

## FROM SOCIAL COMMITMENT TO ART FOR ART'S SAKE

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There is no need to reiterate here that both social commitment and art for art's sake are characteristic features of the *avant-garde*. Either can emerge from the inner dialectic of the path an artist is following. At one stage of development, he or she might feel an urge to take a stand on immediate political issues; at another, social reality might be completely ignored.

A case in point is the Hungarian-American painter *Imre (Emory) Ladányi*. His early works represent an Expressionism with a social message; his late collages suggest a total rejection of any didactic purpose. Undoubtedly, these two creative phases, marked by such diametrically opposite attitudes, are separated by decades in which his activity seems to show fewer individual features, and the discrepancy between his early and late conceptions of art may be explained at least partly in terms of the difference between the social realities which surrounded him in the two periods; yet it cannot be denied that the two artistic creeds are also interrelated.

Born in Kecskemét, on November 8, 1902, he was the third and last child of the cabinet maker Mihály Ladányi and Márta Nagy. At the age of four, he lost his father. The family became destitute; his widowed mother left her children in the care of a grandmother, and went to Budapest to learn dressmaking. The young boy's destiny was apparently to become a self-made man who would harshly condemn social injustice. Ladányi felt he was compelled by difficult circumstances to fight a desperate struggle for his existence.

A few years later the family moved to Eger. While studying in its ancient "Lyceum", at the age of 12 Ladányi was enrolled in a private class taught by his school's art teacher Gyula Tóth. Drawing became his favourite occupation, yet he resisted the temptation of choosing it for his profession. The art teachers and professional painters he met made him skeptical about art as a breadwinning activity, so in 1920 he decided to study at the Medical University of Budapest. After graduating, in 1927 he went to Berlin to do post-graduate work in dermatology. There he met Herwarth Walden, the editor of the Expressionist magazine *Der Sturm*, who exhibited three of Ladányi's pictures in his well-known gallery. A retrospective show of the works of *Munch* made a great impression on him and was to exert a decisive influence on his work.

From the German capital he moved to Vienna, where he continued his postgraduate work, studied the paintings of *Klimt*, *Schiele*, and *Kokoschka*, and attended sketching

classes in the evenings. Having returned to Budapest, he became a friend of Attila József, and joined the "Miklós Bartha Society". *Aranysziget* ("Golden Island"), a small volume of poems by Andor Simon, another member of that association, was published with lino-cuts by Ladányi in 1928.



1. Breadline

Surrounded by militant socialists, he regarded art as a means for expressing social discontent. At first he seemed to be satisfied with the double identity of the respectable dermatologist and the subversive artist, but soon he felt oppressed by the political and aesthetic conservatism which dominated Hungary in the 1920's; thus in 1929 he decided to leave his native country for the United States. Having passed the necessary examination to become a physician in the land of opportunity, he opened an office in New York.

For some years no stylistic change was observable in his creative work: he continued to paint and draw distorted figures, visionary scenes expressive of the misery he left behind. In the years following the Great Depression these works seemed to appeal to the American public. Turning his living room into a studio, each day he devoted several hours to his artistic pursuits. Beginning in 1932 he contributed canvases and pastels to shows. Group exhibits, then one-man shows followed. In January 1933 his works were presented at an exhibition of Hungarians living in North

America, held at the Painters' and Sculptors' Gallery in Manhattan. That same year he won a prize for the woodcuts exhibited at a show which also included works by such well-established Hungarian painters as *Iványi-Grünwald*, *Csók*, and *Szönyi*. In 1935 his first one-man show at the Contemporary Arts Gallery, in New York, became a great success. It was seen by the Hungarian painter *Vilmos Aba-Novák*, who then had just won a second prize at the Carnegie International Biennale, by the British novelist and critic *Ford Madox Ford*, and by *Giorgio de Chirico*. On December 11, 1936, de Chirico gave a talk in the same gallery, analysing four paintings, a still life by *Ladányi* among them.

Success and the conservative taste of the American public made him change his orientation. Abandoning his earlier Expressionism, he turned more naturalistic. The stylistic change went together with a shift in genre: he started painting landscapes. Praised by critics, he seemed to be on the verge of becoming relatively well-known. In 1939 the Chicago Art Institute selected his *Chess Players* (1937) for its International Watercolor Exhibition, and one of his landscapes was chosen for the exhibition in the U.S. pavilion of the New York World's Fair.

Soon, however, the continuity of his life was broken by the war. In 1942, following Pearl Harbor, he decided to volunteer for service in the U.S. Army. The destination of his unit was North Africa and Italy. While he worked for the Army Medical Corps, he had the opportunity to do watercolours of military camps in Africa, and later he painted landscapes in Italy.

