

THESES

**LAJOS IMRE NAGY**

**TRADITION AND INNOVATION – HUNGARIAN ART OF MEDAL MAKING  
(Dissertation)**

**TRADITIONAL AND NOVEL TECHNIQUES IN MEDAL MAKING  
(Masterwork – medal series)**

**Dissertation guide**

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## **TRADITION AND INNOVATION HUNGARIAN MEDAL MAKING**

### **(Dissertation)**

Being engaged in medal making has never meant an activity resulting in great success or failure. The invitation for application to design the new coins in circulation caused some uproar about fifteen years ago, since it had not produced the results expected; our prize-winning coins could not be considered successful. However, we soon got accustomed to them. The designers were not renowned artists, and neither they are today. Medal making, although the product is always at hand, does not seem to be of great public interest.

The relationship between tradition and innovation is of great importance throughout the history of art. The comprehensive works on the history of art tend to present fine arts as if they were the sequence of innovative actions, and the authors focus on the so called progressive trends and tendencies primarily. The artists considered to be the greatest ones, however, were not really innovative, they rather completed the new ideas, and created some kind of synthesis.

In terms of relating to the traditions, the futurists seem to have the most radical approach: they consider novelty and innovation ideal, discrediting all the traditional values appreciated that far. In their Manifesto, Marinetti says that they want to fight against the fanatic, irresponsible and snobbish religion of the past fuelled by the harmful existence of the museums.”

In contrast, the academically trained artists deemed at the academies that originality is feature only of the dilettanti. At the beginning of the 20th century, the greatest innovators, however, were very often academically well-trained, and their masters were the officially acknowledged artists.

István Szőnyi and József Egry, for instance, had completely different attitudes to the art traditions although they not only belonged to the Gresham society as contemporary painters, but often had joint exhibitions. Szőnyi considered it important that the painters know and use all the knowledge and skills accumulated by the predecessors continuing their work. The experience and mastery is handed down from generation to generation. Egry, in contrast with this, thought that only those without talent need traditions.

But is there any particular Hungarian tradition to be continued? Can the example set by Bartók and Kodály be followed in painting and sculpture? The direct use of the folk art traditions largely remained an experiment only.

Medal making is the most conservative field of sculpture: the ideas related to it have not changed much in the past 2500 years. Even today, the medal, in most cases, is a small metal disc with an embossment on both or either side. The system of rules and strict formal requirements of medal making are handed down to a great measure and kept alive.

All kinds of historic styles, however, can be tracked down in medals, too. The embossments of the small metal disc feature the ancient Greek and Roman, then the Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque, Classicist styles, and also the characteristics of art nouveau, avantgarde, through the various „isms”, pop art, op art, the concept, and post-modern art in the 20th century. The innovative trends in art all pursue originality and the break up of the old order of form. This affects medal making too, and the medal makers also try out everything!

The beginnings of Hungarian medal making even if the history of minting has been part of Hungarian history since St. Stephen are marked by the activity of István Ferenczy at the beginning of the 19th century. The “first Hungarian sculptor” started his career as a medal maker training at the Fine Arts Academy of Vienna and later in Rome. He tried to acquire the skills of sculpture from Bertel Thorwaldsen and Antonio Canova.

József Dániel Böhm also started his studies at the Academy of Vienna, and then he learnt gem and medal making from Canova. Later he became the head of the Viennese Carver Academy. At the end of 19th century, apart from engravers of Körmöcbánya, Antal Lóránfi and Ferenc Szárnovszky engaged in medal making after studies in Vienna and Paris. Lóránfi, as the teacher of small plastic arts at the College of Applied Arts drew the attention of several young Hungarian artists to medal making. One of the greatest artists of modern Hungarian medal and plaque making, Ö. Fülöp Beck also started his studies under his guidance. The medal designs, with which he won all the three first prizes of the National Millennium Exhibition in 1895 Beck sent home from Paris, where he trained in medal making. The production of these medals marks the beginning of modern Hungarian medal making art.

