

HUNGARIAN ART OUTSIDE HUNGARY: BERLIN IN THE 1920s

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From 1920 onward, the exodus of a growing number of writers, artists and philosophers of different nationalities turned, practically overnight, towards Berlin, a capital which had never before exercised any particular attraction and which even in the 1920s tended rather to astonish foreigners by its ugliness. The only speciality it could offer as a metropolis was a remarkably highly developed, complex underground and railway system.

To a certain extent the railway network even seemed to determine the attitude of those artists arriving in Berlin, as almost all the new arrivals considered the city as a temporary stop-over from where to continue their trip, as actually did happen after a span of two to three years. The majority of the newcomers arrived from Eastern and Central Europe, principally from Russia, and had absolutely no intention of settling permanently in Berlin and even less of assimilation. In fact, after 1919, Germany was the only place in Europe where a major revolutionary movement still seemed a realistic, objective possibility. Social tensions were extremely sharp in Germany. It had a relatively strong communist party and a left-wing Independent Socialist Party. Extremists even hoped for the success of a German revolution.

The avant-garde artists awaiting a revolution came flocking to Berlin. The possibility of a revolution on the one hand, and the presence of Russian avant-garde on the other, had a profound effect on practically all the forward-looking left-wing intellectuals.

A singular feature of their presence in Berlin was that the officially delegated representatives of Soviet cultural policy (Stereberg, Lunacharsky, etc.) collaborated with those Russian artists who, for various reasons, had left the country either temporarily or for good. Naum Gabo, for example, lost faith in the Soviet system, in late 1921. He told Sterenberg and Lunacharsky that he wanted to leave the country. The two officials supported his request and enabled him to participate in the mounting of the Soviet exhibition in Berlin. By 1921, representatives of the official cultural policy were still working together with those intending to leave the country or having just done so, with

the common goal of acquainting the Western public with Russian art in its finest form and enabling them to accept these works, as another project to provide support for the starving Russian people.

The Soviet-Russian did not in most cases consider themselves as exiles: they represented the officially codified art of their country and voiced the idea of a victorious revolution. Umanskij's book (*New Art in Russia*), his articles carried in the periodical *Ararat*, which all revealed a fair amount of bias, acquainted the German intelligentsia with avant-garde Russian art for the first time. Ideas clashed not only in Moscow but in Berlin as well. Russians constituted the largest numbers among the emigrants, and so their views and art exercised the most marked effect, radiating, through Berlin, to the whole of Europe. Only the Soviet-Russian artists succeeded in having a comprehensive, truly representative show mounted in Berlin, at the Galerie Van Diemen late 1922 which further enhanced the great impact of Russian art.

This transitory state, and the sense of temporariness, stepped up existing tensions still further. All those arriving in Berlin tried to exploit their energies in the most intensive way possible during the shortest time possible and to use their time to the best account.

The first breakthrough came with the arrival in 1920 of the artist Ivan Puni, who moved to Berlin together with his wife, Kseniya Boguslavskaya. Herwarth Walden, the director of the Gallery *Der Sturm* organized his first show as early as February 1921, a year and a half before the big Russian exhibition at the *Galerie van Diemen*.

This was the first exhibition in Berlin where Western public encountered genuine Russian avant-garde works. By that time the names of Malevich and Tatlin were already known, but since none of their works were available, the real discovery came with Puni's exhibition. A costume festival held in connection with the exhibition also contributed to its success: the artists marching in the streets and hailing Puni as a true Russian artist, went a long way towards bringing him success.

In fact, these artists had come straight from Soviet-Russia, and their début brought works that represented a synthesis of the latest and most powerful trends, on the boundary between Suprematism and Constructivism, the Ukrainian Archipenko, had previously spent several years in complete obscurity in Paris. However, once in Berlin, Archipenko founded a school, and Theodore Däubler and Ivan Goll wrote a monograph about him as early as 1921, which made his name known throughout Europe practically overnight. There are hardly any artists whose work has given rise to so many monographs appearing in several languages in a year or two as was the case with Archipenko. His sculpture, both the openwork forms and the colour sculp-

tures, have become a symbol of modernism, and he himself gained extraordinary popularity. In reality, neither Archipenko, nor Puni represented the genuine Russian avant-garde. They were outsiders in a manner of speaking; their style walked a tightrope between figurative and abstract.