Meanwhile *Emily Frances*, the director of the Contemporary Arts Gallery, arranged for him a second one-man show in 1943. This exhibition must have presented him as a far more traditional artist than the previous show. His art seemed to go into a decline. The press went on praising him, but for the wrong reason: the journalists who found his watercolours "gentle", "charming", "ingratiating", and "easily likeable" could not help admiring the "hard-working" physician who was ready to serve as a captain in the U.S. army, although his native Hungary was fighting on the other side.

After the armistice *Ladányi* was ordered on a two-week tour of duty with the Allied Control Commission in Hungary. He visited his mother in *Kecskemét*, took her to *Budapest*, and left her in an apartment, well provided for. Back in the U.S., he had to rebuild his professional life. Within a few years he became a dermatologist of high repute, and so he could find spare time to resume his activity as an artist. Having bought a piece of land in *Connecticut*, he built a house where he could follow his artistic inclination during vacation periods.

Seclusion made it possible for him to develop a new style. Early Expressionist influences reasserted themselves, especially after 1959, when he visited Europe for the first time since the war. He distanced himself from the demands of the general public, turned to collage, experimented with junk sculpture, and even made occasional excursions into multilingual poetry. Recognition came somewhat late for the fresh start he made in his old age, but from the mid-70's he seemed to be accepted by connoisseurs who cared for artistic innovation. In 1977 a book was written about his

art by Walter L. Strauss, published by Abaris Books, New York. In 1979 and again in 1981 Syracuse University invited him to arrange one-man shows at their Lubin House Gallery. The next year the Tibor de Nagy Gallery organized an exhibition entitled "Hungarian Avant-Garde (1919–1939)", presenting four watercolours from Ladányi's pre-American days. After this, he showed regularly at the Matignon Gallery in New York City, as well as at other locations in the U.S. and Europe. In 1986 a representative collection of his woodcuts was published by Paul Kövesdy, director of the Matignon Gallery. That same year, fifty-four of his oil-paintings, collages and woodcuts were exhibited at the Hungarian National Gallery between July 24 and August 24; thirty other works in his native Kecskemét between July 30 and September 21. Although neither of these two shows seemed to do full justice to the best of his *œuvre*, they called attention to the work of an artist who had been almost entirely forgotten in Hungary.

In 1987 some of Ladányi's works were shown in Eger, the city where he took his first drawing lessons, but he died before this exhibition was held. Most of his paintings are stored in an apartment in New York. No Hungarian art historian has studied them, so it remains to be seen what aesthetic or historical significance they may have.

Still, it would be somewhat disappointing to end this brief sketch on such a negative note. It seems probable that the late collages mark the apex of Ladányi's work. If one compares them with the landscapes and figural paintings of the years between the late 30's and the late 50's, the best one can say about the middle phase is that it constituted a *reculer pour mieux sauter*.

The interpretation of his late style is a task for art historians. Here I cannot do more than suggest two starting-points for further investigation. The *ars poetica* underlying the works which Ladányi composed in the last twenty-five years of his life shows the influence of the American aesthetic thinker *Susanne K. Langer*. In *Collages*, probably the most important book on his art, published by Matignon Gallery in 1984, the painter himself quotes the author of *A Philosophy in a New Key and Feeling in Form* as follows: "A work of art is a system of presentational symbols and can not be translated into discursive language."

In Ladányi's view collage is the genre which makes it possible for the artist to move as far as possible from didacticism. At the same time, this is the genre which marks the continuity of late-20th-century art with the *avant-garde* of the years 1905–1925. As is well-known, *papier collé* (glued paper) was a characteristic device used by the Cubists. It led to two important consequences: a) the use of mixed media involved a questioning of the traditional materials of painting; and b) the assemblage of found objects was bound up with a new definition of the work of art, the deconstruction of the traditional opposition between art and life. Obliterating the demarcation line between the finished work of art and the process of composition, a collage emphasizes what is discontinuous, random, or chaotic in experience. The work of Kurt Schwitters – one of Ladányi's favourite artists, who moved from Expressionism to Dadaism – clearly suggests that collage-making can be considered a technique which reveals a continuity between the *avant-garde* of the early 20th

and the Postmodernism of the late 20th century. During World War II Ladányi became acquainted with Edgar Varèse, Anaïs Nin, and Henry Miller, whose art illuminates other aspects of that continuity. Drawing inspiration from their works, Ladányi turned collage into a universal technique and thus may have been one of the artists to question the legitimacy of a distinction between the intentional and the accidental. It seems possible that the goal he had in mind was to undermine the validity of aesthetic judgement. If this is so, his late works point to the ambiguity inherent in art for art's sake: the rejection of didacticism leads to the deconstruction of the concept of art. This contradiction may be one of the principles underlying changes in human activity which we associate with the aesthetic sphere.

2. Thew (1960, Dyptich. Oil collage, 120 x 160 cm) ►

3. Inversion (1970. Oil collage, 40x30 cm) ►

