

# NON-BLIND WALLS: SENSING (AND SEEING THROUGH) DECORATION IN HUNGARIAN SCHOOLS

## *Muros para ser visionados: sentir (y ver a través de) la decoración en las escuelas húngaras*

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**ABSTRACT:** Questions of the role and interpretation of art integrated into the fabric of educational institutions are explored here. Using six case studies taken from Hungarian schools built between 1900 and 1931 issues are raised concerning the 'curricular' and aesthetic nature of the works. Particular attention is drawn to how the art may be perceived, especially when, as in the two principal cases, it is created for schools for the visually impaired. To this end the selection of media ranges from stained glass to mosaic via painting, carving and ironwork, and the locations range from assembly halls to facades via staircases and doors. The political, religious and secular signs expressed are analysed against the backdrop of educational reform and social rupture. The generic subject of 'the decorated school' has been much debated since the introduction of mass education, yet there exists precious little academic study. The choice of the Hungarian examples acknowledges the wealth of material and diversity of ways in which artwork in schools can be read or, better, 'sensed'. Ultimately, caution is advised.

**KEY WORDS:** art, Hungary, perception, sense, blind, children.

**RESUMEN:** En este artículo se explora el papel y la interpretación del arte integrado en la estructura de las instituciones educativas. Utilizando seis estudios de caso tomados de las escuelas húngaras construidas entre 1900 y 1931, se plantean cuestiones relativas a la naturaleza 'curricular' y estética de estas obras de arte. Se presta especial atención a cómo el arte puede ser percibido, sobre todo, cuando *se ubica* en las escuelas para invidentes, como puede comprobarse en los dos casos principales *expuestos en el artículo*. Con esta finalidad, la selección de vidrieras, mosaicos, pinturas, esculturas y hierro forjado adquiere especial relevancia junto a la

vasta gama de espacios como las salas de actos, las fachadas, las escaleras y las puertas. Los signos políticos, religiosos y seculares presentes en estas obras son analizados, como telón de fondo, en el contexto de la reforma educativa y la ruptura social. El tema general de 'la escuela decorada' ha sido muy debatido desde la introducción de la educación de masas; sin embargo, existen pocos estudios académicos. La elección de los ejemplos húngaros reconoce la riqueza de los materiales y la diversidad de formas en las que se puede leer (*o mejor sentir*) el arte en las escuelas. En definitiva, *se requiere atención*.

PALABRAS CLAVE: arte, Hungría, percepción, sentido, ceguera, infancia.

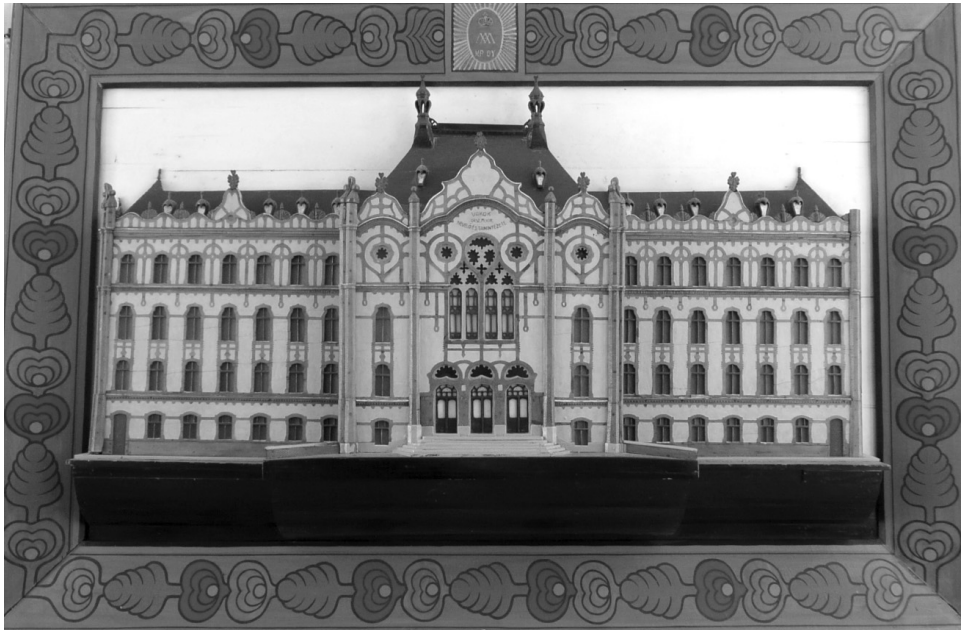
**W**HETHER TWO-DIMENSIONAL OR THREE art is frequently denoted as visual or plastic. Judgements, or appreciations, of its images and qualities are mostly derived from a combination of sight and mind. Perception of such art by touch, smell and sound is less frequent. Yet this perception is significant. As is the artistic representation of sensory experience. And the traces of these in educational institutions can carry particular meaning and value. Something of the range of articulation and concomitant semantics of these signs, as found in Hungarian schools, is the principal subject of this enquiry.



I. BLIND BOY MUSICIAN

— I —

The stained glass windows of the Palatine Hall in the educational institution at 39 Ajtós Dürer Row, Budapest, contain four images of young blind people. From left to right the beholder is shown a girl reading a book by touch, a boy making a wicker basket, a boy playing a violin, and a girl raising a small cross. A percipient can read these figures in a variety of ways. Visual literacy has become a vogue notion for those dealing with images, with educators having special prominence among the interested parties. For art history the ability to visually interpret art's signs and symbols tends to be *sine qua non*, this despite there being major reliance on others' verbal description and analysis, and to a lesser degree reproductions, rather than direct experience. And within art, at least from Antiquity to the present, the representation of blindness has proved particularly fertile stumping ground (more so than that of its oft-related disabilities of deafness or muteness) for creators, patrons, critics and historians alike. But what if one's vision-competencies are compromised by a lack or impairment of sight? What then is to be made of images of the sightless, especially when placed in a school for the blind? Let us explore the Palatine Hall windows to perceive whether, or how much, consideration of their being knowable by those who cannot visually experience them, at least 'fully', may have been a motive in their creation. In so doing we might consider Hume's contention of the possibility of imagining colour or shade without having had an actual visual impression of them<sup>1</sup>.



II. BLIND SCHOOL (WALL MODEL)

<sup>1</sup> HUME, David: *Treatise of Human Nature*, Book 1, Part 1, Section 1: «Of the Origin of Our Ideas», (1739-1740). Retrieved from <http://www.gutenberg.org/files/4705/4705-h/4705-h.htm>.



III. STAINED GLASS WINDOW OF THE BUDAPEST HIGH SCHOOL FOR THE BLIND

At the same time it will become apparent that few sighted viewers (myself included) would possess the literacy required to interpret precisely the windows' numerous signs. Ultimately we may have to accept that all visual interpretation is a matter of both degree and imagination. However paradoxical it may seem, one could even argue for some literary revelation leading to forms of aesthetic relation. Thus the more we comprehend of the windows' language the more ambiguous may their meaning become and the less sure of our sense of their efficacy, intended or otherwise. Readers beware!

The depiction of sensory disability, when it is blindness, lends itself to art for many reasons. With assumptions of defectiveness, queerness, dependency and charity it can be picturesque, appealing to the eye of the seeing as a grotesque form of other that reinforces certain hierarchic notions of suffering, normalcy, understanding and responsibility. The Palatine Hall windows are the polychromatic and ceremonial focal point of the Budapest High School for the Blind, built between 1899 and 1904 to designs by the local architects Sándor Baumgarten and Zsigmond Herczegh. They adorn and dominate the auditorium of the events hall/chapel which is placed at the symmetrical centre of the main wing of the vast building. The only script (Latin) on the windows indicates they were created by the glassmaker Imre Zseller and date from 1930, just as the street upon which they gaze (but from which they are all-but invisible) was renamed Ajtós (Albrecht) Dürer Row, after the Hungarian-German artist who had himself cared for and depicted the supported blind over four centuries earlier<sup>2</sup>. The stained glass project was a slightly belated celebration of the centenary of the founding of the Hungarian Blind Institute in Budapest (1827).

a) *The Main Tier*

The principal figurative panels of the window ensemble occupy eight rectangular lower sections (the second tier) of Hungary's largest stained glass ensemble. Vibrantly coloured, most of the space of these is occupied by full-frontal, full-length adult figures, three of whom are male, three female and two angelic. All of the panels feature stylised repetitive blue heart and acanthus interlacing motifs as backgrounds, which can be taken to signify royalty, courage, endurance and regeneration. The following analysis, which does not seek to assert its sense of sequential narrative as uniquely 'true', moves from the centre to the extremes and then back towards the centre. The blind children appear in the two panels either side of the central four panels. This grouping is important because the four central windows contain images of iconic medieval Hungarian royal saints and my contention is that the panels, when taken together with those above and below them, as well as the location of the window ensemble, can be perceived to act as a lay form of iconostasis.

<sup>2</sup> See Dürer's *Blind Knight* (drawing, c. 1490) and *Portrait of the Artist's Mother aged 63* (charcoal drawing, 1514).



