

## 8 The Birth of Painting from the Spirit of the Gingerbread

### Anna Lesznai's Hungarian Exotic in 1920s Vienna

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Set at the image center, a lavishly filled table stretches out toward a gate in the background, colored in bright yellow and with pointed green windows reminiscent of leaves. Emerging from it is the miniature of a woman in a long skirt. She carries a woven basket, her hair tied up in a large bun. Further aback, the gate gives way to rolling hills and fields, cultivated by women in bright headscarves. To the left, pilgrims line up in front of a church, to the right, shepherds rest and joke, one chatting to a group of girls in folk dress with bright long braids. Above, a choir of angels completes the scene.

Titled *Sunday* (Figure 8.1, 1930), this painting by the artist, writer and craftswoman Anna Lesznai (1886–1966) gives a colorful view of rural life, offering rich detail in



Figure 8.1 Anna Lesznai, *Sunday*, 1930. Watercolor on paper.

Source: © Szépművészeti Múzeum/Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2021.

its depiction of different social constellations, all wrapped in the comforting impression of a wholesome archaic world: eastern Czechoslovakia, near the village Hrušov/Körtvélyes, where Lesznai's family estate was located. Forming the numerous subjects of her paintings, the region was of central importance to Lesznai's self-fashioning as a modern folk artist, which found positive repercussions in her other place of residence during the 1920s and early 1930s: Vienna.

Drawing together the multiple influences in Lesznai's work between rural Czechoslovakia and urban Vienna, this chapter traces the often-forgotten fascination with folk culture among interwar Vienna's urban bourgeoisie with the example of an artist, whose contributions to Viennese modernism have, equally, nearly been forgotten.<sup>1</sup> It assesses Lesznai's contributions to interwar modernity as a well-connected migrant artist and argues that her explorations of folk art added to her success in interwar Vienna because it related to the city's position as a staging point of central European modernism with strong links to other regions of the former Empire.<sup>2</sup>

Popular through paintings such as *Sunday*, as well as through her writing, illustration and craftwork, above all embroidery, Lesznai was a multivalent artist who moved in some of Vienna's most progressive circles, including the *Hagenbund* artists' association, the feminist *Wiener Frauenkunst* group, as well as the Hungarian émigré avant-garde around Lajos Kassák, who lived in Vienna until 1925.<sup>3</sup> One of her best-known works was *The Journey of the Little Blue Butterfly* ("Die Reise des kleinen Schmetterlings"), a children's fairy tale, which she wrote and illustrated in 1912, and whose visual grammar reflected the aesthetics of folk art embroidery.<sup>4</sup>

Most recently, design historian Rebecca Houze has offered a close analysis of the role of embroidered textiles as a "model for stitching together a meaningful identity" in Lesznai's work.<sup>5</sup> Yet even though the artist was engaged in Viennese cultural life for over a decade, her contributions to Viennese modernism have only rarely been mentioned.<sup>6</sup> Due to the folk-inspired nature of her work and the artist's successful self-fashioning as a feminine, maternal figure, analyses of Lesznai's work have, moreover, predominantly been biographical, or tied to Hungarian art and design at the turn of the twentieth century, when she was part of Budapest's avant-garde circles.<sup>7</sup> Exploring Lesznai's networks, prolific activities and positive reception in interwar Vienna, this chapter shifts attention to a period in the artist's life and work that has long been omitted from her reception. In doing so, it also draws attention to the rich nuances of Viennese interwar modernism, including Yiddish cabaret culture and a fascination for folk art that was, not least, tied to the nostalgic memory of Vienna's lost place as the old imperial capital. By tying these aspects together, Lesznai's work shows a different side of interwar Vienna as a place where province and cosmopolis converge.

### **Folk Art and the Avant-Garde: Hungarian Beginnings**

Born Amália Moscovitz, Lesznai was raised in an ennobled Hungarian–Jewish family with connections to the highest ranks of the imperial government. After a sheltered upbringing at the rural family estate in Körtvélyes, Upper Hungary (today Hrušov, Slovakia; part of Czechoslovakia 1919–1992) and a short-lived marriage, Lesznai traveled to Paris in 1907, where she briefly studied with the French regionalist painter Lucien Simon. In 1908, Lesznai became a regular contributor to *Nyugat* ("West"), a literary magazine that published progressive writings of poetry and prose. She made her debut as a visual artist and craftswoman in 1911, exhibiting a number of

embroidery designs with the avant-garde group of painters *A Nyolcak* (“The Eight”).<sup>8</sup> With designs for folk-inspired cushions and handbags (which were also sold by the Vienna Workshops in the years to follow), Lesznai’s participation carved out an artistic identity focused on a reworking of folk embroidery into abstract ornamentation to bridge spatial and temporal boundaries.<sup>9</sup>

