

Bécs művészeti élete Ferenc József korában, ahogy Hevesi Lajos látta [Viennese art world in the era of Franz Joseph – seen by Lajos Hevesi]. By Ilona Sármány-Parsons. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2019. 472 pp.

This is a rather rewarding topic: turn-of-the-century Vienna has an exceptionally good press. The world of Wittgenstein, Freud, and Schönberg is appealing to almost any reader. A book about Vienna and its art at the turn of the century is, one would think, an obvious choice. It is quite surprising, therefore, that the key player in this 450-page-long story, the art critic Lajos Hevesi, is largely unknown and his vast and scattered oeuvre is academically uncharted.

As Sármány-Parsons' book makes very clear, Hevesi is a colorful and compelling character. Born as Lajos Löwy and known in the German-language context as Ludwig Hevesi, this Hungarian journalist and influential art critic with a Jewish family background was born in provincial Heves in the Hungarian Kingdom, in 1843 and was educated in the Piarist grammar school in Pest. He studied medicine and classical philology first in Pest, but in 1862 he began to pursue studies at the University of Vienna. There, he also attended lectures on aesthetics and the arts. Given his talent for languages (he was fluent in German, French, English, and Italian, in addition to his native Hungarian), he earned his living for some time by translation, which brought him close to journalism, which became a life-long love affair for him. Writing for Hungarian and German language journals alike, he continuously played with his authorial identity. In politics, he was a supporter of the circle of Deák and Andrassy, following basically a classical national-liberal program. After the Settlement of 1867, although he had the opportunity to publish in *Pester Lloyd*, an influential German-language journal centered in Budapest, he decided to stay in Vienna, and he managed to turn himself into a Viennese journalist, art-lover, and man of letters, publishing in the influential *Fremden-Blatt*. Remaining unmarried, he sacrificed his whole life on the altar of art criticism and belles-lettres.

As an art critic, he was the personification of the new-style professional critic of the fine arts and theater. He joined the club at the right moment: very soon he made himself known as a dominant voice in Viennese art life for decades. As such, he was not only a witness to but also one of the first defenders of the Secessionist movement, which made Viennese art famous all over Europe. It also caused loud social and political scandals and brought in vast amounts of wealth for some of the fortunate artists in the group and for the most skillful art dealers. As a spokesman of the movement, Hevesi did not make

a fortune, although he made a decent living with his regular *feuilletons*. But his engaging writings brought him success, and he was able to shape discussions on the art world in Vienna. He wrote a great deal, he saw everything worth seeing in the town, and he had very good personal contacts in the art world in Austria, Hungary, and abroad. He also travelled around Europe, working as a writer and publishing short stories and novels alongside his critical writings. His book-length writings on art include a work summing up nineteenth-century Austrian fine art and another on the Secessionist movement. After having had a successful career, he committed suicide in 1910, just before the outbreak of World War I, in the last minute of the Belle Époque.

Ilona Sármany-Parsons, the author of the present volume, is an art historian who was a researcher at the Institute of Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. She has taught at a number of institutions, including Nottingham University, the University of Vienna, and Central European University, and has lived in Vienna since 1984, as did her hero hundred years earlier. Uncharacteristically within Hungarian historiography, she does not adopt a culturally nationalistic perspective, preferring instead to keep an imperial vista. Her aim is to present Hevesi's views on the art events of the day and the main protagonists of the art scene chronologically and to show the major elements of his frame of mind as an art critic. However, she does not neglect to give a synthetic account of her protagonist's personal identity. As we learn, Hevesi had a complex, four-layered personal identity, divided as it was between a Jewish, Hungarian, Viennese Austrian, and European self. Hevesi's Jewishness was the innermost core of this identity, something of which he rarely spoke or wrote, while the external, sociable part of his identity was that of the European man of letters. Yet his Hungarian and Viennese identities were the determining factors of his character, two features which surprisingly seem to dwell side by side quite well in his case.

It is perhaps exactly this unproblematic relationship between Hevesi's identities and, especially, his Hungarian and Austrian selves that makes him a rather remarkable case of late-nineteenth-century Central European culture. Hevesi was not present in Vienna's art world as an exotic Hungarian voice. Rather, he had the position of an insider, who identified himself with the presuppositions of the local culture, an achievement in itself remarkable from someone born in the other part of the Dual Monarchy. The book presents in a detailed fashion the creative and original aspects of the main protagonist's oeuvre in a dynamically growing and transforming art market. This methodology helps Sármany-Parsons

avoid repeating often heard stories of well-known oppositions between national sovereignty and the pan-European cultural elite, offering instead a close view of the Austrian cultural witches' brews. There are two historical lessons, however, that we can learn from this story. The first is that soft power was already a crucial element in middle-to-late nineteenth-century continental politics, as witnessed by the repeated world's fairs and biennales and the other international fine art exhibitions. Secondly, a cultural cold war took place within Vienna's art world in the second half of his career, proving that modernity brought with it a sharp, almost antagonistic struggle among interest groups and world views.

If those interested in the political history of the age have to read between the lines to learn from this refined narrative in an indirect way, art historians have a lot to digest directly here. Although the story itself is by its nature teleological, as its finish-line is the explosion of the art market called the Secessionist movement, it does not commit the fatal mistake of reading previous events retrospectively as a sign of what is to come. Instead, it interprets in a balanced manner the major events and turns of roughly three decades of Hevesi's life as a critic, until he became a full-hearted advocate of the Secessionist artists and, in particular, Gustav Klimt.

Sármány-Parsons usefully offers a scheme of the stylistic transformations of the age, arguing for three major style-defined periods in the last third of the century. The first is the time of Historicism and academic art; the second is the victory of Realism and Naturalism; the third is the specifically style-focused period of Symbolism and Secession. Although both the second and the third phase of this story are usually interpreted as the antechambers of Modernism, Sármány-Parsons is careful to point out that Hevesi had no real chance to confront Modernism, the breakthrough of which happened after his untimely death.

Sármány-Parsons also reflects on the duality of Hevesi's persona as an art critic. She emphasizes that, until the last phase of his career, his voice was that of a balanced middle-of-the-roader, who was able to see the valuable parts of even those often radical works that were not particularly close to his own personal taste. Yet the fact is that Hevesi not only supported wholeheartedly the case of the Secession, but for some time he became one of its main "Etzsesgeber," or even a key theorist. In the last part of his career, he became more of a reader-friendly enthusiast of art works, apparently giving up much of his earlier distanced, objective-professional tone.

Sármány-Parsons' detailed, well-documented, and abundantly illustrated volume (thanks for this last merit to Balázs Czeizel's excellent work as the

designer of the book) gives a year-by-year account of this great oeuvre, relying on primary sources and making a major contribution to our understanding of the art history of Austria. Her major hit is to reclaim Hevesi for the canon of late nineteenth-century and turn-of-the-century Viennese art. By the end of this tour-de-force we also learn the names of the favorite painters of the day, included the Vedutist Alt, Makart, the colorist, and finally Klimt, the most original “aesthete” artist of the Secession. Hevesi knew all of them, and he interpreted their outstanding works for the general public with exceptional clarity and clear-sightedness. Furthermore, he was one of the first to establish the custom of real-time art criticism in these eventful final decades of the Golden Age of the Dual Monarchy.

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