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## Chapter 4

# Crossing Borders and Period Boundaries in Central European Art: The Work of Anna Lesznai (ca. 1910 – 1930)

The normativisation of art history has a long tradition. From what is widely considered the discipline's foundational text, Giorgio Vasari's *Lives of the Artists* (1550), the history of art has long viewed its subject matter as a lineage in which different stages of development follow each other in a logical succession, according to principles of progress and formal innovation.<sup>1</sup> Key to the establishment of the discipline, this way of periodizing forges categories which, besides referring to particular places in time and space (e.g. Vasari's "Italian Renaissance"), help foreground what makes a given stage of development "innovative" or "progressive" and, thus, worthy of the scholar's attention. While providing one of the most essential structuring devices for the history of art as a discipline and connecting its internal developments to broader events in social and political history, this system of periodization nonetheless comes with notable flaws. Even though Vasari's account was recognised as the standard text for studies of the Italian Renaissance for centuries, it was predicated on a clear political-artistic bias: because of the support he received from the Florence-based Medici family, Vasari favoured Florentine painters, most notably Michelangelo, to their non-Florentine counterparts. As is well known, this had far-reaching consequences: while Florence gained a reputation as the cradle of the Renaissance, its rival city Siena was long relegated to secondary status and its artistic production presented as "lagging behind" that of Florence.<sup>2</sup>

Though this well-known example stands at some spatial and temporal distance from the chapter's main topic of investigation – periodization in the history of modern art in Central Europe – it nonetheless captures the essence of the issue: to quote Jacques Le Goff, "there is nothing neutral, or innocent, about cutting time

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1 G. Vasari, *Lives of the Most Eminent Painters, Sculptors and Architects* (London, 1914).

2 B. David, "Past and Present in Sieneese Painting: 1350–1550", *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 40 (2001), pp. 77–100.

up into smaller parts”.<sup>3</sup> Periodization produces exclusivist norms to bestow coherence on the sequence of artistic periods – the Italian Renaissance and 20<sup>th</sup>-century Modernism being two cases in point. As broad categories, these period labels have provided a heuristic structure for art-historical knowledge, a structure based on the succession of styles. Even so, they can only offer a simplified view of art history, one which inevitably overlooks whatever falls outside dominant visual regimes.

The sense of teleological progress underpinning art-historical periodization allows, in the words of Frederic Schwartz, only a “one-dimensional movement of historical time”.<sup>4</sup> One example of this monodimensionality is the established lineage of modern art in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. Successively leading from Impressionism to Constructivism, this lineage has long served as the major reference point for periodizations of 20<sup>th</sup>-century art – a visualisation of which is offered by Alfred Barr on the dustcover of the exhibition catalogue *Cubism and Abstract Art* at New York’s Museum of Modern Art in 1936 (fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Post-colonial and gender theory have undoubtedly helped expose some of the social hierarchies behind this periodization, highlighting the role played by race, class and gender in determining which movements and artists are included in or excluded from the dominant lineage. Nevertheless, the broader practice of periodization – in which artists, styles and movements are bound to specific time periods – has remained notably resistant to change.<sup>6</sup> The teleological narrative of modern art, as well as the periodization on which it rests, is still based on a Western canon, with Paris at the centre of artistic developments. This is best illustrated by the fact that the standard textbook *Art Since 1900*, even in its latest edition (2016), continues to focus almost exclusively on art history within Western Europe and the United States, presenting it as *the* history of art par excellence, rather than of art in the specific geographical context it refers to.<sup>7</sup> The underlying assumption that Western art history represents the norm affects, in turn, how art history elsewhere is narrated and periodized.

When this normative model is applied to the art history of Eastern and Central Europe, it is usually accompanied by an additional normative framework: methodological nationalism, a bias which causes artistic developments to be recognised only insofar as they are confined to and aligned with specific national spaces. In

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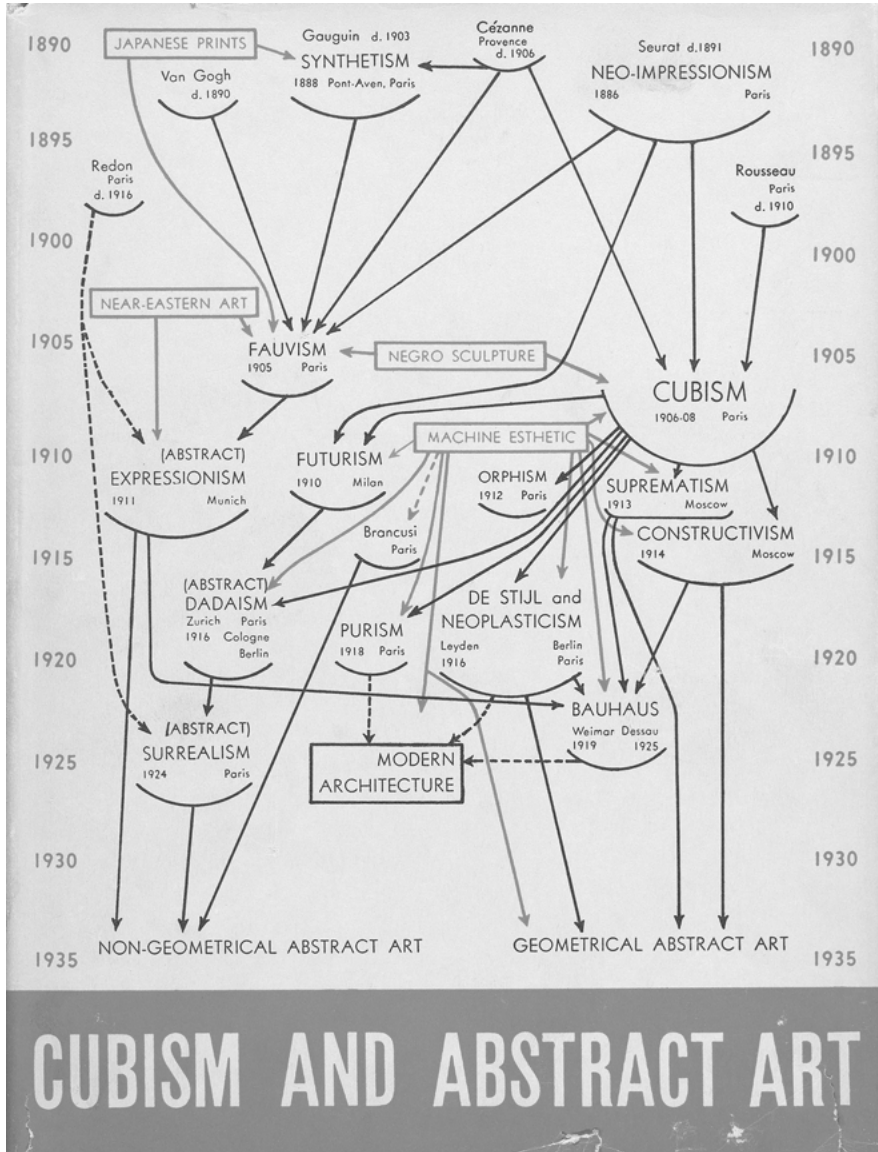
3 J. Le Goff, *Must We Divide History into Periods?* (New York, 2015), p. 2.

4 F. J. Schwartz, “Ernst Bloch and Wilhelm Pinder: Out of Sync”, *Grey Room*, 3 (Spring, 2001), p. 63.

5 A. H. Barr, *Cubism and abstract art* (New York, 1936).

6 L. Nochlin, *Women, Art, And Power and other Essays* (New York, 2018 [1988]); P. Mitter, “Decentering Modernism: Art History and Avant-Garde Art from the Periphery”, *The Art Bulletin*, 90/4 (2008), pp. 531–48.

7 H. Foster et al, *Art Since 1900*, vol. I: 1900–1944: *modernism, antimodernism, postmodernism* (London, 2016 [2004]).



**Fig. 1:** Barr, Alfred Hamilton Jr. (1902–1981): Cover of the exhibition catalogue “Cubism and Abstract Art”, MoMA 1936. New York, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). Offset, printed in color, 7 3/4 x 10 1/4” (19.7 x 26 cm). The Museum of Modern Art Library, New York. MA143 © 2021. Digital image, The Museum of Modern Art, New York/Scala, Florence.

other words, the history of modern Central European art, while delineated by the canonical narrative of modernism, is equally subject to the historical frameworks of individual nation states, each of which forges its own narrative of modernism. Paradoxically, then, treatment of Western art as the universal standard is accompanied, in East-Central Europe, by a superficially opposing tendency towards methodological nationalism, which foregrounds the supposed national particularities of various artistic movements or styles. Under the umbrella term “Central European modernism”, for instance, we find a plethora of nationally framed developments such as “Czech cubism”, “Austrian expressionism” or “Hungarian fauvism” – movements which, while implicitly referencing the Western canon, represent “a notion of culture enclosed within the territorial formation of the modern nation”.<sup>8</sup>

In more recent years, there has been a shift away from a narrow focus on the avant-garde to consider a broader range of modernist movements. However, the appraisal of artistic developments in Eastern and Central Europe remains predominantly squeezed between a national framework, corresponding to the nation-states founded after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918, and the standards of teleological progress established by the Western canon.<sup>9</sup> Even anthologies that promise transnational approaches, such as Krisztina Passuth’s *Treffpunkte der Avantgarden* (2003), or, more recently, the exhibition catalogues *Beyond Klimt: New Horizons in Central Europe* (2018) and *Years of Disarray* (2019), work within – as opposed to across – national frameworks, establishing cross-chapter comparisons rather than providing fully entangled histories.<sup>10</sup> In short, the history of modern art in Central Europe is dominated by a periodization model that combines two seemingly contrasting orientations: a methodological nationalism that follows the state borders established after the fall of the Habsburg Empire, and a canon that,

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**8** M. Juneja, “Alternative, Peripheral or Cosmopolitan? Modernism as a Global Process”, in J. Allerstorfer and M. Leisch-Kiesl (eds), *“Global Art History” Transkulturelle Verortungen von Kunst und Kunstwissenschaft* (Bielefeld, 2017), p. 85; J. Svestka et al., *Czech Cubism, 1909–1925: art, architecture, design* (Prague, 2006); P. Werkner, *Austrian expressionism: the formative years* (Seattle, 1995); K. Passuth and Gy. Szücs, *Fauves, Vadak: Hungarian Fauves from Paris to Nagybánya, 1904–1914* (Budapest, 2000); H. Gassner, *Wechselwirkungen: ungarische Avantgarde in der Weimarer Republik* (Marburg, 1986).