## IV. MAIN TIER LEFT

**Panel One.** Panel One is situated at centre right. It contains no blind child. Instead we are presented with St Stephen I (István), the initiator of the Christian kingdom of Hungary, who died heirless and stricken by grief for his prematurely deceased son (Emeric in Panel Two) in his sixties in 1038. He appears as a grey bearded old man looking out at the beholder rather dolefully. He wears an ecclesiastical purple chasuble with embroidered golden images of saints that accords with his surviving vestment of c. 1030 which subsequently became the coronation mantle for Hungarian kings<sup>3</sup>. Holding a royal sceptre and orb, Stephen wears the holy Hungarian crown with tilted cross with which he is identified. With these trappings of the medieval regalia of the Hungarian state he embodies the quintessence of monarchical Magyar nationhood. Turning away from paganism his adoption of the Catholic faith led him to expand Christianity's grip within his central European lands. All this and his subsequent veneration as the patron saint of the Hungarian kingdom, along with construction workers and terminally ill children, does much to account for his central appearance in the windows. In contravention of certain representational traditions, Stephen, like Emeric and

<sup>3</sup> Now in the Hungarian National Museum, Budapest.

Archduke Joseph beside him, is depicted without his sword, suggesting that indication of weaponry, however symbolic, was considered inappropriate for such a school setting.

**Panel Two.** Panel Two is situated at centre left. It contains no blind child. Instead we are presented with the youthful St Emeric (Imre) (c. 1007-1031), who, like St Elizabeth to his right (Panel Three), is said to have died prematurely at the age of twenty-four (and also, like her, after a life of suffering at the behest of an appointed religious mentor). St Emeric was the heir-apparent to St Stephen. As is typical for his representation he is depicted with a halo, crown and holding a white lily, the latter symbolising his virtuous and pious purity of spirit. He wears laced ankle-length boots, a long red cape and short tunic the border of which is embroidered with the double-cross motif, the symbol of the Christian kingdom of Hungary. On his breast is small shield with red stripes, signifying the coat of arms of the Hungarian state, and in particular its earliest ruling house of Árpád. Forward facing with open eyes and slightly melancholic, clean-shaven countenance, with his long flowing hair and slightly bent naked right leg, Emeric can be read as being a feminised allegory of devotion and humility.

**Panel Three.** Panel Three is situated to the left of St Emeric (Panel Two). It contains no blind child. Instead we are presented with St Elizabeth (Erzsébet) of Hungary. This thirteenth century German-Hungarian princess had died at the age of twenty-four in 1231. Her appearance in the school, on the eve of the eight hundredth anniversary of her death, was due in large part to the veneration accorded her acts of charity and meekness, particularly after her joining of the Roman Catholic Third Order of St Francis as a teenager. Renowned for her short life of suffering and almsgiving she is often depicted as in this window: in a blue cloak from under which she reveals a bouquet of roses (having, according to legend, been accused of stealing from the rich in order to feed the poor). She stands erect and full-frontal, filling the space of the panel. Her inclined head is draped in a white headcloth, crowned and adorned with a halo. Her eyes are cast down, her right hand held modestly across her chest, and her dress covers her from neck to foot.

**Panel Four.** Panel Four is situated to the right of St Stephen (Panel One). It contains no blind child. Instead we are presented with St Margaret (Margit) (1242-1270/1), princess of Hungary and niece of St Elizabeth in Panel Three. In allusion to the life she spent as a Dominican Nun in the Convent of the Blessed Virgin on the Danubian Rabbit (now Margaret) Island near Buda, she is depicted clothed, head to foot, in black and purple veil, white coif, white wimple, brown scapular and white mantle. Enhaloed with a glowing sun-disc and standing facing to the viewer like her venerated relatives to her right, Margaret holds before her a golden crown, sprig of white lilies and black rosary with pendant gold crucifix. Her head is inclined to the left and her eyes are meekly downcast. There is no sign of the stigmata or book with which she is frequently identified, although Zseller has made a point of revealing her toes in their sandals and these do look inelegant, even slightly deformed, thereby just giving the faintest of hints of her self-immolation, which included wearing shoes with nail spikes. Margaret's reputation as an extraordinarily pious devotee of God, was at least partially based on her remarkable acts of penance, these including caring for the convent's sick and infirm and labouring for others in the most unpleasant of manual tasks. But as

with the other images in the windows here there is no sign of violence or suffering, other than the small depiction of the crucified Christ hanging from her rosary. Instead, in keeping with the school's affirmative mission, here there is an image of a beautiful young woman whose process of overcoming adversity appears serene. Her early death, at age twenty-eight, is not a matter for concern.



V. MAIN TIER RIGTH

**Panel Five.** The dominant figure in the left outermost panel is that of Archduke Joseph Habsburg (brother of Francis, the last Holy Roman Emperor), the Palatine of Hungary for most of the first half of nineteenth century<sup>4</sup>. Joseph is dressed in the ceremonial uniform that marked his position as Grand Cross Knight of the Royal Hungarian Order of St Stephen and Field-Marshal of Austria. His image complies with that of a Hussar, replete as he is with gold-braided short crimson jacket and trousers, white and green pelisse over his left shoulder, high riding boots and Grand Cross collar, badge, sash and star. Hung on the pelisse

<sup>4</sup> Joseph became Palatine (*nádor*), the viceroy of Hungary, aged thirty in 1796. He held the post until his death in 1847.



the latter marks the space just above the profiled figure of a reading girl. Barely reaching up to his navel, the girl is clasped around her left shoulder by the Archduke. The large size and firmness of his hand, in comparison to her diminutive form, endorses, as does the directive gesture of his right arm, paternalism. Standing with straight back, the girl is dressed in pale pink blouse, slightly higher than knee-length mauve skirt and slipper shoes. The book which she reads with her hand and closed eyes is large and open at a page towards the middle. As with her modern dress, this indicates a time-shift in the panel since reading by Braille was only adopted in Hungary after the death of Joseph (and in the School from the 1870s). Yet for all the little girl's more contemporary appearance and her placement in front of the Archduke she appears ashen-faced and ghostly, her vulnerability only being assuaged by the protective grip of the much more substantial Palatine who encloses her with his ponderous form, slightly inclined head (with pronounced forehead) and eyes that gaze down and past her. The Palatine's presence is, in the main, a commemorative tribute to his paternal role in the establishment of Hungary's first institute for the blind in the 1820s<sup>5</sup>.

**Panel Six.** The right outermost panel depicts a Catholic nun. Forward-facing, she wears a dark blue mantle, a white wimple, white coif and large starched white splayed cornette. A long rosary with simple cross hangs from her waist. Before her stands a little girl whose height and age correspond with those of the girl in Panel Five. Similarly, this girl is dressed in modern attire with a short brown skirt reaching to just above the knees, cream coloured blouse, ochre cardigan and slipper shoes. Her long hair is kept in place by a simple band. She holds a golden cross aloft in her left hand, gazing past it and the nun behind her with unseeing eyes. There is a tie around her elbow that connects her to the nun via the latter's left hand which opens under the child's elbow in a show of guidance. The blanched nun looks calmly over the girl, her right hand raised, palm open, above the girl's head in a gesture that suggests both blessing and discipline. Her appearance accords with her being a Daughter of Charity of St Vincent de Paul (of Szatmár). This coincides with the Vincentian mercy sisters being appointed to assist with the running of the school while it was under the directorship of Szidor Mihályik (1865-95). Such participation in blind education comprised just one element of the Daughters' charity work in Budapest, following their establishment there in 1853<sup>6</sup>. Simultaneously, they were active teaching religion, literacy and manual work, and as nurses in numerous other schools, orphanages, prisons, hospitals and asylums. With vows of obedience, chastity and poverty their motto was 'We are ruled by the love of Christ' (2 Corinthians 5:14). The communal conduct of the Daughters' work, in keeping with their appearance, means that individual identification of the nun in this panel is probably inappropriate.

<sup>5</sup> On the wall opposite the window there hangs (at least at the time of writing) an oil portrait of Archduke Joseph by Jakab Warschag (1790-1854). His age, pose and attire are similar to that of the window. However here he wears a sword, his right hand rests on a rationalist plan for a large institution and, in the absence of the blind girl, his gaze is more distant and severe. The suggestion is that he is contemplating the establishment of the blind school, his middle-age appearance being in accordance with this in the 1820s.

<sup>6</sup> The first Hungarian house of the Daughters of Charity was at Szatmár in eastern Hungary (now Satu Mare, Romania), established in 1842.

**Panel Seven.** This panel is situated to the right of Panel Five. Here the larger figure is that of a winged Angel, in loose white cloak with embroidered trims. He/she has hands raised in front of his/her breast with the fingertips touching as if in prayer. His/her head surrounded by a glowing golden halo he/she looks down towards the figure of the basket-weaving boy before her. The boy is larger and probably older than the girl with the Palatine. With shirt sleeves rolled up he wears a green apron over brown shorts and purple stockings. He half kneels on a small bench while looping the flexible cane around a circle of upright stiff rods in near-completion of a tall basket. More canes and a completed basket appear to his sides. Eyes closed and head inclined it is his hands which carry out the work. Though similarly well-formed in terms of physique he appears more active than the schoolgirl in Panel One, his substantiality heightened by his taking centre-stage in front of the recessed pale, whitened angel behind him.

