

The Essential Marosi: a Review of His Collected Essays

“Fénylik a mű nemesen”. Válogatott írások a középkori művészet történetéről [“Bright is the Noble Work”. Selected Writings on the History of Medieval Art]. Vols I–III. By Ernő Marosi. Budapest: Martin Opitz Kiadó, 2020. 1408 pp.

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The publication to be presented here is highly significant in itself; nevertheless, it is relevant in another sense: the author, Ernő Marosi, aged 81, died a few months ago. Professor Marosi (18.04.1940 – 09.07.2021) was unquestionably the most significant Hungarian art historian of the last half century, and one of the most prominent medievalists. He graduated from Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest in art history and literature and started to teach there at the Department of Art History in 1963. A professor from 1991, he educated generations of art historians—practically almost all the present-day Hungarian art historians are his former students. He was invited in 1974 to the Institute for Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, where he acted first as vice-head and later director (1991–2000). In 1993 he was elected corresponding member of the Academy, and in 2001 he received full membership. He acted as vice president of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences between 2002 and 2008. He also participated in the foundation and work of the Medieval Studies Department of Central European University with his advice, lectures, and seminars. He gave the last public lecture at the department on the Budapest campus of CEU just before teaching went online in early 2020 (this paper was published in HSCE 1, no. 1, pp. 3–27). But beside all his positions and prizes, he was an excellent scholar. As a medievalist, he switched easily between philology and philosophy, but primarily he was an art historian. The present publication is a summary of his oeuvre.

When Professor Marosi was 70, he was honored by a *Festschrift*.¹ Thus, the approaching anniversary of his eightieth birthday needed to be celebrated in a

1 *Bonum ut Pulchrum. Essays in Art History in Honour of Ernő Marosi on His Seventieth Birthday*. Edited by Livia Varga, László Beke, Anna Jávor, Pál Lövei, and Imre Takács. Budapest: MTA Művészettörténeti Kutató Intézete 2010.

different way. The idea came from Imre Takács, one of Marosi's closest disciples. He suggested collecting Marosi's earlier, often not easily available publications in a single volume. Marosi received the idea enthusiastically—he himself selected the papers, worked on the translations, and added new remarks. Imre Takács, a major promotor of the edition, wrote a long epilogue for the book, which is a useful overview of the career and oeuvre of the most influential art historian of our age.

The result is astonishing. The publication, printed by the Martin Opitz Publishing House (which has been one of the most active publishers in the field of medieval studies in Hungary during the last decade), is enormous in many regards. It consists of three heavy volumes (sold in a large box), altogether 1408 pages with 1359 black-and-white photographs and 54 figures. The bibliography of the publications of Marosi between 1961 and 2019 fills 37 pages. To read and understand the entire oeuvre of Ernő Marosi one would need an entire lifetime; to facilitate this task, we here receive the essential part. From his colossal output, 88 studies have been selected. Among these, 22 have never been published in Hungarian, thus the author translated them himself for the purpose of the present edition. This might be disappointing for those who do not read Hungarian, but the good news is that a quarter of his most important studies exist in international languages (the translation of the rest would definitely be an urgent task). Marosi not only selected and edited his own essays, often originally published decades ago, but added fresh remarks to them. These are occasionally additions or corrections but also self-reflections in an essayistic manner.

The enigmatic title "*Fénylik a mű nemesen*" is a quotation from a poem that once decorated the door of the Abbey Church of Saint-Denis, commemorated by its author, Abbot Suger, in his autobiographical work *De administrando*. I have used the classical translation of this passage by Erwin Panofsky, which reads: "Bright is the noble work."² Marosi borrowed this quotation for the title of an essay he wrote about the light and brightness of medieval churches in 2015. The Hungarian translation is his own, coming from his ground-breaking source collection on medieval art.³

One of the three volumes contains the illustration material. This consists of black-and-white photographs, usually high quality, reflecting the characteristic aesthetics of the 1960s–1970s, a classical period for black-and-white movies and the years of the early career of Ernő Marosi. He preferred black-and-white photography for documentation purposes, partially because it is more resistant to deterioration. Nevertheless, the title pages of each chapter are accompanied by beautiful color pictures.

2 Panofsky, *Abbot Suger*, 47.

3 Marosi, *A középkori művészet világa*. Extended version: Marosi, *A középkori művészet történetének olvasókönyve*.

The other two volumes contain the textual part. The first volume includes studies dealing with more general subjects and with Romanesque and Early Gothic art, while the papers in the second volume discuss the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, historiography, and problems of monument protection. The essays are grouped in twelve chapters; thus, the whole collection is comparable to a symphony in twelve movements. The first chapter consists only of two short papers, both from 2015: an autobiographical essay, and the analysis of the role of light in medieval art. The studies in the second group are dedicated to the problems of interpretation. These were written mainly in the 1990s and 2000s and reflect the emerging problem of visibility, naturalism and reproduction, scientific models, and artistic connections. The theoretical attitude of these essays makes them essential for non-medievalists, too.

The next two chapters are also general in character. One of them is dedicated to the problems of nationality, nationalism, and the nation (*natio*) with respect to medieval Hungary, its national saints and its regions. Another more general topic is medieval architecture; a side-production of his more specific research which leads to general conclusions.

