

UNIVERSITY OF SZEGED
DOCTORAL SCHOOL OF LITERARY STUDIES
RUSSIAN LITERATURE AND CULTURE

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**DESACRALISATION OF THE ICON
BÉLA UITZ, LAJOS VAJDA AND THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE**

ABSTRACT

SZEGED

2021

My thesis examines the influence of the traditions of Russian icon painting on 20th-century (avant-garde) art. The artists of the Russian avant-garde organically integrated the iconographic principles of icon painting into their art, but reworked them according to their own artistic vision.

In the introductory part of my thesis I will draw a comprehensive picture of the rediscovery of Russian icon painting and its influence on Russian avant-garde art. It is also important to mention the process of desacralization, which was already addressed in the discussion papers of the 17th century, but took place with the greatest intensity through avant-garde art in the early 20th century. In parallel, I examine in detail the relationship between Russian and Hungarian avant-garde art. In accordance with the subject of my thesis, I will focus on the work of three painters who had a significant influence on the representatives of the Hungarian avant-garde, especially Béla Uitz and Lajos Vajda: From their oeuvre, I highlight the works of Malevich, Kandinsky and Rodchenko, which parallel icon painting.

For the two great creators of Hungarian art history, Béla Uitz and Lajos Vajda, rethinking the traditional interpretation of icons and their incisive presence in their life's work also played an extremely important role. In presenting the two different artistic perspectives, I analyse in detail how Russian avant-garde artists influenced the development of the two artists and how they incorporated the phenomena of Russian and Serbian icon art into their art.

The first chapter of my thesis describes the concept of icon as *representation, image, likeness, conceptual image, imagination* and *vision*. From the tenth century, after Kievan Rus' adopted Orthodox Christianity and made it the state religion, icons became an important part of Old Russian culture. By the 18th century, the icons had adopted countless elements from the Western painting tradition, and it was at this time that secular art in Russia began to develop and solidify in parallel with icon painting. The decline of interest in religious painting, its relegation to the background, took place in the 18th and 19th centuries. In the second chapter of the thesis, I present the rediscovery of icons in the 20th century.

The rediscovery of icons in the 20th century is one of the greatest milestones in Russian art history. Scholarly interest in icons began to grow at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. Visual artists also discovered the icons for themselves and incorporated them into their own artistic concept.

An important chapter of my thesis is Russian avant-garde art and its relationship to religion and icon painting. Smaller and larger groups of artists, as well as independent artists who felt connected to the spirit of the avant-garde, attempted not only to understand the questions of representation and style posed by Western art movements, but also to enrich their

approaches to solutions with new perspectives. Their avant-gardism, which rebelled against everything they called “outdated”, was not necessarily accompanied by a denial of past values. These artists were in the midst of the stormy intellectual life of their passionate and ardent times and, in line with a reinterpretation of the concept of “Gesamtkunst”, collaborated with choreographers, composers and literary figures who were in search of the new. They discovered the deepest roots of Russian culture for modern art and organically incorporated them into their art. Some of them consciously turned to icon painting, others, even if only indirectly, came under its influence to some extent. The Russian avant-garde artists were fascinated by the Orthodox icons, and many artists discovered the icons for themselves, integrated their forms into their own artistic concept and reworked them according to their individual ideas. They believed to have found in the icons the national characteristics they were looking for, but at the same time they distanced themselves more and more from the original sacredness of the icons.

In accordance with the subject of my thesis, I will specifically address the work of three painters, Kazimir Malevich, Aleksander Rodchenko and Wassili Kandinsky, who had a significant influence on the representatives of the Hungarian avant-garde, in particular Béla Uitz and Lajos Vajda.

BÉLA UITZ AND THE RUSSIAN AVANT-GARDE

Béla Uitz (1887-1972) was one of the most talented painters of Hungarian activism. From 1908 he attended the University of Fine Arts and from 1912 developed his constructive-expressive style establishing a new school of thought. From 1915 he was one of the leading figures of the art group around the magazines *Tett* and later around *Ma*. After the disintegration of the soviet republic, he lived first in Vienna and then in Paris. In Vienna he participated in the work of the communist emigration. After 1916, Béla Uitz was touched by the spirit of Expressionism: his large-format prints were constructive and expressive. He was influenced by Russian Constructivist art and later in Vienna, following Rodchenko, engaged in analyses of form. Due to his role in the soviet republic, Béla Uitz had to leave the country in 1920 and settled in Vienna. But his past and his political activities contributed to his being sent to Moscow in January 1921.

Uitz was still familiar with Constructivist art from Vienna, but was able to engage more intensively with the avant-garde movements in Moscow. The new Russian art completely captivated Uitz. From Malevich he adopted the most abstract search for visual values in experimenting with pictorial planes, and as a counter-effect he integrated Rodchenko’s black

and white material experiments as well as Tatlin's spatial compositions into his art. Uitz's most important achievement in reinterpreting Russian influence in Vienna was his five synthesising 1.5x1.5 m oil paintings in 1922, most of which he called (like some similar watercolour compositions) *Icon Analysis*. These emerged partly under the spell of Russian icon art, partly under the spell of the avant-garde, but were not analyses but expressive, arbitrary transcripts. Thus, with his large oil paintings of 1921-22, Béla Uitz became a rare, Western bearer of the Eastern tradition. Béla Uitz not only traced the masterpieces of ancient Russian architecture, but was also taken with the beauty of the old Russian icons. He was one of the first to discover icon painting and incorporate it into his art. Uitz was not religious, it was not his religious conviction or faith that led him to icon painting, but the aesthetics of icons. Uitz namely arrived in Moscow at a time when scholarly interest in icons was growing. The iconostases he was able to admire in the churches of the Kremlin was of course not an ordinary travel experience for Uitz. Indeed, this was the case for many Hungarian painters who visited Russia, but their art remained untouched by this experience. In addition to his analytical, theorising readiness and the novelty of the experience, Uitz was motivated by another factor, and that was the Russian avant-garde already mentioned. In my thesis I am looking for the icons that possibly formed the basis for Uitz's icon analyses and his further work.

LAJOS VAJDA AND THE ICONS

In the oeuvre of one of the most outstanding artists of Hungarian visual art, Lajos Vajda, the works that can be associated thematically and motivically with Orthodox icon painting occupy a significant place. Unlike Béla Uitz, Lajos Vajda did not bring the world of icons with him from the Soviet Union: He was influenced by the Orthodox religion, icon worship and the lives of the saints as a child, having spent a significant part of his childhood in Serbia. After his studies, Vajda lived in Paris from 1930 to 1934, where he was strongly influenced by the works of ancient sacred cultures, as well as by the Romanesque and Gothic cathedrals in France and the art programmes of the Russian avant-garde artists Malevich, Kandinsky and El Lissitzky. In my thesis, I examine the icon era of Lajos Vajda in more detail. In my opinion, Vajda's series of self-portraits can be seen as a preparation for his icon era, as certain "Byzantine" traits can already be detected in these works. Vajda's self-portraits, as mentioned, are consistently characterised by a certain Christian or prophetic role. The same applies to his "Mask" paintings from 1937 to 1939. I examine and analyse in detail Vajda's main works, the Self-portrait with

Icon, Self-portrait with Lily, but his other works, such as the still lifes, are also imbued with the icon character.

On the basis of all this, it can be stated that the enforcement of the aesthetic principles of the avant-garde in relation to the conception of icons can be perceived both in Russian and Hungarian culture in action.