At this time, Ede Telcs started modelling medals, first for pleasure only, but in 1905 he was vice-president already of the newly established Medal Fan Association. Medals played a great part

throughout his life. Without his work as a medallist and educator, the art of medal making in Hungary could not have had a boost in the first half of the 20th century and the young artists would not have had guidance. Telcs, however, did not train formally in this field, he had pursued studies at the Academy in Vienna with the masters of monumental sculpture. The “Telcs School” was not a real school in fact, Telcs only accepted students in his own studio, where they consulted him if they wanted. Men of talent were trained by him like Lajos Berán, József Reményi, Pál Vicze, Andor Mészáros, István Szentgyörgyi and others.

József Reményi was the only, who, later in the second quarter of the century instructed medal making formally in the School of the Applied Arts.

(Medallists in our country even today share the way of learning from one another informally, but mainly on the basis of their own experience and practice do they acquire the skills necessary to medal making. There are always masters and trainees who also like working in the field of sculpture and sharing their experience.)

The students of István Szentgyörgyi at the College of Fine Arts were Ferenc Csúcs, József Ispánki and Walter Madarassy. All the three sculptors won the so-called scholarship in Rome at the beginning of the '30s, and medal making played an important part in their activity. At that time in Hungary modelled medal and bronze casting gained ground. It became more popular to cast thicker medals with more plasticity and more finely chased surface. Struck medals started losing ground.

Apart from the masters mentioned above several other medallist sculptors of European standard were active in the first half of the 20th century. Let me mention the most important ones only paying tribute to them: István Csillag, Vilmos Fémes Beck, Gyula Juhász, Ödön Moiret, Gyula Murányi, István Schwartz, Antal Szirmai, Gyula Tóth, Richard Zutt, Sándor Boldogfai Farkas.

The two heroes of our medallists today are Béni Ferenczy and Miklós Borsos. They took different paths. Béni Ferenczy learnt the basics in his family, and developed them in Florence, Munich and Paris. Miklós Borsos relied on his skills as an engraver, and developed them without formal training to become a sculptor and medallist of European rank.

After World War II, a few masters like Béni Ferenczy, Miklós Borsos, Pál Pátzay at the College of Fine Arts and Applied Arts oriented several students towards medal making, but without

instructing the classic rules of medal making! In fact, they had not learnt them either, since they had not attended the academy. They acquired the knowledge and skills that they found important without being inhibited by “academic rules” and fossilized traditions.

At the beginning of the 1950s, the activity of sculptors following by them (Tamás Vígh, István Martsa, Sándor Kiss, as well as Gyula Kiss Kovács and László Csontos) broke free more and more from the traditional forms and also from the allegorical topics that had been prevailing before. A lot of critics say that the end of the sixties and at the beginning of the seventies Hungarian medal making saw its most flourishing period of its history that far.

In the second half of the seventies, the National Biannual Medal Exhibition in Sopron was established and it still provides the greatest opportunity for the artists to introduce themselves. In 1977, FIDEM organizes its exhibition in Budapest acknowledging the internationally high standard of Hungarian medal making. This year also marks the set up of the International Medal Making Camp initiated by Sándor Tóth in Nyíregyháza-Sóstó. Not only did all the three events draw the attention to the achievements of the genre, but meant acknowledgement, relationships and orientation on a broader basis. Struck medal almost completely disappeared and cast medal gave way to the individual experiments and inventiveness both in terms of form and content. Until the mid-seventies, however, “no artistic intention could be felt that aimed to deny and destroy the traditional framework while seeking new ways of expression.” (Antal Tóth)

The premiss that medals are nothing else but small metal discs with embossments has been challenged only since the second half of the '70s. By the mid-'80s the issue was indeed that the rules of medal making had to be upset completely. Some, however, tried to refer to these rules and produce „medal-like objects” messing up its formal and functional features. It seemed sometimes that the further you ventured from the several millennium-old formal rules of the genre the more modern medallist you could claim to be.

