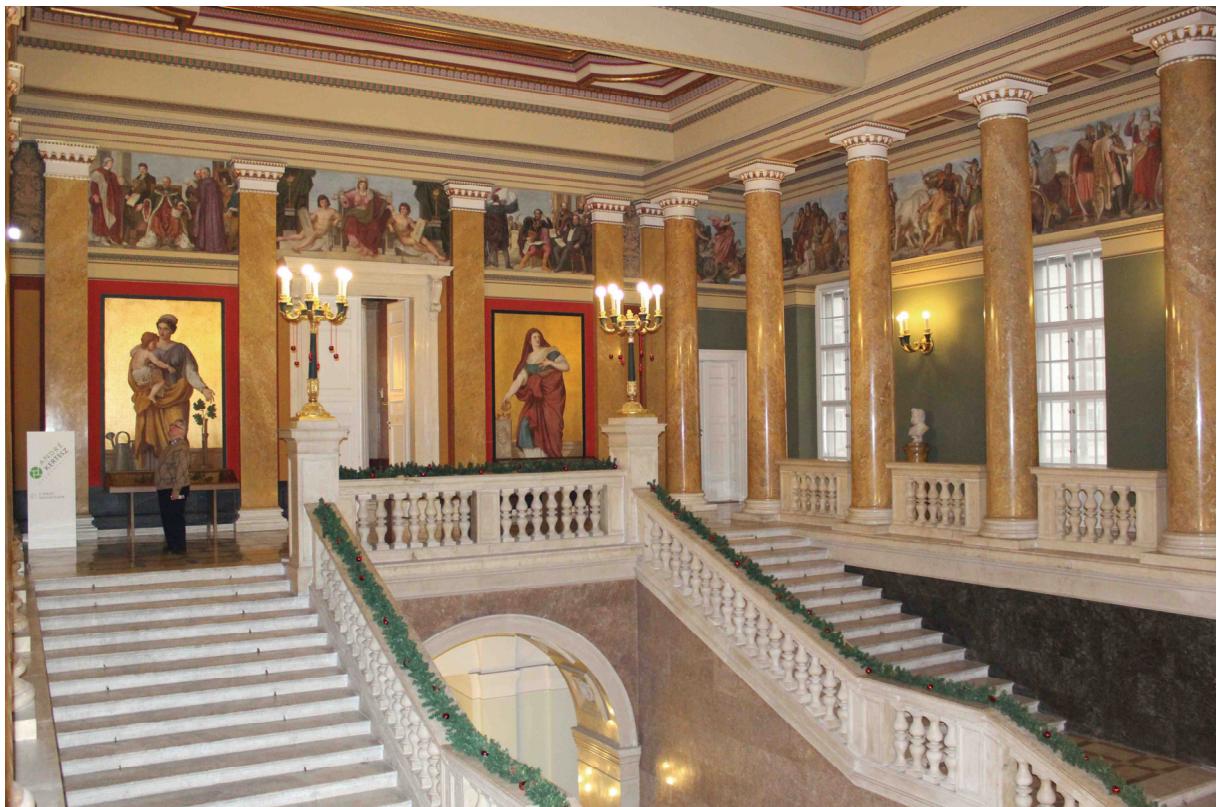


Figure 2: Staircase of the museum with the first and last phases of the narrative (© The Author)

The murals, finished by Károly Lotz and Mór Than in 1875, created the frame of interpretation for the earliest exhibitions in the museum running under the independent Hungarian cultural administration formed after 1867. They are an early and splendid example of the representation of national cultural history, and also the second example of a monumental mural cycle of the Hungarian capital Budapest, formed as a unified city of the former Óbuda, Buda and Pest in 1873. (The first being the decoration of the Redoute in Pest, executed between 1863-1876 representing episodes of Hungarian mythology and Hungarian pre-history) (Szvoboda Dománszky 1998: 166-167). The resolutely national aspect of the murals differentiates them from the mural works in the Berlin and Munich museums and makes them appear as conceptually closer to the (Austrian) national narrative in the Vienna Arsenal. The mural cycle of the Hungarian National Museum narrative expressed the vision of its founder, Ferenc Széchényi: they ensure the frame for the nation's cultural history represented through its exhibited objects.



Figure 3: Important scenes depicting the foundation of the Hungarian State, the role of the Austrian princes (© The Author)

### Preparatory drawings of the murals at the 1873 Vienna Universal Exhibition

The original intention of the universal exhibition was to present the cultural and economic aspirations and achievements of Western civilization. Aside from the commercial competition to capitalise on the advances made by the industrial revolutions, the positivist, encyclopedic conception was fundamental in the development of the universal exhibition phenomena and allows us to bring it into parallel with the museum-phenomena. Categorization and description were key to understanding, and in the case of universal exhibitions, they were manifested as presentations of newly developed machinery, the newest objects and works of art created by man. The original aim of the universal exhibition was to help the modernization of the Western world in the field of production, consumption, economy and culture by presenting new industrial, scientific and cultural achievements (Wesemael 2001: 21).

