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**ADDITIONS TO AN OEUVRE.
GÁBOR MIKÓSSY’S PAINTING AND PEDAGOGICAL WORK
THROUGH THE LENS OF HIS DIARIES**

Summary

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Contents

1. Introduction	1
2. Historical and Ideological Context	3
2.1. Transylvania after the Second World War	3
2.2. The results of the relative cultural opening between 1965–1975	5
2.3. The period between 1975 and the 1989 regime change	7
3. Gábor Miklóssy’s biography	8
3.1. Literature review	8
3.2. Written/painted self-portrait. Biographical details	12
3.3. Scent of paint and/or violin bow. Education: in the spirit of variety	24
3.4. Gábor Miklóssy and the development of Transylvanian fine art education	32
3.4.1. Oradea: the path to institutionalised fine art education	33
3.4.1.1. Preliminary events	33
3.4.1.2. Oradea Institute of Fine Arts	37
3.4.2. Cluj Napoca: the path to institutionalised fine art education	41
3.4.2.1. Preliminary events	41
3.4.2.2. From the founding of the Hungarian Institute of Arts to the “Ion Andreescu” Institute of Fine Arts	55
3.5. Presentation of Gábor Miklóssy’s biography	61
3.5.1. Miklóssy’s early painting career	64
3.5.2. Miklóssy and socialist realist art	74
3.5.3. Miklóssy’s nude paintings	99
3.5.4. Miklóssy’s biblical paintings	112
3.5.5. Miklóssy and Transylvanian surrealism	118
3.5.6. Pastels	132

3.5.7. Exercises	133
4. Gábor Miklóssy's work through the lens of his diaries	139
4.1. Diary as a genre	139
4.1.1. Diary as a social and art historical source	139
4.1.2. The methodology and literature of 20 th century diary research. Art diaries	140
4.2. Introduction to Gábor Miklóssy's diary entries	143
4.3. In the wonder of oriental rugs. The art studio as creative milieu	145
4.4. Gábor Miklóssy's pedagogical work from the perspective of the teacher and his pupils	160
4.5. "Violin on the canvas". Interlacement of painting and music in Miklóssy's art	184
4.6. Miklóssy's spiritual and intellectual world	212
4.7. Miklóssy's visual world	214
4.7.1. History paintings	219
4.7.2. Socialist realist images	231
4.7.3. Biblical and mythological artworks	237
4.7.4. Surreal-metaphysical compositions	246
5. Conclusions	254
Bibliography and list of abbreviations	259
Appendix	270
Appendix of images and directory	313
Summaries (English, Romanian)	376

One does not need to introduce artist Gábor Miklóssy (1912–1998), since he is considered to be among the most exceptional figures of 20th century Transylvanian and Romanian fine art. However, paradoxically, there was no in-depth art historical research previously conducted into the details of his artistic and pedagogical work; and only summarising writings or partial studies attempted to unravel his complex ideas and personality, his rich and varied art. My thesis titled *Additions to an Oeuvre. Gábor Miklóssy's Painting and Pedagogical Work Through the Lens of His Diaries* wishes to continue this series of research by looking at the artist's body of work from the perspective of his diary entries. Following Gábor Miklóssy's 1998 death, his remarkably rich bequest was cared for by his son, Gyula Miklóssy, with a high level of professionalism. The bequest contains several thousands of oil paintings, approximately fifteen thousand graphics, as well as a several thousand-piece, prized library, in which Miklóssy's diaries and sketchbooks are held: invaluable source materials for understanding his work.