Lesznai’s theoretical underpinnings, outlined in her writings, as well as in public lectures in later years, first developed through the artist’s participation in the Sunday Circle.<sup>10</sup> Officially founded in 1915 and led by György Lukács and Béla Balázs, this group of progressively minded intellectuals met weekly to discuss literature and philosophical ideas, focusing on a sense of isolation and uprootedness that has been interpreted as based on the members’ position as assimilated Jews.<sup>11</sup> In a questionnaire about Jewishness, published in the radical, leftist periodical *Huszadik Szaszad* (“Twentieth century”) in 1917, Lesznai herself called the resulting “nervousness and insecurity” the condition of the assimilated “cultural Jew.”<sup>12</sup> This perception had strong roots in the multiple identities she struggled to unify: Jewish, Hungarian, an aristocrat disconnected from the rural population of her beloved estate, a city dweller, a woman constantly defying convention. It is her work in Vienna where this multiplicity and the aim to harmonize it through folk culture surface most clearly.

### Nostalgia, Continuity and Vienna as a Staging Point

Lesznai relocated to Vienna after the First World War and the collapse of the Habsburg Empire in 1918. On November 16, Mihály Károlyi became the first president of a democratic Hungary, confined by new national borders, by which Hungary lost almost two-thirds of its territory.<sup>13</sup> Upper Hungary, where Lesznai’s estate was located, was ceded to Czechoslovakia as Körtvelyes became Hrušov. For a few months, Lesznai’s husband at the time, the historian, sociologist and founding editor of *Huszadik Szaszad*, Oszkár Jászi (m. 1913–1918), served as Minister of Nationalities and Károlyi’s Adviser of Foreign Affairs. He fled to Vienna when the revolutionary Béla Kun took government in March 1919, declaring a Soviet-style Republic of Councils.<sup>14</sup> Lesznai remained in Hungary and was appointed as specialist for fairy tales in the Ministry of Education, a position instated in the hope that compulsory fairy tale afternoons would promote people’s harmonious co-existence.<sup>15</sup>

After one hundred days of communist rule, the reactionary regime of Miklós Horthy succeeded the Kun government, forcing its opponents into exile.<sup>16</sup> Initially, Lesznai took refuge at the family estate in Czechoslovakia but by 1920, she bought a house in the Viennese suburb of Mauer. For the next decade, she spent her time between the Austrian capital and rural Hrušov. Lesznai’s artistic career at this point increasingly began to stress her position “between” places. The core of her work was the dualism between (Viennese) city and (Czecho-Slovak) countryside, while also exploring aspects of her Jewish identity. As a city in which a strong historical identity collided with a search for cultural responses to the socio-political changes caused by the collapse of the empire, Vienna was the ideal staging point for exploring such dualities, encompassing a modern identity, Habsburg nostalgia and an interest in provincial culture.<sup>17</sup>

Habsburg nostalgia was a prominent feature in interwar literature, one of the best-known examples being Joseph Roth’s *The Emperor’s Tomb* (1938).<sup>18</sup> Rather than solely imagining an urban imperial past, the empire’s former provinces also played an important role in their work, the most significant of them being Galicia. Part of

the empire from 1772 until 1918, Galicia gained a strong identity as the easternmost province. Coming to represent its “close other,” “exotic” and provincial, the region offered fertile ground for cultural explorations and fantasies.<sup>19</sup> Home to a diverse ethnic and religious population, Galicia was idealized as “non-national” and *kaisertreu* (“loyal to the emperor”) and developed a regional identity in cities such as Krakow and Lviv, which reached Vienna through prolific coverage in newspapers, novels and exhibitions.<sup>20</sup>