“(..) what is medal making worth, as a branch of sculpture, if it is Hungarian?” asks István Hajdu the question in 1985, and then he answers it himself: “(..) not much. Not only is it anachronistic in spirit, but created a paradoxical situation for itself when it had broken the age-old benchmarks of its very genre used that far as the token of survival, and now defying these rules but pretending to observe them it tries to head for sovereignty.” He continues: “And by the time this freedom provided the medals and plaquettes with the happy illusion of uselessness, the categories with this illusion can be blurred to the extent that raising the very concept of medals for these objects

become anachronism itself.”

This criticism was brought here because the problem was still there in the mid-90s, and even today. The doubts voiced by it can be raised these days, too. The disintegration and devaluation of the classic forms is still going on without the chance of being really replaced by something new and worthwhile.

The best medallists tried a lot of directions in the '90s. Many opted for the traditional rules of form and the restrictions. It is an artistic programme to make medal-like medals and observe the rules of form, content and composition which evolved in the 19th century (especially among those making struck medals). (The Mint of Szeged with its support for these endeavours nourish our traditions.)

The other extreme is that every kind of material, technique, and form has to be tested. Tibor Wehner puts it like this in 1997: “The border line and cross border cases of the Hungarian art of medal making at the end of the century and millennium demonstrate that every liberal artistic objectification can be called a medal which is related to the several-century-old tradition in terms of form, content, idea or even a gesture. (...) The disintegration of the rules and categories, nudging and ruthless pushing the borderlines further raises the delicate question of how long can things stay identical with themselves and when and where do they start to be a completely new quality.”

The turn of the millennium, of course, does not mean a break, or radical change in the art of medal making either. The main most exciting question in the history of modern Hungarian medal making has been for decades what the relationship is between tradition and innovation. That is the medal is not only a small metal disc with embossments, but, broadening its realm with varied experiments in form, techniques and workmanship, it is nearing the genre of small sculpture almost shifting into it. The possibility of multiplication is pushed into the background by the need of individuality and uniqueness expressing the freedom and sovereignty of the creator. Although there are quite a few institutions and communities which order cast or struck medals of more traditional styles for certain occasions the making of the so-called autonomous medal is gaining ground at the expense of those produced as applied art pieces. The consistent innovators of form, who have always used the platform of the classic order of form, are still able to find rich and versatile solutions to prove the power of the genre.

If we browse in the last catalogues of the National Biannual Medal Exhibition in Sopron, or the

issue of *Hungarian medal today* from 2002 thinking about the medals exhibited in the past few years, variety is what strikes us first. And this varietas really delectat! The range is very broad from the classic and mature pieces to those of search and experiment. The critics say, however, that the balance presented in this variety, and in which a lot of different forms and approaches can co-exist even within the oeuvre of the same artist, may imply some kind of ebbing of ideas and originality, and signals the loss of steam, which was still there in the '70s and '80s.

It can be considered a sign of crisis that, as I see, no clear tendency can be found determining the orientation and attitude of the artists in this field. The benign pluralism today is likely to be the cradle of ideas that can affect the image of the medal in the future. I hope that the Hungarian medal makers will be strong enough to withhold the pressure and intervention of curators, art historians, and other interest groups, and medal making continues to be free and autonomous. It must keep its (relative) independence during the constant change of art theories and amidst the dangers of the market economy of art production.

#### **TRADITIONAL and NOVEL POSSIBILITIES IN MEDAL MAKING (masterwork – medal series)**

I started producing medals in the mid-1970s. During the past decades I have tried to tackle as many of the theoretical, historical and practical issues of medal making as possible, and use this knowledge together with my own ideas. I modelled, engraved and designed hundreds of autonomous and functional medals. Among these there are some produced in over ten thousand copies, while others were produced in one copy only.

The autonomous medals are mainly sand modelled bronze castings (from a plaster positive) or produced with lost wax technology using a wax model. The castings are always chased, sanded, and if necessary, polished by me. The bronze is sometimes completed with enamelling and colouring. I have tested several kinds of patina and a lot of chemicals. I like and mostly use the colour of the potassium-sulphide patina. I have also experimented with brass, aluminium, tin and lead casting as well as various techniques of glass smelting and making.

