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Art history without theory

A case study in 20th century scholarship

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Abstract:

My paper investigates the issue of art history's need for theory (NT), n.b. that this issue is and remains relevant as the process of research in art history advances. My argumentation rests on a case study from 1950s Hungary. Lajos Fülep, a reluctant member of Georg Lukács's pre-first-war Budapest entourage, has made an interesting opponent's review on the 1955 doctoral thesis of distinguished Hungarian Renaissance scholar, Jolán Balogh.² On Fülep's account Balogh's theoretical tools are inconspicuous. Fülep disapproves not of the lack of theory in Balogh's scholarly work, but of theoretical encroachments, sometimes even theory-laden conclusions without an awareness of a basic need of theorizing. For Fülep a historian of art responds to the constant urge of theoretical vision and thus has to make explicit theoretical commitments to fulfill her/his historical research goals.

Behind Fülep's critical review apparently stands the primitive-intuitive idea of a *scientific research program*. If a historian of art pursues no research program, or to invoke Imre Lakatos' words, a normative methodology her/his work would easily lose coherence and, respectively, the whole enterprise is liable to forfeit its echo and importance. Without a research program there is no room left neither for internal, nor for external histories. Considering that in the case of art the internal history pertains to the problem of aesthetic value, a theory-free or theory-laden but theory-unaware history of art would also miss the process how different art-making individuals coming from different historical, social, and material circumstances conceived of beauty and ugliness. Accordingly, Balogh's work, notwithstanding with its clear erudite nature, could be politely labelled historically "blind" (in the sense of Kant's dictum and its paraphrase provided by Lakatos).

I will try to argue that Balogh's work is capable to infer in both descriptive and normative manner, but due to a complete lack of viable research programs her theses are still relevant while less defensible against refuting facts and concurrent (i.e. coherent) research programs. And, as a sociological corollary, without research programs an art historical work has less chances to be received and discussed, and consequently will be unable to enter a wider scholarly community.

Fülep's commentary also bears on reconsidering an older topic: a theory which could be transformed into a research program is a much plausible solution (of NT) to be adopted by art historians than shedding their clear theoretical aspirations for the temporary good of collecting and refining data on individual cases.

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² *Az esztergomi Bakócz kápolna*. [The Bakócz Chapel of Esztergom] Budapest: Fine Arts Fund Publishing, 1955.

In the closing section I will summarize the possible ways, Balogh's work could be framed by specific research programs. One of them plays an important angle of Wölfflin's thesis on decorativity. The importance of an artwork could be coherently grasped against the background of "certain notions of pleasure", and the artwork assessed by Balogh received its particularly noble, even admirable status by instantiating a then-relevant sense of the notion of decorativity and, concomitantly, by *not* conflicting with its other, historically altering senses.