After the First World War, Galicia became a part of Poland after embittered fighting left the region in tatters. Many refugees who continued to see themselves as citizens of the empire fled to Vienna, joining the city’s strong Jewish–Galician population, which counted about forty thousand members by 1910.<sup>21</sup> Thus, Galicia not only represented a vivid cultural fantasy in the capital before 1918, but it was also a cultivated memory in the post-war Austrian capital.<sup>22</sup> Indeed, the regional identity of Galicia remained particularly vivid in the memory of Vienna’s Jewish population, because it represented the possibility of synchronic identification as Jews, as Galicians and as citizens of the empire.<sup>23</sup> While after 1918 these multiple identifications no longer complied with new ideals of national belonging, they prevailed as imagined places. Roth writes in *The Emperor’s Tomb*:

We were convinced that we were painting an entirely false portrait of it [Galicia], yet could not stop picturing this place which none of us knew. In other words, we furnished it with all sorts of characteristics which we knew from the start were deliberate creations of our own fantasy.<sup>24</sup>

This “deliberate creation” of a lost provincial identity also played a significant role in Lesznai’s paintings. On the basis of the demographic parallels between eastern Czechoslovakia and Galicia, the artist’s quaint regionalism corresponds with fantasies about remote provinces that conjured a lost Habsburg idyll. On the one hand, this represented a sense of withdrawal for an artist forced into exile. On the other, it fashioned an exotic yet close-by world for Viennese audiences, which positioned the artist as a mediator between center and periphery. A significant aspect of this process was the artist’s confrontation with her Jewish roots.

### **Yiddish Cabaret and Jewish Nostalgia**

While Jewishness had always been part of Lesznai’s world, her closest engagement—and identification—with it began in exile. In 1924, Lesznai and her partner Tibor Gergely began to contribute stage designs and costumes for Di Gildene Pawe, a Yiddish theater group founded by young artists and actors within Vienna’s *Free Jewish Popular Stage*.<sup>25</sup> Modeled on the Russian–Yiddish traveling cabaret *The Blue Bird*, which regularly performed in Vienna, Di Gildene Pawe developed new presentations of Yiddish folk songs and plays.<sup>26</sup> While the source material for the performances was rooted in Jewish folk culture from the shtetl, their production took on decidedly modern forms. The nostalgia for shtetl culture and folklore, as well as its translation for a modern urban context, closely corresponded with Lesznai’s practice in its outlook, making it an ideal place to explore her own adaptations on the theme.

Di Gildene Pawe performed until 1926, even though Lesznai and Gergely’s contributions only took place in the cabaret’s initial period. However, the artists’ designs

appear to have left a sustained mark on the ways in which the cabaret evenings were set in scene: describing the performance's light-hearted, jovial atmosphere, Oskar Rosenfeld noted in the *Wiener Morgenzeitung*, how

the dances and the movements of the play form a unity with the colors and forms of the costumes and decorations. . . . One speaks Yiddish and sings Yiddish. And still, the performance has a great effect on the audience, which only rarely understands Yiddish.<sup>27</sup>

Presented as a colorful total work of art, the review conveys a fascination with folk culture as a “close rural exotic” with an embrace of a modernist aesthetic.

In February 1925, Lesznai contributed an article to the theater magazine *Die Bühne* (“The Stage”), in which she wrote about her work for the theater group.<sup>28</sup> Her description conjures the image of colorful and highly ornamented stage and costume designs, including a pink robe for the figure of the devil and golden slippers for Abraham. Rather than offering links to a specific visual tradition, the artist emphasizes Jewish mysticism as the main point of reference. However, the article also includes drawings by Gergely, which give some indication in terms of style: one of the illustrations shows a group of men in long kaftans around a table, two high-up windows in the background allowing in both moonlight and sunlight. Framing the scene, heavy curtains suggest that this may be a sketch of the stage design. The emphasis on the light falling into the room and the strong shading is reminiscent of Viennese Kinetism, a contemporary art movement focusing on rhythm, movement and abstraction, based in the art classes of Franz Čížek at Vienna's School of Applied Arts.<sup>29</sup> Gergely attended Čížek's classes upon arriving in the city in 1920–1921, and, throughout the early to mid-1920s, the students in the class remained in contact with the Hungarian emigres.<sup>30</sup> Combining these links with Gergely's illustrations and Lesznai's descriptions of the design process as focused on Jewish mysticism and “movement, melodies and rhythm,” the design aesthetic of the costumes and set designs evokes a synthesis of contemporary artistic practices and Jewish folk culture.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, the group's interest in avant-garde practices is also evident from the participation of Galician-born troupe members Leo Halpern and Mirjam Schnabel-Höflich in the “First German propaganda evening of activist artists” organized by Kassák in 1925.<sup>32</sup> Merging folk and avant-garde culture, *Di Gildene Pawe* thus built on an amalgamation of nostalgic and utopian ideas, corresponding to Lesznai's own ideas and practice.