**9** B. Hock, K. Kemp-Welch and J. Owen (eds), *A Reader in East-Central-European Modernism* (London, 2019); M. Bartlová (ed), *Budování státu: reprezentace Československa v umění, architektuře a designu* (Prague, 2015); E. Forgács, *Hungarian art: confrontation and revival in the modern movement. Avant-garde and modern movements* (Los Angeles, 2017).

**10** S. Rollig and A. Klee (eds), *Beyond Klimt new horizons in Central Europe* (Munich, 2018); M. Werner and B. Zimmermann, “Beyond Comparison. Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity”, *History and Theory*, 45/1 (2006), pp. 30–50.

though presented as “international”, was in fact constructed primarily with reference to artistic developments in early 20<sup>th</sup>-century France.<sup>11</sup>

At first sight, this interplay between nation-specific and canonical principles of periodization appears contradictory in nature. It is all the more remarkable, then, that such a polyrhythmic dynamic forms the core of the standard post-1989 volumes on Central European modernism: Steven Mansbach’s *Modern Art in Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Balkans* (1997) and Timothy Benson’s *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930* (2002).<sup>12</sup> Mansbach in particular has argued that avant-garde groups in the region “pictured themselves as unique representatives of the emerging nation, as caretakers of the national culture”, while simultaneously characterising the growth of national artistic trends in the region as the result of “influence” from Western artists.<sup>13</sup>

In a review of Mansbach’s book, James Elkins has strongly criticised this approach, suggesting that “the continuous description of artists in terms of others, with dollops of exotic politics, language, and geography thrown in, is really nothing less than a kind of Orientalism”.<sup>14</sup> The main point of contention with Mansbach’s approach is that, despite his attempts to emphasize the diversity of modern art in Eastern and Central Europe, his adoption of the Western canon as the standard implicitly places Eastern and Central European art in a subordinate position to painters in Paris and Berlin. In his representation of the Hungarian painter Vilmos Perrott Csaba (1880–1955) as “influenced by” and even “indebted to” Cézanne, for example, Mansbach would establish a hierarchical relationship between the two, in which certain formal similarities were foregrounded as a sign of dependency.<sup>15</sup> The very choice of a vocabulary built on artistic developments in France would implicitly force Csaba’s work into a framework of art history informed by foreign developments.

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11 B. Joyeux-Prunel, “Provincializing Paris. The Center-Periphery Narrative of Modern Art in Light of Quantitative and Transnational Approaches.”, *Art@s Bulletin*, 4/1 (2015), Article 4.

12 S. Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe from the Baltic to the Balkans* (Cambridge 1997); T. Benson (ed), *Central European Avant-Gardes: Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930* (Cambridge, 2002).

13 Mansbach, *Modern Art in Eastern Europe*, p. 7.

14 J. Elkins, “Review of Steven Mansbach’s book *Modern Art in Eastern Europe: From the Baltic to the Balkans, ca. 1890–1939* (1999),” *The Art Bulletin*, 82/4 (2000), p. 785.

15 Elkins, “Review of Steven Mansbach’s book”, p. 782. The most recent response to the challenges of writing on modernism in Central Europe is by Matthew Rampley, “Networks, Horizons, Centres and Hierarchies: On the Challenges of Writing on Modernism in Central Europe,” *Umění*, 69/2 (2021), pp. 145 – 162. Open Access here: [https://craace.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Umeni\\_2\\_21-Rampley.pdf](https://craace.com/wp-content/uploads/2022/01/Umeni_2_21-Rampley.pdf)

There is little doubt that Central European artists, like artists elsewhere, would often look to Paris as the “centre” of modern art. However, as Elkins pointed out in his critique of Mansbach’s treatment of Central European art as a form of “belated/derivative” modernism, this influence was not simply uni-directional. A productive idea that can help accommodate both Western “influences” and local developments is Ernst Bloch’s notion of “the nonsimultaneity of the simultaneous”. Bloch would contend that “history is not an essence advancing linearly, in which capitalism, for instance, as the final stage, has resolved all previous stages, but is rather a polyrhythmic and multi-spatial entity with enough unmastered and as yet by no means revealed and resolved corners”.<sup>16</sup> The influence of Parisian cultural developments on Hungarian artists can thus be integrated within a polyphonic narrative that constructs nationally specific art histories in reference to both local and Eurocentric canonical frameworks.

Given that the dominant periodization of art has favoured a narrative in which progress is marked by linear transitions from one modern movement to the next, elements of gradual change or continuity that would blur this teleological narrative are often erased. This approach also excludes artists that do not fit within those art historical movements that are used as periodization devices, and those who moved between different national spaces – hence, across different national narratives of art.<sup>17</sup> Just as Vasari focused on Florentine artists at the expense of non-Florentine ones, thereby excluding the latter from the canon of Renaissance art, so nationalised narratives of modernism in Central Europe develop their own exclusionary frames of periodization. As an interpretative tool that can help bridge the gap between myriad local specificities and an encompassing history of art, Bloch’s approach to periodization has the potential of broadening this system to include artists whose work does not conform to established spatial and temporal boundaries and who have thus been relegated to the margins.<sup>18</sup>

By focusing on Anna Lesznai (1885–1966), an artist whose life and work defied numerous spatial and temporal boundaries, this chapter highlights the limitations of linear and nationalised art histories and shows that the realities of

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<sup>16</sup> E. Bloch, *Erbschaft dieser Zeit, Werkausgabe* (Frankfurt, 1985), vol. IV, pp. 68–69. Translation from Schwartz, “Ernst Bloch and Wilhelm Pinder”, p. 63.

<sup>17</sup> K. Srp, “Unstable Central Europe”, in K. Srp et al. (ed), *Years of Disarray 1908–1928. Avant-gardes in Central Europe* (Olomouc, 2018), pp. 4–19.

<sup>18</sup> The relationship between avant-gardes of the centre and the periphery has been considered in a broader European context by P. Piotrowski, “Toward a Horizontal History of the European Avant-Garde”, in *Europa! Europa?: the avant-garde, modernism, and the fate of a continent*, ed. S. Bru (New York, 2009), pp. 49–58.

Central European modernism were rather more entangled than the dominant system of periodization would suggest. As will be shown, Lesznai's work in the 1910s and 1920s lends itself particularly well to the questioning and rethinking of art-historical period boundaries.

Lesznai has predominantly been classified as a pre-First World War Hungarian modernist, based on the correspondences between her biography and art-work, on the one hand, and the defining features of Hungarian modernism in the late Habsburg Empire, on the other. After 1918, however, Lesznai almost disappears from historical narratives of Central European art, even though she continued to work successfully in Vienna and rural Czechoslovakia, before returning to Hungary in 1931.<sup>19</sup> The occlusion of Lesznai's post-1918 career from art-historical scholarship is revealing. When Hungary was part of the multi-national Habsburg Empire, Lesznai's creative work could easily fit within the Hungarian narrative of art, both because she was based in Budapest and because Lesznai's references to folk culture could be read as a reflection of the Empire's multi-national character and, as such, a feature that was compatible with pre-1918 Hungarianness. However, with the nationalisation of the region after 1918, the enduring features of Lesznai's pre-1918 work and lifestyle – her cosmopolitanism and the rootedness of her work in folk art and primitivism – would become much more difficult to reconcile with the methodological nationalism underpinning art-historical narratives in East-Central Europe. There was, moreover, another factor contributing to the erasure of post-1918 Lesznai from the history of art: the widening gap between her artistic production and that of groups more closely approximating art historians' understanding of what it meant to be avant-garde in the 1920s. In short, after 1918 Lesznai's work fell foul of both biases – methodological nationalism and teleological, progress-oriented Eurocentrism – structuring the periodization of Central European art history. By tracing how and where Lesznai's work developed after 1919 and how it was received in new local contexts, this case study will not only reframe her work as that of a truly transnational modernist whose work bridged the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, but also expose the impoverishing effects that the aforementioned biases in periodization have on art-historical knowledge. In so doing, it will build an

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<sup>19</sup> An exception to this general rule can be found in the small number of exhibition catalogues dealing with Hungarian contributions to the Hagenbund artists' association in Vienna. These catalogues mention Lesznai in brief biographical sketches. A. Husslein-Arco, M. Boeckl and H. Krejci (eds), *Hagenbund. Ein europäisches Netzwerk der Moderne 1900–1938* (Vienna, 2014); É. Bajkay et al. (eds), *6 Ungarn im Hagenbund: Béni Ferenczy, Anna Lesznai, Tibor Gergely, Georg Mayer–Marton, Elza Kövesházi Kalmár, Imre Simay* (Vienna, 2015); *Kunsthandel Widder, Sammlung Chrastek – Hagenbund* (Vienna, 2019).

argument for more nuanced approaches to Central European art history – approaches which can overcome the spatial, temporal and political limitations of (existing) period boundaries. In keeping with the main questions addressed in this volume, my chapter problematises dominant models of periodization and argues that a history of art that is tied to the temporal and geographical constraints of political boundaries cannot account for developments that stretch beyond the master narratives shaped by them.

