

Ludwig Hevesi and art in *fin-de-siècle* Vienna

Review of:

Ilona Sármány-Parsons, *Bécs művészeti élete Ferenc József korában, ahogy Hevesi Lajos látta* [The artistic life in Vienna in Franz Joseph's time, as seen by Lajos Hevesi]. Budapest: Balassi Kiadó, 2019, 472 pp, 336 col. and b. & w. illus., bibliography, index, HUF 6,900 hdbk, ISBN 978-963-456-057-9.

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Since Carl E. Schorske's ground-breaking and seminal book entitled *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture* was published more than forty years ago,¹ a great deal has been written on the subject of art in Vienna at the turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Artists and architects such as Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele and Otto Wagner have become established figures, if not household names, in international scholarship and beyond. All this has substantially changed and enriched the European canon of art and architecture. Yet a kind of canon was already established in the art world and art criticism in turn-of-the-century Vienna itself, which undoubtedly influenced what would later be perceived and appreciated by modern scholars. In fact establishing the contemporary canon had practical consequences for the artists' and architects' careers in terms of commissions and could pave the way for success and fame. No-one played a more important role in this process than Lajos/Ludwig Hevesi (1843–1910), the eminent journalist and art critic of *fin-de-siècle* Vienna.

Born Lajos Lówy in Heves, Hungary, in theory he would have been an unlikely candidate to become a pundit in the art world of Vienna. Yet, thanks to the social and cultural composition and mobility of the Habsburg/Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, he was able to fulfill this mission. Following in the footsteps of his father, he first studied medicine in Pest, then in Vienna, never graduating at either university. In Vienna he became interested primarily in the arts, attended lectures on art history at the university, avidly read the books of Franz Theodor Kugler, Jacob Burckhardt and others, and tirelessly visited exhibitions. In Vienna also he got acquainted with some prominent Hungarian journalists, polyglot and worldly-wise members of their country's cultural élite. One of them, Miksa Falk, invited him to join the staff of *Pester Lloyd*, a leading German-language paper in the Hungarian capital, where he began to publish *feuilletons* (essays on art for an educated, but not specialist, public) his favourite genre for the rest of his career. In 1875 Lajos Hevesi (he had published under this name, which later he would assume officially) moved to Vienna and found employment with the *Fremden-Blatt*, the semi-official and highly influential daily paper of the Austrian establishment. Through his innumerable articles published here and elsewhere Ludwig Hevesi (in his German-language

¹ Carl E. Schorske, *Fin-de-Siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1979.

publications of course he used the German version of his first name) came to occupy a leading position in art criticism in his adoptive city.

In her monumental book Ilona Sármany-Parsons, former professor at the Central European University in Budapest, covers the life and work of Lajos Hevesi and much more. As it would be difficult to understand his role and position just by itself, in the first section of her book, after Hevesi's biography, she discusses the history of art criticism in the leading countries of Europe, i. e. France and England. Then she proceeds to Germany and Austria. She highlights the protagonists and special characteristics prevalent in the respective countries, as well as the institutional backgrounds such as the role of the world fairs and other exhibitions together with the forms and norms of publications. This comparative analysis is a treat and a unique achievement by itself. Having discussed the scene in the major European countries, though, it wouldn't have been uninteresting to have a similar overview of the Hungarian situation. The reason for this omission lies probably in the fact that what existed in Budapest at the time was not comparable to developments in Paris, London, Munich or Vienna, and what little could have been said about the subject more or less transpires in the pages of the book anyhow.

The bulk of the book of course is devoted to Hevesi's work. It focuses basically on his activities as an art critic, just briefly referring to her versatile and immensely prolific protagonist's other interests. Of the latter there were many, one of his engagements being to write pieces on the theatre. Yet it would be well-nigh impossible to cover properly all of Hevesi's activities in a single volume. As he was a veritable workaholic, even coping with his articles that fall into the category of art criticism has been a challenging task.

Ilona Sármany-Parsons has chosen to discuss Hevesi's work as an art critic in a chronological order. Her approach was two-pronged: always bear in mind the big picture, the European context, and penetrate into Hevesi's mind in an attempt to present the art world as he saw it. In the process the empathetic author virtually identifies with her protagonist to the point of all but emulating his many-sidedness. And since Hevesi saw a great deal of the world around him, the readers of Ilona Sármany-Parsons' book have the privilege to do likewise, with the wisdom of hindsight and expert analysis.