To the Germans it was their art which represented the Russian avant-garde, but already in 1921 in the same Berlin other Russians were present: El Lissitzky and Gabo whose works embodied the essential spirit of Suprematism and Constructivism, and yet they were much closer to what was going on in Moscow than Puni or Archipenko.

In fact, the Berlin events paved the way for the arrival of El Lissitzky, who had succeeded in getting permission for his departure for Berlin, and of Ehrenburg, who reached Berlin by adventurous routes after his expulsion from France. In 1922, the two of them presented a united front as representatives of the Soviet state, and published the review *Veshch*, Gegenstand, Objet in three languages, with Soviet state support. The last, and most important phase in the collaboration between Russians living at home and those having left the country, was the exhibition at the *Galerie van Diemen*, whose eclectic character (with exquisite works displayed side by side with indisputably mediocre and traditional ones) was also due to this duality. The Russians were followed, both in number and significance, by the Hungarians. Their viewpoints also concurred most closely with those of the Russians, as they too had brought along their revolutionary memories: the staggering experiences of the Revolutions. They had left Hungary en masse and not individually but their organizational centre was in Vienna, with *MA* (Today), the periodical edited by Lajos Kassák, as their rallying point. Although the paper was not published in Berlin, its international network of relations, the authors of the articles and the problems they tackled, and the international outlook it represented all linked the periodical directly to Berlin. This tendency was even more clearly evident from April 1921 onwards, when László Moholy-Nagy – who had been living in Berlin since April 1920 – became the Berlin editor of the Vienna-based *MA*. Moholy-Nagy selected the illustrations for the periodical and forwarded them to Kassák.

From 1920 on, Ernő Kállai, the eminent critic and aesthete, also lived in Berlin. Kállai was equally at home in German culture and journalism, and in the realm of contemporary Hungarian art. The expressive language and passionate stand of his essays and articles made a major contribution towards Hungarian avant-garde becoming an integral part of European avant-garde.

Of the members of the group of activists, Lajos Tihanyi spent a short time in Berlin, between his stays in Vienna and in Paris, and József Nemes Lampérth also stayed there temporarily, during which time he even held a joint

exhibition with Moholy-Nagy in 1920 (*Galerie Fritz Gurlitt*), before lapsing into insanity and returning to Hungary. His large-size wash paintings dating from this time convey a dramatic force of expression.

Finally, *Der Sturm* gallery helped two artists to take their place on the scene: Béla Kádár and Hugó Scheiber, whose works regularly featured in the displays mounted by Walden and on the pages of the periodical as well.

The two artists whose abilities really unfolded in Berlin, with a truly unexpected speed and impact, were both young people whose names had previously been practically unknown in Hungary: László Moholy-Nagy and László Péri. During the war both belonged to the fairly loose circle of the Hungarian activists, but beyond this they had practically no artistic past and background behind them. Both were Leftists in their views but took no active part in the events during the period of the Republic of Councils. Unlike the other Hungarian emigrés, they did not settle in Vienna but in Berlin, and this put them into an extremely advantageous position compared to the Kassák circle, who remained fairly isolated from their immediate environment in Vienna. Both artists soon identified themselves with a form of geometric abstraction close to Constructivism, and their artistic approach was mainly stimulated by El Lissitzky; in the case of Moholy-Nagy, this became evident mainly in the use of drawings, linocuts and in the case of László Péri, in a sculptural form. But at the beginning of their careers, they represented a fairly unified outlook, and in 1920–21, there was still much less difference in their style than a couple of years later. Even their techniques are related – Péri (presumably) painted on wood and canvas, and Moholy-Nagy also used rough nettle-cloth as the basis of his compositions, often leaving a large part of the cloth unprimed. Though he executed his motifs in paint (*Great Wheel*, 1920–21, *E-Picture*, 1921, *Glass-Architecture III*, 1921–22), they have the effect of being each glued upon the raw base, standing out of it like sharp silhouettes. It would be difficult to say which of the two artists was the first to develop this specific silhouette style in a period dominated by cross-currents. What seems certain, however, is that the realms of expression of Péri and Moholy-Nagy are not independent of each other, as they employed similar means in their experiments with various means of transition from the painterly to the plastic and the architectural. One of the main characteristics of Péri's art was his conception in terms of cement, walls and edifices even when producing reliefs, paintings, linocuts or photographs.