**Panel Eight.** This panel is situated to the right of Panel Six. As with Panel Seven, which it partially mirrors, here the larger figure is that of a winged Angel and the smaller figure a boy. Again the angel is full-frontal, winged, in a long embroidered cloak, and has hands raised with fingertips touching in front of his/her chest. As with the apparition in Panel Five the angel has a thick body of hair parted in the middle, around which glows a halo. Here, however, his/her eyes are more widely opened, as he/she casts his/her glance further afield (though still slightly downward). The boy is again to the angel's right and of roughly the same size as the basket weaver, but now he is playing a violin. Dressed in a uniform that comprises a blue tunic-jacket belted at the waist, brown knee-length breeches and leather boots, the boy bends his left leg, holds the violin to his chin and draws the bow across the instrument with his right hand. Short-haired and perfectly formed he appears to look up, but with eyes that have cloudy irises. As with the other three panels with blind children there is no sense of ocular contact between them and the adult/spiritual beings who accompany them.

### *b) The Bottom Tier*

The main tier of the windows is bordered by ogee tracery that marks the smaller tiers immediately above and below it. All of the bottom tier's eight panels have crude and vigorous polychromatic acanthus forms. With their central arcs and scrolls and outer diagonals this semblance of energised growth acts an enlivened pedestal to the figures they support. The outermost panels also feature medallion portraits of a man. That on the left, under Archduke Joseph, is a bust of Sándor Nárai Szabó (1861-1914). He appears full-frontal. Middle-aged, he is bald-headed and with a handlebar moustache. He wears a white shirt with upturned collar, tie and jacket. Set against a dark, abstract ground and within a yellow ring, Nárai Szabó seems more real and contemporary than any of the figures of the main tier. He looks out directly at the beholder. His presence derives from his being a physician who worked for the Ministry of Religion and Education (from 1886), rising to become Secretary of State for the department just before his early death. He was especially recognised for his contributions to special education, particularly around the turn of the twentieth century when, under his guidance, new institutions for the disabled and associated teacher

training were established in Hungary. Concerned with widening social opportunity for the disabled, he was co-organiser, with Paul Ranschburg, of the Psychological Laboratory of Special Education (from 1906) and published widely on pedagogy for the blind.

Nárai Szabó is twinned with the medallion portrait in the opposite, bottom right, corner of the tier. Here, the depiction is of Ignác Pivár ('of Csonbánka') (1843-1905), director of the school from 1895 to 1905. As with the image of Nárai Szabó, Pivár appears as a frontal bust staring straight forward with intent and seriousness. Rounder in face than his colleague he is shown clean-shaven, bald-headed and middle-aged. He wears a dark cassock with round white collar, this in keeping with his having become a Piarist monk at the age of eighteen. Having gained a degree in Pedagogy and Chemistry from Budapest University in the mid-1870s, Pivár thereafter dedicated himself to special education rising to become director of the Institute for the Deaf at Vác, north of Budapest, prior to his appointment to the blind school. It was largely due to his efforts that the palatial new school was built at the turn of the century. Within the institution he established a new curriculum with an emphasis on crafts and music (it was a five tier system which included learning Braille in elementary classes and with a focus on crafts and music at the fourth and fifth tiers). He also wrote on teaching the deaf and blind, and played a key role in the creation of a national Hungarian association for the blind in the late 1890s, focusing attention on the education, employment and care for the visually impaired.

c) *The Third Tier*

The tier above the main tier features eight sets of mirrored arabesques with abstract twinned red and green Hungarian crowns topped in the middle by a black, yellow, red and white form loosely suggestive of a plumed Hussar hat. This can be taken as allusion to the heraldic devices of the Austrian and Austro-Hungarian empires that witnessed the establishment of the institute for the blind, and the fact that Hungary in 1930 remained a monarchy.

d) *The Fourth Tier*

The fourth tier is the most central of the window ensemble and also the most abstract. Bordered by thin panels with yellow, green and white zigzag and sinuous forms, the four main rectangular spaces comprise mostly clear glass fringed with yellow swags and volutes and topped by white bandaged red hearts.

e) *The Fifth Tier*

The four round arches of the fifth tier contain representations of the Evangelists and elemental zodiac signs. The lefthand panel is of St John, Scorpio and Water: an open winged and enhaloed eagle set within a celestial blue curved space with gold stars. The centre left panel is of St Mark, Taurus and Earth: an

enhaloed and winged bull in the same celestial setting. The centre right panel is of St Matthew, Leo and Fire, here as a cosmic, enhaloed and winged lion. The righthand panel is of St Luke, Aquarius and Air, here as a praying, enhaloed and winged angel surrounded by the heavenly azure and stars.

*f) The Sixth Tier*

The budding, ogival forms of the four windows of the sixth tier contain identical polychrome designs. With clear, glowing orbs at their centre they appear as stylised, symmetrical and verdant acanthus and star motifs.

*g) The Seventh Tier*

With the sets of eight having been organically shaped into sets of four as the panels ascend by the time the seventh tier is reached, the fours are reduced to three, the window beginning to narrow into an ogee arch towards its apex. The three small concave-curved rhomboid forms of the seventh tier panels are virtually identical, each having twinned cherubim set amidst vaporous spirals and effervescing colour flows. All of these six stylised children's heads face forward, their only differentiation being that the pair on the right have closed eyes while those in the centre and on the right gaze before them.

*h) The Eighth and Ninth Tiers*

Three becomes two at the eighth level and then one at the ninth. Collectively these uppermost tiers of the window denote the Hungarian coat of arms. The centres of attention in the two large ovate panels of the eighth tier are two shields. That on the left is crossed by four red and four white bands, these representing the Árpád dynasty royal stripes, with the white said to symbolise the four main central European rivers (the Danube and three tributaries) crossing Hungarian lands. The escutcheon on the right is of white double cross set against a red ground and emerging from three green mounds, the central and highest one of which is adorned with a golden crown. The mounds represent three mountain ranges (Tatra, Matra and Fatra) that were considered, at least partially, as Hungarian territory. The shields are depicted within fields of green oak leaves and under a blue sky with swirling clouds, stars and sunrays. The latter are emitted from the Holy Crown of Hungary at the centre of the uppermost ninth tier. This Byzantine-inspired golden crown is shown from the front, surmounted by its crooked cross, and with its foremost enamel icons revealed. These comprise a central Christ Pantocrator, with the archangels Michael and Gabriel to His left and right respectively, followed by images of saints. The artistic expression of the Divine Right of the Hungarian monarchy is thus complete, this despite the fact that the last king of Hungary, Charles IV, had been forced out of power in 1918, but in accordance with the window being created in the zenith years of the ill-fated regency of Admiral Miklós Horthy (1920-44).

**Perceiving Windows.** The validity of reading the windows sequentially, let alone in the tiered sequence offered here, is, of course, debatable. Furthermore, the sequence suggested for apprehending the main tier means that we are not reading from left to right as the current name of the room might suggest. Rather the order is from the centre outwards, starting from the eleventh century king and prince, via the thirteenth century princesses, jumping to the peripheral Palatine and Daughter of Charity and then returning to the angel-blessed blind boy creators. While this might give us a sense of chronological plot and accord with the idea of divinely motivated royal beneficence as key it might be confusing for those used to experience and read by sight. But it has to be admitted that in the process of entering the room by the main door one is confronted with the central two of the eight main tier panels. These are at approximate eye level and when one casts about them one is faced most closely with the images of the four blind children in the peripheral panels. Given their height these alone offer the possibility that fingertips of an outstretched hand could trace their forms via the rib tracery surrounding them. That the early curriculum of the school began with reading and religion, and moved on to crafts and music accords with the (significantly?) gendered progression of the children panels from outside in.

With the window extending some ten metres in overall height it is hard to conceive that even those with the keenest visual acuity would be able to appreciate the details of the uppermost panels. These can be seen from the gallery and organ loft that surround the room on its three other sides yet here one is, similarly, either at a considerable distance or oblique angle. When I witnessed the room I relied on the artificial zoom lens of a camera to pick out the variegated minutiae of the top five tiers. But I have to say that the overall impression I had (and I write as someone with distinctly imperfect vision) was of an idiosyncratic mix of colour symphony, lay iconostasis and hidden curriculum. This was compounded by a feeling of pyramidal ascent – from a vigorous earth base to a radiant heavenly apex. As musicians prepared for a concert and voices sang out I also felt that the window somehow synaesthetically affected the acoustics of the high-ceilinged room. The sense of lay iconostasis (and concomitant hidden curriculum) stands most scrutiny, not least because of the religious underpinning and formal treatment of the window. And as this window, an iconostasis can be read, or spiritually imbibed, as a bridge between realms. In Orthodox churches the iconostasis is frequently multi-tiered, with the main (‘sovereign’) tier being centred around double ‘Royal Doors’ (or ‘Beautiful Gates’) which have depictions of the Annunciation (and sometimes the Four Evangelists). To the immediate right and left of these there are icons of Christ and Virgin and Child respectively. The Blind School central right and left panels with their simulcra of holy majesty reinforced by the presence of the cross and white lily respectively accord with this order. Thereafter, the sovereign tier of an iconostasis commonly has patronal icons with images of most significant local patron-saints at its left and right extremities, i.e. in the place of Archduke Joseph and the Daughter of Charity. In between the patronal and central icons, on either side, come Angels’ (or ‘Deacons’) Doors, with depictions of Archangels Michael and Gabriel as defender and messenger of God respectively, i.e. in the place of the boy craftworker, boy musician and angels. Significantly for us, the theme of these doors is ‘paradise regained’. Hart has

summarised the theological symbolism of the iconostasis in a way that can be applied, at least in lay terms, to the Blind School window:

[it] affirms four realities: incarnation, deification, pilgrimage, and community... with its array of icons [it] is like a window or door, symbolizing on the horizontal west/east axis what happens spiritually on the 'vertical' axis – namely the incarnation of God... and the deification of the human person (the saints). It shows how heaven and earth have been and are being united in Christ... It serves to distinguish between – though not separate – heaven and earth, sanctuary and nave<sup>7</sup>.