In *Die Bühne*, Lesznai cites the cabaret's director Halpern, “the Jewish gesture, the Jewish inflection, should not only find its expression in the caricature but should also be revitalized in its religious sensibility, its decorative, oriental expression.”<sup>33</sup> Turning away from naturalist theater productions, *Di Gildene Pawe* embraced experimentation, inspired by its links to the famous Vilna Troupe through Halpern.<sup>34</sup> As Debra Caplan has argued, on the Yiddish stage, “modernism was never the intent, but rather, an accidental discovery inspired by the unpredictable currents of Jewish life in inter-war Eastern Europe.”<sup>35</sup> Precisely this amalgamation of forms and styles, which Caplan calls “fusion modernism,” is evident in the new theater practices introduced by *Di Gildene Pawe*, as well as the broader artistic practice of its costume designer, Lesznai.

Indeed, the description of “fusion modernism” as a practice arising from the aim to visualize the rich cultural experience of central Europe's border regions closely corresponds with motifs in Lesznai's paintings at the time. Like *Sunday*, introduced at the



Figure 8.2 Anna Lesznai, *Market in Nagymihályi*, 1930s. Tempera on paper.

Source: © Szépművészeti Múzeum/Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest, 2021.

beginning of this text, *Market in Nagymihályi* (Figure 8.2, 1930s) shows a busy market scene in the small town of Nagymihályi/Michalovce in eastern Czechoslovakia, near the family estate.

In the painting, figures in orthodox Jewish dress move alongside women in colorful folk costumes and barefoot Slovak shepherds in their traditional white dress. Reduced to standard types, the harmonious co-existence between these peoples of different origin is emphasized, building a timeless and abundant world in which factory chimneys, synagogues and churches form part of the town fabric as much as freely roaming animals, Roma fortune tellers, wine-loving monks and Jewish merchants. Rather than focusing on Jewish culture specifically, here, it is part of a rich paradisiacal landscape, in which different aspects of modernity and tradition collide. Similar to *Sunday*, the many different scenes included in the painting are organized in small groups which rhythmically interact, transforming the typified figures themselves into ornamental elements.

In her diary, Lesznai refers to Marc Chagall's paintings of rural Russia in reference to these village paintings, suggesting that the diverse populations of a region are part of its natural landscape.<sup>36</sup> There are clear parallels between the work of Chagall, who

also created set design for the Yiddish theater in Vitebsk and developed a modernist style of painting that engaged with Jewish folk art and Russian orthodox culture, and Lesznai's nostalgic depictions of rural Czechoslovakia.<sup>37</sup> Indeed, the work of both artists and their relation to Yiddish theater recalls Caplan's notion of "fusion modernism," based on a search for expression that would define the experience of life in central and eastern Europe's rural provinces. Praising the melodies of Hasidic rabbis and the colorful costumes set to "bring to life the decorative oriental ways of expression" of Yiddish folk culture, Lesznai parallels the theater of Di Gildene Pawe to her paintings of Hrušov as her "native village," which merges deeply personal elements with an exoticization of the rural environment.<sup>38</sup>

The personal angle of Lesznai's "exotic regionalism," combined with her search for harmony and abstraction of folk pattern might, in this light, also be extended as a form of modernist "Jewish primitivism," which marks an engagement with traditional Jewish culture by central European Jewish intellectuals as a "continuous triangulation between the Jewish European self, the Jewish other, and the European other."<sup>39</sup> Rather than a fascination for a different, distant culture, Jewish primitivism stemmed from a fascination with a distant form of one's own cultural heritage, tied to the former eastern provinces of the Habsburg Empire. In relation to Lesznai's paintings, Jewish primitivism mediates some of the contradiction between her presentations of Hrušov as an exotic yet also deeply personal space. Her work in Vienna, in this sense, was a dislocated regionalism, which could be found in the nexus between modernist artistic practices, such as Yiddish cabaret culture, and a nostalgic vision of the "lost," exoticized territories of the former empire.

