

PASTELS FROM THE DRAWER

NEWLY RESURFACED ORIGINAL DESIGNS OF TWO VASZARY TAPESTRIES IN THE NATIONAL SZÉCHÉNYI LIBRARY



Mislaid pieces resurfacing

Some of the best moments of an art historian's work are finding objects thought to be lost. It is especially surprising if a well-known artist's formerly unknown piece is discovered in a public collection. In the autumn of 2009 two original pastel tapestry designs by János Vaszary resurfaced in the NSZL Collection of Posters and Small Prints. In this case, attribution was not problematic, as Vaszary's curtains are widely known and the fine detail of the plans also clearly pointed in his direction. Provenance nevertheless remained a key question: we were curious to find out how the object ended up in our collection. The two drafts had probably been lying for decades in decaying condition in a metal cabinet's drawer full of poster designs. Because of their large size, they were folded, and their edges became tatty while moved. Gouache and chalk dust from other manual drafts under and over the sheets very badly smeared the pastels. Nevertheless, even the present day viewer can clearly make out the compositions of two of Vaszary's tapestries: the *Engaged Couple* and the *Fair*.

János Vaszary: *Engaged Couple* and *Fair*

The Hungarian János Vaszary joined the Europe-wide arts and crafts movement of the early 1900s. Within the approach originating from the English Pre-Raphaelites, the revival of handicraft ran parallel with building the institutional system of applied art. Besides the artists of the Gödöllő Colony, trends of the industrial design movement were present in the oeuvres of several outstanding artists, including József Rippl-Rónai and János Vaszary. The two artists' lifework may be compared in this respect, adding that Rippl-Rónai's industrial design output is much wider than Vaszary's:

Among other things, he closely cooperated with the Zsolnay factory on their ceramics and designed complete interiors (e.g. the Andrassy dining hall).

Vaszary's connection to applied art is primarily through the charismatic chief director of the Museum of Applied Art, Jeno Radisics, who was appointed in 1896. Devoted to Secession, Radisics added objects of this style to the museum's collection and also pointed Hungarian artists in this direction. Understanding the



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Museum's role in forming people's preferences, he invited such modern thinkers as János Vaszary to contribute to his large-scale projects.

Vaszary's tapestries are characterized by the double alignment of Radisics's main objective: a parallel co-existence of the modern and national directions. On the one hand, the curtains reflect a secessionist-postimpressionistic attitude: compositions are built of huge patches and decorative, plane-like forms. On the other hand, they are fundamentally defined by going back to folk art, lending them a Hungarian character. The weaving technique of the tapestries is also in line with this double affiliation. The Scherrebek studio headed by the northern progressive artist of the applied art movement, Otto Eckmann developed this technique that was to spread all over Europe. They wanted to restore in school the traditional women's weaving techniques, for example, by using natural dyes and simple but decorative weaving work which gives the same texture on the face and the back of the carpet. Sarolta Kovalszky, the leader of the weaving studio set up in Németelemér in Torontál County, was encouraged to learn the method by Radisics himself. Moreover, the Museum even lent her a northern carpet as a model. Kovalszky notes that mastering the technique is easy because it is very similar to traditional Torontál carpet-making. The weaving technique has a strong impact on Vaszary's designs as well: when using the technique close to folk art, he takes the world of shapes in folk art as his source of inspiration for designing his drafts. Vaszary is related to folklore not only in techniques, but also in the choice of his themes. He depicts everyday scenes of rural life: the shepherd looking after his flock, the little girl playing with animals, the fair or the wedding. At the same time, dreamlike arcadic scenes also emerge in his tapestry designs as another topic. (e.g. the two versions of *Spring*, *Ladies playing and Dance*).¹

The plane-like quality and large blobs in Vaszary's tapestries bring them close to the methods and topics of the *Nabis* group of artists, evoking especially Emile Bernard's and Gauguin's Breton women. It is well-known that Vaszary followed contemporary art (especially the French) with keen interest, connecting it to the forms and subjects of Hungarian folk art. Despite the rural topics and weaving technique (modern at the same time), his works are characterized by the modern decorativeness of the turn of the century.

The *Engaged Couple* shares the rigidity of old wedding photos, coupled with their sweet naivety. The artist makes no reference to any emotions: man and

wife appear as each other's natural complements, as an unquestionable unit despite their differences in age and attitudes. The decorative, almost abstract background made up of floral motifs hints at a new beginning, at the budding relationship.

The bold composition and depiction of space in the *Fair* stands out among Vaszary's tapestries. Conspicuous in comparison with the somewhat rigid symmetry of the *Engaged Couple*, the asymmetry of the work is worth noting. The frame cuts through the outlines of figures, while space is made tangible by



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contours, patches and placing objects behind each other rather than by plasticity or perspective. The women and girls wearing headscarves in the foreground are seen from the side, as well as the cattle and the trading peasants in the back; the groups are connected by two bent figures in between the two segments. Objects closer and farther are contrasted by being at the bottom or at the top of the picture. In other words, it is as if we saw the scene also from above. The solution European painting borrowed from Japanese wood cuts was frequently applied by modern Parisian artists. It shows Vaszary's moderni-

ty that one of the Hungarian Fauves, Béla Czóbel, a member of the younger generation studying in Paris, used the same concept of space in his 1906 *In the Square* as the *Fair*: Czóbel presents a colourful urban crowd with children playing and ladies with parasols in the “spread out space”.