## I Anna Lesznai and the pre-war Hungarian avant-garde: period boundaries in the making

Born as Amália Moscovitz to an ennobled Hungarian-Jewish family with connections to the highest instances of government, in her early twenties Lesznai became a member of Budapest's avant-garde. In 1908, after a sheltered upbringing at the rural family estate in Körtvélyes, Upper Hungary (currently Nižný Hrušov, Slovakia; part of Czechoslovakia, between 1919 and 1992), a short-lived marriage and a sojourn in Paris, where she studied painting, Lesznai, aged 23 and a divorced mother-of-one, became a regular contributor to *Nyugat* ("West", 1908–1941), a literary magazine that published progressive poetry and prose. Lesznai's breakthrough as a visual artist and designer would come three years later, in 1911, when she was invited to exhibit her work alongside the avant-garde group of painters, A Nyolcak ("The Eight").

By creating a new visual language that built on artistic forms developed in France, A Nyolcak paved the way for the establishment of modern art in Hungary.<sup>20</sup> While Lesznai's contributions to the group's 1911 exhibition – a range of colourful embroidery designs – differed significantly from the French-inspired paintings of her peers, her participation in this widely received show nonetheless catapulted her into the ranks of the Hungarian avant-garde.<sup>21</sup> Her position in the avant-garde would be further solidified through her subsequent membership in the Sunday Circle, officially founded in 1915.<sup>22</sup> Led by György Lukács and Béla Balázs, the Sunday Circle was a group of young and progressively-minded intellectu-

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**20** The group was formed in 1906 by Károly Kernstok, Béla Czóbel, Róbert Berény, Ödön Márffy, Lajos Tihanyi, Dezső Orbán, Bertalan Pór and Dezső Czigány. G. Barki and Cs. Markója, *The Eight: Róbert Berény, Dezső Czigány, Béla Czóbel, Károly Kernstok, Ödön Márffy, Dezső Orbán, Bertalan Pór, Lajos Tihanyi* (Pécs, 2010).

**21** G. Barki and Z. Rockenbauer, "A Nyolcak auf dem Vormarsch", in E. Benesch et al. (eds), *Die Acht: Ungarns Highway in die Moderne* (Berlin, 2012), p. 77.

**22** M. Gluck, *Georg Lukács and his generation, 1900–1918* (Cambridge MA, 2011), pp. 13–23.



als that met weekly in Balázs's Budapest apartment to discuss literature and philosophical ideas. Like Lesznai, several of its other members, who included the sociologist Karl Mannheim and the psychoanalyst Juliska Láng, came from assimilated Jewish families. Feeling alienated by the conservatism of the local intelligentsia, these progressive young intellectuals would use the Sunday Circle as a space for discussion and to engage with new ideas about society.<sup>23</sup>

Moving between the Sunday Circle, A Nyolcak and *Nyugat*, Lesznai was closely involved with central representatives of Hungarian modernism in the late Habsburg Empire. Unsurprisingly, therefore, her creative output displayed many commonalities with some of the prevalent trends of the time. Lesznai belonged to a generation of Hungarian modernists deeply concerned with human isolation in the modern environment. In an undated diary entry, she stated: "The inhumanity of individualistic, capitalist society [...] stems from the fact that its individual members are solitary atoms whose vital relationships are not with other men, nor with nature, but with abstract institutions".<sup>24</sup> As a possible solution to modern isolation, the Sunday Circle celebrated notions of innocence and truth as natural and "authentic" states of being, which they found in the writings of Dostoyevsky, for example. They also placed particular importance on fairy tales, folk tales and dreams as means through which modern atomisation could be transcended. In her own writing, of which the best-known example is the children's book *The Journey of the Little Butterfly in Fairyland* (1912), which she also illustrated (Fig. 2), Lesznai was particularly drawn to fairy tales, seeing them as visions for the harmonious coexistence between all human beings and the natural environment.<sup>25</sup>

A sense of uprootedness was central to the concerns of the Sunday Circle, and has often been associated with its members' position as assimilated Jews.<sup>26</sup> Lesznai herself referred to "nervousness and insecurity" as the condition of the assimilated "cultural Jew".<sup>27</sup> For Lesznai, this feeling of uprootedness was intensified by her juggling of multiple social roles and identities – those of a

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<sup>23</sup> E. Gantner, "The New Type of Internationalist. The Case of Béla Balázs", in F. Laczó and J. von Puttkamer (eds), *Catastrophe and Utopia: Jewish Intellectuals in Central and Eastern Europe in the 1930s and 1940s* (Oldenbourg, 2018), pp. 91–93.

<sup>24</sup> Undated diary entry by Lesznai in Gluck, *Georg Lukács and his Generation*, p. 25.

<sup>25</sup> Lesznai in Gluck, *Georg Lukács and his Generation*, p. 26. For selected writings see A. Lesznai, *Wahre Märchen aus dem Garten Eden*, trans. A. Hecker and I. Russy (Berlin, 2008).

<sup>26</sup> Gluck, *Georg Lukács and his Generation*; Laczó and Puttkamer, *Catastrophe and Utopia*; T. Sandqvist, *Ahasuerus at the Easel* (Frankfurt, 2014).

<sup>27</sup> Anna Lesznai's response to a 1917 survey about perceptions of "Jewishness" in *Huszadik Szaszad*, p. 104; translation in Gantner, "The New Type of Internationalist", p. 99.



**Fig. 2:** Anna Lesznai, illustration for *The Journey of the Little Butterfly in Fairyland*, 1913, ink on paper. © Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2022.

Hungarian, a Jew, an aristocrat disconnected from the rural (Slovak) population of her beloved estate, a city dweller, and, finally, a woman constantly defying conventions in a society of strict etiquette and hierarchy. As a result, the quest for a place of belonging became a dominant theme in her creative work. In this context, Lesznai also developed an understanding of folk art and fairy tales as conceptual models for an ideal world in which humans would harmoniously live alongside each other in a natural environment. Thus, in *Nyugat* (1918) she would write:

In the *mese* [fairy tale], in this beautiful state of each being next to the other, all things are on one plane. The *mese* is an ornamentally one-dimensional image, identical with the reality of the soul undifferentiated from itself. Ancient oneness: the dissolution of all things into an unbounded totality. The reality of the soul: the unbounded transcendent realm of the soul. These two magic expressions, which reveal the garden of Eden of the *mese*, at one time overlapped. Today, the existence of the *mese* beyond time and natural reality, its symbolic form that puts the past and the future into play, restores the connection between these long-ruptured categories.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>28</sup> A. Lesznai, “Babonás észrevételek a mese és a tragédia lélektanához”, *Nyugat*, 11/13 (1918), p. 6; translation in F. Stewart, “‘In the Beginning was the Garden’: Anna Lesznai and Hungarian Modernism, 1906–1919” (PhD Dissertation, York University, 2011), p. 240.

In her practice as a visual artist, Lesznai's embroidery, illustration and painting work translated this philosophy of universal harmony with close reference to folk art practices. Drawing inspiration from peasant art, folk culture and rural life, Lesznai remodelled these sources in line with her theoretical writing as utopian visions for a harmonious future.<sup>29</sup>

This reliance on folk motifs connected Lesznai's work to some of the dominant trends in Hungarian art and design in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Folk culture first became important to Central European art in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, when the rise of nationalist movements invigorated a nostalgic quest for national origins in myths, fairy tales and folk songs.<sup>30</sup> By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the cultural, social and economic reform ideas of the British Arts and Crafts Movement had found a positive reception across the region. In Hungary, folk art practices, designs, and themes were most prominently synthesised and redeveloped by the founders of the Gödöllő workshops, Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch and Sándor Nagy.<sup>31</sup> Owing to a widespread desire for the preservation of traditional craftsmanship and establishment of a "national art", folk art and culture grew not just in popularity, but also in political importance at the turn of the century.<sup>32</sup>

Having first learned needlework from her mother, as was usual in a noble household, Lesznai swapped the "Persian and oriental" patterns of her childhood for those that peasant women produced in the surrounding village of Lesná.<sup>33</sup> Taught by the women of Lesná, where no particular embroidery tradition dominated, Lesznai learned to recreate a range of embroidery techniques and patterns from different regions of Hungary. On this basis, she would eventually develop her own designs based on abstracted patterns, contrasting outlines and a mixture of different stitching techniques.<sup>34</sup> Highly popular, these "Lesznai

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29 A. Lesznai, "Embroidery", Talk given in the Needleworker's Club in Boston, 1940 (Archives of the Petőfi Literature Museum, Budapest); A. Lesznai, "Lecture Mdme Lesznai" (Archives of the Petőfi Literary Museum, Budapest).

30 N. Gordon Bowe, *Art and the National Dream. The Search for Vernacular Expression in Turn-of-the-Century Design* (Dublin, 1992).

31 K. Keserü, "The Workshops of Gödöllő: Transformations of a Morrisian Theme", *Journal of Design History*, 1/1 (1988), pp. 1–23.

32 K. Gellér, "Romantic Elements in Hungarian Art Nouveau", in *Art and the national dream*, pp. 117–126; K. Keserü, "Vernacularism and its special characteristics in Hungarian Art", in *Art and the national dream*, pp. 127–142; J. Lukacs, *Budapest 1900. A historical portrait of a city and its culture* (New York, 1988); J. Szabadi, *Art Nouveau in Hungary. Painting, Sculpture and the Graphic Arts* (Budapest, 1989).

