

Pázmány Péter Catholic University  
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

THESES OF THE DOCTORAL (PHD)  
DISSERTATION

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**Involvement and Distance**  
**Stages of Artistic Career in Béni Ferenczy's Oeuvre**

Doctoral School of History

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## **Theses of the Dissertation**

### *Objective*

The subject of the thesis is the oeuvre of the sculptor Béni Ferenczy. Instead of producing a traditional monograph on an artist, the main focal point of the research was set on scrutinizing the artistic career and the various influences that impact it. Through my research, I wanted to answer the question of how the combination of his family background, his circle of friends and acquaintances, his individual choices and decisions, and his artistic principles impacted Ferenczy's commissions, possibilities to exhibit his work, official roles in Hungarian culture, political and artistic as well as art historic reception at a given time. Thus, a primary focus was given to factors beyond his artistic output that impacted his career, in an attempt to produce the portrait of the artist in society.

### *Sources and Methodology*

There is extensive literature on the art of Béni Ferenczy, the majority of which was written in the 1960s and the following few decades. In the vein of traditional art history treatment, the published writings generally aim to present analyses of works of

art or objective descriptions of a particular artistic phase of the sculptor. A widely available large-scale monograph has never been written, and the various periods of the oeuvre are researched to an even extent. As for the whole of his artistic career, with the exception of a few well-expounded subtopics, the literature typically echoes the same tropes of a mini-monograph's length that were originally formulated by the first interpreters of the oeuvre. Since the publication of these writings, a large number of written documents and archival sources have become available, which have not been processed critically and integrated into the literature.

The bulk of the research conducted for this dissertation involved the systematic assessment of the sculptor's correspondence collected from archival research, as well as mapping out letters and memoirs written by his immediate family, friends, acquaintances, and fellow artists. With the help of these sources, I was able to construct an extensive account of his wide social network, which spanned from fine art circles to the contemporary cultural and political spheres. Ferenczy's figure integrated organically into the eventful 20<sup>th</sup> century history of Hungary, and the interplays of this process fundamentally determined the course of his artistic career. The broader examination of the period as well as placing the oeuvre into the system of relations present in Hungarian culture required, besides traditional library research, investigating archival documents and records, along with perusing several thousand contemporary

newspaper articles. The proposed approach necessitated the comprehensive review of Ferenczy's reception based on press materials, which due to size constraints, I concluded at his death in 1967. The presence of censorship in the artist's appearance in the press was given additional consideration. I was primarily interested in how certain biographical elements, such as his studies or the various locations of his emigration, were highlighted or distorted with false information depending on the political climate of the time.

The examination of Ferenczy's career trajectory consists of two main aspects. Besides the objective analysis of the oeuvre, the dissertation also involves a survey of how the sculptor himself experienced and assessed the changes in the Hungarian artist community, his own successes, failures, artistic possibilities and financial position. To explore this aspect, I utilized Ferenczy's own letters, interviews and anecdotes. While using these primary sources, due to their personal and deeply human nature, I strove to employ a critical attitude by cross-checking their contents, and to overrule them if necessary.

The in-depth reconstruction of Ferenczy's career multiplied the amount of data that previously published literature made available. The result of this work provided a possibility for drawing conclusions about the driving forces behind his career.

### *The Main Content of the Dissertation and its Research Points*

The factors that contributed to the sculptor's professional success, besides his actual artistic output, can be identified. The structure of the dissertation is chronological, with each of the chapters focusing on exploring different topics of interest.

The first chapters are dedicated to investigating the impact of his special artistic upbringing and various manifestations of nepotism on the oeuvre. What shaped the choice of careers for the Ferenczy children, and what were the benefits and disadvantages of accepting and expressing innate artistic talent? What rules formed the inner creative community of the family, and to what degree was the children's artistic start influenced by their father's mental, financial and social support? These are the main questions I set out to answer in this part. While reconstructing Béni Ferenczy's progress of artistic training, I also investigated the people and their influence or support impacting the young sculptor-to-be, besides his patron-father. I also touch upon the difference between the possibilities he was afforded with this familial background and support and the usual practice and reality of the artistic start of his contemporaries.