It is worth noting that the so-called Palatine Hall is also the school chapel and hence the spiritual aura that the window evokes is no accident. The everchanging yet cyclical qualities of intensity, hue and warmth of the light that pervades it from outside are altered dramatically and constantly by the stained glass window, ensuring that the presence and process of nature, its status of being as becoming, not only extends within but is also distinguishable multi-sensorily. This makes the window, not least for its being in an institution for the visually impaired, an especially powerful arbiter of the so-called hidden curriculum<sup>8</sup>. What we are being treated to is a form of acculturation that seeks to embed an imaginary and syncretic model of history, mythology and sign, without being part of the formal curriculum. This functions as: 'the direct production of ideological belief systems'; as a control mechanism, whereby a hegemony of interest groups is maintained; and as a tool of socialisation, whereby the process of turning a (certain kind of) child into a (certain kind of) responsible citizen is promoted<sup>9</sup>.

I do not understand the spoken language of the film *Blind Guys* (*Vakvaganyok*) (2001), be that the dialogue or the designed-to-be-helpful diegetic narration<sup>10</sup>. I am sure I miss a great deal by only having a smattering of Hungarian, but I believe I can grasp the gist of the film's plot, and, to a certain extent, appreciate its camerawork, editorial phrasing and soundtrack. In addition, I can sense a considerable amount of what it is conveying with regard to blindness and vision. This is not the place to go into its qualities, suffice it to say that principal moments take place in the Palatine Hall and the significance of the order and placement of the window panels is emphasised by their repeated iteration. Like the window, *Blind Guys* is for both the blind and the seeing, featuring the blind and seeing, and suggestive of the potential of the blind. Yet it goes further than the window in its suggestion that blind sensitivity (to surroundings and impressions) is, in a variety of regards, more nuanced and insightful than that of those whose vision is not seriously impaired. Furthermore, it also shows that the saints, angel, archduke and blind children have been on the move. For the order of the left hand panels in the film is different from the present order, being, from

<sup>7</sup> HART, Aidan: *Techniques of Icon and Wall Painting*, Leominster, Gracewing, 2011, p. 72.

<sup>8</sup> For an eloquent summary of hidden and null curricula, see MARGOLIS, Eric: «Representations of Race, Gender and Ability in School Photography», *Education Policy Analysis Archives*, 8, 31 (2000). Retrieved from <http://epaa.asu.edu/ojs/article/view/422>.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibidem*.

<sup>10</sup> TÍMÁR, Péter: *Vakvaganyok*, Budapest, Budapest Film, 2001.

left, St Elizabeth, St Emeric, the Palatine and blind girl, the angel and blind boy. This means that in the decade between the film's making and my experience of the window, the Palatine/Blind Girl and Angel/Blind Boy have both shifted two places to the left while St Elizabeth and St Emeric have moved two places to the right. It is clear that the present order can be read as more 'correct', allowing the left and right sides to act as symmetrical mirrors of one another. But it is worth conjecturing why the order was considered significant and why the changes were made.

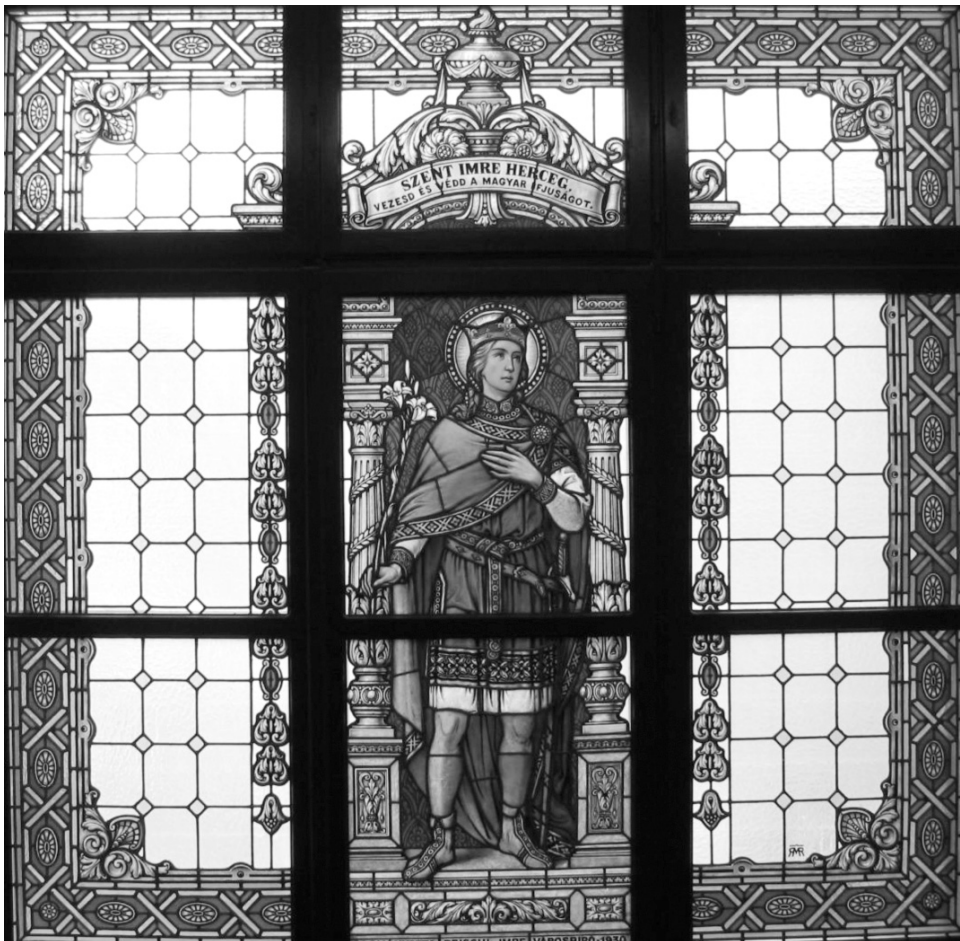
My appreciation of the colour, space and sound sensitive *Blind Guys* was possible only through a simple DVD on a metre-wide LCD television screen. There was no 'high definition', no 'three dimension', no 'surround sound'. These limitations to my audio-visual experience undoubtedly affected my appreciation but the film was still capable of piquing curiosity, not least through its provoking of new angles on the functionality of the window. By moving away from the actual window to consideration of its evocative appearance in the *Blind Guys* one can begin to get a sense of its translative cognition, i.e. how it can be understood through reference to its appearance in another medium or within a broader setting. Such a sense of the contextual relevance of the panels can be stimulated, as follows, by consideration of: 1) related imagery and glasswork in Hungarian schools (and churches); 2) the decoration of another Budapest school for the blind; and 3) a school with a depiction of a certain form of blindness.

— 2 —

Imre Zseller (1878-1959) was a stained glass and mosaic artist who produced a great deal of work for Roman Catholic patrons (particularly churches and mausolea) across Hungary in the first half of the twentieth century. His commissions include images of, for example, St Stephen, St Emeric, St Elizabeth and St Margaret, e.g. for the Holy Trinity Church, Ada, Vojvodina, now Serbia (1909) and the Cathedral of the Assumption, Kalocsa, Bács-Kiskun county (1910). However the treatment is distinct from that at the Blind School, with both examples displaying a greater fussiness and detail, the former (for all the similarities of the saints' pose) being adorned with an intricate Baroque decorative flourish and the latter relating stories from the lives of the saints. This heightened illusionism evidently presumes a seeing percipient and conveys a similar relationship to that which may be sensed between the Blind School window and the window on the main staircase of the Premonstratensian Real High School in Keszthely (Zala county, western Hungary). Created in the same year as the Blind School window, the Keszthely School work was, however, by Miksa Róth, the Budapest glassmaker to whom Zseller had been apprentice before establishing his own workshop in 1903<sup>11</sup>. Róth's Emeric is also full length and frontal, holds a white lily in his right hand, wears a short embroidered tunic, ankle boots and

<sup>11</sup> While there is no monograph on Zseller, for Róth, see VARGA, Vera: *Róth Miksa: Művészete*, Budapest, Helikon, 1993. There is no mention of the Keszthely window in Varga, yet the author does list other school decorative work by Róth.

crown, and has his head and long flowing hair surrounded by a golden halo. Yet while he is also set against a repetitive floral patterned blue ground, this Emeric is fuller-bodied, his gaze is averted, his left hand held to his chest, his tunic crimson and shawl blue, making him appear as much a twin to Zseller's St Elizabeth as to his Emeric. Furthermore, the Keszthely Emeric has a sword hanging from his belt and stands on the threshold of an ornately columned doorway which itself is surrounded by bands of multiple swags, garlands and geometric motifs. In addition he is identified in writing and with a motto in a volute across the festooned cornice: 'Saint Emeric Prince - Lead and Protect the Hungarian Youth' (*Szent Imre Herceg - Vezesd és védj a magyar ifjúságot*). The flattened and more abstract appearance of the Blind School Emeric appears caricatural and crude in comparison. Could this have anything to do with the difference in perceived beholders?