The historical part starts in the fifth chapter. In around 2000, the problem of the art of the previous millennium was relevant, which corresponds in Hungary to the problem of Christianization and the beginning of Western-type art in the country. Marosi, one of the organizers of the exhibition series *Europas Mitte um 1000* (which opened first in Budapest and continued in Berlin, Karlsruhe, Prague, etc. in 2000–2002), dedicated himself to many of the related problems during these years. Unfortunately, some of his ground-breaking papers are missing, probably because of their length. This chapter ends with the period of Saint Ladislas; i.e., the end of the eleventh century, and continues with the next chapter, entitled “Monuments of the Árpád Age,” which traditionally corresponds to the eleventh to thirteenth centuries. Here, we can read about Benedictine monasteries as well as parish churches, stone carvings, and the Holy Crown of Hungary. Early Gothic is also discussed in two early essays (the reception of Regensburg from 1983 and a Madonna from Somogyvár from 1972). In fact, Early Gothic was one of the main research topics of Ernő Marosi, summarized in his most important monograph.⁴ This book is dedicated to the role of Esztergom and the royal court in disseminating Gothic style as early as the end of the twelfth century in Hungary. Not surprisingly, the next chapter focuses on two Hungarian cathedrals: those of Pécs and Esztergom. Marosi regularly returned to these two key monuments of Hungarian Romanesque and Gothic architecture, and the respective selection offers a useful cross-section of his extended research.

4 Marosi, *Die Anfänge der Gotik in Ungarn*.

The second volume starts with problems of fourteenth-century art, which corresponds in Hungary to the rule of the Anjou dynasty. Marosi was the editor and major author of the magistral compendium of fourteenth- and fifteenth-century art in Hungary.⁵ Among the topics of this chapter, key objects of the period return, such as the Prague statue of St George of 1373 and the Hungarian Illuminated Chronicle. Marosi was also organizer of the important exhibition on the period of King Louis I (1342–1382, Székesfehérvár, 1982),⁶ which was continued with another one on King Sigismund of Luxembourg (Budapest, 1987).⁷ He was also an important contributor to the later, large international exhibition entitled *Sigismundus Rex and Imperator*.⁸ Thus, the ninth chapter is dedicated to the time of Sigismund (1387–1437), which corresponds in art history to the decades of International Gothic style. Marosi himself contributed to our knowledge of this period, starting with his early analysis of St Elisabeth's church at Kassa/Košice; the earliest essay published in this collection deals with this church (1967) and one of the last ones, too (2015). Another key problem of the period is the '1974 Buda sculpture found', to which Marosi also returned regularly. A re-evaluation of these highly important statues is expected from Szilárd Papp in the near future; this was announced with expectation by Marosi as well. The historical part ends with the last great Hungarian ruler, Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490). Peculiarly, the title of the chapter calls Matthias a medieval man: just the contrary of the traditional view that sees him as a humanist and supporter of Renaissance art. The portrait of Matthias is also an opportunity for Marosi to make an excursion into twentieth-century art, analyzing the statue of the king by János Fadrusz in Cluj-Napoca (Kolozsvár, Klausenburg).

The historical part is followed by two more general chapters. One of them is dedicated to historiographic problems. While the second chapter is entitled "Understanding the Middle Ages," here we read about the concepts of the Middle Ages in historiography. Visegrád, a palace of Matthias Corvinus, connects the previous chapter to nineteenth-century concepts, which also touch on problems of national identity. The figure of King Matthias also leads to the analysis of Tibor Gerevich, the most influential Hungarian art historian between the two world wars. The *Wiener Schule*, a research topic of the young Marosi, returns here in a 2015 paper. Finally, the last chapter is dedicated to the protection of historic monuments. All those who deal with medieval architecture face the fact that what we see is not original but the construction of nineteenth and twentieth-century restorers. The *furor* of reconstruction has gained new impetus during recent decades in Hungary

5 Marosi, *Magyarországi művészet*.

6 Marosi et al., *Művészet I. Lajos király korában*.

7 Beke et al. *Művészet Zsigmond király korában*.

8 Takács, *Sigismundus Rex and Imperator*.

(as is elsewhere), with the destruction primarily of important medieval sites and castles (Székesfehérvár, Esztergom, Visegrád, Diósgyőr...). Marosi often raised his voice against these attempts—alas, without much success. The illustration for this chapter, a tapestry by Mária Túri that once decorated the palace of the Office of Protection of Historic Monuments (1974), is also a memento to the dissolved institution. Moreover, it is a reference to the interest of Marosi in modern art, which started with his earliest publications and was continuous until his death.

The 88 essays and their splendid illustration material, while representing only a small portion of the oeuvre of Ernő Marosi, offer insight into a breathtakingly wide spectrum of the genres of medieval art, from architecture to sculpture, from stone carvings to altarpieces, from miniatures to goldsmithworks, and include the interdisciplinary analysis of royal seals, heraldry, iconography, and the cult of saints. The collection will be a standard reference work not only for art historians but all medievalists and beyond.

Of course, with the publication of this essential portion of his oeuvre, Marosi did not stop writing. One of the last studies he was working on deals with the reception of Early Gothic architecture in the central parts of the Hungarian Kingdom (*medium regni*) in Transylvania. He saw the proof of this 120-page paper, but died before it was printed;⁹ further manuscripts are expected to be published, too. However, the three volumes of the present essay collection will comfort us for a while. Readers of this publication will surely agree with the title: *Bright is the Noble Work*, indeed.

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