33 Lesznai in S. Swartz, "Mme. Lesznai Describes Hungarian Peasant Arts", *Wellseley College News* (23 Nov. 1939), p. 5. Lesznai also took on the village name to show her affiliation with it.

34 Stewart, "In the Beginning was the Garden", p. 115.

designs” were passed on to the embroidery workshop that Lesznai established in 1912 in order to meet rising demand. In this workshop, peasant women from around the family estate would create sought-after artisanal products based on Lesznai’s designs.<sup>35</sup>

Although her work was closely aligned with dominant cultural trends in terms of both style design and manufacturing process, Lesznai had no interest in using folk culture for the construction of a national art. On the contrary, she would object to such instrumentalizations of folk culture, declaring: “I find it one of the grossest falsifications to use peasant art as a weapon of national division and particularism”.<sup>36</sup> Nonetheless, Lesznai’s work was interpreted through a national lens. Writing in the German craft journal *Stickerei-Zeitung und Spitzenrevue*, the art critic and writer Anton Jaumann noted that: “the spirit, the tradition of the Hungarian needleworker, is awake in her consciousness [...] she does not invent and create ‘for’ a people, but is instead herself a living, particularly vital part of the people’s body, whose dreams she dreams, whose formal gaze reawakens in her as an art”.<sup>37</sup> Similar assessments of Lesznai’s craftwork as “savouring [...] the national”, to use the words of British crafts writer Amalia Levetus, offer further evidence of how the correspondences between Lesznai’s work and the dominant trend of folk design caused the former to be interpreted as a visual manifestation of the neo-Romantic national movements of the late Habsburg Empire.<sup>38</sup> Yet, for Lesznai, it was a quest for universal harmony – rather than any nationalist ideology – that her work gave expression to. Nevertheless, the prevailing interpretation of Lesznai’s work is revealing of how, at the time, her work still *appeared* synchronous to the period of national emancipation in Hungarian art, even though her desire to create a “universal” – as opposed to “national” – art already indicated its incongruity with a predominantly nation-oriented narrative.

Lesznai’s positioning as a pre-war Hungarian modernist in subsequent art-historical narratives is often based on her acquaintance with the leading figures of Hungarian modernism, and the fact that she moved within its central networks and produced artwork that resonated with some of the most important ar-

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35 Stewart, “In the Beginning was the Garden”, p. 309.

36 Lesznai, “Embroidery”, p. 7.

37 A. Jaumann, “Neu-Ungarische Bunt-Stickereien von Anna Lesznai – Budapest”, *Stickerei-Zeitung und Spitzenrevue* (Dec. 1912), p. 76.

38 A. Levetus, “Hungarian Architecture and Decoration”, *The Studio Yearbook of Decorative Art* (London, 1914), p. 217.

tistic concerns of the time.<sup>39</sup> Indeed, it is precisely on this pre-1919 Hungarian period that most of the scholarship on Lesznai's craftsmanship and writing has focused. In synoptic works on Hungarian art, such as *The History of Hungarian Art in the 20th Century* (1999), Lesznai only features in the context of the early Hungarian avant-garde where her "decorative folk-style embroideries" are invoked, while her later art tends to be omitted.<sup>40</sup> Similarly, in her seminal work on Hungarian Art Nouveau, Judit Szabadi has characterised Lesznai's visual and graphic work as "a late Hungarian offshoot of the universal Art Nouveau style", thereby confining her production to the first two decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In their influential exhibition catalogue on A Nyolcak, Gergely Barki and Csilla Markója also claimed that "in the first half of the 1910s, Lesznai's design work was at its peak".<sup>41</sup> Even exhibition catalogues that consider Lesznai's work within a broader timeframe, such as *Hagenbund: an international network of modernity 1900–1938* (2014), largely focus on her stylistic development before 1918 or, as in the case of *6 Hungarians in the Hagenbund* (2015), privilege biographical information over a critical assessment of the artist's creative production.<sup>42</sup> As was recently pointed out by Anna Menyhért (2020), this frequent conflation of Lesznai's creative work with her biography has favoured surface-level analyses instead of a more thorough engagement with her multi-faceted visual work.<sup>43</sup> There are few exceptions to this general rule. One of them is a recent analysis by design historian Rebecca Houze of the role of embroidered textiles in Lesznai's work as a "model for stitching together a meaningful identity".<sup>44</sup> Another, which in turn treats Lesznai's work as a *Gesamtkunstwerk*, is a study in cultural history by Fiona Stewart (2011), which emphasises multi-modality as the key to understanding the artist's practice of working "without boundaries". Stewart's focus, however, is limited – once again – to Lesznai's formative years in pre-1919 Hungary.<sup>45</sup> While Stewart acknowledges that "the work of Lesznai [...] is well-positioned to question the polar opposition established by modernist schol-

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39 Lesznai's first biography was published by Erzsébet Vezér in 1979, based on conversations with the artist. E. Vezér, *Lesznai Anna élete*, (Budapest, 1979). The artist also published a semi-autobiographical novel in 1966. A. Lesznai, *Kezdetben volt a kert* (Budapest, 1966).

40 G. András et al., *The History of Hungarian Art in 20th Century* (Budapest, 1999), p. 48.

41 Szabadi, *Art Nouveau in Hungary*, p. 51. Barki and Markója, *The Eight*, p. 482.

42 Husslein-Arco et al., *Hagenbund*; É. Bajkay et al., *6 Ungarn im Hagenbund*.

43 A. Menyhért, *Women's Literary Tradition and Twentieth-Century Hungarian Writers* (Leiden, 2020), p. 232.

44 R. Houze, "The Art and Design of Anna Lesznai: Adaptation and Transformation", in E. Shapira (ed), *Designing Transformation. Jews and Cultural Identity in Central European Modernism*, (London, 2021), p. 174.

45 Stewart, "In the Beginning was the Garden", p. 289.

arship between ‘modern’ and ‘traditional’ ideologies and practices”, her confinement of Lesznai to the 1906–1919 timeframe de facto reaffirms the reductionist framing of the artist as a Habsburg-era Hungarian modernist.<sup>46</sup>

In reality, Lesznai’s career did not end in 1919. What is more, though the political rupture caused by the Empire’s collapse did generate important changes in Lesznai’s life, it did not result in significant discontinuity in the character of her artistic production. Nevertheless, Lesznai’s lifestyle and art came to lose their “synchronicity” with the dominant art-historical narratives for the post-1918 period. On the one hand, as we will see, the political events of 1918–1919 forced Lesznai to leave Hungary for Austria and Czechoslovakia – countries that had once fallen within the same geopolitical space as Hungary, but that after 1918 would be walled off from it by new national borders and the separate, nationally oriented art-historical narratives these engendered. On the other hand, the political changes of 1918–1919 also marked the end of “pre-war Hungarian modernism” in the dominant narrative of Hungarian art history, which was instead propelled into new directions. The resulting incongruity between Lesznai’s post-1919 production and lifestyle, on the one hand, and the vectorality of nationalised art histories, on the other, would cause the former to appear anachronous and, thus, also to fall into oblivion.

## II National boundaries and artistic continuities

The rupture that put an end to the period of “pre-war Hungarian modernism” in the dominant art-historical narrative is inseparable from the political changes triggered by the collapse of the Habsburg Empire. On 16 November 1918, Mihály Károlyi became the first president of a democratic Hungary following the abdication of Emperor Charles I.<sup>47</sup> For a few months, Oszkár Jászi – Lesznai’s husband at the time – served as Minister of Nationalities and as Károlyi’s Adviser of Foreign Affairs. In March 1919 he would be forced into exile in Vienna after the communist Béla Kun toppled Károlyi’s government and declared Hungary a Soviet-style Republic of Councils.<sup>48</sup> Unlike her husband, Lesznai remained in Hungary. Though Lesznai would later insist on “how apolitical” most of the Sunday Circle had been during this period, several figures associated with the group

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<sup>46</sup> Stewart, “In the Beginning was the Garden”, p. 20.

<sup>47</sup> P. Sugar, P. Hanák and T. Frank, *A History of Hungary* (Bloomington, 1994), p. 298.

<sup>48</sup> Gy. Litván, *A Twentieth-century Prophet: Oszkár Jászi, 1875–1957* (New York, 2006), pp. 186–188.

did in fact serve in Kun's government.<sup>49</sup> Amongst the most prominent appointments, György Lukács became Minister of Culture and Béla Balázs People's Commissar for Education and Folk Culture. Lesznai too entered the government's service. Thanks to her and Balázs's previous work on the social functions of fairy tales, she would be appointed as a specialist on fairy tales in the Ministry of Education, a position instated by Lukács in the hope that compulsory fairy tale afternoons would promote people's harmonious co-existence.<sup>50</sup>

After one hundred days of increasingly radical communist rule, the Kun government was overthrown and replaced by a new reactionary regime led by Miklós Horthy. A former admiral in the Habsburg navy, Horthy re-established the Kingdom of Hungary (1919–1946), installing himself as its governor. Having taken an active part in the Republic of Councils, Lesznai was forced by the new threat of counter-revolutionary terror to go into exile, alongside many of her peers.<sup>51</sup> Initially, exile took her to a familiar place: the family estate in Körtvélyes, which had become Nižný Hrušov after the transfer of Upper Hungary (now Slovakia), where the estate was located, to the new, post-1918 Czechoslovak Republic. Soon after fleeing Hungary, Lesznai, who was at least initially able to hold on to the family wealth, also bought a house in the Viennese suburb of Mauer; for the next decade, she would split her time between the Austrian capital and Nižný Hrušov.<sup>52</sup>

Lesznai's departure from Budapest coincided with the standard caesura in Hungarian art history, signalling an end to the period characterised by A Nyolcak, the folk-art revival and the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the onset of a period of avant-gardes, defined by radical artistic responses to radically new socio-political circumstances.<sup>53</sup> In the Hungarian narrative, this shift would be epitomised by the group gathered around Lajos Kassák and his avant-garde magazine *MA* ("Today", 1916–1926).<sup>54</sup>

Having briefly supported the Republic of Councils (not for long due to a fall-out with Kun), Kassák too was forced to flee Horthy's counter-revolution, going

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<sup>49</sup> Gluck, *Georg Lukács and his Generation*, p. 24.