VI. EMERIC KESZTHELY



The Keszthely Emeric is the subject of a five-minute video posted on the János Vajda School website<sup>12</sup>. This features two students reading in front of the window as the camera pans out and zooms in to its details. The front page of a local newspaper (*The Keszthely News*) of June 1930 is shown with an article about the window<sup>13</sup>. The soundtrack includes an adult female narrational voice and soft, early woodwind music. The video ends with numerous students in broad stairs with St Emeric in the background. This evocation of the central and transitory place of the decoration in the school contrasts with the more static positioning of the Blind School panels yet at the same time makes the window itself seem less vivacious and more sentinel (particularly when considered together with the window's encumbered doorway motif and upper case inscriptions).

The Keszthely Emeric window has an inscription running along the bottom of its central shaft that indicates it was a donation of Imre Reischl. This is significant because Reischl (1869–1938) was himself a much decorated alumnus of the Premonstratensian High School, an engineer and brewer who had become Keszthely City Judge and a major player in the local administration and infrastructure between the world wars. As such he placed great value on decorative symbols and would have appreciated that the grand staircase leading off the entrance axis of the large and rational butterfly plan school building was ripe for having its light and space adorned with a suitably emblematic figure of youthful piety, compassion and restraint. Furthermore, as with the Blind School, the edifice was of another era, having been completed in 1892 to designs of local architect János Schadl, and its late decoration during the interwar Horthy regime suggests, in keeping with the regent's conservative political agenda, a desire to revivify a sense of national tradition and value based on a limited religious and historical iconographical set.

— 3 —

The Keszthely High School was a Roman Catholic Premonstratensian institution from 1808 to 1948 (when the school was secularised under the new Communist regime). As such it anticipated the St. Norbert High School, established by the Premonstratensians in Gödöllő, thirty kilometres northeast of Budapest, in 1925. The schools were the modern products of the Norbertine canons' establishment of several abbeys in western Hungarian lands from the late twelfth century and were actually symptomatic of the Order's fight for survival and subsequent revival in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries respectively. The large new Gödöllő school (for two hundred students) adjoined a recently built monastery<sup>14</sup>. It was completed by the addition of numerous artworks, not

<sup>12</sup> See Keszthelyi Televízió 'Szent Imre üvegablak' [The Saint Emeric Window], *PTE PMMK*, 2009. Retrieved from [http://www.vajda.zala.hu/index.php?page=szent-imre-uevegablak&hl=hu\\_HU](http://www.vajda.zala.hu/index.php?page=szent-imre-uevegablak&hl=hu_HU). The school is now the János Vajda High School [Vajda János Gimnázium].

<sup>13</sup> «Szent Imre ünnepély Keszthelyen. Szent Imre színes-ablak a prémontrei realgimnáziumban» [Ceremony for Saint Emeric in Keszthely. The stained glass window of the Premonstratensian Real High School], *Keszthelyi Hírek*, 1 June 1930.

<sup>14</sup> For a visual survey based on contemporary photographs, see: ÁLTAL, Imre: «Prémontrei gimnázium és konviktus», *Üdvözlet Gödöllőről!* (2007). Retrieved from <http://udvgodollo.uw.hu/>.

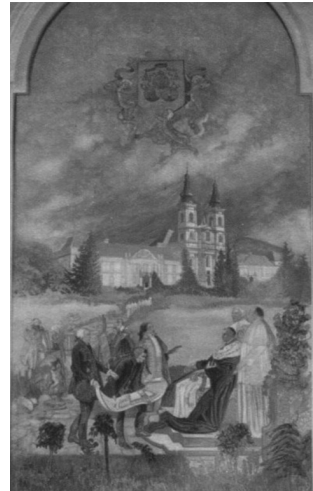
least a sculpture of St Emeric which was a three-dimensional triplet to the stained glass incarnations of the Blind and Keszthely Schools<sup>15</sup>. Its assembly hall doubled as a chapel and featured murals by one of Hungary's most prominent artists of the early twentieth century, Sándor Nagy<sup>16</sup>. Known from black and white postcards made in 1926, Nagy's wall paintings at Gödöllő comprised three views of early Hungarian Premonstratensian establishments: Lelesz Abbey (founded in 1188, now



VII. VARADZENTMARTON



VIII. LELESZ



IX. JASZO

Leles, Slovakia) – nearest the altar; Váradzszentmárton Abbey (founded in 1784, now Sânmartin, Romania); and Jászó Monastery (founded in 1170, now Jasov, Slovakia). While these revealed the extensive scale and high quality building of the Norbertine institutions (the latter including the elaborately decorated Baroque complex of Franz Anton Pilgram, built 1745-65) and featured the monks and founders at one with their architecture-nature settings (despite the stormy skies), a fourth wall painting by Nagy at the school was a triptych filled with turbulence and entitled «Warriors' Way» (Hadak Útja). It featured sword- and cross-bearing horsemen charging through raging starlit seas under the aegis of a celestial Madonna thereby conflating Hungarian mythology and Christianity as if a painterly rendition of the *Székely Himnusz*. This 1921 song, that has since become

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The survey records the institution's transition from Premonstratensian High School to University of Agriculture (1950). Since 2000 it has been known as the Szent István University. The grand historicist (neo-classical with elements of Baroque) structure was designed by Robert Kertesz and Gyula Sváb. It was used as a military hospital during the Second World War and then briefly turned into a state secondary school. The whereabouts of its artworks are unknown to me.

<sup>15</sup> By the academic sculptor Ferenc Sidló.

<sup>16</sup> Sándor Nagy (1869-1950) was instrumental in setting up the Gödöllő artists' colony and weaving school at the start of the century.



X. WARRIORS' WAY

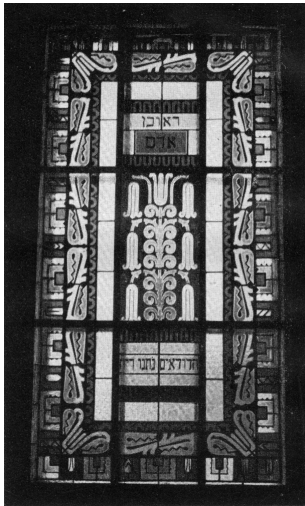
a folk anthem, was born out of the transference of the eastern Transylvanian land of Székely from Hungary to Romania following the Treaty of Trianon in 1920<sup>17</sup>. For Hungarians this meant a loss of what many considered the fount (and vital protection) of the nation's existence in Europe. The song, which is essentially a prayer for divine intervention on behalf of suffering Hungarians, is largely derived from a myth concerning Prince Csaba, son of Attila, the much feared ruler of the vast fifth-century Hunnic empire. The legend claimed that Csaba's posthumous appearance at the head of an army riding through the Milky Way served, despite the tumultuous forces ranged against them, to save his people from their enemies.

— 4 —

The St. Norbert School's communication, via pictorial means, of hostility, resolution, and calm can be perceived as a defence of national and religious identity in the face of opposition from 'others'. It can also be read as being derived from an ideological construction of self-defining separateness. Such aspirational division marked (and often scarred) various components of pre- and inter-war Hungarian society. Thus «The Warriors' Way» and its associated imagery in Gödöllő, together with the Keszthely and Blind School windows, are worth consideration in parallel to the contemporary decoration, for example, of the Budapest Jewish Community High School. For the 'null curriculum' of the Premonstratensian and Blind institutions' artworks is about invisibility. And in their cases this means the peoples who are missing as well as the belief systems which are absent. Integration and segregation were problematic issues for the

<sup>17</sup> Lyrics by György Csanády, music by Kálmán Mihalik. First performed in 1922. The poet Endre Ady had published a poem entitled 'A Hadak Útja' in 1908, and its sense of Hungarian symbolist invocation of national destiny via the legend of Csaba, also anticipates Nagy's triptych.

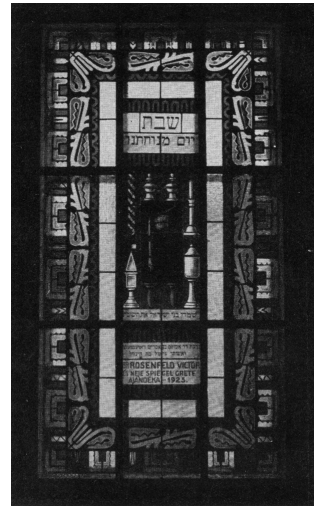
modern, new post-1867 Hungarian state and its parliamentary Acts concerning mass education (e.g. of 1868, 1907 and 1934) revealed tensions between Magyarist assimilation policies with regard to minorities and liberal integrative multiculturalism. The result was that groups such as the large Hungarian Jewish minority both gained and were denied means for self-development and expression. The establishment and closure of faith schools are signs of the unease, as is the treatment of their artworks. In terms of ‘null’ treatment this means both the absence of semiological interpretation and the denial of the work itself, either by concealment or removal.