A great part of the functional medals (occasional and commemorative medals) is sand modelled bronze casting made from a plaster positive. Others are struck medals made of bronze, copper alloy, silver, sometimes gilded silver, or pure gold. They are produced with the use of bases reduced from bigger size plaster moulds, and multiplied in several copies.

The medals I made during the DLA training (2000-2003) and after that (2004-2005) and that are going to be presented as masterwork can be classified basically in the two categories above, but they cannot be divided sharply.

The functional medals are mainly occasional or commemorative medals, the message of which (inscription, figures, portrays, motives used, etc.) are, to a great extent, determined. The compositions often follow the conventions. Their formal arrangements reflect a “traditional” order, and express the ideals the addressed community considers important.

The need of multiplication of both the medals cast in sand moulds or struck requires technological discipline in view of the height of the sculpture, the thickness of the medal, etc.

Most of the autonomous medals were produced with the lost wax bronze casting technology. This ancient method makes techniques possible which would otherwise be awkward or impracticable. It enables us to think differently about the obverse and reverse of the medal, as well as its edge. Thus, it is a conservative approach in effect because the contemporary “medals” do not necessarily have an obverse, a reverse and an edge. Recently, I have been very interested in the novel relationship between the obverse and reverse of the medal since I chose this technique to produce a medal series with the forms of a disc and squares cut out from it. (The application of the disc and the square is very old in the composition of medals: quadratum incusum, ancient Chinese coins ...)

The bronze disc of the medal we can hold in our hand divides the space into two. The two parts of the space divided by the bronze disc can be united through the square shaped perforation. The square shaped opening, the “window”, and the “forms” of various characters placed in it can provide a lot of opportunities to connect the two spaces (and to interpret the obverse and the reverse of the medal).

The “form”, the “forms” are placed separately in the two space spheres, but in a virtual relationship, a grid structure, or between the two space spheres, not belonging to either of those. The “form” penetrates from one space sphere to the other, and the other way round, thus connecting the sides of the medal. The “form” penetrates both space spheres several times through the perforation and occupies the “edge” of the disc, too. A “form” starts from both directions of the space divided into two towards the one in the other or it starts from one space sphere and arrives in the other ... Thus the obverse and reverse are (almost) replaceable, neither is in prominent position, they feature the same order.

Apart from those mentioned above, there are scores of possibilities. Searching for novel technologies may result in a lot of medals made!

### **Published articles and papers related to the topic of the dissertation (2000-2005):**

- Nagy L. I.: Töprengések 2001 tavaszán  
In: Pedagógiai Műhely XXVI. évf. 3. szám  
Nyíregyháza, 2001, 55-61. o.
- Nagy L. I.: Iparművészetünk az ezredfordulón  
In: Kelet-Magyarország  
Nyíregyháza, 2001. április 25., 11. o.
- Nagy L. I.: Magyar éremművészet  
In: Bölcsészettudomány a millennium évében  
Nyíregyházi Főiskola Doktorandusz Füzetek 2.  
Bessenyei György Könyvkiadó, Nyíregyháza, 2001, 159-170. o.
- Nagy L. I.: Magyar éremművészet a huszadik században  
In: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Megyei Tudományos Közalapítvány Füzetek 15.  
Nyíregyháza, 2001, 180-183. o.
- Nagy L. I.: Hagyomány és újítás a mai magyar éremművészetben  
In: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Megyei Közalapítvány Füzetek 18.  
Nyíregyháza, 2002. 188-191. o.
- Nagy L. I.: Kis traktátus az érmészetről  
In: Térformálás Tárgyformálás 2.  
Budapest, 2002. 150-160. o.
- Nagy L. I.: Vallomás, harangszóval  
In: Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg Megyei Szemle  
Nyíregyháza, XXXVIII. évf. 2. szám, 2003. május, 218-220. o.
- Nagy L. I.: A tradíció és az újítás kérdése a (képző)művészetben  
In: Magyar tudományosság Európai dimenziók  
Nyíregyházi Főiskola Doktorandusz Füzetek 4.  
Bessenyei György Könyvkiadó, Nyíregyháza, 2004. 39-49. o.