<sup>50</sup> Stewart, "In the Beginning was the Garden", p. 291.

<sup>51</sup> É. Forgács and T. Miller, "The Avant-Garde in Budapest and in Exile in Vienna", in P. Brooker et al. (eds), *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, vol. III: *Europe, 1880–1940* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 1128–1156.

<sup>52</sup> É. Forgács and T. Miller, "The Avant-Garde in Budapest and in Exile in Vienna", in P. Brooker et al. (eds), *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines*, vol. III: *Europe, 1880–1940* (Oxford, 2013), pp. 1128–1156.

<sup>53</sup> S. Edwards and P. Wood (eds), *Art of the Avant-Gardes* (Yale, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Forgács and Miller, "The Avant-Garde in Budapest", pp. 1128–1156.

into exile in Vienna. Here, he resumed the publication of *MA*, using it as a platform to establish contacts with other avant-garde groups across the continent, in the name of an “internationalism and collectivism” that could counter the “nationalist and individualist host societies” of their exile and their place of origin.<sup>55</sup> In Hungary, meanwhile, conservative artistic tendencies represented by groups such as the “School of Rome” began to dominate the cultural scene, particularly in the first years of the Horthy regime.<sup>56</sup> Given the conservative turn in Hungary itself and the emigration of many cultural figures, the teleological narrative of Hungarian modernism at this point follows its protagonists into exile, relocating outside the country’s political borders.

The Kassák circle represented only a fraction of the diverse Vienna-based Hungarian artistic diaspora. However, as the group that could most successfully claim for itself the mantle of the Hungarian avant-garde, it has been considerably overrepresented in art-historical scholarship. This is entirely in keeping with the disciplinary tendency to treat the most “progressive” artistic group in a given period as the bearer of a given nation’s art history. In other words, if the Kassák circle has eclipsed other artistic movements in the dominant narrative, this was thanks to its mastery of the specific forms and rhetoric associated with the artistic avant-garde. In an art-historical periodization scheme favouring progress and continuous renewal, the Kassák circle’s belligerence towards the traditional art world and demands for a breaking down of boundaries between art, society and popular culture won it centre stage, transforming it into a standard for Hungarian art of this particular period. Occluded in this master narrative, however, is the way modernism continued to evolve in a distinctly pluralist manner, with each of its currents evolving differently and at different speeds.

One illustration of this plurality can be found in the post-1919 artistic career of Anna Lesznai who continued to build a visual identity based on references to folk motifs and rural culture. Far from signalling a caesura in her artistic style or prompting her to adopt the rupture- and novelty-oriented self-image of the avant-garde, the tumultuous events of 1918–1919 left no dramatic mark on Lesznai’s work.<sup>57</sup> This is not to say that her art remained static or unresponsive to new ar-

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<sup>55</sup> Forgács, *Hungarian Art*, p. 112.

<sup>56</sup> J. P. Szűcs, “A ‘Modern’ Official Art: The School of Rome”, in *A Reader in East–Central European Modernism*, Chapter 20.

<sup>57</sup> E. Balázs, “MA and the Rupture of the Avant-garde 1917–18: Reconstructing Aesthetic and Political Conflict in Hungary and the Role of Periodical Culture”, *Journal of European Periodical Studies*, 3/1 (2018), pp. 49–66; B. Hjartarson, “Myths of Rupture. The Manifesto and the Concept of Avant-Garde”, in Á. Eysteinnsson and V. Liska (eds), *Modernism* (Amsterdam/ Philadelphia, 2007), pp. 173–194.



tistic trends. After 1919, Lesznai redeveloped the ornamental patterns that she had used in her embroidery as the basis for watercolour and gouache depictions of village life around Nižný Hrušov. These depictions relied on formal abstraction and colour to forge a sense of order and harmony. Thus, whilst a painting like *Sunday* (1930, fig. 3) seemed tumultuous at first, each part of the image was in fact ordered through the clustering of similar forms. Lesznai achieved this effect by adopting a collapsed perspective, leading to a flattened picture plane that accentuated the image's "naïve" style.<sup>58</sup> In her decision to revisit earlier motif choices whilst subjecting them to gentle formal adjustments, Lesznai responded to the growing fashion for abstraction without foregoing earlier elements in her work. From the perspective of a historical narrative associating 1918 with a radical artistic rupture, Lesznai's continued adherence to quaint figurative forms certainly may appear anachronistic. Without the blinkering effects of such a narrative, however, it becomes apparent that through her reliance on folk themes Lesznai developed an alternative sense of artistic progress, in which formal changes and stylistic transformations took place as a slow, continuous process.

Thus, in Lesznai's watercolours, all kinds of stylistic or formal change were introduced gently and in harmony with previous motifs. As a result, Lesznai's oeuvre retained its underlying continuity, even as it proved itself capable of responding to changes in her environment. For instance, owing to Lesznai's frequent walks through Schönbrunn Zoo, the floral motifs of her early embroidery gave way to watercolours populated by exotic, fantastic animals, but in style these watercolours reproduced many of her embroidery's features. The most emblematic example of this mixture of innovation and continuity is *Animal Fantasy*, a watercolour from the 1920s (fig. 4), which shows a plethora of animals stitched together on the image plane as if in an elaborate piece of embroidery. While the animals are shown alongside each other on a flattened plane and without any hierarchy, each species is given its own space, delineated by individual backdrops. As they became more playful and surreal, Lesznai's motifs maintained "th[e] beautiful state of each being next to the other, all things [being] on one plane" of her pre-war embroidery and painting, and its resulting vision of natural harmony.<sup>59</sup>

Yet while Lesznai's shift to watercolour painting and abstract figures was in line with new artistic trends, her persistent reliance on folk motifs would rather complicate her position in the art-historical narratives of post-1918 Central Eu-

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58 P. Török, "Anna Lesznai und Tibor Gergely in Wien und im Hagenbund", in *6 Ungarn im Hagenbund*, p. 49.

59 Lesznai, "Babonás észrevételek", p. 6.



**Fig. 3:** Anna Lesznai, *Sunday*, 1930, watercolour on paper. © Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2022.

rope. For a start, the Hungarian émigré artist's continued references to the folk culture of a region (the Slovak countryside around Nižný Hrušov) that now lay outside both her nation of origin (Hungary) and the city of her exile (Vienna) confounded easy national classification. In the new Central Europe of nation-states, understandings of which art “belonged” to which nation had to be negotiated anew. In Lesznai's case, matters were further complicated by the fact that her ornamental treatment of the Slovak countryside was out of step with efforts to use the countryside as a resource in the construction of new national identities.<sup>60</sup> And in a further complication for Lesznai's place in the post-1918 art-historical canon, the folk motifs that she relied upon were incongruous with the thematic predilections of internationally oriented, post-1918 avant-gardes whose art generally betrayed an obsession with technology and modern life.

Fitting neither a specific national framework nor that of the international avant-garde, Lesznai's work sits uncomfortably within the art history of post-Habsburg Central Europe – as if it had moved outside outside its “original” period. Lesznai's ornamental images of rural life could easily be seen as the relic of

<sup>60</sup> A. Hrabušický, K. Bajcurová and A. Kusej, *Slovenský mýtus* (Bratislava, 2005).



Fig. 4: Anna Lesznai, *Animal Fantasy*, 1920s. © Collection Peter Chrastek, Vienna.

a bygone era, and Lesznai herself as a “belated modernist” who clung onto ossified forms. However, as will be shown in the following section, it is possible to detect a more “synchronous” side to Lesznai’s work in the post-1918 period – something that has been obscured by teleological art-historical accounts blinkered by periodization norms. In particular, it will be argued that Lesznai’s apparent “belatedness” proves difficult to reconcile with her active involvement,

and positive reception, in the Viennese cultural life of the 1920s – a contradiction that will help uncover some of the limitations of set periods in art history.

## I Lesznai and Austrian modernism: inclusion

Even though Lesznai lived and exhibited in Vienna for little over a decade, few other women artists active in the city during the 1920s encountered such a consistently positive reception. In the mid-1920s, Lesznai became associated with the Hagenbund artists' association<sup>61</sup> and the Wiener Frauenkunst,<sup>62</sup> enabling her to move in Vienna's most forward-looking and open artistic circles. Lesznai also regularly exhibited craftwork and watercolours in renowned galleries and at Hagenbund and Wiener Frauenkunst exhibitions; designed costumes for the local Yiddish theatre group *Di Gildene Pawe*; as well as writing and illustrating poetry, fairy tales and children's stories in Hungarian and German.<sup>63</sup> Actively involved in Vienna's cultural life, Lesznai built connections with various local cultural figures: for example, she would regularly engage in literary discussions with the writers Maria Lazar and Heimito von Doderer, while Frauenkunst member Frieda Salvendy and Hagenbund Vice-President George Mayr-Marton were habitual guests at her house.<sup>64</sup> Mirroring her involvement in pre-1918 Budapest's cultural scene, Lesznai's engagement in the cultural life of post-1918 Vienna is indicative of her continued proximity to the modern artistic milieu, even though

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**61** The Hagenbund, a progressive exhibition society founded in 1899 in protest at the conservatism of the Vienna academy, was to become Vienna's most prominent artists' association after 1918. Peter Chrastek et al., *Expressionism, New Objectivity and Prohibition – Hagenbund and Its Artists* (Vienna, 2016); Husslein-Aco et al., *Hagenbund. Ein europäisches Netzwerk der Moderne 1900–1938* (Vienna, 2014).