Both artists were discovered by Herwarth Walden, who exhibited their works on several consecutive occasions in *Der Sturm* gallery. Of the two, László Péri stood closer to Walden, as in Walden's eyes he embodied the ideal of the revolutionary, the communist and the constructivist artist, and Walden

devoted the same attention to Péri as he had devoted earlier to Chagall and Kandinsky. This is also borne out by the album of linocuts published by *Der Sturm* in 1922–3, with an introduction by Alfréd Kemény. (After 1920, Walden published no similar album of works by any other Eastern European artist.) The series of twelve sheets is composed in grey and black, except for the two sheets which also uses red and orange. The series embraces Péri's motivic realm practically in its entirety, and the order in which the sheets featured – which was fixed by the artist – reflects a logical artistic development. The album appeared simultaneously with El Lissitzky's portfolios entitled *Proun (I. Kestner Mappe)* and *Sieg über die Sonne* (Victory Over the Sun), but in form it is somewhat closer to Moholy-Nagy's *Kestner Mappe*, also published in 1923. This portfolio type owes its existence mainly to Kasimir Malevich's album entitled *Suprematism*.

The actual breakthrough of Puni came with the 1923 show in the *November-gruppe* section, which also bore out the avant-garde dynamism of the Berlin Fine Arts Show.

The real sensation of the exhibition sprang not from these isolated works, but from much larger-scale works.

In fact in May 1923, several artists including Van Doesburg, Péri, El Lissitzky and the Hungarian Vilmos Huszár, went in for tackling spatial problems, each after his own manner. El Lissitzky's *Proun Room* was undoubtedly the most successful and most popular piece at the exhibition, although, despite the artist's original intentions, his restricted financial and technical means compelled him to use boards instead of really durable material. As a consequence, the work has not survived. The original version of László Péri's composition was presumably made of painted canvas affixed to a wooden frame. In all probability he executed this composition in coloured concrete only later, in the 1930s, in accordance with his original concept.

Of the works displayed at the 1923 exhibition in Berlin, two were of spatial effect and two built on planar dimension. El Lissitzky's *Proun Room* and the *Interior Design* by Vilmos Huszár and Gerrit Rietveld, were both visualized – in El Lissitzky's case even executed – in space. In both works, the wall departs from its neutral supportive role of, and becomes an active part of the composition.

In contrast to the other works, Péri's *Three-piece Composition* was only displayed in one plane, on a given wall surface. The two outer elements were strictly geometrical, the two silhouette drawings complementing each other, while the central motif, being in part a round form, was emphatically different.

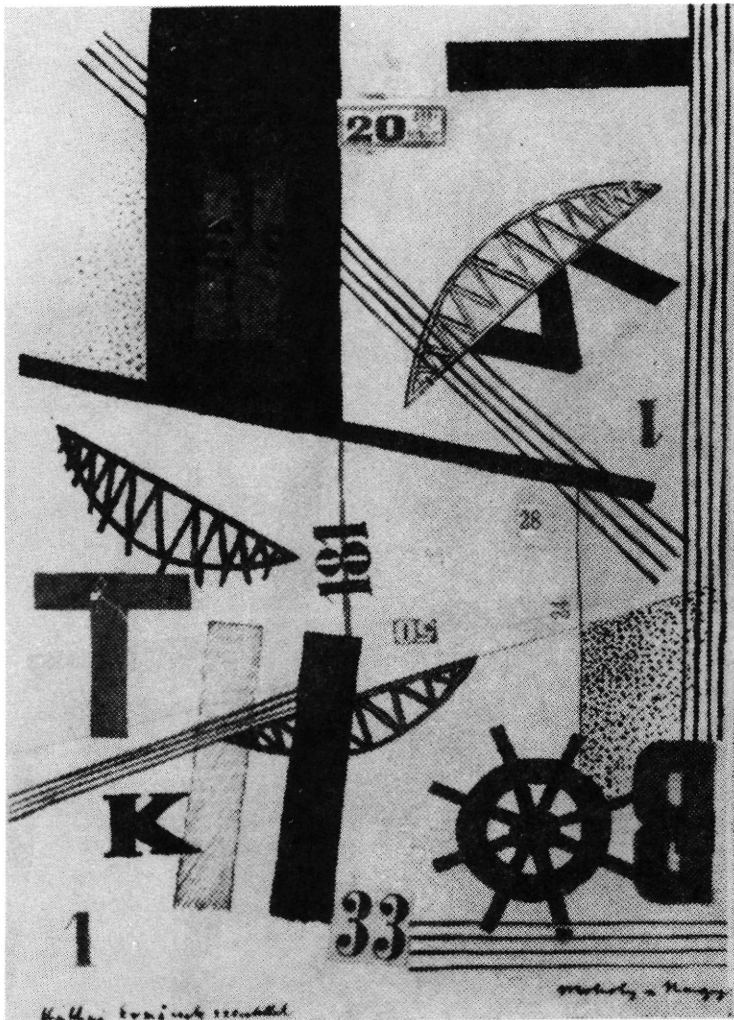
The elements themselves are uniform and homogeneous, and thus more elementary than those in any of the other compositions. In El Lissitzky's work,