The first chapter of my dissertation aims to underline the significance of the subject matter that is supported by the impressive richness of the bequest, as well as Miklóssy's pedagogical work encompassing three decades. Although Gábor Miklóssy's diaries were previously known to art historical research, their methodical processing and transcription has not taken place before. I discovered this in 2014, while fulfilling my Assistant Curator role at the Quadro Gallery's exhibition *Gábor Miklóssy: Exercises* (curator: Sebestyén György Székely). The exhibition's main concept was connecting the palm-sized artworks presented in cabinets with the great oil paintings using Miklóssy's own artistic and theoretic ideas captured in his diaries. This show prompted the research project supported by Gyula Miklóssy and Sebestyén György Székely that allowed me to access the artist's booklets and to transcribe them. The 35 diaries that cover the period from the 1950s to the 1970s, and his autobiographies from 1949 and 1982 constitute as my dissertation's primary sources, and following their processing and transcription my research included exploring the literature of 20th century visual art and the somewhat fragmentary literature written about Gábor Miklóssy's oeuvre. In addition to the art historical bibliography, contemporary press reviews and criticism also play a significant role in presenting his biography, not only thanks to relaying crucial information about the artist, but also because of his artworks' reproductions. Furthermore, the images preserved in his bequest (paintings, graphics and reproductions) are particularly important source materials, and I have also used the artworks that appeared in the Quadro Gallery's auctions and those that are held in the collections of the Art Museum of Cluj-Napoca. The visual source material also includes the photo negatives from the Tamás Szabó collection of the Quadro Archive, which offer insight especially into Miklóssy's first solo exhibition, held in 1981 at the Korunk Gallery (which have not been discovered and published before). Alongside the photographic documents, there are two portrait films of Gábor Miklóssy directed by Marius Tabacu and Béla

Hegyi, which also include old video recordings combined with selected passages of Miklóssy's autobiography, proving to be useful in understanding his artworks.

Considering the methodology used, the optimal way to present the artist's biography was the chronological approach, which combined with comparative methods allows the reader the most in-depth insight into his life and work. In addition to the chronological presentation, Gábor Miklóssy's body of work was also grouped thematically and stylistically (historic, socialist realism, biblical and mythological, and surreal-symbolic compositions), and in addition, special notice was given to significant genres (e.g. nudes, Exercises) and art techniques (e.g. pastels). While the third chapter outlines the biography as seen through the existing literature, press and survived visual sources, these are completed by the description of paintings. The fourth chapter is primarily comparative: it connects the artworks with the diary entries, giving a more complex view onto Miklóssy's visual world. The method of iconographic-iconological interpretation was the most useful in the case of musically themed pictures, which helped in deciphering symbols such as the violin, cello and figures playing music.

The thesis' second chapter aims to give an overview of the historical and ideological context, which is central to discussing both 20th century art and Miklóssy's oeuvre within. After the Second World War, Romania had the lowest support for the Communist Party amongst the Eastern European countries, and Marxism was also less popular in its population. Nevertheless, following the transitioning period between 1945–1948, there was a distinct Soviet-modelled totalitarian power system applied, that affected not only the economic and social issues, but also controlled education, culture and the arts sector. In 1950 a radical administrative-geographical restructuring based on Soviet principles resulted in reducing Romania's 58 counties to 28 provinces, thus the centre of Hungarian cultural, artistic and literary life in Transylvania, that has been flourishing in Cluj-Napoca, has been tried to be moved to Târgu-Mureş, a more provincial and controllably sized city. The radical changes, in addition to restructuring, also involved closing institutions that represented old traditional values. The ideological propaganda, similarly to other countries of the Soviet Bloc, made use of all communication methods to introduce the new cultural values that were best shown in visual arts through the style and guidelines of socialist realism. Socialist realism became the communist parties' official artistic style, which adopted the tools of 19th century realism to express new, Marxist-Leninist ideologies in an easily understandable and accessible manner: depicting the communist ideals of the multifaceted, progressing individual, and an idealised socialist society and country. Artists were expected to clearly place the focus on social-historical content, and to capture the reality of everyday life in a way that fulfilled the socialist task of theoretical progress and education. This manifested in expectations regarding the depicted themes, as well as the applied artistic manners of expression, often prioritising accessibility and educational nature over artistic