### Viennese Impressions, Exotic Fantasies

So far, this chapter has emphasized how Lesznai's work branched out in her Viennese environment, balanced with a focus on Hrušov in her painting. However, far from the idiosyncratic interests of a nostalgic artist, Lesznai drew from a range of sources and responded to continuing debates in the fields of psychoanalysis, sociology, anthropology and art history. Part of her extended network was Géza Róheim, for example, who offered psychoanalytic approaches to folk tales and rural traditions, and his research expeditions to Australia in the late 1920s were enthusiastically received in the Viennese press.<sup>40</sup> She closely engaged with the work of Curt Glaser, who conducted some of the first extensive inquiries into east Asian art.<sup>41</sup> Through the *Sunday Circle*, Lesznai also showed interest in the work of a new generation of art historians such as Charles de Tolnay, whose early research focused on the busy genre paintings by Pieter Breughel the Elder and fantastic works by Hieronymus Bosch.<sup>42</sup> In addition to her exchanges with Tolnay, who studied at the University of Vienna at this time, Lesznai frequently visited the Kunsthistorisches Museum, which had a number of Breughel paintings on display. During this time, the description of her village paintings as "Breughelesque" appears in her own writing as well as in reviews of her work, marking a place for her practice between historical reference, folk art and modernist primitivism.<sup>43</sup> In the context of her broader intermedial output in embroidery and book illustration, this linking of her paintings with those of an "old master" shows how Lesznai's work consistently traversed boundaries, not only between rural and urban spaces but also between traditionally connoted fields of "masculine" and "feminine" artistic practice. As indicated by the press reviews of her work, discussed

in detail below, Lesznai's paintings found greater reception in the Viennese press than her design work. Despite her success across different media, Lesznai was thus taken most seriously as a painter by her Viennese contemporaries, as the merging of decorative, exoticist and primitivist aspects in her work was validated with references to Breughel.

Importantly, Lesznai also adopted a fascination with East Asian artistic practices, which had held a firm place in Viennese Modernism since the turn of the century.<sup>44</sup> In Lesznai's work, it found particular repercussion in the introduction of animal motifs to her work. Taking frequent visits to Schönbrunn Zoo, she began to engage in animal studies in a calligraphic style, drawn with a single line. In "Animals in Captivity" an essay written for *Die Bühne*, Lesznai's drawings appear alongside a text in which she describes not only her interest but also her compassion for the zoo animals:

You, captured animals, glimpsed behind bars at the zoological garden: you bring us joy with your diverse beauty, yet this pleasure lets us blush from shame, almost as though one feasts on the sight of captured people of a foreign race.<sup>45</sup>

As the text indicates, Lesznai saw these animals in relation to a fascination with the "exotic," which she sought out yet equally criticized in the way it was consumed in the metropolis. How this was adopted in her visual work is perhaps best illustrated in *Animal Fantasy* (Figure 8.3), a watercolor from the 1920s in which a plethora of animals are stitched together on the image plane like an elaborate piece of embroidery.

Set on a flattened plane, the animals are shown alongside each other without hierarchy, yet each species is given its own space, delineated by individual backdrops. While becoming more surreal and playful, Lesznai's motifs maintain "this beautiful state of each being next to the other, all things are on one plane" of her embroidery, creating a vision of harmony that simultaneously recalls the East Asian art she studied.<sup>46</sup> Lesznai's painterly practice in Vienna thus developed universalist ideas of ornament and folk culture in reference to colonialist cultural debates, fascinated by "less developed" yet "purer" non-Western culture. This not only confirms her understanding of folk art as a form of "primitivism," regardless of its location of origin, but, in its painterly application, also corresponds to a distinctly modernist "Western gaze." In turn, Lesznai's own artistic identity in Vienna was reduced from a multi-dimensional image to a particular version of the exotic; one, which was explicitly tied to a fascination with the peripheries of the former Habsburg Empire.

### **Femininity, the Close Rural Exotic and Folk Modernism in the Metropolis**

Given that artists and designers of the Vienna Workshops explored folk art as a significant aspect of modern design since the turn of the century, and that many members of the *Wiener Frauenkunst* shared her enthusiasm for folk art and embroidery, Lesznai's work was certainly at home in the Austrian capital.<sup>47</sup> However, by anchoring her paintings in observations and encounters in villages surrounding Hrušov, Lesznai's explorations of the folk had a different stake than many of the urbane Viennese interpreters. Indeed, her images of rural life were perceived to be more "authentic," based on the artist's long-term (yet no less idealized) engagement with village life and folk traditions in multi-ethnic eastern Czechoslovakia.