Béni Ferenczy's artistic career started under extremely favorable conditions. His great painter of a father, an eminent cultural environment provided by the family, and the close proximity of the Nagybánya painting school all contributed to the

fact that he and his siblings were given extraordinary possibilities to delve into the theoretical and practical aspects of modern art. His arrival on the art scene was aided by the outstanding status of the name Ferenczy, as well as the fortunate formation of his social network. With the help of his acquaintances, he quickly found a home in the Budapest art scene, during that short period of Hungarian cultural history which openly accepted the various outlets of avant-garde movements. His leftist views influenced by his mother, his close connections to the officials of the Museum of Fine Arts and the members of the “Sunday Circle” [Vasárnapi Kör], as well as the artistic movements he represented, all contributed to the fact that, despite his young age, he received a dominant position amongst the leaders of culture during the days of the 1919 Hungarian Soviet Republic. This brief high point had a lasting impact on his later career due to its political weight.

In the 1910s, the young sculptor probably was not aware of the power of the name Ferenczy, which provided him with an exceptional position in the Hungarian artist community. Nevertheless, after the fall of the soviet republic, he was forced into emigration and he too had to experience the struggles of making a living as an artist. For the examination this period, the focus was shifted to exploring the hardships of the sculptor living abroad, his options for work, commissions and exhibitions. Since this paper mainly concentrates on Ferenczy’s career in relation to the Hungarian art scene and its social network, contrary to earlier

research, I put more emphasis on his relationship with the motherland when discussing his years of emigration. Thus, I approach the period between the two world wars from the perspective of the artist, who, despite his existential issues and homesickness, keeps postponing his date of return as he is torn between life choices.

Ferenczy's route of immigration can be considered fairly typical, since the cities of Felvidék (today's south Slovakia), Vienna, Berlin, and Moscow were all popular destinations for immigrant leftist intellectuals. Even though he too was excited about the 1926 wave of return to Hungary, his dislike of the Horthy administration as well as the hopelessness of obtaining commissions in Hungary continued to prevent him from actually committing to return. The help he received during this period, mostly from representatives of the cultural elite in power in 1919 and the circle of friends in Vienna he made through them, was a great aid in receiving commissions in the years he spent abroad. Despite all that, he could never reach the point of establishing an international career. In Austrian art history, he is mostly noted for creating the Schiele Memorial. The four years he spent in the Soviet Union had a profound effect on his relation to the eastern superpower, which later fundamentally shaped his decision-making during the totalitarian dictatorship of Rákosi.

Ferenczy only returned to Hungary after the 1938 annexation of Austria to Germany. During World War II, the Hungarian press depicted him either as the outstanding offspring of the Ferenczy family, who after a career in the West returned as a mature artist, or as a former lackey of the Communist era, whose artistic path was driven by his Soviet connections. During the period of the Nazi occupation of Hungary, he and his wife were active participants of the civil effort in rescuing the Jews. It was around this time that the sculptor established close connections to the circle of Albert Szent-Györgyi. In the post-war period, although he distanced himself from direct political engagement, he did receive high-ranking official positions in Hungarian culture once again. He had a seat on the Council of Arts and was tenured as teacher of sculpture at the University of Fine Arts. After 1949, he had an ideological conflict with the newly formed Soviet-style administration, and Ferenczy was dismissed from his position at sixty years of age.

The sculptor was forced to subsist on the edges of the fine art scene, where he made ends meet with ecclesiastical commissions and book illustrations. Even though educational writings on the artist's tragedy-stricken life often depict his period in the 1950s as a time of misery and financial woes, one should not ignore the fact that he became one of the most sought-after and highest-earning artists by 1955. All without making the compromises that the official cultural administration expected of



sculptors, who, once compromised, were able to work on political memorials or monumental worker figures.

The chapters on the period between 1938 and 1956 attempt to survey the incredibly fluid system of relations that characterized Ferenczy and the Hungarian cultural spaces around him. In order to provide nuance to the tropes about the oeuvre, I tried categorically listing all his positions, state-funded commissions, and awards. I also deemed it important to follow up on the changes in how contemporary press and fine art literature treated Ferenczy.

As a direct supporter of the politics of Imre Nagy, the downfall of the 1956 revolution shocked him deeply, which presumably also contributed to the drastic change in his health. In November 1956, he suffered a stroke that marked the beginning of the last illness-stricken period of the oeuvre. The final part of the thesis presents the so-called left-handed period of the artist as well as reviews Ferenczy's reception in the 1956-1967 cultural media and fine art literature.