Lajos Hevesi is generally considered to be the man who championed the cause of modernism in the face of conservative taste. He is the prophet, whose famous motto *Der Zeit ihre Kunst, der Kunst ihre Freiheit* (To the age its art, to art its freedom) adorns the facade of the Secession Building in Vienna. His career, however, spanned half a century and he covered all of its art, including the age of historicism and academism. And he did it with sound judgement and great erudition throughout. He understood the art of Mihály Munkácsy and Hans Makart, since he always appreciated Vienna's 'culture of the senses', independent of 'style'. He regularly visited the Viennese, Munich or Budapest art exhibitions and from 1867 onwards saw all the World Exhibitions in Paris. His criticisms, based on his comprehensive cultural knowledge, sound aesthetic judgement and openness for novelty, made him one of the chief opinion makers of art criticism in Vienna from the early 1880s. He assiduously visited, and commented on, the exhibitions of the Künstlerhaus and the Österreichischer Kunstverein, just as he would later the exhibitions of the Secession and the Hagenbund. His *feuilletons* educated the general

public and in the meantime refined the methodology and vocabulary of art criticism, which is to say art history itself. No doubt his greatest achievement was the promotion of new art and its representatives, for he was not a simple chronicler but also, as we would say today, an effective influencer. He was well aware of that and wanted to drive the point home: towards the end of his life in close succession he published two sets of his essays in book form, one on eight years of the Secession,² one titled 'Old Art, New Art'.³ But, as Ilona Sármany points out, Hevesi also published a book on Austrian art in the nineteenth century,⁴ thus providing the first comprehensive and immediate account of the bygone years. It seems appropriate to quote her summation of Lajos Hevesi's significance:

'A chronological survey of his articles gives a vivid history of Viennese exhibitions from 1876 until the end of 1909, and throws light upon the immense power Hevesi possessed: based on individual taste and preferences, he built careers, facilitated the development of important oeuvres, and remarkably influenced the reception of new styles. Visitors to the exhibitions sought out the pictures that he had praised and explicated, while if Hevesi did not notice an artist, that person has remained practically unknown to us, his or her life-work probably now submerged in the mass-production of contemporary painting. He became thereby one of the creators of the artistic canon. Art criticism is the first step of selection, the first filter of artistic "production". In 1903 Hevesi constructed the first historical narrative as well, establishing the canon of Austrian/Viennese art and painting. And all this in a way that did not view any of the artists whom he supported through an ideological prism.'⁵

As could have been construed from the above passages, the book under review presents not just the artists and works of art as seen through Hevesi's eyes. There is much more to it. His critical opinions are frequently confronted with those of his colleagues with different views. The protagonists of Viennese *fin-de siècle* culture come to life, should they be artists or architects, art critics or members of the political élite. The social and cultural panorama of Vienna and Central Europe is unfolding before the reader's eyes thanks to the erudite author's sensitive and highly readable presentation. The text is supported by a wealth of pictures, many of them familiar to the experts, others lesser-known or entirely disregarded. Ilona Sármany-Parsons has already published in German a selection of Lajos/Ludwig Hevesi's *feuilletons* along with an essay on his life and work.⁶ It is to be hoped that the present, magisterial book will soon be available as well to an international readership.

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² Ludwig Hevesi, *Acht Jahre Sezession. Kritik – Polemik – Chronik*. Vienna: Carl Conegen, 1906.

³ Ludwig Hevesi, *Altkunst- Neukunst. Wien 1894–1908*. Stuttgart: Carl Conegen, 1909.

⁴ Ludwig Hevesi, *Österreichische Kunst im 19. Jahrhundert*. Leipzig: E. A. Seemann, 1903.

⁵ Ilona Sármany-Parsons 2019, 441. (Reviewer's translation from the Hungarian)

⁶ *Ludwig Hevesi und seine Zeit*, edited by Ilona Sármany-Parsons and Csaba Szabó. Vienna: Institut für Ungarische Geschichtsforschung in Wien, 2015. (Publikationen der ungarischen Geschichtsforschung in Wien, Bd. XI.)

the University of Pécs. He specialises in nineteenth-century architecture and garden design. His books include *Lechner, a Creative Genius* (2014), *Motherland and Progress: Hungarian Architecture 1800–1900* (ed., 2016) and *Az Országház építése és művészete* [The building and art of the Hungarian Parliament House] (ed., 2020).

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