quality. The very strict period of 1949–1954 was somewhat relaxed by Stalin’s death, when artists had opportunities to travel abroad, and Romania took part in international exhibitions, such as the Venice Biennale. In 1958 however, the system’s cultural politics has seen a drastic change: Gheorghe Gheorghiu-Dej has achieved the removal of Soviet troops from Romanian territories, but payed for this privilege with the introduction of stricter policies. Following Ceaușescu’s coming to power in 1965, state controll has again seen some loosening in Romania, while his external politics have also seen a change of direction. Romania was the only country of the Eastern Bloc that harshly opposed Czechoslovakia’s invasion, winning the symphaties of Western powers. This relative freedom applied to cultural politics as well. The 1968 values have created a cross-countries solidarity between not only philosophical and historical thinkers but artists as well. In parallel to other socialist countries, artists from Romania also tried to align their work with Western art, its artistic and aesthetic approaches. Naturally, this could not completely materialise, but there were several non-institutionalised, programmatic cultural initiatives in this period. The enduring 1968 values and the increasingly unforgiving poverty and realities of everyday life have together resulted in a peculiar, absurd duality. The national – and within, the Hungarian Transylvanian – art has gone through a complex, multifaceted process of reform, which was strongly connected with the artistic community in Cluj-Napoca. Being positioned halfway between the two capital cities (Budapest and Bucharest), having a significant academic layer and a variety of cultural institutions (theatres, operas, philharmonia, museums, the galleries of the Artists’ Society in Cluj, publishing houses, journals, magazines, etc.), with the addition of its multicultural character, the city opened the opportunity for innovations, but it also moderated their intensity. Its Western geographic position, its connections to Hungary and Western countries all facilitated the easier flow of information (within the context of the cultural-political environment), that formed an advantage even over the capital city of Bucharest.

In cultural terms, Ceaușescu followed dual politics, initially creating the illusion of openness and liberalism, allowing concessions, but later progressively taking repressive measures. After his official visit to China in 1971 he introduced the so-called “cultural revolution” of Chinese model, that reapplied old ideologies, propelling back the country’s development with a decade. The intensifying personal cult culminated in 1974, when Ceaușescu was elected President of Romania in addition to his role of General Secretary of the Romanian Communist Party. The horizons of those who worked in the field of culture and arts have been again forcefully narrowed down, and they have been placed under full supervision and propaganda control. Trips abroad were again impossible and the poverty and hardships experienced in the everyday life have had a profound effect on society and arts. The desperation of the 1980s (especially the ever strengthening control of

the Securitate) has forced many to flee abroad, that caused significant losses within the circles of intellectuals and artists.

Paradoxically, this period – together with its negative effects – is exactly the one considered to be one of the most fruitful and exceptional periods of the Romanian and Transylvanian art, which also gave birth to the bloom of important bodies of work such as Gábor Miklóssy's.

The third chapter attempts to present this unparalleled oeuvre with the use of the literature, press reviews, exhibition features and critiques, and the artworks themselves. The first subchapter includes the literature review, outlining published works about 20th century art, separate publications about Miklóssy, and also exhibition reviews, interviews, and longer editorials from contemporary press. Surprisingly, despite the art prizes and national awards Miklóssy received, only a small amount of art historic analysis had been written about his art. In the Oradea period's press, his name appeared related to the winning of some applications and he was also mentioned in reference to the founding of the School of Fine Arts. After his move to Cluj-Napoca, thanks to the major success of his work *Grivița 1933*, almost all daily and weekly newspapers published a reproduction and a shorter or more in-depth description of the work. His breakthrough into the elite of the official Romanian art did not last long. The momentum of the 1950s had slowed down, the official commissions had been dropped by the mid-1960s, however, after “recovering” from socialist realism, Miklóssy achieved to adopt a unique stylistic language and painted imagery, that makes his art stand out in the Romanian and Transylvanian art of the second half of the 20th century. Naturally this turn towards surrealism and symbolism cannot only be interpreted in isolation, and could have also been the result of the relative cultural opening of the 1960s. While in the 1950s several well-known art historians and critics wrote about him and *Grivița 1933*, such as Krikor H. Zambaccian, Radu Bogdan or Ervin Ditrói, István Borghida, and Zoltán Banner, there have been far less mentions of him in the press after the 1960s. One particular highlight is a longer feature illustrated with reproductions in the Hungarian journal *Művészet*, written by Ödön Gábor Pogány in 1972, a result of the art historian's visit to Miklóssy's art studio. Later, following Miklóssy's first solo exhibition in Cluj-Napoca in 1981, there were again some reviews of his art, but after that the artist's person was “forgotten” in line with his increasingly rare participation in exhibitions. In his lifetime, Zoltán Banner and György Sümegi conducted more profound research into his art, the earlier having written detailed overviews of his art, while the latter having published independent short monographs (but these had been printed only after the death of the artist). After Miklóssy's death, György Sümegi and Endre Simon organised an exhibition titled *Miklóssy Gábor növendékei* [Gábor Miklóssy's Pupils] in 2000 at the Vigadó Gallery, Budapest, which was accompanied by two catalogues, one about Miklóssy, the other about his pupils' art. In addition, György Sümegi wrote a monograph about Miklóssy in 2001 commissioned by the Mentor