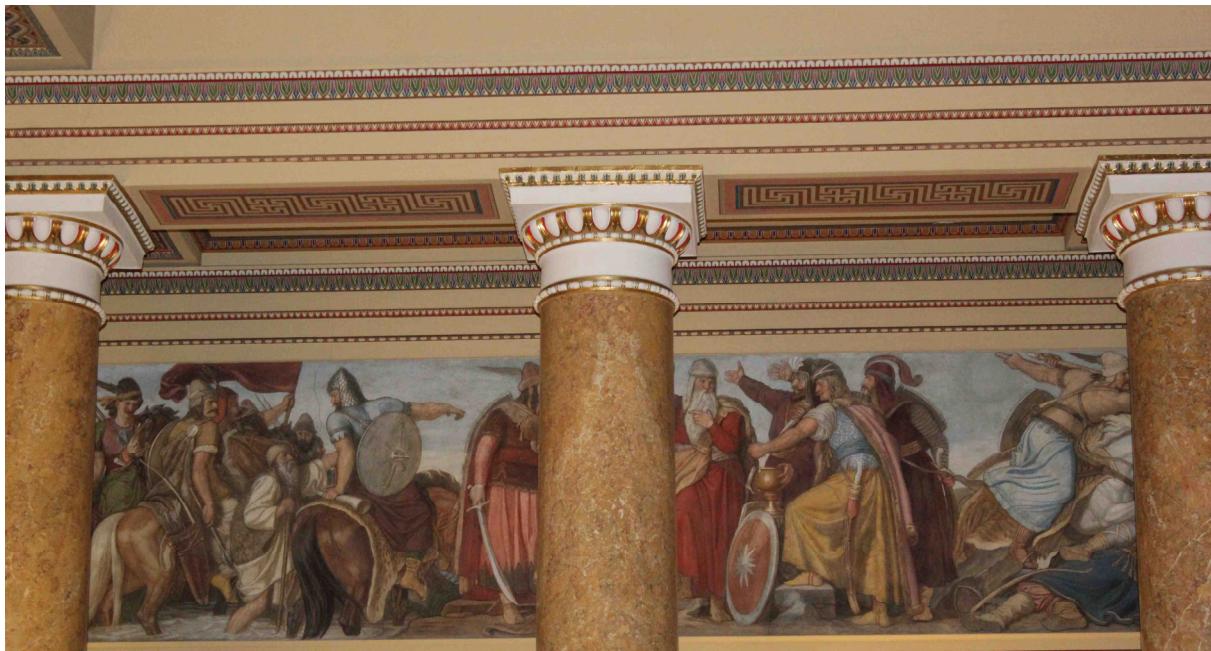


Figure 4: Scenes from the Hungarian prehistory (© The Author)

The aims and methods of the policy that sought to alter Hungary's self-representation were greatly influenced by a sense of its "civilizing" mission inherited through the centuries among the members of its aristocracy. Indeed, their rights were partially restored by the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867, based on the recognition of the Hungarian Constitution. Starting with the 1867 Compromise, the political elite, mostly of aristocratic origin, were able to introduce and represent the independent and Hungarian economy, culture and its historical view for the turn-of-the-century. The universal exhibitions organized in this period (Paris 1867, Vienna 1873) coincided with significant political changes in Hungary. The Austro-Hungarian Compromise served as the basis for the country's self-definition, it marked the beginning of a new era in the interpretation of its own history and culture.

The period between the Austro-Hungarian Compromise in 1867 and the Millennium Festivities in 1896 that celebrated the conquest of the state territory and thus the foundation of the State, was characterized by gradual modernization and efforts to establish the modernised economic and cultural system of the country. The activity of Hungarian exhibiting groups now was under the control of the Hungarian government. In the year of the compromise, Hungary made an independent debut on the international stage with its first catalogue, in French, and a self-organized exhibition at the Paris universal exhibition. Parallel to industrial development, foundation of museums and schools of applied art and industry and the exhibition of objects of applied art at great international shows (among them in 1873 in Vienna) grew more and more conscious on representing diverse aspects of the national culture. As an important moment of national self-representation high profile guests were invited and guided around the Hungarian capital's main attraction and cultural institutions, among them the Redoute and the Hungarian National Museum were the only ones decorated with mural cycles (Szvoboda Dománszky 1998: 135-136).



Figure 5: King Matthias as patron of the arts and sciences, Péter Pázmány as founder of the university (© The Author)

The 1873 universal exhibition in Vienna was not organized by the Monarchy, but by Austria, and Hungary was invited as a foreign state and made an introduction as a culturally independent country with the most important fine and applied art material of the 1860-1870s. The sketches of the murals were exhibited in the Hungarian fine art section. From the point of the newly created Hungarian Cultural administration, the significance of exhibiting the sketches of the only painting series representative of national history was far more important merely introducing newly created artworks. The preparatory drawings of the murals were given high rank in the Hungarian exhibition catalogue with a detailed description of each scene. Their exhibition in the Hungarian fine art section indicated the relation of the Hungarian fine arts to the Vienna Academy in aesthetic terms, but also the shared conception of a Hungarian and Austrian view of historical narrative and the continuity of the Hapsburg Empire's official political agenda in the recently created independent cultural administration.

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