Aside from her participation in group exhibitions of the *Hagenbund* and the *Wiener Frauenkunst*, Lesznai held her first one-woman show in Vienna in 1926 in the graphic cabinet of the *Buch-Kunst-Musikalien* (“Book-Art-Music”) publishing house. In a particularly vibrant review titled “Anna Lesznai-Jászi or the Birth of Painting from the Spirit of the Gingerbread,” Lesznai’s watercolors from this exhibition are compared to “a colorful rug of village paradise” in reference to the flatness and bold color of her work.<sup>48</sup> While not all reviewers reacted quite as enthusiastically, Lesznai’s reception in Vienna was exceptionally positive across the 1920s and she was presented as an artist of “limitless talent,” who could translate “folk art into the general-artistic.”<sup>49</sup>

Even though Lesznai’s work was unmistakably identified as that of a woman in reference to the gendered dimensions of craftwork, based on her paintings, contemporary reviewers nonetheless saw her as a modern artist who produced original, new work. Reviews drew frequent associations between Lesznai as a woman artist, the naïve style of her watercolors, and the “exotic” character of her painting, embroidery and fairy tales. Balázs wrote of his friend’s work, “Lesznai’s tales are the tales of a woman. There is no adult here speaking to a child, rather a child speaking to the adult with all-knowing wisdom.”<sup>50</sup> The simplified visual language and idyllic views of rural life, stylized as “exotic” and timeless evoked connotations of women’s proximity to nature and simple culture, which remained a persisting stereotype in interwar debates on gender, art and craftwork.<sup>51</sup> Indeed, the popularity of Lesznai’s painting seemed to rest on the premise that folk culture as an effeminized practice was truer to nature. In a review of the third exhibition of the *Wiener Frauenkunst* in 1930, Lesznai’s contribution is presented as remarkable, because she “who has lived life with the farmers, shows in her images the disappearing village of the Hungarian lowlands with real *Gestaltungskraft* (“creative power”).”<sup>52</sup> The fantasy of the village idyll in Lesznai’s images, her quaint animal drawings and interior decorations overall seemed to offer a sense of escape to Viennese audiences, in which Hrušov became a utopian ideal, revelatory of a broader fascination with “the provincial.”

Throughout her decade-long stay in Vienna, Lesznai spent several weeks each year at the family estate with Gergely and acquaintances from Vienna, including *Hagenbund* painters George Mayer-Marton and Frieda Salvendy, as well as Viennese writers such as Maria Lazar and Heimito von Doderer. The American art historian Stanton Lewis Caitlin, who stayed in Hrušov as a friend of Lesznai’s son, remembered the estate as a “summer artist’s colony,” which offered formative experiences.<sup>53</sup> Summers at the estate were spent by painting, writing, debating and exploring nearby villages. In fact, Lesznai’s paintings were based on sketches from life that she made there, as well as on photographs taken by her eldest son. Caitlin recalls a place that was lost in time:

[Lesznai’s family] were still the leading family and the lords of the village manor in a peasant society, where they grew flax and tended cattle. But the folk traditions of Hapsburg Imperial Slovakia, eastern Slovakia at that time were still very much alive.<sup>54</sup>

Indeed, eastern Czechoslovakia was a sought-after travel destination for artists, ethnologists and writers who saw it as “something like a Slav Tahiti, where one could experience the mythical time of [one’s] ancestors.”<sup>55</sup>



Figure 8.4 Anna Lesznai, *Slovak Lourdes*, 1924.

Source: Gouache on paper. Lajos Hatvany Museum, Hatvan. Photo © Integrated Library and Museum Collection—Lajos Hatvany Museum.

While this romanticization had its biggest reception in the Czechoslovak state to which it belonged, eastern Czechoslovakia as a “jungle and medieval age,” in the words of journalist Hans Margulies, found recurring coverage in Vienna, too.<sup>56</sup> The region was presented as wild, poor, yet also idyllic and unique in its ethnic and religious multiplicity; as a remnant of something otherworldly that, like Galicia, seemed lost in the post-Habsburg world. Lesznai’s paintings visualized this nostalgia, showing a world in which the “Habsburg dream” seemed to persist. A good illustration of this is *Slovak Lourdes* (Figure 8.4, 1924), a watercolor referring to an apparition of the Blessed Virgin of Lourdes in the village of Dlhé Klčovo in 1922.