Ferenczy's last decade, limited by his illness but enriched by joyous creativity, was a symbolic example of artistic rebirth after the fall of the revolution, an example that proved very powerful in the cultural discourse of the period. His former life consisted of a continuous interchange of triumphs and tribulations, but his illness changed attitudes toward his person and his art. In

contrast to the independent intellectual teacher of individual artistic principles, the old master, devoid of his ability to speak and use of his right arm, painting flower still lifes, was no longer a threat to the official leaders of culture. They no longer had any expectations of him due to his health condition. The Kádár era brought consolidation and different foreign relations, which meant that the officially accepted stylistic frame of reference became wider, and fine art literature could once again elaborate on Western influences and connections. The cultural shift of the 1960s made it possible for Ferenczy to claim his rightful place as an outstanding modern sculptor, the Hungarian representative of Aristide Maillol's Mediterranean movement. Thus, the old master underwent a peculiar form of canonization, which simultaneously included honoring the previous output of the oeuvre as well as idolizing the artist who overcame personal tragedy through his art.

The governing principle of the dissertation—which identifies the results and failures of Ferenczy's oeuvre—naturally leads to the rather nebulous concept of “artistic success”. Although contemporary critiques, awards, and financial rewards are not that significant from the perspective of art history, they do have a profound effect on the development of an artist's career and the works they manage to produce. An oeuvre is the product of its age, shaped by its circumstances. A work of art is produced as a result of numerous conditions, such as existential options, aesthetic judgment, cultural environment, and political expectations, which

is just as true for commissioned pieces as for original and independent works. Thus, this dissertation is not only concerned with uncovering the driving forces behind the oeuvre, but also focuses on presenting the complex system of relations between the artist's career and oeuvre.

## Publications Related to the Topic of the Dissertation

### *Book*

„Balkezében is elfér a világ” Ferenczy Béni utolsó alkotókorszaka. Budapest, Ferenczy Család Művészeti Alapítvány, 2017.

### *Studies*

Útmutatás a Mungóknak. Ferenczy Károly hatása gyermekei művészi indulására. *Ars Hungarica* 47 (2021) Vol. 1., pp. 75–92.

„Aztán vajon tanár vagyok-e még?” – Ferenczy Béni tiszavirág-életű főiskolai pályafutásáról. In: *OPUS MIXTUM VI. – Tanulmányok a Fiatal Művészettörténészek VI. Konferenciájáról*. A CentrArt Egyesület évkönyve. 2020. pp. 137–147. URL [https://issuu.com/centrart/docs/opus\\_mixtum\\_vi](https://issuu.com/centrart/docs/opus_mixtum_vi)

Munkában elmerülő lélek – Ferenczy Noémi-kiállítás Szentendrén. *Hitel* 33 (2020) Vol. 4., pp. 96–106.

„Balkezében is elfér a világ” Ferenczy Béni utolsó alkotókorszaka. *Magyar Szemle* (New Series) 29 (2020) Vol. 1–2., pp.6–25.

"The whole world fits into his left hand..." – The Last Artistic Period of Béni Ferenczy. *Hungarian Review* 10 (2019) Vol. 6. pp. 103–124.

Erős nők és játszó fiúk – Östémák Ferenczy Béni érett korszakából. *Új Művészet Online*, 16 October 2018 URL <http://www.ujmuveszet.hu/2018/10/eros-nok-es-jatsz0-fiuk/>

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Ferenczy Béni estéje – A balkezes korszak szobrászati alkotásai. In: *Studia Comitatus 33. Tanulmányok Pest megye múzeumaiból*. Ed. Judit MAJOROSSY. Szentendre, Pest Megyei Múzeumok Igazgatósága, 2014. pp. 67–90.

„A művészet csillagos ege” – Maillol és a görögség szerepe a modern magyar szobrászatban. | “The starry sky of art” – The role of Maillol and Greek culture in modern Hungarian sculpture. In: *Rippl-Rónai – Maillol: Egy művészbártság története*. | *The Story of a Friendship*. Exhibition Catalogue. Ed. Eszter. FÖLDI Budapest, Hungarian National Gallery, 2014. pp. 134–167.

Egykezes szobrok. Művészet a stroke után – Neuropatológiai kutatások helye és miértje Ferenczy Béni utolsó alkotókorszakának feldolgozásában. *Artmagazin* 11 (2013) Vol. 6., pp. 46–50.

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