Provenance

The *Fair* and the *Engaged Couple* were made for the Hungarian hall of the 1905 Venice applied art exhibition, designed by Zoltán Bálint and Lajos Jámbor and were hanging on either side of a door; in addition the upholstery for chairs in the hall was also Vaszary’s design. We have an original photo of the hall published in the Hungarian design journal *Magyar Iparművészet*². The *Fair* and *Engaged Couple* tapestries are kept in the Museum of Applied Art³. As testified by the correspondence in the Museum’s archives, Radisics commissioned Sarolta Kovalszky of the Németelemér factory to weave it⁴. When the curtains were completed, the weavings and their designs took different paths: the drafts went back to Radisics, while the tapestries were taken from Venice to the Milan international exhibition in 1906.⁵

Several pieces in the poster collection of the Collection of Posters and Small Prints bear the stamp of the Library of the Applied Design Museum and School. It stocks some documents originating from the charismatic director Jenő Radisics: for example, a print, a beautiful blank calendar made by Guillaume de Dubufe in the Art Nouveau style, with a pencil note on the back saying “presented by Mr. Jenő Radisics.” A certificate has also resurfaced that Radisics received for attending the 1902 Torino exhibition (where he was the vice-chairman of the jury). The exquisite lithography, a fine example of the Art Nouveau style conquering the “first international exhibition of decorative modern art,” is identical with the one János Vaszary was also awarded there, and which featured in the 2007 Vaszary collective exhibition⁶.

The Museum and School of Applied Art had a shared library for a long time with a remarkable print collection, as well as everything else to serve the training of young applied artists: patterns, designs, ornament sheets and posters. The designs for the tapestries are also most likely to have ended up there. According

to a document preserved in the NSZL archives, it was transferred in 1945.⁷ The library building was badly damaged in a bomb attack, and together with “war interns” the librarians were forming a chain, handing unscathed books to one another to salvage them. The Museum of Applied Art suffered a similar fate, from which the Poster Collection received not only Aladár Póka’s collection of posters and picture cards but also the Museum’s own stocks.⁸

A matter of perspective

The relationship of the woven tapestries kept in the Museum of Applied Art and the recently resurfacing drafts is intriguing. It is obvious at first glance that their colour schemes are different: they are given a bluish grey basic hue by the paper, where dark and



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light blue, white, brown and some pink appear. In the tapestries pink is dominant, while brown has completely disappeared, giving over to a light creamy colour. Probably due to the weaving techniques, in the

Fair, the women's scarves are grey and blue striped, and the contours are more pronounced.

Differences are natural if two different artists, namely the designer and the weaver, work together. It is surprising however that the *Engaged Couple* tapestry is turned to its side, as compared to the draft, the latter being the way the literature as well as the stock card has recorded it for decades. In the photo of the Hungarian hall of exhibition in Venice, published in the *Magyar Iparművészet* journal, the woman is on the right and the man on the left. What is even more puzzling is that the *Fair* tapestry is also the opposite of what we have thought. It seems that already in Vaszary's lifetime the curtains confused exhibitors with their completely identical two sides. The two newly found drafts provide conclusive evidence. Examining the compositions of the two curtains, the painter's original concepts are clearly reflected by the drafts: As the *Engaged Couple* was hanging on the left of the door, the dark central patch (the man) had to be on the left-hand side. Similarly, in the *Fair* hanging on the right of the door, the dark tones (women with scarves) had to be on the outer, or the right side. This is how the two works were – or could be – in balance on either side of the door.

It is unfortunate that because of its poor condition, the *Engaged Couple* would need much restoration before it could be turned round. Thus in the NSZL exhibition it featured again with its back to the public.

The drafts and tapestries were shown together in the National Széchényi Library's exhibition entitled "Design

and Work - Applied Works of Art by János Vaszary" from 21st January to 10th March 2011.

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¹ János Vaszary's (1867-1939) collective exhibition: Hungarian National Gallery, 2007. October 18–2008. February 10. [arranged by Mariann Gergely and Edit Plesznivy] ; [catalogue ed. by Nóra Veszprémi] ; [... authors Gábor Bellák et al.], Budapest, HNG, 2007. 367.

² 1905. No. 4. 216.

³ Registration No. 14.973, No. 14.972.

⁴ Correspondence: IM Data, Reg. no 1905/69 reply: 1905/175.

⁵ The two tapestries must have been destroyed in a fire there. Thus the designs were sent again, but this time to the weaving studio in Gödöllo, probably to Kovalszky again. The same year the National Salon held a collective Vaszary display, where they wanted to show the tapestries, but as they were in Milan, only the drafts were shown. They had to be requested from Gödöllo. The head of the studio, the painter Aladár Körösfoi-Kriesch promised to Lajos Ernst (director of the National Salon 1901–1909) in a letter to send back the designs as well as (the new) tapestries. The Salon catalogue lists the two designs as owned by the Applied Art Museum. Thus after the exhibition they must have returned to the Museum stocks.

⁶ 106., HNG. Registration No. 21010/1981.

⁷ A Library report of 1945 (NSZL Archive 1946/328)

⁸ According to the collection curator, Piroska Munkácsi: "In June 1945 the History Museum's Applied Art Collection donated its poster collection (...) to us with the justification that it would receive more professional handling and processing here. The categorization by genre of the large collection/2205 posters (...) was done immediately."