The Virgin appeared to the peasant woman Anna Šaffa, and after several miracles took place in the following months, a church was built in the virgin’s honor. The event did not go unnoticed by a broader public, especially as Jászi attended the consecration and was so compelled by it that he published a sociological analysis in the *Prager Tagblatt* and *The Slavonic Review*.<sup>57</sup> A report of his findings was also reprinted in Vienna as “The Nationalized Miracle” in *Die Stunde*.<sup>58</sup> Drawing an image of a backward forgotten land for an international urban readership, Jászi wrote of a mythical country, where it was “hard to resist the charm of the truly biblical atmosphere which surrounds these people.”<sup>59</sup>

*Slovak Lourdes* corresponds with this image, commemorating the consecration of the church in a paradisiacal rural idyll, populated by an overabundance of women in bright folk costumes. By rendering the scene of the consecration idealized yet clearly recognizable, the painting merges elements of popular local history with the fantastic, blurring fact and fiction, past and present. The reception of Lesznai's works in Vienna depended on similar terms, conceived of as "a colorful rug of village paradise" which was simultaneously reachable and centuries away.<sup>60</sup> Remaining sufficiently vague, interchangeably described as "Ruthenian", "oriental," "Hungarian," "Slovak" or "Slovako-Hungarian," Lesznai's paintings replicated and visualized the nostalgia for lost provinces of a multi-national empire, half-familiar, half unknown and colorful in every sense of the word.<sup>61</sup>

## Conclusion

Lesznai's artistic practice and positive reception in Vienna show that the provinces, as imagined places of timelessness and continuity, were a continually revisited topic in interwar Viennese culture. Indeed, the city's mixture of modernist cultural practices, such as the Yiddish cabaret of Di Gildene Pawe, and a yearning for the days of empire represented an ideal place of artistic experimentation between center and periphery. Tapping into different traditions that resulted in a "fusion modernism," which linked multiple notions of the "exotic," the "rural," the "primitive" and folk art, Lesznai moved between modernity, tradition and different media, united by the ideal of forging a timeless world without boundaries. The diverse cultural and philosophical traditions available to her in Viennese exile, as well as her mobility between the Austrian capital and eastern Czechoslovakia supported the creation of a "folk exotic," defined by the artist's fascination with the region surrounding her estate and its estrangement as an otherworldly place. In turn, Lesznai's well-versed explorations of folk art added to her success in interwar Vienna, and stress the city's position as a diverse staging point of central European modernism, with deep affinity for other regions of the former empire.

## Notes

1. The Viennese modernist fascination with folk culture has recently gained attention in the work of scholars such as Megan Brandow-Faller, "Folk Art on Parade: Modernism, Primitivism and Nationalism at the 1908 Kaiserhuldigungsfestzug," *Austrian Studies* 25 (2017): 98–117.
2. A similar aim of connecting Vienna to former provinces can be found in Agnes Husslein-Arco, Matthias Boeckl and Harald Krejci, eds., *Hagenbund: A European Network of Modernism 1900–1938* (Munich: Hirmer, 2014).
3. On the *Wiener Frauenkunst*, see Megan Brandow-Faller, *The Female Secession* (Pennsylvania: Penn State Press, 2020), 157–188. On Má in Vienna, Peter Weibel, *Beyond Art: A Third Culture* (Vienna and New York: Springer, 2005), 68–69.
4. Anna Lesznai, *Die Reise des kleinen Schmetterlings durch Leszna und nach den benachbarten Feenreichen* (Vienna: Rosenbaum, 1912).
5. Rebecca Houze, "The Art and Design of Anna Lesznai: Adaptation and Transformation," in *Designing Transformation. Jews and Cultural Identity in Central European Modernism*, Elana Shapira, ed. (London: Bloomsbury, 2021), 174.
6. Sabine Plakolm-Forsthuber, *Künstlerinnen in Österreich 1897–1938* (Vienna: Picus, 1994), 72–75; Julie M. Johnson, *Memory Factory: The Forgotten Women Artists of Vienna 1900* (West Lafayette: Purdue University Press, 2021), 338; Éva Bajkay, ed., *6 Ungarn*

- im Hagenbund* (Vienna: Collegium Hungaricum, 2015); Éva Bájkay, “Hungarians in the Hagenbund, the Hagenbund in Hungary,” in *Hagenbund*, 317–324.
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