Publishing House, however this is more an overarching view on the main directions of the oeuvre due to the length limits of the publication. Another book published in 2004, edited by the art historian Sümegi, *A szépség a szellem rangja* [Beauty is the Intellect's Rank] collates Miklóssy's artistic and pedagogic writings, interviews, letters and diary entries, therefore becoming a valuable source material, even though it contains a very small selection of the diary entries (giving more room to letters). In the next year, a major exhibition took place at the Art Museum of Cluj-Napoca showcasing his nudes, accompanied with a catalogue documenting an in-depth research, edited by Sebestyén György Székely. In 2009 Sümegi published with Kriterion Publishing House a more comprehensive monograph of Miklóssy's oeuvre to complete his previous book with Mentor, – however considering the multifaceted body of work, it still remains summarizing in nature. The book's merit is the richness of the reproduced artworks (archive photographs, sketches, paintings' reproductions); nevertheless it only states the location of the works if they are reproduced in colour. Thereafter, Ágota Zakariás's art history MA thesis is notable, that focuses on presenting Gábor Miklóssy's pastel works, but is mainly based on Sümegi and Székely's previously published writings. Sebestyén György Székely's study regarding the layers of modernity in the 1960s and 1970s Cluj art published in the comprehensive volume of *Destiny and Symbol – Hungarian Art in Transylvania 1920–1990* discusses the artistic tendencies between the moderate modernization and radical innovation, analysing also the art of Miklóssy from the perspective of symbolic-surrealism.

The remaining subchapters of the third chapter give an overview of biographical details and the period of his studies. Miklóssy was born before the First World War in 1912, in Nagyvárad (later Oradea), still part of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, as an impoverished noble family's first child. Throughout his life he has seen a series of major political changes, which inadvertently have affected his work. His youth was defined by his passion and talent for both music and fine arts: in 1935–1936 he attended both the Budapest Music Academy and the College of Fine Arts. Later however, he conceded his plans for a career as a violinist due to his physical condition resulting from a childhood illness, and chose painting. Notwithstanding, his life and art continued to be marked by his passion for both painting and music. Since he was studying in Gyula Rudnay's class at the College of Fine Arts, Budapest, his early work while he studied makes part of Hungarian art, even though he experienced all the disadvantages of being a “foreigner” (e.g. in terms of eligibility for scholarships and financial support). The chaotic political events of the Second World War also had an effect on his life: he was not able to use his Italian scholarship in 1942–1943 and therefore decided to move back to his hometown. Alongside his artist colleagues in 1945 he took part in founding the Oradea School of Fine Arts, which launched his pedagogical career (even though he used to be Rudnay's teaching assistant in Budapest). The subchapter focusing on the founding of the Oradea school also gives a brief overview of the previously existing independent schools, and

details the educational programme published in the new School of Fine Arts's 1945 prospectus. 1948 marked a turning point in Miklóssy's life, when he was invited to the Painting Department of the Hungarian Art Institute in Cluj-Napoca (later "Ion Andreescu" Institute of Fine Arts), which he accepted as a new challenge. Therefore, he moved to Cluj-Napoca in 1949, where he became one of the most notable teachers of the department until his retirement in 1977. The subchapter looking at the founding of the Cluj-Napoca school also starts with presenting the preceding circumstances, then relates in detail the founding of the Hungarian Institute of Arts (then its legal successor "Ion Andreescu" Institute of Fine Arts), artistic programme, the teaching staff and its development through the lens of the existing literature.

We can respect a legendary teacher in Miklóssy, but also a prominent, deep-thinking, vulnerable artist and artistic writer. Even though he did reach the top of the Romanian socialist realist painting, he never abandoned pursuing painting independently from commissions and political themes. His impressive works sprung up from the intimate atmosphere of the studio, filled with oriental rugs, violins and antique furniture. From the early years of his career he showed an interest towards the genre of nudes, and his variations of it constitute a significant section of his oeuvre.

