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MUSEUMS, COLLECTIONS AND THE ART MARKET IN THE PEOPLE'S REPUBLIC  
OF HUNGARY

1. The situation in the post-war years

Before or soon after the outbreak of war, important collections, or parts of them, had been moved abroad for safety, especially in the case of works which had an important place in the history of European art. Soon after the war an intensive traffic in smuggled art treasures (particularly paintings and applied art) added to the damage done during the war: most provincial museums and castles were looted during the final months of the war, so that all that was available later were the leftovers which had remained in the country. Museum collections and, to some extent, libraries too had been cut off from contemporary trends in art for decades - in fact since the first world war.

The year 1949 saw the introduction of a law for the protection of art treasures, under which registered works in major museums may not be sold abroad. If they are sold at all, then State collections have the first option to purchase.

Up to the mid-1950's new inventories of all museums were being produced, and the process of decentralisation began. It was only after 1950 that initial efforts could be made to expand the art market. On the antique market the prices paid for old art treasures were still lower than the fees commanded by contemporary artists, on the basis that an artist had to live on what he was paid for his work, and that most owners of old art treasures were members of the former ruling class. Economic factors ruled out any question of new collections.

Most former collectors whose collections survive concentrated on Hungarian art and were always on call for museum exhibitions.

2. Museums and collections in recent decades

Since the mid-1950's the relationship between museums and private collectors has changed in many respects, producing a new market for art and a new type of collection. By then practically all large private collectors (who usually specialised in Hungarian art, as mentioned above) had signed agreements with



museums, under which they either bequeathed or donated their collections to a particular museum in exchange for a regular monthly payment (which reflected the ever-rising prices of all works of art). As a result of this reciprocal arrangement several collectors and reputed artists donated parts of their collections to the most dynamic museums, in order to assure the works of the most appreciative public. Thus several important museums outside Budapest have developed into new cultural centres which specialise in contemporary art (eg Pécs, Szentendre, Szombathely, etc.).

For a long time the financial and economic climate prevented any social group from collecting actively, and day-to-day dealings in art were principally prompted by thoughts of brightening up the home, so that little continuity can be observed in collecting. Nevertheless, in the last 15 - 20 years several notable private collections have been established or expanded by purchase from dealers and at auctions. Several of these are also open to the public, in association with local museums, and most are registered in the appropriate national museums. (This means that the museums concerned have right to borrow works for exhibition, and are obliged in return to undertake regular restoration work on them.)

A more recent and increasingly popular interest is the collection of "small-scale" works, principally prints, etc., and medals: these do not require any great investment, but are evidence of the desire to have a collection of one's own. One product of recent history is that museums are very short of modern art from abroad, so that they are happy to encourage these individual efforts - for example with exhibitions of privately-owned foreign graphic art, and so on.

### 3. The art market

Day-to-day dealings in art are concerned with the work of contemporary Hungarian artists, and in principle - apart from purchases at exhibitions or in the studio - the art market is state-run. In its wide range of tastes and trends it reflects state and co-operative demand for architectural art, as well as the variety of state and co-operative purchases of works of art: here, the total turnover is comparable to that of the private market. (State and co-operative purchases, etc., always also imply a certain decentralisation, since the orders are actually placed by a variety of state or co-operative institutions or industrial concerns.)

Considering the size of the country and its population, artists can expect to find a fairly lively and regular market for their work. Most find it possible to make a living with their art, with all the advantages and disadvantages implied by market-oriented work in a creative field. In all cases, juries of artists are appointed by the "Artists' Union" to decide whether works offered for sale should be accepted, and to recommend purchase prices to galleries; galleries run by the "Artists' Association", the commercial and economic organisation to which all artists belong, take care of practical side of buying and selling.

Over the years a shift in popular taste has become apparent: people now tend to favour contemporary art, compared to the more traditional tastes of previous decades. The art market has been very effective in discouraging kitsch, and so has promoted certain more general aims of cultural policy.

But as well as its many advantages, the art market naturally also implies certain drawbacks for the artist, who is materially dependent upon market trends, and thus under pressure to sell.

#### 4. The artist and the artistic life of the nation

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In Hungary, a nation of some 10 1/2 million inhabitants, the "Artists' Association" has a membership of 3400 (including all painters, graphic artists, sculptors, craftsmen and art critics), and the "Artists' Union" some 1000 members. Roughly 500 - 600 artists receive relatively regular commissions (architectural art, work for industry, etc.) and most support themselves by selling their work. Thus importance must be attached not only to the solid structure of the official art market, but also to private collectors and the support they receive from museums. There is reciprocal relationship between the present vitality in diverse fields of artistic life and the rising standards of popular taste, so that it is also important to encourage decentralisation of cultural activity.

A fifth of the population of the country lives in the capital, although the increasing importance of the "regional capitals" has not only opened up new possibilities on the economic front, but has also led to a growth of interest in the fine arts. A large number of new museums have been opened, mostly devoted to one particular artist or group of artists, and the various biennial and triennial exhibitions include some devoted to artistic fields in which local industries have a direct interest: for example tapestry, textiles, enamelling, ceramics, etc. This trend also has an influence upon the development of museums, collections and the art market.

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The aim of this survey was not to present a complete picture of the artistic life of Hungary, but merely to pick out a few features which are relevant to the theme chosen for the congress. Due consideration had to be given to the historical background of the country, in which the role of the work of art and the various facets of artistic life have undergone certain changes, and are now developing in the context of a new social system.