**62** An association of women artists, Wiener Frauenkunst was, in the words of Megan Brandow-Faller, a “radical offshoot” of the moderate Austrian Association of Women Artists. Founded in 1926, the Wiener Frauenkunst “espoused the notion of an aesthetically distinct women's art and equality of the fine and applied arts” whilst taking a decidedly progressive stance towards modern art and women's emancipation. M. Brandow-Faller, “Tenuous Mitschwester: The Mobilization of Vienna's Women Artists and the Interwar Splintering of Austrian Frauenkunst”, *Austrian Studies*, 21 (2013), p. 149.

**63** R. Lackner, “Für die lange Revolution! Die Vereinigung Bildender Künstlerinnen Österreichs 1910–1985 und der Verband Bildender Künstlerinnen und Kunsthandwerkerinnen Wiener Frauenkunst 1926–1938/1946–1956. Eine Re-/Konstruktion” (PhD Dissertation, University of Vienna, 2017); K. Jesse, “‘Außerordentliche Frauen’ im Hagenbund. Künstlerinnen und ihre Netzwerke”, in *Hagenbund*, p. 362; “‘Der goldene Pfau’ Premiere bei der ‘Güldenene Pawe’”, *Die Stunde* (10 Jan. 1925), p. 6.

**64** É. Bajkay, “Ungarn im Hagenbund, Hagenbund in Ungarn”, in *Hagenbund*, p. 320.

this engagement with modern art occurred in a different city which, as will be shown, developed its own narratives of modernism.

By the mid-1920s, Lesznai began to exhibit more regularly in the Austrian capital. In 1925, she even participated in the summer group exhibition of Vienna's Neue Galerie. Although only two years had past since its foundation in 1923, this gallery had already showcased some of Vienna's most revered pre-war artists, including Egon Schiele and Oskar Kokoschka.<sup>65</sup> Here, Lesznai exhibited together with artists such as Anton Faistauer and the young Otto Rudolf Schatz, who would be awarded the Great Austrian State Prize the same year. Participating in this exhibition, therefore, allowed Lesznai to show her work – more than sixty in total, including craft objects and a number of sketches and watercolours – alongside established artists.<sup>66</sup>

The elements of folk culture in Lesznai's work would be received positively by the press:

Particularly interesting are the craft objects of Anna Lesznay [sic], who lifts Ruthenian folk art objects into the realm of fine art. Her embroideries, drafts for book ornamentation, wooden objects etc. all have a sense of the original, the personal, that which one seeks in vain in the "artistic" crafts of our women. Her works are the opposite of kitsch, because they are simple, authentic and always comply with their original purpose.<sup>67</sup>

With her abundantly rich, naturally naïve and visionary intellectual personality, Mrs Lesznai possesses the unlimited talent to express herself fully and to successfully convey both the folkishly simple and artistically conscious.<sup>68</sup>

As forms brought to life with a true reliance on childish fantasy, [Lesznai's work] could only spring from the soul of tirelessly overflowing motherly love and could only be created by the hand of a real artist.<sup>69</sup>

These positive reviews show not only that Lesznai's work was seen as modern, feminine and authentic, but also that it aligned with contemporary trends in Austrian art. To explore this further, it is necessary to take a closer look at the cultural framework implied by the reference to "Ruthenian" craftwork and folk art, as well as its significance in the Austrian context.

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65 C. Tessmar, *Neue Galerie: Otto Nirensteins Erfindung der Moderne* (Vienna, 2007), pp. 3–7.

66 "18. Ausstellung Faistauer – Probst – Schatz – Seeland – Lesznai 1925", Archive material Galerie Belvedere, exhibition correspondence 595/1–6.

67 F.k. "Neue Galerie (Sommerausstellung)", *Der Tag* (24 June 1925), p. 8.

68 "Aquarelle der Anna Lesznai", *Die Stunde* (9 Jan. 1926), p. 8.

69 L. Berényi, "Das Kind. Eine Ausstellung, die man sehen muss", *Die Bühne*, 62 (1926), p. 61.

Located in the far eastern corner of post-1918 Czechoslovakia, not far from Lesznai's estate, Subcarpathian Ruthenia was by far the least developed part of interwar Czechoslovakia, a deeply rural frontier region which had become a sought-after travel destination for artists, ethnologists and writers.<sup>70</sup> While the romanticisation of Ruthenian peasant culture had its greatest resonance in the new Czechoslovak state, evocations of this former Austro-Hungarian hinterland comparing it to a "jungle and medieval age", to quote one journalist, would also be plentiful in the Viennese press.<sup>71</sup> Invariably, the region was presented as wild and poor, yet also idyllic, and unique in its ethnic and religious multiplicity – in other words, as a remnant of some otherworldly "authenticity" that had been lost in the modern world. Whilst most strongly linked to the ideas of the Arts and Crafts Movement with which Lesznai's pre-war work had dovetailed, this yearning for a lost rural arcadia was also deeply embedded in the culture of interwar Austria, where it was closely bound up with the pursuit of new sources of artistic inspiration.<sup>72</sup>

While the turn towards the countryside has generally been associated with the conservative *Heimat* movement, in reality it encompassed a much broader and politically varied range of tendencies and was seen, particularly in Austria, as part of a wider regeneration process.<sup>73</sup> 1918 had seen not only the collapse of the Habsburg Empire, but also the demise of some of Vienna's most celebrated artists and designers, including Egon Schiele, Gustav Klimt, Koloman Moser and Otto Wagner. Pitted against this general decline, and the new Austrian Republic's struggle with economic collapse and political instability, the decadent culture of "Vienna 1900" would soon be perceived in nostalgic terms as a lost era of plenty.<sup>74</sup> Connectedly, artists began to look for sources of cultural rejuvenation. While many found a solution by moving to other cities, particularly Paris and Berlin, others remained in Austria and found inspiration in peasant art and the provinces. Anton Faistauer, who exhibited alongside Lesznai in 1925, went

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70 A. Hrabušický, "A quiet celebration of Slovakia", in A. Hrabušický and V. Macek (eds), *Slovak Photography 1925–2000* (Bratislava, 2001), p. 17.

71 H. Margulies, "Reise durch Urwald und Mittelalter", *Der Tag* (7 Feb.1932), p. 6.

72 G. Barth-Scalmani, H.J.W. Kuprian and B. Mazohl-Wallnig, "National Identity or Regional Identity: Austria versus Tyrol/Salzburg", in G. Bischof and A. Pelinka (eds), *Austrian Historical Memory and National Identity* (New York, 2018 [1997]), p. 33.

73 W. Kos (ed), *Kampf um die Stadt. Politik, Kunst und Alltag um 1930* (Vienna, 2010), pp. 98–137.

74 A. Kożuchowski, *The Afterlife of Austria-Hungary. The Image of the Habsburg Monarchy in interwar Europe* (Pittsburgh, 2013); W. Kos and C. Rapp (eds), *Alt-Wien. Die Stadt, die niemals war* (Vienna, 2004).

so far as claiming that the only productive form of cultural renewal was that which linked all forms of cultural production to local contexts.<sup>75</sup> Indeed, some Austrian scholars have even suggested that in the interwar period regionalism replaced Austrian national identity altogether, as a kind of reaction against the imperial identity that had dominated among German-speaking Austrians in the decades before the First World War.<sup>76</sup>

Thus, even before the rise of Austro-fascism and National Socialism, regionalism and folk art represented significant aspects of post-Habsburg Austrian culture. In conventional periodizations of modern art in the region, this focus on the rural has been interpreted as a sign of the general “belatedness” and non-synchronicity of post-1918 Austrian art: lacking an avant-garde that would fit the normative demands of the art-historical canon, post-Habsburg Austrian art is still, by and large, portrayed as a kind of “post scriptum” to the glorious years of Vienna 1900, as shown by exhibition catalogues such as *The Lost Austrians 1918–1938*, *Lost Modernity* and *Uncertain Hope: Austrian Painting and Graphic Design, 1918–1938*.<sup>77</sup> Despite recent attempts to establish the Viennese Kineticists (gathered around Franz Čížek at the Viennese School of Applied Arts) as the “Austrian avant-garde”, the absence of groups identifying themselves with the international avant-garde, like the Kassák group in the Hungarian context, has made Austrian art an awkward fit for the broader canonical narrative of European art, often leading to its exclusion.<sup>78</sup>

At the same time, the reason why Lesznai was so well-received in Vienna in the 1920s, while seeming out of sync with developments in Hungarian art, was precisely that her reliance on folk culture and rural motifs chimed with a local regionalist quest for the “authentic”. Lauded as an artist of “limitless talent” who could translate “folk art into the realm of fine art”, Lesznai was not so much an epigone from a past epoch as an artist whose work responded to artistic developments in her immediate environment.<sup>79</sup> The artist’s relocation to Vienna after 1919 had simply placed her in a “new” national art history – an art history

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75 A. Faistauer, *Neue Malerei in Österreich. Betrachtungen eines Malers* (Vienna, 1923), p. 5.

76 Barth-Scalmani, Kuprian and Mazohl-Wallnig, “National Identity or Regional Identity”, p. 31.

77 O. Oberhuber (ed), *Die verlorenen Österreicher 1918–1938? Expression – Österreichs Beitrag zur Moderne. Eine Klärung der kulturellen Identität* (Vienna, 1982); T. Natter (ed), *Die verlorene Moderne. Der Künstlerbund Hagen 1900–1938* (Vienna, 1993); C. Bertsch and M. Neuwirth, *Die Ungewisse Hoffnung: österreichische Malerei und Graphik zwischen 1918 und 1938* (Salzburg, 1993).