XI. SYMBOL  
OF TRIBE OF REUBEN



XII. MOUNT NEBO



XIII. SYMBOLS  
OF SABBATH

Encountering, let alone appreciating and recognising the history of, the stained glass windows of the Jewish High School, is not easy<sup>18</sup>. It is far simpler to read and touch its textured decorative brick and plaster work since this has survived and is on the building's exterior. Conceived in 1887, the first architectural plans for the school were drawn up in 1913, and it was completed in 1931. Such protracted establishment belies just a few of the problems that the Budapest Jewish

<sup>18</sup> The account given here is based on the black and white early photographic reproductions that can be viewed at: CSÁKI, Tamás (ed.): «Grammar School of the Pest Jewish Congregation», *Béla Lajta Virtual Archives* (2010). Retrieved from <http://lajtaarchiv.hu/muvek/pesti-izraelita-hitkozseg-alapitvanyifogimnaziuma-1913-1914/?lang=en>. I have so far been unable to ascertain the fate of the windows. Despite being badly damaged during the war, in 1944 the school was a refuge for over 2000 Jews under the aegis of László Ocskay's Clothing Collection Labour Service Company. By 1952 the school had become Stephen's High School and nine years later it had evolved into the Eötvös Loránd University Miklós Radnóti Teacher Training Primary and Secondary School [*ELTE Radnóti Miklós Gyakorló Általános Iskola és Gyakorló Gimnázium*]. The school is at Cházár András Street 10, Budapest.

community encountered. It also meant that neither its initiator Mór Kármán nor its architect Bela Lajta lived to see the school open<sup>19</sup>. Yet in the mid-late 1920s, i.e. at the same time as the aforementioned Catholic and Blind School decorations, it was to acquire two sets of three stained glass windows that bore witness to the sense of religious and ethical pedagogy promoted within its walls. Conceived for the school synagogue and its vestibule by language and literature teacher-writer Salamon Widder both sets were made by Károly Majoros<sup>20</sup>. The first (from 1923-25) comprised images representing «The Tribe of Reuben», «The Sabbath» and «Mount Nebo». In keeping with the tradition of not having potentially idolatrous human body images within a synagogue these are highly abstract works with identically-patterned borders comprised of three rows of geometricised and floral motifs. In the centre of the «Reuben» window, surrounded by Hebrew script is a stylised and symmetrical plant form with six flowers. This could be the fertility-inducing mandrake with which Reuben, the eldest son of the Israelites' patriarch Jacob, is identified (after the biblical account [Genesis 30] of his use of the plant). The «Sabbath» window features another symmetrical arrangement – this time of the objects associated with the Jewish holy day, e.g. the traditional five senses – related Havdalah accoutrements of wine [kiddush] cup (taste), candleholder and braided candle (sight and touch), spice box [besamim] (smell). Only the sound of the blessings made over these is absent. Unlike the first two windows which are rectangular, the third, of «Mount Nebo», is round arched. It depicts, under a cloudy sky, the gentle slopes of the hill where Moses, according to the Bible (Deuteronomy 34), was shown the Israelites' promised land.

The Judaic fount iconography of the first set of Jewish School windows serves as a counterpoint to that of the contemporary «Warriors' Way» and Saints of the other schools, challenging as it does their sense of formative myth, order and truth. Likewise the second series articulates an alternative perception of piety, ethics and education to its Catholic counterparts. In contrast to the allegorical form of the early windows the panels made in 1928-29 for the synagogue vestibule are figurative and overtly didactic. As with the main tier of the Blind School they feature children being guided by adults. Here, however, the scenes are multi-figural and the space illusionistic. In the first, «The Study of the Torah», a rabbi teaches five boys. They are all seated, with the boys in rows in the left panel facing the rabbi in the right. The teacher holds his Torah scroll on the slope of his desk and gestures with his right hand as he speaks to his pupils. They respond by obediently directing their gaze to his or to the page in front of them. They sit on wooden benches at wooden desks. All wear headgear and loose fitting robes. The

<sup>19</sup> Mór Kármán (1843-1915) was an educational psychologist who pioneered modern teacher training (from 1872) for the Hungarian Ministry of Religion and Education. He promoted active student participation and was director of theoretical pedagogy at the Ministry from 1907. As a pioneer of Neolog Judaism he viewed himself as 'Hungarian of Jewish religion' and supported education in the Hungarian language. He was also adviser to the Education Department of the Jewish Community of Pest. Concerning Lajta, see below. One of Lajta's drawings of 1914 indicates that the patron of the school was the wealthy landowner Antal Köves-györi Freistadtler.

<sup>20</sup> Salamon Widder (1880-1951) taught and wrote on Hebrew, German and Hungarian linguistics and literature as well as religion. Károly Majoros (1867-?) opened a stained glass and mosaic workshop in Budapest in 1905. He worked on numerous municipal and ecclesiastical projects (often 'Neo-Magyar') in the early twentieth century. In the 1920s his company was known as Majoros and Bátky.



Tóratanulás

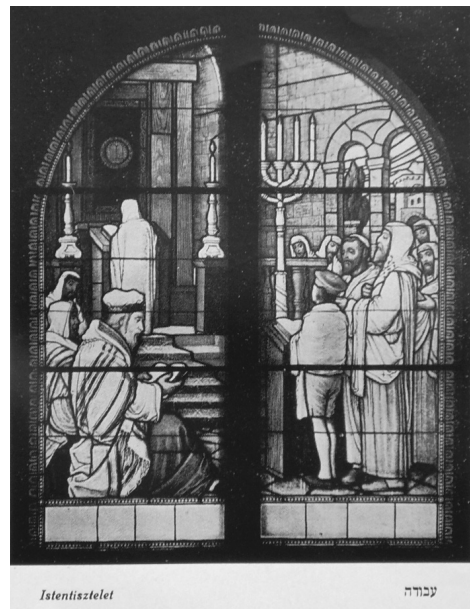
תורה

XIV. STUDY OF TORAH

setting is by the columns of four horseshoe arches through which can be seen some tall, castellated architecture. The columns have creeper plants wrapped around them. The style of the arcade is highly reminiscent of that of the Ibn Shoshan (Santa María la Blanca) Synagogue of Toledo, considered by many to be the oldest European synagogue edifice (being from around 1180). This reference to the ancient Mudéjar temple built contemporaneously with the Lelesz and Jászó monasteries depicted in the Gödöllő school speaks of a similar concern to ensure that modern education builds upon tradition.



XV. CHARITY



XVI. WORSHIP

The second window in this series is of «Worship». It shows a synagogue interior looking towards the Torah Ark behind its Paroket curtain. A prayer leader stands at the bimah table reading the Torah. Candelabra and a menorah are placed between the cantor and the groups of male worshippers. In the right foreground is a thirteen-year old boy reading from the Torah as part of his Bar Mitzvah. This then is a rite-of-passage scene and an indication of assumption of responsibility and community value. The latter are reiterated in the third window, «Charity», as here food is distributed to the poor and infirm. A group of three adults (two women and a man, the latter on a crutch) and three children (two boys and a girl) receive bread from a Jewish elder and his assistant<sup>21</sup>.

<sup>21</sup> The windows had inscriptions at their base indicating their donors: i.e. 'Charity' – by the industrialist, philanthropist and president of the Pest Jewish community Aladár Kaszab ('and the parents of his wife Józsa Wieszkopf'); 'Study of the Torah' – by Ignác Gleichmann ('and the parents of his wife Janka Wiesenberger'); 'Symbols of the Sabbath' – by Victor Rosenfeld and his wife Grete Spiegel.

The interaction between youth and adult in the Jewish School windows complements that seen in the Blind School main tier. Using beautiful polychromy and simplified human form they both denote, essentially through reading and religion, the process of being steered into a social system. One may perceive, therefore, that the young (who are the main target recipients of the windows' messages) will both gain from and contribute to that society into which they are fostered.



XVII. JEWISH HIGH SCHOOL: MAIN



XVIII. JEWISH HIGH SCHOOL: DETAIL

It is no coincidence that the Jewish School windows come in sets of three, the symbol of holiness. Number symbolism and decoration are repeated on the entrance façade of the school: the main doors are three and they are located under three tall ornate round arches whose soffits are crowned by the hexagram Star of David, this below seven (divine) proportionately smaller round-arch windows<sup>22</sup>. Between the three doors, expressed merely by the slight projection of bricks, are two elongated menorahs with their seven lamps symbolising the quest for enlightenment through knowledge and belief that the school they lead to stood

<sup>22</sup> In accordance with Mór Kármán's concepts of secondary education the school had three storeys with each having classrooms for one of the three stages of his nine-year curriculum.



for. The representation of understanding and spirituality turns from allegory to concrete in the plaster reliefwork of the doors' intrados. For here, among the exaggerated swirls of stylised flora, on which sits a 'wise' owl, are images of a factory, airship, windmill, steam train, motor car and yacht<sup>23</sup>.