### **Exhibitions, in which my medals were displayed (2000-2005, selected):**

2000

- Arcok és Sorsok Országos Portré Biennálé kiállítása, Gyöngyös, Mátra Művelődési Központ
- Reformáció és Magyarország, Budapest, Szilágyi Dezső téri református templom

2001

- Barzó Endre Művészeti Társaság kiállítása, Nyíregyháza, Bencs villa
- Országos Érembiennálé, Sopron, Lábasház
- Dante in Ungheria, Ravenna, Róma, Olaszország

- Iparművészet, Budapest, Múcsarnok

2002

- A 25 éves Nyíregyháza-Sóstói Nemzetközi Éremművészeti és Kisplasztikai Alkotótelep gyűjteményéből válogatott kiállítás, Budapest, Árkád Galéria
- Tavasz a MKISZ Szabolcs-Szatmár-Bereg megyei területi szervezetének kiállítása, Nyíregyháza, Pál Gyula Terem
- Találkozások Nyíregyháza, Pál Gyula Terem (Kerekes Elekkel)
- I. Kortárs Keresztény Ikonográfiai Biennálé, Kecskemét, Képtár
- Országos Nyári Tárlat, Debrecen, Egyetem Díszudvara
- “Mesterveretek Szabó Géza ötvösmester műhelyéből”, Szegedi Vár, Szeged

2003

- “Irodalom és éremművészet”, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, Budapest
- Országos Érembiennálé, Sopron, Lábasház
- A 27. Sóstói Nemzetközi Éremművészeti és Kisplasztikai Alkotótelep zárókiállítása, Nyíregyháza, Városi Galéria
- Kiállítás Nyíregyháza újratelepítésének 250. évfordulója alkalmából, Nyíregyháza, Pál Gyula Terem
- “Őszi betakarítás” a Magyar Képzőművészek Szövetsége Szobrász Szakosztályának kiállítása (II. Országos Szobrász Biennálé) Magyar Mezőgazdasági Múzeum Budapest
- XIV. Országos Portré Biennálé, Moldvay Győző Galéria, Hatvan
- Piszkos Fred Rejtő Jenő érem pályázat, Petőfi Irodalmi Múzeum, Budapest
- Derkovits Gyula Művelődési Központ Városi Kiállítóterme, Tiszaújváros (önálló)

2004

- Visegrádi Négyek (válogatás nemzetközi művésztelepek anyagából), Nyíregyháza, Városi Galéria
- Debreceni Országos Nyári Tárlat, Debrecen, Medgyessy Ferenc Emlékmúzeum
- Tizedik a Magyar Szobrász Társaság jubileumi kiállítása, Szombathelyi Képtár
- Éremművészeti Világ Kongresszus FIDEM XXIX., Seixal (Portugália)
- Szent Flórián Kortárs Egyházművészeti Kiállítás, Hatvan, Moldvay Győző Galéria
- Magyar tájak Országos Tájékp Biennálé, Hatvan, Moldvay Győző Galéria

2005

- Csak bronzból a Magyar Szobrász Társaság viaszveszejtési ösztöndíjban részesült tagjainak kiállítása, Budapest, Kispesti Vigadó Galéria
- Barendorfi (múzeum és művésztelep) galéria, Iserlohn (Németország) (önálló)
- A Magyar Nemzeti Bank épületének 100. és Alpár Ignác születésének 150. évfordulójára rendezett kiállítás, Budapest, MNB Látogatóközpont
- Nyíregyházi művészek kiállítása, Budapest, MKISZ Andrássy úti kiállítóterme
- Országos Érembiennálé, Sopron, Lábasház