78 G. Bast, *Wiener Kinetismus – eine bewegte Moderne* (Vienna, 2011).

79 “Aquarelle der Anna Lesznai”, *Die Stunde* (9 Jan. 1926), p. 8; F.K. “Neue Galerie (Sommerausstellung)”, *Der Tag* (24 June 1925), pp. 7–8.

that would subsequently fall outside the main narrative of modern art in Central Europe.<sup>80</sup>

In short, that Lesznai's work fell into oblivion, despite being attuned to the concerns of her Austrian contemporaries, is closely tied up with her relocation to Vienna – a move that involved crossing not just a spatial, but also what the dominant art-historical narrative construes as a *temporal*, boundary. Falling outside the dominant visual regimes of canonical narratives, Lesznai's work appeared to be out of sync with contemporary developments and thus deserving of marginal status. Further, Lesznai is denied a place within the post-1918 Central European canon by the region's post-Habsburg tendency to nationalise art historical developments, a practice reinforced in art-historical scholarship since 1989.<sup>81</sup> The Kasák circle, for example, is considered the *Hungarian* strand of the avant-garde, even though the group's outlook had a decidedly international focus: by representing a link to “progressive” developments at the international level, the group gained prestige within the national canon.<sup>82</sup> For Lesznai, a failure to keep up with apparent progressive norms (as defined by the canon) combined with her exile from her home country would translate into a double exclusion. As will be shown in the next section, even at the time Lesznai's full acceptance in Austria was hampered by her status as a *migrant* artist: even though her visual work fitted in with dominant trends in Austrian painting – itself marginalised as non-synchronic with broader narratives – Lesznai's Hungarian identity prevented her from full admission into the canon of Austrian art. This shows how the periodization norms governing Central European art history, informed as they are by biases towards teleological progress and methodological nationalism, can even end up excluding successful artists who kept up with contemporary trends from canonical narratives.

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**80** The marginality of post-1918 Austrian art is visible in the fact that it has been consistently omitted from most standard accounts of modern art in the region, from Mansbach's book in the 1990s to more recent publications like *Reader in East-Central-European Modernism* and *Years of Disarray*. *Beyond Klimt* represents a rare exception. Rollig and Klee, *Beyond Klimt*; Hock et al., *A Reader in East-Central-European Modernism*; Srp et al., *Years of Disarray*.

**81** J. Bakoš, “A Remark on Globalization in (East) Central Europe”, in J. Elkins, Z. Valiavicharska and A. Kim (eds), *Art and Globalization* (University Park PA, 2010), pp. 205–208; E. Andrés, “What Does East-Central European Art History Want? Reflections on the Art History Discourse in the Region since 1989”, in *Extending the Dialogue. Essays by Igor Zabel Award Laureates, Grant Recipients, and Jury Members, 2008–2014* (Berlin, Ljubljana, Vienna, 2016), pp. 52–77.

**82** This is most obvious in Gassner, *Wechselwirkungen*.



### III National art histories vs the foreign artist: exclusion

The yearning for the “rural” as a place of recovery and recovered “authenticity” was deeply embedded in post-1918 Austrian culture and constituted an important part of the quest for artistic renewal. With the biggest political and social conflicts taking place in Vienna, regional centres came to be seen as a site of rejuvenation.<sup>83</sup> This would strengthen the role of regional (as opposed to national) identities in Austrian culture, as well as invigorating artists’ attraction to the countryside as a repository of regional heritage. A recurring theme within this fascination for the rural was, as Faistauer argued in 1926, the necessity of being “at home” (*das In-der-Heimat-sein*) with one’s art – in other words, of linking all forms of culture to their regional context of production for the purpose of artistic renewal.<sup>84</sup> The search for a place of belonging – for a “home” (*Heimat*) – thus almost seamlessly converged with the pursuit of new regionalist identities. In simplified terms, *Heimat* meant the search for a safe, native place that represented a person’s or group’s authentic origins. It was a trope employed across the political spectrum.<sup>85</sup>

In pictorial representations, the idea of an “original” Austria would often be evoked through references to one region in particular – Tyrol, in Western Austria, which Hermann Bahr had described, as early as 1899, as “male, forceful and thoroughly German”.<sup>86</sup> As a place of “authenticity”, by the mid-1920s Tyrol had become not only a popular and intensely marketed tourist destination, but also a common backdrop for the canvases of numerous artists, most notably Alfons Walde, Herbert Gurschner and Albin Egger-Lienz. By combining the representation of folk culture and traditional rural life (farming communities, religious scenes and alpine landscapes) with modern artistic forms, their work represented a regional form of modernism.<sup>87</sup>

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**83** Barth-Scalmani, Kuprian and Mazohl-Wallnig, “National Identity or Regional Identity”, p. 33.

**84** A. Faistauer, “Das Fresko”, *Bau- und Werkkunst* (1926), p.20.

**85** M. Puchberger, “Heimat-Schaffen in der Großstadt. ‚Volkskultur‘ im Wien der Zwischenkriegszeit”, *Österreichische Zeitschrift für Geschichtswissenschaften*, 27/2 (2016), pp. 33–66; C. Rapp, “Schnelle Neue Alpen. Schnappschüsse der Moderne aus Österreichs Bergen”, in *Kampf um die Stadt*, pp. 123–124; H. Nikitsch, “Heimat in der Stadt. Von Trachtler, Tänzern und Proletarier”, in *Kampf um die Stadt*, pp. 137–145.

**86** H. Bahr, “Die Entdeckung der Provinz (1899)”, in C. Pias (ed), *Hermann Bahr. Kritische Schriften* (Weimar, 2010), p. 147.

**87** G. Amann (ed), *Alfons Walde* (Innsbruck, 2001); C. Thun-Hohenstein and K. Pokorny-Nagel (eds), *Franz von Zülow. Papier* (Nuremberg, 2013); R. Leopold, *Abin Egger-Lienz 1868–1926*

These images display some obvious similarities with Lesznai's watercolours and craftwork, first and foremost in their depiction of a rural world removed from modern life. Tyrol and Subcarpathian Ruthenia played analogous roles in the Austrian/Czechoslovak imaginary, as remote lands perceived by urban intelligentsias as repositories of tradition cocooned from modernity by virtue of their peripheral remoteness. In the artistic realm, such conceptions translated into a tendency to represent each region through highly stylised and composed depictions of peasant communities at their colourful best, donning folk costumes and engaged in festivities and religious celebrations. When everyday labour was depicted, it was shown in an idyllic light, eliminating any trace of the hardship endured by toiling peasants. Given the idealised nature of such depictions, it made little substantive difference whether the countryside in question was "local" (e.g. Tyrol) or "exotic" (e.g. Subcarpathian Ruthenia) and whether the artist was an outsider or a "local".

Yet, despite these visual similarities between *Heimat* art and Lesznai's depictions, the Viennese press would consistently characterise Lesznai's work as "exotic" and "timeless" – qualities reinforced by her identity as a woman with a "child-like" spirit, whose success was based on her apparent proximity to nature and primitive culture.<sup>88</sup> Who or what this "primitive culture" comprised was less clear: Lesznai's art would be interchangeably described as "Ruthenian", "oriental", "Hungarian", "Slovak" or "Slovak-Hungarian", without any further explanation.<sup>89</sup> Quite simply, for Lesznai's Viennese audience, her village scenes from eastern Czechoslovakia became schematically merged into a single eastern idyll: Oriental, colourful, half-familiar and half-unknown – a far cry from the "powerful" and "honest" qualities attributed to the Austrian regionalists. Lesznai's role in Vienna's art world was, thus, to represent the "Other" – always a foreign woman, despite the positive reception and commercial success of her work.<sup>90</sup> Even though Lesznai's regionalism was in line with the defining elements of interwar Austrian modernism, it was nonetheless perceived as distinct due to the foreignness of both the artist and her subject matter.

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(Vienna, 2008); C. Widder and R. Widder, *Herbert Gurschner. Ein Tiroler in London* (Innsbruck and Vienna, 2000).

<sup>88</sup> "Aquarelle der Anna Lesznai", p. 8.

<sup>89</sup> F.k., "Neue Galerie [Sommerausstellung]", p. 7; M.E., "Anna Lesznai-Jaszi oder die Geburt der Malerei aus dem Geist des Lebkuchens", *Der Tag* (26 Jan. 1926), p. 3; R. Harlfinger, "Die Ausstellung 'Wiener Frauenkunst'", *Die Österreicherin*, 2 (1928), p. 5; "Bilderausstellung 'Anna Lesznai'", *Die Bühne*, 60 (1925), p. 18.

<sup>90</sup> M.E., "Anna Lesznai-Jaszi", p. 3.

