

HERITAGE IN TRANSYLVANIA: KELETI BÉLA'S SMALL ART NOUVEAU BUILDING IN TÂRGU MUREȘ

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The Secession movement is a worldwide phenomenon that started during the late 19th century and stretched until the first two decades of the 20th century. It was driven by various factors, such as liberation from the plastic viewpoint of the world and a return to nature. Regional manifestations of the movement were also created according to the pre-existing context. If the 1900 movement is identified in France under the name Le Modern Style or Art Nouveau, then we would refer to it as the Stile Liberty in Italy, the Glasgow Style in Scotland, the Jugendstil in Germany, and the Austrian or Hungarian Secession. In Hungary, artists started to create their own version of the 1900 art by using local folk crafts and history as inspiration.

The city of Târgu Mureș was one of the first Transylvanian towns to benefit from the Art Nouveau movement. Bernády György, who was a visionary mayor of the town, oversaw the construction of around 160 buildings during the period 1900 to 1918. The erected buildings featured the Secession-style architecture. Along with architects from Budapest, Komor Marcell and Jakab Dezső, artists Thoroczkai-Vigand Ede, Körösfői-Kriesch Alár, Nagy Sándor and Roth Miksa also participated in their creation.

In the year 2023, in which Europeans celebrate both the Szecesszió/Art Nouveau movement and the European Year of Skills, an emblematic building that can be considered a pioneer of this style, combining the two trends: Szecesszió and Transylvanian Craft, can be found in the center of Marosvasarhely, in the Roses Square at no. 18. (Photo1)



Photo 1. The Art Nouveau building found at Roses Square at no. 18

The small dwelling house, built by Adolf Hirschmann's widow in 1905, which later also housed the building of the former Mór Hirsch printing house, was built by the master builder Keleti Béla and was based on the formal language of folk art and the architectural solutions of Ödön Lechner (1845-1914), who was a promoter and theorist of the national style in Hungarian architecture. When Keleti Béla designed the building, it gave a remarkable structure, resulting into a complex architectural building that immediately attracts attention, through the volumetric structure of the building, the curved attic, the undulating lines of the façade, the ornamentation inspired by folk art, and the window carpentry existing in an identical form to the other architectural masterpieces of the master builder Keleti. The main facade of the house is the most important architectural feature of the building, evoking folk art motifs, especially in the ornamentation, with a rich embroidery form based on colourful stylized floral motifs in that specific style of the turn of the century. (Photo2)



Photo 2. The main facade of the house evoking folk art motifs

These unmistakable elements are also present in other local works by Keleti Béla, a graduate of the Budapest Vocational State School, who thus became an important player in the introduction and establishment of Lechnerian forms in the city.

Keleti Béla (1867-1919), who was a master builder and designer, as well as an entrepreneur, was able to reinforce the Târgu Mureș (*hu.* Marosvásárhely) Art Nouveau character by working on a smaller scale, compared to the famous Komor Marcell and Jakab Dezső, Hungarian architects, designers of nursing homes, temples, public and private buildings. He was active in the town from the start of the century until the First World War. He mainly designed apartment blocks and family houses based on Lechner's Art Nouveau style.

Mrs. Adolf Hirschmann building's transformation is connected to his name. The edifice, which housed the printer, bookstore, and stationary retailer Mor Hirsch, one of the first tenants of the premises, was reconstructed in the Hungarian Open-Air Museum, Skanzen, in Szentendre, near Budapest.

Thus, the small edifice of the widow Hirschmann can be considered a trailblazer of this style, built shortly before the representative works, such as the Old Town Hall (1906–1908) and the Reformed College (1908–1909).

Throughout Hungary, Lechner's ideas and art were spread by his followers. These architectural trends, which are usually described in terms of the artist's ideas, are commonly featured in the country's specialized literature under the name “magyaros szecesszió.” This terminology was used in Romanian literature as the Hungarian Secession style. It seems that the year of 1905 is regarded as a critical point, when more and more projects influenced by this Secession style are built, including the Hirschmann house.

According to Dr János Orbán [1], in his researches, which focused on the house's earliest depictions, the building showed “a wooden showcase with three entrance doors, characterized by curved joinery and carved floral decoration. This joinery structure, installed during construction (1906), was organically integrated into the façade's appearance. In the interwar period, however, it was transformed and dismantled in the mid-20th century.” (Photo3)



Photo 3. From Csepreghy András Collection' – The building with its original features

Today, its present form is the ground floor's result of this alteration. (Photo2)

During the 1980s, a proposal was made to bring back the ground floor's original facade. However, it was not carried out [1]. The main facade of the house is symmetrical and has simple features of the Art Nouveau style. The upper part, on the first floor, has more decorations. There are two windows embellished on top with an arched closure in accolade (Photo4).