The Miklóssy oeuvre is exceedingly rich from a thematic and technical as well as compositional point of view. The virtuoso maestro confidently engaged with not only the classical genres – nude, still life, landscape, portrait, sacred and historical themes – but also with a great variety in frame sizes. Despite the public recognizing him primarily for his large format canvases, in the intimate, almost mystical atmosphere of his studio, having finished the day's work, he created smaller compositions from the leftover paint, the so called Exercises ("finger exercises" – term used in music for small violin/piano exercises). The last subchapters of the third chapter all deal with this immensely diverse part of the oeuvre, bearing in mind the chronological order (career start and years at Oradea, then the Cluj period), as well as the stylistic variety (socialist realism and surrealism periods), furthermore the applied themes and genres (biblical themes, nudes), and finally a myriad of works done in pastel. I separated an entirely different section for the Exercises which despite the fact that technically belong to the oil paintings, when it comes to themes and stylistic methods show a great degree of variety. No art historic investigations took these into account before the exhibition of 2014, but even the preceding inquiries simply denoted these as sketches. In this part of my dissertation, I want to draw attention to these works as distinct works of art, which the artist created parallel to his large format canvases as joyful play, simply for the pleasure of creation.

Even though in presenting the oeuvre I employ a variety of points of view, I found the above explained structure to be the most efficient when it comes to Miklóssy's body of works in order to

avoid self-repetition (for instance I did not take into account the technical distinction of painting and graphics, and rather stressed their thematic or stylistic approaches).

The fourth chapter is strictly connected to the presentation of the Miklóssy-oeuvre seen in the third chapter, only this time from the perspective of journal excerpts and various record keepings. Information collated from various earlier bibliographies, media criticisms and interviews are supplemented with Miklóssy's own writings and sketches from different notebooks, adhering to the previously mentioned categories to present the oeuvre.

The first subchapter of the fourth part dealing with the diary entries starts with the presentation of the genre of journal writing that reached relatively late the focal lens of historical and art historical inquiries, getting an entirely new depth of meaning with the appearance of historical anthropology. The first diary interpretation was done by Alan Macfarlane, named *The Family Life of Ralph Josselin* and published in 1970 – the publication of the journal of an Anglican priest that he had been writing for 42 years. From the line of Hungarian studies one needs to mention Tamás Moholy, Zsigmond Gyarmathy or Gábor Gyáni who all engaged in using, interpreting and publishing the diary as a form of historical source. The journal therefore as a genre is a subjective primary source document that aims to present the subjective and microhistory-level perspectives, rather than the only and objective reality as historical studies often aim to do.

The history of European art keeps count of the journals/sketchbooks of such noteworthy artists as Leonardo da Vinci, John Constable, William Turner, Monet, van Gogh, Picasso, Henry Moore or David Hockney, to mention but a few. But genre-wise these are all situated on the crossing point of diary, notebook, autobiography, and a number of them to some extent only functioned as a sketchbook. When it comes to Hungarian artists from Transylvania, we are also well aware of a number of artist journals that were published in various volumes, such as: András Mikola, Sándor Szolnay, Imre Nagy, Albert Nagy, Sándor Mohy or Miklós Jakobovits, that stylistically aren't only journals, but contain letters as well as essay-like deliberations on various artistic themes.

The excerpts from Gábor Miklóssy's diaries pose a number of problems when one attempts to establish a stylistic classification. The large majority of the texts included in my research come from these notebooks, but I also used separate writings (for example his notes on pedagogy), a shorter autobiography from 1949 as well as the expanded one from 1982. The problems arise from the stylistic variety, fragmented nature as well as the lack of dating of the various excerpts, since the themes change chaotically and abruptly from deeply personal notes to art historical deliberations further complicating the interpretation. At the same time the lack of dating, that is an fundamental characteristic of the journal according to classical interpretations, as well as the non-chronological

nature of the excerpts made my research even more challenging. Despite this, the source value of the notebooks is undeniable.

Sebestyén György Székely, in his 2005 study on the nudes painted by Miklóssy, mentions 42 diaries, from which during this research 35 were found, transcribed and processed (the rest at the time of writing remain untraceable, location unknown). A part of these notebooks contain merely sketches, compositional plans, movement – and detail studies without any further discussion (except very short notes on colour or painting manner). However, the other part of the notebooks contain a large amount of text regarding Miklóssy's thoughts on pedagogy and artistic practice. From his earlier period (late 1940s, early 1950s) only a few sketchbooks survived, therefore only one single notebook documents the Oradea years. The notebooks from the first third of the 1950s only contain the sketches to the *Grivița 1933* and other compositions from the socialist realism era, almost entirely lacking any textual commentary. The most prominently featured notebooks are from the second half of the 1960s to the late 1970s – these form the main content both in terms of visual and textual interpretations. There is no information whatsoever if Miklóssy did or did not write any journals in the missing years, or what is more probable, those did not become a part of his legacy (have not survived through the years).

