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**FINE ARTS AND PRESS CULTURE AT THE
CHANGE OF AN ERA IN 1968**

Path Seeking in the Arts as Reflected by the Hungarian
Press in Romania

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Excerpt

My PhD research follows the endeavors and path seeking in fine arts between 1965 and 1975 as reflected in the contemporary press, more specifically in the most important cultural magazines of the age, namely in the weekly publication *Utunk*, as well as in *Korunk* and *Igaz Szó*. The other main area of my research is the evolution of fine arts criticism in these magazines. While analyzing the fine arts related articles, an ever increasing number of aspects of the topic have emerged. As a result, the research contains an analysis of the mode of communication after 1965 and discusses how the fine arts content started becoming increasingly free in the above publications, which years saw the publication of the most fine arts-related writings, and finally, how the slogans and obligatory content praising the party and the system found their way into the publications again after 1972.

The decade between 1965 and 1975 was a period of so-called cultural opening, and it is still exciting in our days, even for those who were born later, and therefore may observe and interpret the period from a sufficient historical distance. Gheorghe Gheorghiu Dej's death brought an extremely significant change in the Romanian society. Until the next president, the young Ceausescu became established in his new function and among the leaders of the Eastern European region as well as in the shadow of the Soviet power, the Romanian society enjoyed a certain level of economic well-being; in the cultural realm, artistic expression also gained a certain

amount of freedom. The European trends, without any continuity, appeared again in the arts, and cultural products became more accessible. The age of socialist realism came to an end for good, and the artists did not have to comply with any requirements set by the Communist party. At least apparently, creation gained back its freedom. The artists, writers and journalists of the age still call the age the golden era of the Hungarian culture in Romania – not only the ten years between 1965 and 1975, but the entire period until the end of the seventies. It is this cultural opening in fine arts that I wished to capture some way or another, as reflected by the press of the age. I only realized after starting to read the issues of *Utunk* that it was possible to gain a rather accurate image of the remarkably dynamic fine arts activity of the period. The weekly publication was a rich and varied forum of the fine art endeavours of the age, whereas the more personal, in-depth articles published in *Igaz Szó* and *Korunk* made the age seem easily accessible. I was captured by the richness of the authors' style, and therefore I decided to present the age by compiling thoughts collected from these articles. This way, by the inclusion of the word use and ideas of the period, the present thesis is not only a history of fine arts, but also of the related press; the essay-like, easy-to-read style of the thesis is another result of the above feature. The annexed interviews made with columnists of the period Lajos Kántor and Zoltán Banner, as well as with assistant editor Zolt Gálfalvi serve the purpose of making the presentation of the press of the age more complete by including their stories. Besides, the interviewed persons could also interpret the period that, given my age, I already regard as history.

In the first, theoretical chapter of the thesis I have presented the fine arts of the period between 1945 and 1975. After the Second World War, institutions were reorganized and the cultural life tried to come to terms with itself. As a result of political pressure, widespread cleansing took place, and the so-called “purification” marked not only the culture but every area of life. The stigmas determined the lives of the excluded persons for a long time, sometimes even for an entire lifetime.

Socialist realism was a defining factor in fine arts as well. The creation mode prescribed by the ruling power, the predefined topics and exclusions from regional art exhibitions also represented a retrogressive power. The end of the age of social realism, and then Georghe Gheorghiu Dej's death brought optimism in the Romanian society. Nicolae Ceausescu became the leader of the country during an apparent cultural and political opening; therefore, the period between 1965 and 1975 was not only a period of relative freedom, but also of path seeking in fine arts, and of a flood of Avant-garde and Neo-avant-garde trends. In the fine arts, a unique combination of traditions and Avant-garde trends appeared, and the period also saw a flourishing of graphic art and handicrafts. At the same time, the path seeking lead to a halt of certain art forms, especially that of sculpture and painting. The said age saw the establishment of some fine arts centers in the country that still define the Hungarian fine arts in Romania.

The second chapter reflects on the methodology of the research, beginning with an account of the books and publications on fine arts after the Second World War. So far, no comprehensive work has been published on the arts of the past half century. Some publications and studies present certain aspects of the age, but the period between 1965 and 1975 has never been analyzed in details. This thesis presents a map of the path seeking in fine arts as reflected in the press of the age, by analyzing fine arts-themed writings of the weekly periodical *Utunk*, and of the magazines *Korunk* and *Igaz Szó*. The highlighted ideas taken from criticism, reports, interviews and portraits offer a unique image of the fine arts and thinking about the fine arts of the period.

The case studies in Chapter 3 analyze the issues of the three periodicals, *Utunk*, *Korunk* and *Igaz Szó* published in ten years. Out of the three, *Utunk* is the publication with the most comprehensive and varied fine arts content. The weekly periodical followed the Hungarian fine arts events in the whole country. The writings belong to various genres, and they offer clues to artistic path seeking and make it

possible to follow the evolution of criticism. Also, they help us observe the process of communication freeing up after 1965 and then, after 1972, the gradual appearance of phrases praising the party and the system.

The monthly periodicals *Igaz Szó* and *Korunk* published in-depth and analytical writings on fine arts, characterized by a remarkably personal style. The *Igaz Szó* first mostly asked writers to present the events in the arts and artistic portraits, and these writings are more intimate in style. The magazine *Korunk* offered a larger outlook on the events in the arts, also including the European trends, while the magazine *Igaz Szó* mostly concentrated on the artistic life in and around Targu Mures. In the analysis of the content, I divided the articles into chapters according to their genre and content, and thus gained a synthesis of how frequently certain contents appeared in the periodicals. The table and the graph present an accurate illustration of how the fine arts content became richer and then narrowed down in the analyzed weekly and monthly publications.

Chapter 4 summarizes the conclusions of the research, showing the direction taken by the Hungarian fine arts between 1965 and 1975. The relative openness of the age was, in many cases, a defining factor in the development of the artistic styles, in the foundation of the arts centers during the period, and last but not least in the creation of institutions. In the analyzed decade, a group of critics and art writers emerged that performed very significant activity until the fall of communism in 1989. It is important, however, to emphasize that the opening was only a *relative* one: as it becomes obvious from the interviews included in the annexes, self-censorship remained very active, which points to the fact that a certain kind of censorship never ceased to exist between 1965 and 1975. When summarizing the results of the research, it is very important to point out that the hypotheses proved to be overwhelmingly correct; moreover, the fine art content of the three cultural magazines turned out to be much richer and much more varied than expected. It has also been fully proven that all three of the publications lived up to their undertaken mission of serving the

Hungarian culture. Since no proper fine arts publications existed at the time, these periodicals served as substitutes. All three publications contain rich illustration material and a high number of reproductions as well.

The *Annex* contains four interviews made with Zoltán Banner, the period's editor of the arts column of *Utunk*, Lajos Kántor, the period's columnist at *Korunk* and Zsolt Gálfalvi, the period's assistant editor at *Igaz Szó*. The interviews complement the image of the age at the level of *oral history*, but they also contain important data regarding the press of the time.

Research on the fine arts of the age is an area still largely unexplored. The present thesis is meant to present a unique combination of the press and the fine arts history of the region.

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