Photo 4. Details of the façade, decorated with simple symmetrical elements

The windows' wooden frame is divided into three vertical sections fragmented by a transom (Photo5). These sections are decorated with denticles and this design is comparable to the windows of the houses on Cuza Voda Street that were also designed by Keleti. This arched window style can also be found in other prominent buildings, such as the Geological Institute in Budapest [2]



Photo 5. Window decoration

Comparing the two façades, of the building in Târgu Mureş and the newly built replica in Szentendre, (Photo6) (Photo7) we notice that there are some added elements: under the two windows we can see two rectangular plaster panels that were probably made during the house's restoration in the '80s.



Photo 6. The original building found in Târgu-Mureș - comparison
Photo 7. The building replica found in Szentendre Museum

The orange-coloured panel that visually connects the windows displays four identical sculpted floral elements and a larger central piece that consists of a row of plant and heart motifs in the shape of a grape (Photo8). This ornamental piece was probably inspired by the folk-art motifs, which, in the same period of time, were collected and catalogued by József Huszka and Dezső Malonyai, who were authors of numerous publications related to ethnography. In addition, it is also similar to the main motif of the Szekler shepherds' felt cloaks. Images of the embroidered objects can be found in the archives, all collected the Gheorgheni area, which are featured in the published collection of Malonyai [6].



Photo 8. The sculpted floral elements and the central piece made of a row of plant and heart motifs

Above the first floor, at the attic level, a simplified, yet elegant, tulip-like skylight has beneath its structure branches flourishing on either side of a central bud. (Photo9)

The main façade ends at the top with a wide cornice that is decorated with a wavy band and dynamic curved lines (Photo10). The large and dynamic attic is an apparent take on the style of Lechner, whose buildings featured various elements that are characterized by the same design. One of these is the Budapest Post Office Savings Bank [2].



Photo 9. The tulip-like skylight



Photo 10. The wide cornice decorated with a wavy band and curved lines

Another element that survived until our days is the water drainage system. The two gutters, found on each side of the main façade, are simple decorated with various protuberances, resembling of poppy bulbs (Photo11).



Photo 11. The drainage system's decoration

The secondary facade is not without decoration either. On the upper part, it presents simplified, geometric decorative elements, with small hearts embedded in the plain composition of the facade. (Photo12)



Photo 12. The secondary façade from the Bartók Béla street' view.

Using elegant and uncomplicated techniques, such as moulded plaster panels, terracotta wall plaster ornamentations, or delicate tinsmithing, Keleti was able to create an impressive building.

The various factors that contributed to the development of this style of architecture were also considered when the house was copied and rebuilt in an urban setting (Photo13). The previously stated reasons are why the building was particularly chosen and replicated as part of the ensemble of buildings picked from various Transylvanian towns for the Open-Air Museum of Ethnography Skanzen in Hungary, in Szentendre (Photo14). The small replica town is represented by six buildings: the printing house, a coffee house, a pharmacy, post office, a fashion store, and a private house.



Photo 13. The urban setting in which the Hirsch Mor's building was replicated



Photo 14. Outside view of the whole urban setting with building replicas. In the far end, the Hirsch Mor's building can be seen.

Apart from preserving cultural and historical values, the building replicas also exhibit unique stories from different social levels and individuals. This allows us to gain a deeper understanding of Transylvania's history.

The trade, workshop, and printing house of Hirsch Mór has a very important place in history because it helped improve the city's information transfer and communication. It also provided the citizens with an enjoyable and educational experience. The Art Nouveau building allows us to see the life of a small-town publishing establishment during the early 20th century. [3] (Photo15-18)



Photo 15. The building's restored original main façade



Photo 16. The original-coloured decoration



Photo 17. The original main entrance in the typography



Photo 18. The secondary façade - comparison

“The diversity of culture and world heritage is irreplaceable as a source for the spiritual and intellectual wealth of mankind. The protection and enhancement of the cultural and heritage

diversity of our world should be actively promoted as an essential aspect of human development.” [4]

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PHOTOGRAPHS

All photographs are from the author's private collection, unless stated otherwise.

Photo 3 - Csepreghy András Collection. <https://blog.skanzen.hu/2021/10/11/gutenberg-templomaban-tilos-volt-karomkodni/> [Last visited 05 May 2023]