The third subchapter of the fourth chapter attempts to describe Miklóssy's uniquely atmospheric studio with its rich antique rug and furniture collection, as well as his collection of precious violins. My aim was to present the artist's atelier in a chronological manner, based on the report of friends and acquaintances as well as the artist's nude and studio compositions and various other visual depictions used by him. For Miklóssy the studio was not simply the environment of creation, as a temporary place to inhabit, but the place of everyday life and during the last decade before retirement, also a place for teaching. The mystical atmosphere created by the eastern rugs and renaissance, baroque furniture served as creative, as well as inspirational source for him the structural details or mysterious lights and mood of which can be traced on the paintings themselves. For this reason, it has a much deeper significance to the entirety of the oeuvre than the mere physical space of creation.

The next subchapter details Miklóssy's pedagogical activities in a chronological order reflected in the artist's own pedagogical notes. Although only a few notes are known from his pedagogical writings, they allow us to trace the pedagogical method inherited from Rudnay, as well as providing a few case studies through the analysis of the works of a number of students and apprentices. In the later part of the subchapter my aim was to present the teaching method of the master from the point of view of his apprentices through their reminiscences and anecdotal stories.

Henceforth I detail the large significance music played in Miklóssy's oeuvre, which stemming from his dual qualification had a deep impact on his art from the beginning. Beyond

putting music and painting in a parallel interpretation-pair, I attempted the iconographic analysis of the motif of the violin, focusing on the surreal-symbolic character of the works present throughout the oeuvre.

The next subchapter details the intellectual and theoretical life of Miklóssy. Gábor Miklóssy, both in personal and professional ways, was highly dualistic, ambivalent and contradictory. His exceedingly high education (besides the arts and history of art, he was educated in literature, philosophy, psychology, as well as in Eastern philosophies, occultism and astrology) was coupled with a rigorous, both towards others and himself, yet at the same time autonomous spirit. This duality was not only present in his personal life and pedagogy, but in his entire body of works.

Both his life philosophy and the spirit of his art was always profoundly influenced by his deep religiosity and catholic upbringing. This was partly due to his family's traditions, but at the same time due to his studies conducted with the nuns of the Orsolya order and the Premontrei Gymnasium at Gödöllő. His reading list gives ample proof of his interests in religious literature and religious philosophy, which are also mentioned in his letters and notes. His personal library as part of his legacy is another proof of his depth of understanding in these fields.

During his years of education at Budapest, the horizon of his interests widened even further. He got into contact with various Eastern philosophies, which influenced him to merge these views with his own religious thoughts creating a unique worldview. His faith was not shaken even during the darkest days of communism. In a rather paradoxical way the celebrated maestro of socialist realism was not a party member, thus conserving his artistic integrity and his confessed intellectual views. All this, of course, was made possible by his earlier accomplishments and the respect gained with *Grivița*.

The last few subchapters of the fourth chapter detail the visual landscape of Miklóssy's oeuvre through the lens of his sketches. From a thematic standpoint (historical, socialist realism, biblical, mythological and surreal) these works are analyzed in conjunction with sketches from Miklóssy's notebooks, that give additional information regarding the dating of these works, the reconstruction of their creation, as well as the interpretation of various motifs, themes or inspirational sources. This constitutes the part of my research with the greatest potential for new insight, since the majority of these journals excerpts were not published anywhere else before.

In the conclusions I draw up the results of my research which provide a considerable addition to the so-far fractional presentation of the Miklóssy-oeuvre. The aim of my research was not the writing of an entire monography of Miklóssy (since for that it would be indispensable to create an oeuvre-catalog), but the transcription and textual, as well as visual utilisation of the journal excerpts.

Our analysis and processing of the diaries were the first necessary steps in gaining a more complex insight into Miklóssy's creative and pedagogical work – as an additional development of the previous comprehensive and partial studies; providing a primary source for the further discovery of the artist's ideas, worldview, and artistic approach unravelled through the presentation and interpretation of his images, their themes and motifs.