the tension caused by the diagonal comes from the axes which link the elements, while in Péri the positioning of the forms, and their silhouette effect itself, conveys the diagonal tension.

The exhibition of 1923 was one of the most momentous in the history of the Berlin Fine Arts shows. The following exhibition, in 1924, already lagged behind it in quality, even though it was attended, in the *Novembergruppe* section, by Segal, Puni, Máttis-Teutsch and also by Moholy-Nagy.

The exhibitions, coffee-house discussions, press articles, and the constant exchange of views, gave birth to ever fresh ideas and concepts in Berlin, which are significant though never reaching the stage of realization. Delaunay's Orphistic notions became reformulated in Arthur Segal's "equivalents", while El Lissitzky's and Viking Eggeling's concepts were filled with new meaning in the Polish artist Berlewi's "machano-facture". But few concepts were so closely linked to Berlin as László Moholy-Nagy's pictures entitled *Glass Architecture*. This utopia was formulated first by Paul Scheerbart, and later by Adolf Behne, and was set out by Bruno Taut in a whole series of architectural designs. Moholy-Nagy's paintings in the series *Glass Architecture*, which he executed in Berlin, tackled the problems of geometric abstraction, experimenting with the infinite possibilities of light and transparency. But for Moholy-Nagy, as for the theoretical writers on glass architecture, this concept meant not only a stylistic and artistic task, but, beyond that, the transformation of new materials, of the new architectural, technical and scientific means and discoveries, into image and sculpture. Moholy-Nagy and Alfréd Kemény's theory of the dynamic-constructive power system was formulated in 1922. But the *Light-Space Modulator* was realized only later. In fact, Moholy-Nagy executed his idea, dating from 1922, in 1930, with the help of an engineer, István Sebők. Sándor László's *Colour Organ* also signified a breakthrough in genres, by striking the keys, the pianist also brought about a light concert, that is a simultaneous synthesis of auditive and visual effects. The same spirit gave rise to the light reliefs and light sculptures of Nikolaus (Miklós) Braun, a sculptor of Hungarian extraction, in which the very structure of the work becomes transformed under the effect of light. (Unfortunately only photographs of these light sculptures have survived.) Hungarians felt an attraction for light and motion, and for the use of new, industrial materials, like Moholy-Nagy for celluloid, gallalit, rhodoid, Péri for cement, Braun for electricity, etc.

The Berlin of the 1920s provided a shortlived and never-to-be repeated meeting point of Eastern, Central and Western European cultures. A meeting point where utopias played a larger part than realities, but without these utopias a synthesis of the foremost intellectual endeavours of international avant-garde could never have been realized, not even for a few short years.



*Fig. 1. László Moholy-Nagy, Collage (IK 33), 1921. Watercolor, 33.5 × 23.5 cm
Nazionalgalerie, Berlin, Germany*