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The monumental Jewish High School building was completed after Lajta's death by Ármin Hegedüs, an architect we shall return to as we conclude this sensory survey of decorated schools. In many ways it summarises the power of the architectural vision that had previously been expressed in Lajta's other outstanding Budapest schools, i.e. the Trades School on Vas Street (1909-13) and the Wechselmann & Neuschloss Blind School (1905-08). Attention here is briefly focused on the latter since this, Lajta's first large-scale commission, acts a direct counterpart to the state-funded Budapest High School for the Blind which had been completed a year before Lajta's project commenced<sup>24</sup>. Here, however, we concentrate on the tactility of its external ornamentation and the signs it contains.

Whereas the stained glass windows of the Jewish Community School have become all but invisible the exterior of the Wechselmann & Neuschloss Blind School is readily available to touch and to see. The building was erected at Mexikói Út (Mexico Road) 60, just three hundred metres northeast of the High School for the Blind. It was the bequest of one of Budapest's most prolific architects and builders of the late nineteenth century, Ignác Wechselmann (1828-1903), who had been forced to give up his practice in 1890 due to vision loss. Wechselmann and his wife Zsófia Neuschloss, having no children of their own, turned to philanthropy and bequeathed much of their estate to the creation of this boarding school for seventy-five visually-impaired and blind Jewish and Christian children<sup>25</sup>. For our purposes it is the main entrance and railings that are noteworthy. The former is reached by means of a broad stone staircase with coursed rubble walls. It is surrounded by an oversized projecting parabolic arch built in brick and contains two double wooden doors. These, together with their wooden surrounds, frosted glass and ironwork, comprise a veritable tactile almanac of Jewish, Christian and folk tradition fused, invented and reinterpreted for modern beholders and users. The hand and the eye are drawn to the metal

<sup>23</sup> The refined, vivacious nature of the external decoration (including the figurative metalwork panels in the doors) suggests the hand of the designer Lajos Kozma, one of Hungary's most versatile modern artists-architects of the early twentieth century, who had worked in Lajta's office for three years prior to the First World War.

<sup>24</sup> The original surname of Béla Lajta (1873-1920) was Leitersdorfer. He changed to Lajta in 1907. He belonged to the Budapest Jewish community.

<sup>25</sup> It is now the Corrective Movement Elementary and High School (Boarding) combined with the Special Education Methodology Institute [*Mozgásjavító Általános Iskola, Szakközépiskola, Egységes Gyógypedagógiai Módszertani Intézmény és Diákotthon*]. For the most useful visual and documentary survey of the building see: CSAKI, Tamás (ed.): «Boarding School for Blind Children founded by Ignác Wechselmann and Zsófia Neuschloss», *Béla Lajta Virtual Archives* (2010). Retrieved from <http://lajtaarchiv.hu/muvek/1905-1908-wechselmann-ignac-es-neje-neuschloss-zsofia-vakok-tanintezete/?lang=en>.

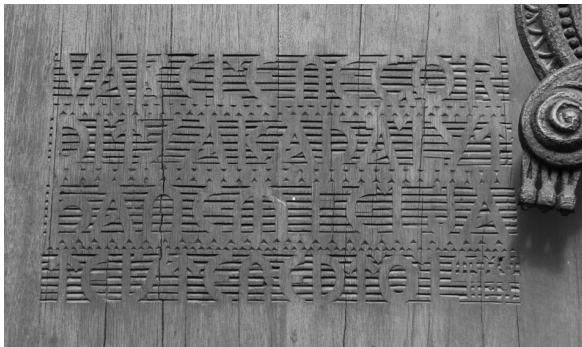


XIX. WECHSELMANN & NEUSCHLOSS BLIND SCHOOL (WN)

handles and chip carving by Jenő Galambos and Károly Porges respectively as if one is being prepared for the benefits of Sloyd education. The first feel as if they have arrived from some ancient forge, their wrought iron being shaped into vertical grip bars extending down like rounded elongated tongues from abstract conical heads to zigzag-patterned disc door plates. Below these are similarly stylised moveable latch handles in the form of snails/brooches (left) and birds (right), the whole being coordinated with the rows and lines of protruding rounded metal studs that emphatically mark the edges of the doors and their windows (there is more elaborate rivetting on the inside of the doors). A sense of Migration Period Animal Style metalwork is evoked, as if hinting at the origins of the Hungarian peoples.

The entrance's artwork defies most senses of sequence not least because it mixes aphoristic script with abstract and figurative design. Horizontal bands, vertical bars and an arch of text and pattern are discernible, their combination being an expression of underlying syncretic motive. Thus, for example, every element of text is similarly stylised and set within a grid of incised horizontal lines (usually seven) from which it stands proud without being in relief. And hence the letters and words can be read and traced, just as the patterns and motifs, by hand and eye. Starting from those either side of the door handles the following can be discerned:

- Left Door (left and right): «And in that day shall the deaf hear the words of the book... and the eyes of the blind shall see out of obscurity, and out of darkness. Isaiah 29:48» [29:18];
- Right Door (left): «Thou shalt not put a stumbling block before the blind, but shalt fear thy God. Moses 3:19» [Leviticus 19:14];
- Right Door (right): «Who maketh the seeing or the blind: I the Lord. 2 Moses 4:1» [Exodus 4:11];
- Left Surround: «And the eyes of them that see shall not be blind» [Isaiah 32:3];
- Right Surround: «The Lord gives sight to the blind» [Psalms 146:18];
- Arch: «I will bring the blind by a way that they knew not. I will make darkness light before them» [Isaiah 42:16]<sup>26</sup>.



XX. LEVITICUS



XXI. WN LEFT

This physical intoning of Old Testament prospects for the blind, with its message of hope, is fully integrated with the abstract and figurative elements. These are largely symmetrical and geometric, with the right hand panel of the surround mirroring (with subtle differences) that of the left and both enclosing the central panel. The side panels' chip carvings spring tree-like from two rectangles and, between them, a deer and sheep respectively. They rise in a series of curves and bands, marked by intricate circles and diagonals, to a crowned serpent around which grow rosette plants under a floriate sun. Above these, in a

<sup>26</sup> The entrance is also 'signed' in a similar fashion, i.e. «Created from designs by Bela Lajta. József Malomsóky and Károly Porges».

line with the chamfered tops of the doors are sets of three birds standing next to individual trees and upon large triangles made of small triangles. The effect is one of elemental, multifarious yet harmonised growth and this accords with the sense of abstract tree-menorah-animals in the entrance centre. The designs look as if they could have been transferred from some Transylvanian national costume or utensil but at the same time as if they might have been extracted from pieces of ancient nomadic jewellery, such as that of the Migration Period (which brought the Hungarian ancestors to Europe from Asia). Connections between such ornaments were being cultivated by Hungarian ethnographers from the late nineteenth century, in part at least, to forge a neo-Magyar style and identity. It is tempting to read the entrance designs as a compilation of ideogrammatic symbols of belief and value systems, but the abstractions defy specifics. Suffice it to say that if the centrepiece is a tree of life and menorah combined then it can be taken as a sign of knowledge and enlightenment, while the left and right panels could be interpreted as effervescent bowls of Hygieia and Aesculapian snakes protected by the Hungarian White Stag and Lamb of God/Paschal lamb, hence being indicators of healing, nation formation and obedience.



XXII. WN RIGHT



XXIII. WN TREE MENORAH

The combination of maxims and motifs at the entrance is complemented by the quotations and zoomorphic-Judaic-Folk details of the iron railings and lanterns that surround the building<sup>27</sup>. This ironwork includes fantastic birds and creatures, as well as recognisable peacocks, rabbits and squirrels, and also distinctive totem- or gravestone-like poles. The twelve quotations were at the base of the railings in large rectangular panels. They were in Braille, with their sources in embossed lettering at the bottom. When I visited, in 2011, three survived: Psalm I<sup>28</sup>; József Eötvös' «Will»<sup>29</sup>; and, nearest to the entrance Mihály Vörösmarty's «Appeal» which turned into a second Hungarian national anthem sung at the end of ceremonies: «To your homeland without fail Be faithful, O Hungarian; It is your cradle and will be your grave Which nurses and will bury you»<sup>30</sup>. The other Braille panels are said to have contained fragments of classical Hungarian poetry concerning the struggles for self-realisation, the soul of the Hungarian nation and redemption, such as János Arany's «To My Son»<sup>31</sup>, Ferenc Kölcsey's «Hymn» (the first national anthem)<sup>32</sup>, a memorial to Ferenc Rákóczi II (the leader of the 1703-11 Hungarian uprising against the Habsburgs), «Compatriots' Song» (1844) by the national revolutionary Sándor Petöfi, and Gyula Reviczky's «It is Spring» (1878)<sup>33</sup>.

<sup>27</sup> The frosted glass windows of the door were by Miksa Róth and contain menorah-tree motifs and geometric patterns. The two lanterns at the foot of the entrance staircase also have religious maxims: «God gives us eyes that we might see» and «The Thoughts of the Blind are directed towards the Heavenly Father».

<sup>28</sup> First verse of Psalm 1: «Blessed is the man that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly, nor standeth in the way of sinners, nor sitteth in the seat of scornful». Missing: Second verse of Psalm 1: «But his delight is in the law of the Lord, and in his law doth he meditate day and night».