Lesznai's potential inclusion in the artistic canon of her second place of exile – the eastern Czechoslovak provinces whence she drew much of her inspiration – would also be complicated by the creation of nation-states in 1918. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, Lesznai would spend several weeks each summer and winter on the family estate in Nižný Hrušov. According to the American art historian Stanton Lewis Caitlin, who as a student stayed at the estate in the summer of 1937, Lesznai even established an unofficial “summer artists’ colony”, within easy reach of the town of Košice.<sup>91</sup> Košice, which has recently been “rediscovered” as the first Slovak cultural hub in Czechoslovakia and the centre of “Košice modernism”, harboured a pluralist culture.<sup>92</sup> With its multiethnic urban culture that defied easy national classification, the identity of Košice was one marked by distinct localist tendencies that were more capable of encompassing local diversity compared to national categories. Indeed, as Zsófia Kiss Zeman has suggested, Košice's multiethnic character would later contribute to its modernism's omission from Czech, Slovak and Hungarian art-historical narratives.<sup>93</sup>

Just like in Vienna, Lesznai's work was well-received in Košice. In October 1924, she participated in the jubilee exhibition of the Kazinczy Circle cultural association at the East Slovak Museum, exhibiting various craft objects as well as five watercolours.<sup>94</sup> As one of the first scholars to acknowledge the contribution of Hungarian artists to Košice's interwar culture, Lesznai's contemporary Kálmán Brogyáni paid particular note to Lesznai's watercolours from the exhibition, describing them as “pure, lively art” that “draws not only on the motifs but also the spiritual content and style of *Slovakia* [emphasis mine]”.<sup>95</sup> In keeping with the post-1918 nationalist Zeitgeist, Lesznai's watercolours of the villages around Košice were emphatically framed in the now Slovak city of Košice itself as representations of *Slovak* life, and, thus, a potential resource in the construction of a local

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91 Lesznai's Hrušov summer salon has yet to be properly researched. Smithsonian Archives of American Art, “Oral history interview with Stanton L. Catlin, 1989 July 1– September 14”, [https://www.aaa.si.edu/download\\_pdf\\_transcript/ajax?record\\_id=edanmdm-AAADCD\\_oh\\_215546](https://www.aaa.si.edu/download_pdf_transcript/ajax?record_id=edanmdm-AAADCD_oh_215546).

92 J. Purchla, “Košice and Košice Modernism in Kraków”, in N. Žak and Zs. Kiss-Szemán (eds), *Košice Modernism* (Krakow, 2016), p. 13.

93 Zs. Kiss-Szemán, “Košice Modernism and Anton Jaszusch's Expressionism”, in I. Wünsche (ed), *The Routledge Companion to Expressionism in a Transnational Context* (Routledge Handbooks Online, 2018).

94 The craft objects, almost exclusively produced by women artists, were shown in a separate section. *Vystava umelcov zo Slovenska v Košiciach* (Košice, 1924); M. Gmitrová, “Exhibitions in Kosice between 1900 and 1938”, in Z. Bartošová and L. Lešková (eds), *Košice Modernism and its Wider Context* (Košice, 2013), p. 111.

95 K. Brogyáni, *Festőművészet Szlovenszón. Tanulmány*, (Košice, 1931), pp. 122–127.

modern culture, built on the imagery of a rural people closely tied to the mythical landscape of its homeland.<sup>96</sup> Brogyáni, for instance, treated Lesznai's work alongside other local painters of both Slovak and Hungarian origin, such as Martin Benka and Štefan Prohászka-Tallós, as an example of modern Slovak painting, characterising Lesznai as a “highly decorative painter with a rich imagination”, “mainly influenced by Slovak folk themes”.<sup>97</sup> Thus, unlike in Vienna, where it was received as “exotic”, in eastern Czechoslovakia Lesznai's work was initially accommodated within the founding myth of a new national art, thanks to its formal consonance with the dominant artistic narrative of the time.

Despite this promising beginning, from the mid-1920s Lesznai's chances of being included in the Slovak national canon would fade. By this point, the city of Bratislava had been elevated to the rank of Slovakia's leading cultural centre, relegating Košice to a secondary position.<sup>98</sup> As a result, Košice and its artists would largely fall into oblivion until the 1960s, when art historian Tomáš Štrauss began to rehabilitate selected artists from the region, most notably Anton Jaszusch.<sup>99</sup> It was not, however, until much more recent exhibitions, such as *Košice Modernism and its Wider Context* (2013), that Lesznai's contributions to modern art in the region began receiving any recognition.<sup>100</sup> An emphasis on the exceptionally multi-ethnic character of Košice in this exhibition catalogue, however, has only confirmed its – and with it Lesznai's – marginality to the mainstream history of Slovak modernism.<sup>101</sup>

After her return to Hungary in 1931, Lesznai did not manage to reintegrate herself into the interwar Hungarian canon, even though she taught in Dezső Orbán's Atelier art school and exhibited in Hungary in the 1930s. Forced to re-emigrate in 1938, her subsequent career path in the United States, where she also taught and exhibited, has remained completely unexplored.<sup>102</sup> Lesznai's first and only retrospective at the Hungarian National Gallery took place in 1976, where she was emphatically framed as a Hungarian national artist whose

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96 J. Abelovsky, “Identita a moderna”, in *Slovensky mytus*, pp. 9–24.

97 Brogyáni, *Festőművészet Szlovenszón*, p. 73.

98 Kiss-Szemán, “Košice Modernism”.

99 T. Štrauss, *Slovenský variant moderny* (Bratislava, 1992); T. Štrauss, *Zwischen Ost- und Westkunst. Von der Avantgarde zur Postmoderne. Essays (1970–1995)* (Munich, 1995).

100 Even then, the focus was on Lesznai's pre-1918 work. Z. Bartošová, “Interwar Košice as the centre of artistic events”, in *Košice Modernism*, p. 84.

101 Z. Bartošová, “Palimpsest ako jeden z možných jazykov interpretácie dejín umenia 20. Storočia”, *World Literature Studies*, 5/22 (2013), pp. 56–74.

102 See Lesznai's lecture notes at the Petőfi Literature Museum, Budapest, and the Greta Loeb Collection, Leo Baeck Institute, New York.

work peaked in the late Habsburg Empire.<sup>103</sup> Her departure from Vienna would also seal her exclusion from the dominant narratives of Austrian art history. After this date, her work would not be discussed at all in Austria, aside from a few listings in a handful of 1930s exhibition reviews.<sup>104</sup> Indeed, Lesznai's work would not be considered as a part of Austrian art history until the 2015 exhibition catalogue *Die 6 Ungarn im Hagenbund* (2015), where Lesznai was represented as one of six *Hungarian* artists active in the Hagenbund in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>105</sup> While presenting her as one of the most integrated migrant artists in the interwar Hagenbund, the exhibition nevertheless “nationalised” Lesznai, treating her status as a Hungarian artist in Vienna as the principal reason for her inclusion in the catalogue. In short, the methodological nationalism of Central European art history has significantly obscured Lesznai's career outside the period of pre-war Hungarian modernism to which she has been assigned. Even though her art and design evolved in step with local artistic developments in the 1920s, reflecting the regionalist tendencies of Austrian and Slovak art, the methodological nationalism that set in after 1918 and that has barely been challenged since would result in her exclusion from art-historical narratives both at the time and in subsequent scholarship.

## IV Conclusion

Whilst Lesznai's pre-1918 art is widely recognised as having been embedded in Hungarian modernism, after the collapse of the Habsburg Empire Lesznai would fall outside the scope of art-historical narratives and the new nation-oriented and avant-garde-led period they projected onto the years after 1918. The art-historical image of post-Habsburg Hungarian art would instead be dominated by the Kassák group, whose avant-garde style and self-presentation aligned it with canonical developments in the West. As Lesznai continued to base her work on folk art and rural culture, from the perspective of canonical periodization she would increasingly appear as an epigone unworthy of attention in the post-1918 world. In reality, Lesznai's art remained in step with post-1918 developments in Austrian and Slovak art, a fact that was reflected in her continued pop-

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103 É. Bájky, *Lesznai Anna (1885–1966)* (Budapest, 1976).

104 “Graphik im Hagenbund”, *Die Stunde* (17 Nov. 1932), p. 5; W. Born, “Graphikausstellung im Hagenbund”, *Neues Wiener Journal* (17 Nov. 1932), p. 8; “Die schöne Wand. Ausstellung der Wiener Frauenkunst”, *Arbeiter Zeitung* (6 April 1933), p. 10; P. Chrastek, “Die Entdeckung des Hagenbunds”, in *Sammlung Chrastek – Hagenbund*, p. 4.

105 Török, “Anna Lesznai und Tibor Gergely”, pp. 40–51.

ularity in her new host countries. However, despite this positive contemporary reception, Lesznai's status as an "other" in both contexts would lead to her exclusion from subsequent national art-historical narratives. Even the "rediscovery" of Lesznai's work in recent exhibitions has done little to change her image as an artist of pre-war Hungary – an image that inevitably erases her post-1918 work.

Through the simple fact of having produced roughly similar art in different national contexts and across decades that have come to be known for different styles, Anna Lesznai's career is hard to reconcile with a periodization scheme underpinned by teleological and unilinear notions of progress and organised around exclusionary national frameworks. By disrupting the boundaries that such periodization constructs, Lesznai's art offers a sense of continuity in the face of (largely constructed) historical ruptures. In doing so, her work exposes "the nonsimultaneity of the simultaneous" that is an intrinsic, but usually ignored, feature of Central European art history, as well as the homogenising distortions that come with a periodization framework that is simultaneously constrained by the "international" canon of Western art and a bias towards methodological nationalism. Lesznai is far from being only the victim of such distortions. Her fate is, in fact, representative of the similar occlusion of many individual Central European artists and designers, among whom Friedl Dicker Brandeis, Zofia Stryjeńska or Marie Hoppe Teinitzerová.<sup>106</sup> By reintegrating artists like Lesznai into the broader story of art, as this chapter sought to do, scholars can hopefully overcome ossified period boundaries and develop new, more nuanced perspectives on the history of Central European art.

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**106** E. Makarova, *Friedl Dicker-Brandeis, Vienna 1898 – Auschwitz 1944: the artist who inspired the children's drawings of Terezin* (Los Angeles, 2001); Światosław Lenartowicz, *Zofia Stryjeńska: 1891–1976* (Krakow, 2008); H. Dobešová, *Umění řemesla: život a dílo, Marie Hoppe-Teinitzerová 1879–1960* (Jindřichův Hradec, 2004).