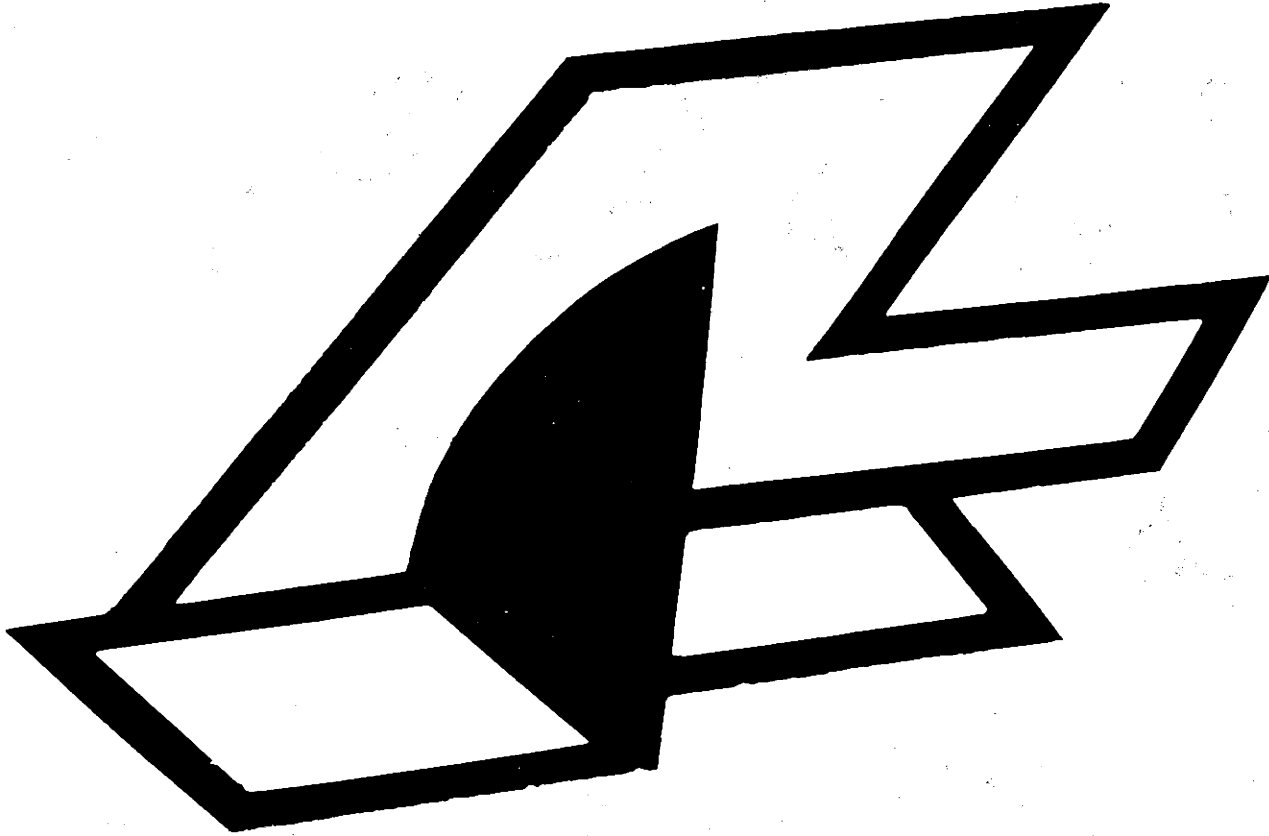


Fig. 2. László Péri, *Lino-Engraving I.* 1922–23

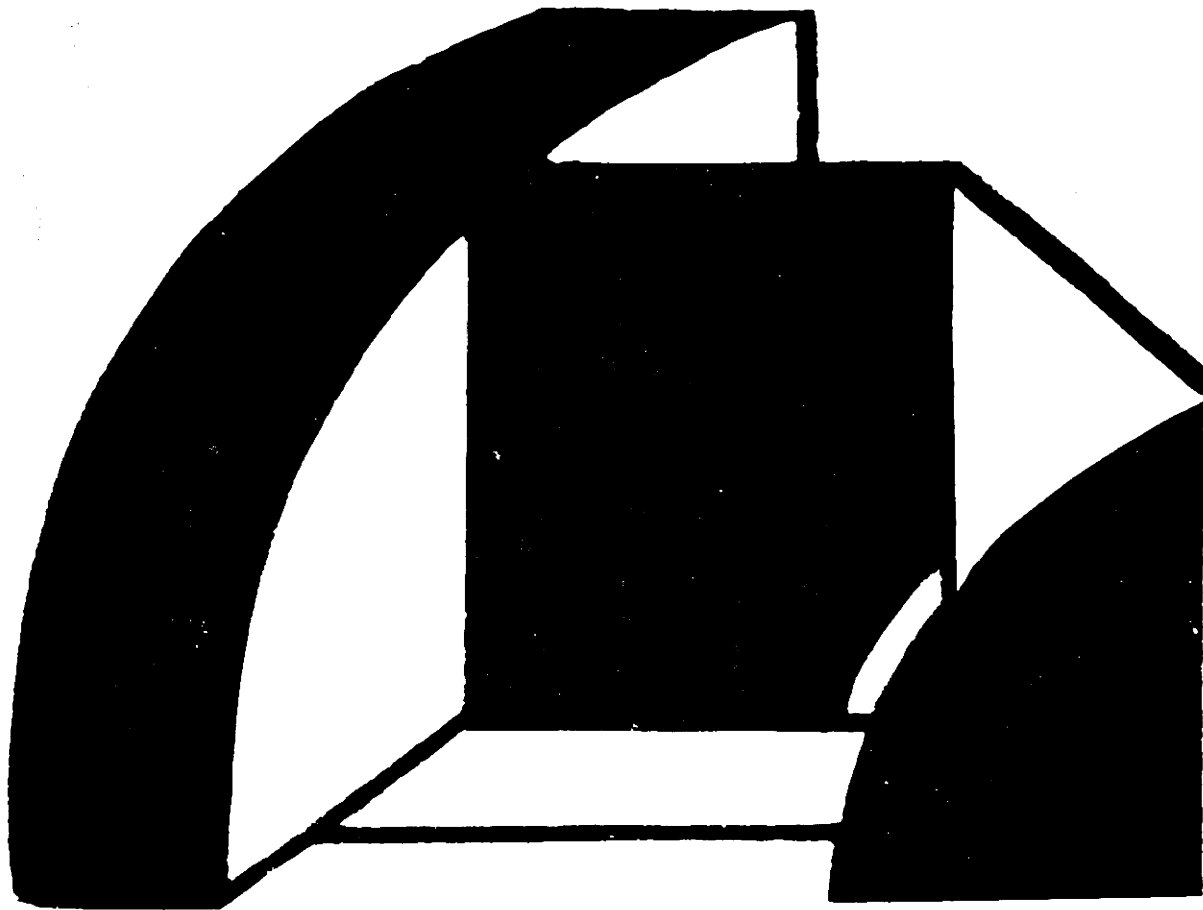


Fig. 3. László Péri, *Lino-Engraving II*. 1922–23