<sup>29</sup> Baron Eötvös (1813-71) was Hungary's first Minister of Religion and Education after the 1867 Compromise with Austria and as such the instigator of the National Schools Act of 1868 introducing mass education. He was an early advocate of Jewish emancipation. The first two stanzas of his «Will» (1848) are given: «When the close of this rough path I attain, and up the steep Wearily climb, until I win The cold grave where I shall sleep: Raise no marble o'er my dust, But the lasting victory Of the cause for which I fought, May that my memorial be».

<sup>30</sup> Mihály Vörösmarty (1800-1855). This is the first and most commonly sung verse of «Appeal» (1836).

<sup>31</sup> János Arany (1817-82). The first four lines of the third verse of «To My Son» (1850) were given: «Religion is the treasure of the poor. It teaches, and who needs the lesson more – To suffer and to hope alas we must Suffer and hope until our hearts are dust».

<sup>32</sup> Ferenc Kölcsey (1790-1838). «Hymn» (1823) was adopted as national anthem in 1844. The first stanza (that sung at official ceremonies) was given: «O, my God, the Magyar bless With Thy plenty and good cheer. With Thine aid his just cause press, Where his foes to fight appear. Fate, who for so long did'st frown, Bring him happy times and ways; Atoning sorrow hath weighed down Sins of past and future days».

<sup>33</sup> The fullest list I have found is at: ROKOB, Tibor: «Vaktáblák a Mexikói úton», *Budapest: Avárosalakók Folyóirata*, IV, 5 (2007). Retrieved from <http://www.budapestfolyoirat.hu/archivum/2007/5/158-vaktablak-a-mexikoi-uton>.



XXIV. WN BRAILLE VOROSMARTY

— 6 —

To be able to touch and imbibe this plastic rendition of the multivalent wellspring of the modern Hungarian nation was a unique experience and it took the decoration of school buildings in radical new direction. But it did so as part of a politicised movement in art and architecture that sought to invigorate both the local youth and the wider public with a sense of communal purpose and pride. As such it is worth comparing with one last contemporary example and this a municipal Primary School. For the school at 85 Dob Street in Budapest also expresses the value of sensory perception for a patriotic cause. And while the decoration is also external and contains the first lines of Vörösmarty's anthem, it contrasts with the Wechselmann and Neuschloss Blind School work by being flat, figurative, 'child-centred' and... beyond reach. In addition, it is polychromatic, but, unlike anything so far considered, is in mosaic. And unlike the previous works here it will be read from its extremities to its centre.



XXV. DOB STREET COMMUNITY SCHOOL MAIN

The Dob Street Community Elementary School, as it was originally known, was built in densely populated Elizabethtown [Erszébetváros], the historic Jewish quarter of Pest, to designs of Ármin Hegedüs, the architect who completed the Jewish Community School<sup>34</sup>. Constructed between 1905 and 1906 on a narrow site it is a four-storey edifice whose exterior and interior are marked by a highly vivacious playfulness of colour and line. This is inspired by the transference and reinvention of Transylvanian-Oriental peasant textile and woodcarving motifs to

<sup>34</sup> Ármin Hegedüs (1869-1945) is best known as the architect of the Gellért Hotel and Baths, Budapest (1909-18). He worked as a designer for the municipal engineering office for many years. The school is now known as the Hungarian-English Bilingual Primary School and Catering School (Magyar-Angol Kéttannyelv Általános Iskola és Vendéglátó Szakiskola).

civic architecture that had been initiated a few years earlier by Ödön Lechner, widely considered the Hungarian equivalent of Antoni Gaudí. It was no coincidence that similarly stylised and colourful floriate motifs were also painted on the ceiling of the Palatine Hall of the Blind School. Here, however, above the six windows of the two ground floor (girls') classrooms that face the street such decorations are juxtaposed with a mosaic frieze depicting forty-nine young children<sup>35</sup>. It was designed by Zsigmond Vajda and executed by craftsmen from Miksa Róth's workshop. This and the emblemata above it (with symbols of municipality, state and depictions of learning aids) represent the curriculum as conceived by the educational authorities. Both ends of the frieze commence with small groups of children and are indicative of a perception of gender divide not dissimilar to that of the Blind School window. On the left, starting from near the entrance for girls, three girls carrying reading and writing equipment and flowers



XXVI. DOB LEFT

head towards a bunch of flowers on the other side of which is a fourth girl with an open book. Next comes a group of three girls whose hands and faces indicate they are working on mental arithmetic. These are followed by two girls holding and marking a slate, a girl who appears to be reciting from heart, and two seated girls reading large books. Thereafter is a group of four girls engaged in crafts. The first two of these wind yarn into a ball, the third works at a large sampler on an easel, and the fourth appears to knit. Of particular significance here are the fragments of visible words being embroidered onto the sampler by the third girl in a display of beautiful, well-trained woven handwriting. For from these can be made out the opening two lines of Vörösmarty's «Appeal»: «To your homeland without fail Be faithful, O Hungarian». The line of girls is completed by another group of four, this time facing the beholder and singing from songsheets. Wearing a wide variety of practical, knee-length dresses and aprons, all but two of the girls are bareheaded.

<sup>35</sup> This may be compared with a similar, painted, decoration on the exterior of the Karlín School in Prague, built at the same time. See HOWARD, Jeremy: «Learning and seeing through walls: The Karlín School's form of education through art (raising questions of location, nation, trans-nation, history, myth and modernity)», *International Journal of Education through Art*, 9, 1 (in press), (2013). Retrieval from <http://ojs.library.ubc.ca/index.php/ijeta>.





XXVII. DOB RIGHT

From the right, nearest to the boys' entrance, the first group of three boys also move towards the centre and are either engaged in 'going to school' or a practical lesson of natural history. In this case, however, they not only carry their reading and writing equipment by hand but also have satchels, and the third is a budding lepidopterist attempting to catch in his net one of the butterflies fluttering in front of him. The next group comprises four boys gathered thoughtfully in a group around a large globe, one with a large set square behind his back. This conveyance of geography and measurement then meets an image of a boy dressed as a sailor reading from a book and next to him a gesticulating ('creatively expressive') boy holding a palette and brush. Thereafter come two boys apparently singing. These face a group of four boys, three of whom wear feathered caps. Gathered around the Hungarian red, white and green tricolour their leader is in oratorical pose and appears as a youthful Sándor Petöfi. Next to these march a line of three boys in blue shorts, and yellow and red striped caps and t-shirts. They hold poles upright, rifle-fashion, as if cadets. In front of these three more boys engage in physical exercise, one holding a dumbbell and another preparing to jump over a bar using a springboard.

We now arrive at the centre and with it the end of our sensory survey of the decoration of five Hungarian schools from the early twentieth century. It brings us full circle to the role of sight and touch (if not sound, smell and taste, etc.) in youthful learning. And once again the sexes are combined and there is a tree, that here appears to push the cornice upward as if by healthy organic force. Now, however, in this place for small children, the scene appears wholly secular, contemporary and one of play. Yet this is no chance game but one in which four boys and four girls take active part. They are placed in a balanced, moving circle holding hands. And in the centre of the ring is a girl who stands out, in white, with her hands groping to either side. She is deprived of sight. For she is blindfold and the game is Blind Man's Buff. The aim is to tag through sensitive, quick use of sound and touch and thereby pass on the sensory deprivation and have one's own sight restored. And thus it is that children learn something of what it means to suffer a form of physical impairment. It could be argued that Vajda's «Blind Man's Buff» recalls Francisco de Goya's *La gallina ciega* (1789, Museo del Prado), only now instead of being a circle of young aristocrats playing the game and to decorate a princess's bedroom in the Royal Palace of El Pardo, the Dob Street School scene updates and democratizes the universal children's game for a mass educational 'palace' (the school was designed to cater for 621 children, have twenty teachers, and two directors).



XXVIII. DOB BLIND MAN'S BUFF

XXIX. *La Gallina Ciega*, GOYA

In «The School House», an article published at the time of his work on the Dob Street School, its architect Hegedüs wrote:

The modern school building should seek truth. Most important here is pleasing children, almost imperceptibly, with work, learning and good morals. The art of that teaching should involve a thorough knowledge of the soul and encourage a child's genuine love of truth. The children should happily hurry to school feeling the fondness of the teacher and that a constant, serene, childish joy awaits. The construction of the school, its floor plan, and interior and exterior, should express and be full of beautiful, pure, exhilarating and inspiring ideas. School houses should not be bleak children's barracks but cheerful and fun venues. They should be airy, clean, spacious and foster taste<sup>36</sup>.

Certainly the Budapest «Blind Man's Buff» is on the street and for all, if not to touch, to see. All, except perhaps, the blind? And this begs the question: for whom is the mosaic's construction of gender, youth, race and able-bodied normalcy intended? How much more of hidden and null curricula do decorated schools contain? To what extent are they aesthetic vehicles of hierarchical, sensory inculcation? Whatever is the truth? Let's 'see'... But let's not aim for apperception.

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<sup>36</sup> HEGEDÜS, Attila: «Az iskolaház», *Népm velés* [Peoples' Education], (1906), 1, cited and translated from GERLE, Janos; KOVACS, Attila; MAKOVECZ, Imre: *A Századforduló magyar építésze* [Hungarian Turn-of-the Century Architecture], Budapest, Szépirodalmi, 1990, p. 41.