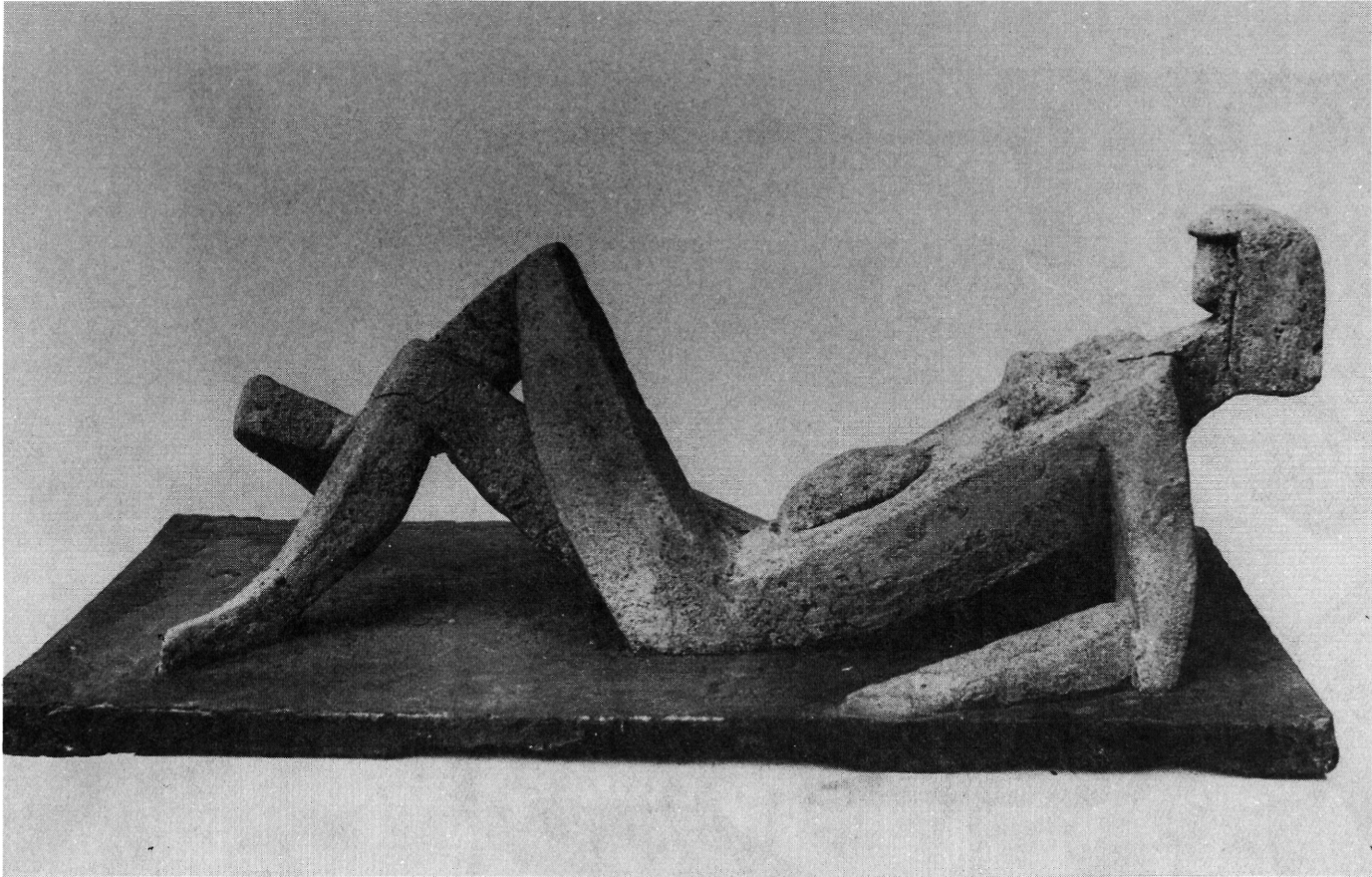


Fig. 4. László Péri, *Construction d'espace*, 1922–1930s Concrete, 80 × 56 cm.
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest

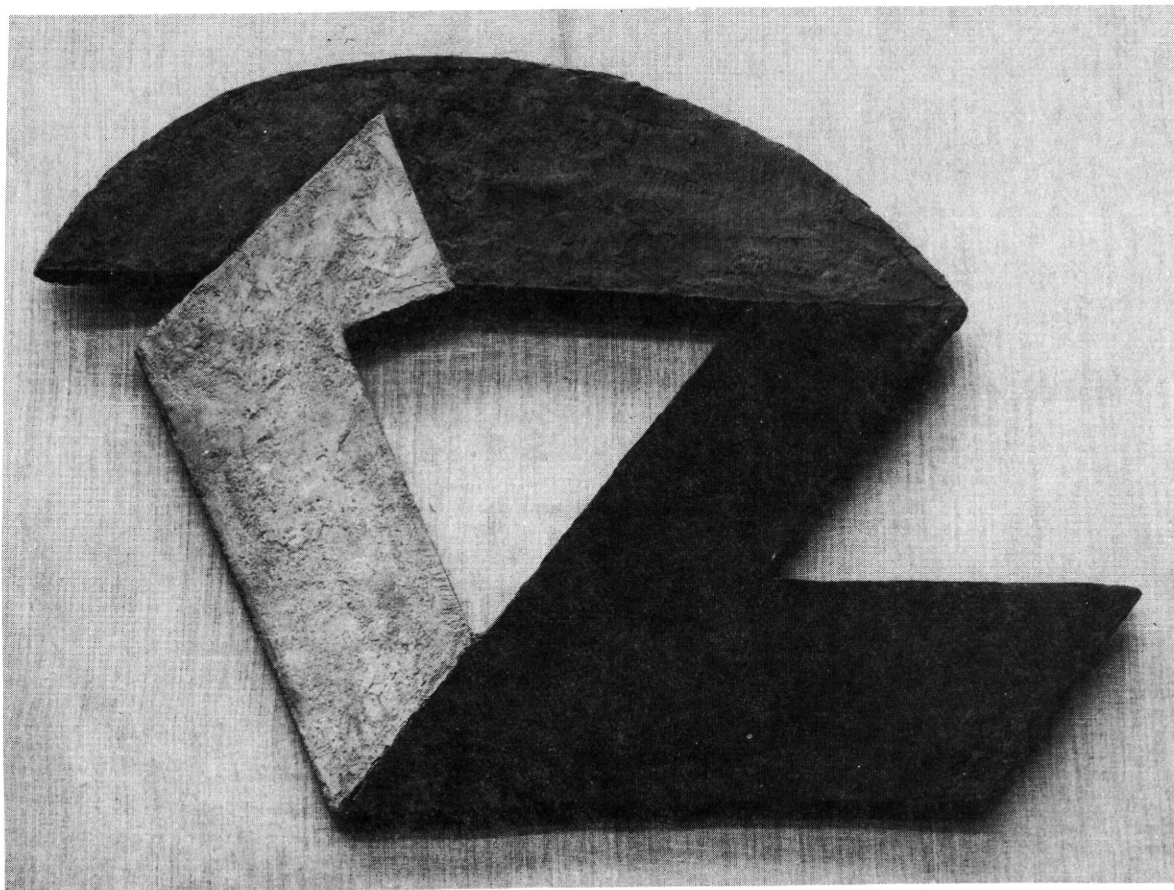


Fig. 5. László Péri, *Reclining figure*, 1920. Light and darker concrete, 23 × 61 × 31 cm.
Attila Kovács Collection, Köln, Germany

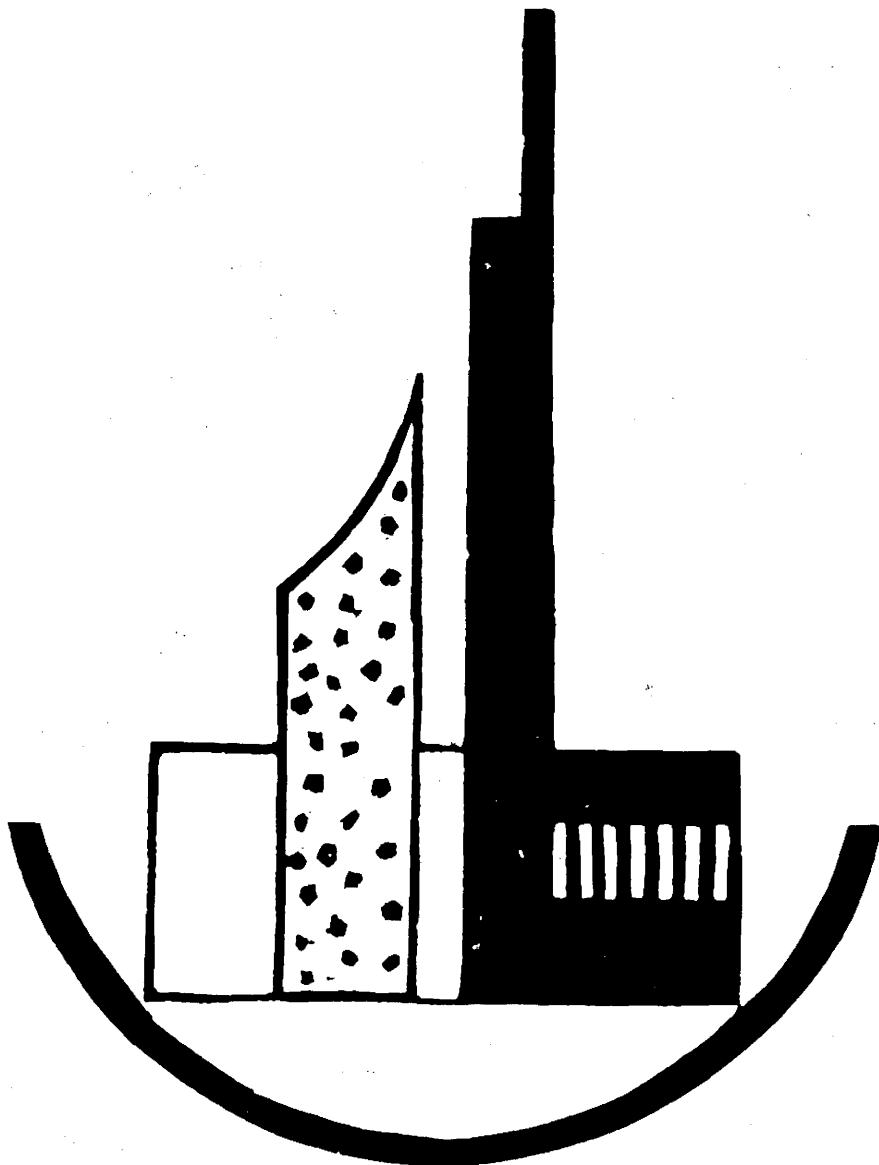


Fig. 6. László Moholy-Nagy, *Composition*
(cca 1921) Engraving