

Pázmány Péter Catholic University
Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences

Doctoral (PhD) Dissertation
THESIS BOOKLET

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The Revolution of the Profane

On Late Medieval Language and Iconographic Characteristics
Reflected in the Stove Tiles of the Kingdom of Hungary

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In my dissertation, I aimed to explore and describe elements of late medieval visual language that were once widely understood but whose meanings have since become obscure or are no longer comprehensible. To achieve this, I selected compositions appearing on stove tiles created between 1470 and the 1540s in the territory of historical Hungary as my primary sources. Due to the constraints of the formal requirements and the current state of research on the subject, I did not intend to create a comprehensive corpus of stove tiles from this period. Instead, I focused on the most representative examples, which once functioned in ecclesiastical and secular buildings, showcasing commonly recognized pictorial topoi of the era as well as modeling and analyzing rare phenomena using art historical methods. I attempted to grasp the connections behind these visual programs, considering the perspectives of the users as well: I tried to capture the intentions of the creator, the commissioner, and the owner of the stove, as well as how the visual program or pictorial anthology of a stove might have worked for contemporary viewers, what content it conveyed, and what network of references it operated with. Therefore, I explored whether there was a deliberate cultural, political, ideological, or aesthetic program or intent behind the objects, and how the interpretive community received/used them.

Research Background and Problem Statement

The starting point for this research was the stove tile finds from the Ebner House in Banská Bystrica and the multifaceted problems that arose in connection with them (1.1.). This group of stove tiles is particularly valuable for art historical analysis for several reasons: 1. The workshop and its other products are known, allowing for a comparison of the technical characteristics, stylistic and iconographic features of the stove tiles from the Ebner House with other finds from the same workshop as well as with stove tiles characteristic of the region. Additionally, the peculiarities of the compositions can be examined in a broader context, incorporating the question of cultural transfer. 2. The commissioning background of the tiles from the

Ebner House was known (affluent civic milieu), allowing consideration of the economic and cultural factors that may have influenced the decision to include certain images on the stove and stove tiles. 3. The material in question comes from a period when significant changes were occurring in both the motifs depicted and their accessibility and production, which justifies the temporal (1.3.) and spatial (1.4.) boundaries used in the dissertation.

One of my goals with this research was to demonstrate that stoves can also be regarded as unique image carriers (1.2. and 1.5.), which thus serve as special sources for the visual language I aimed to reconstruct or at least present. Therefore, I first had to address the definition of this visual language. Visual culture is part of our cultural identity, which is in constant flux and change; elements not only fade away but new ones are also integrated into the collective consciousness, and knowledge of this shared knowledge is a prerequisite for communication. It is a common language, layered with deliberately chosen (cultivated) elements and adopted, imported phenomena. It provides a foundation for formal and intellectual association, further enriched by the mixing of multiple ideological symbols and the blending of folk beliefs with official religious ideas. It is influenced by social and economic changes, as well as shifts in religious life, which also impact material culture, leading to the creation of new types of objects.

By using stove tiles as sources, we can gain closer insight into late medieval visual thinking and the visual language of the time, and into how thoughts were expressed during the Middle Ages. This is especially true since stove tiles often feature "common" (or profane) pictorial elements that were widely known and understood by everyone.

The scholarly presentation and analysis of late medieval stove tiles, due to the genre of the subject matter, primarily appear in archaeological studies, which mainly consist of reports and material publications focusing on the technology, description, and typification of the finds, and on seeking analogies based on these aspects.

Although art historical perspectives do appear during their processing, they are not predominant, even though interdisciplinary approaches could yield valuable results for the research. Works belonging to the craft arts also fall within the research domain of art history, and they can be approached through stylistic analysis and iconographic perspectives, with the results being interpretable. If, beyond their general cultural significance and clear value as sources for the history of mentalities, we also examine the stylistic characteristics, iconographic features, cultural historical roles, hermeneutic, iconological, and genre historical traits of stove tiles (all of which belong to the classical tasks of art history as a discipline), they can serve as additional sources for cultural history and late medieval (religious) culture as well: objects through which images could enter homes.

Structure and Applied Methods

After defining and justifying the objectives, I presented the research history, its current state, the methodology employed, and my relationship to it in my dissertation (2.). Following the discussion of historical and terminological issues (3.1.), I introduced the finds through which I sought to explore the questions outlined above.

The sources I selected for analysis are stove tiles created between 1470 and 1540 that were found in the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary. These include finds from Buda (specifically the royal palace, 3.2.), Nyitra (materials related to the town hall, 3.3.), Csábrág (finds from the castle, 3.4.), Menedékkő (finds from the Carthusian monastery, 3.5.), Párics (finds from the Perényi family's castle, 3.6.), Ráholca (finds from the castle, 3.7.), Varasd (archaeological materials from the castle, 3.8.), Alsórákos (finds from the former manor house, 3.9.), Beszterce (finds from a town house, 3.10.), and Székelykeresztúr (finds from a manor house, 3.11.). These include works by local Hungarian masters as well as imported works, so the geographical scope of the dissertation is not limited solely to the territory of the medieval Kingdom of Hungary. I also analyze other

significant finds that may have direct or indirect workshop connections, as well as essential artifacts included as analogies. The more than ten finds provide a representative sample of the entire heritage of the Kingdom of Hungary, with the depth of analysis varying depending on whether a detailed examination was possible or if only a brief presentation could be attempted. It may seem that some of the artifacts' descriptions do not bring us closer to the main topic, such as gaining a deeper understanding of profane themes, yet they are still instructive: it appears that the frequency and nature of profane themes on the surviving stove tiles vary by region.

Stove tiles are found in the archaeological record of all types of settlements: monasteries, churches, castles, manorial centers, rural settlements, and urban dwellings alike. Consequently, I aimed to analyze stove tile finds from various contexts, outlining their possible visual programs. I also attempted to reconstruct the background of the patrons and commissioners, demonstrating how these factors influenced the content conveyed by the visual themes and the functions associated with the stoves. The sample aims to provide insight into the typical trends of the Kingdom of Hungary, while also considering the difficulty that stove tiles were not found in situ, as they primarily come from secondary contexts—such as fill deposits—so it is not certain, nor can it be fully proven, that they once actually covered a stove. I discuss them to the best of my knowledge, using stylistic and iconographic methods, and considering the current state of research. Additionally, I explore what is known about stoves specifically in the context of Hungarian visual and written sources.

The potential visual program of the finds is particularly exciting because the representations on the stoves combine multiple worldviews, and their interpretation has been scarcely or only tangentially addressed in research so far. Profane and biblical scenes appear on stoves functioning in both sacred and secular spaces, so their meaning can vary depending on their operational context and may also be nuanced or expanded with new layers of meaning. The same object can serve as a tool for moral edification and education:

depending on the content it conveys, it can be didactic and admonitory like a parable, adopt a mocking-satirical tone, or simply serve as a decorative piece that enriches everyday life. Thus, the interpretation of each scene depends on the given visual context and also on the type of building and space in which the stove was located.

As I mentioned, stoves are connected to both the private sphere and the public space (civic home/town hall), and they are found in both ecclesiastical and explicitly secular spaces (monastery/palace). The Hungarian artifacts feature iconographic themes that have not survived through other genres (or only in very small numbers), while these finds highlight the fact that these scenes were once widely recognized. In describing the finds, I attempted to elucidate their meaning within the artifacts, and in the next larger section, I deal with the appearance of iconographic rarities in other visual themes, as well as their manifestation on other media and in other genres, exploring their possible layers of meaning, and attempting to reconstruct elements of the visual language that suggest a semiotic nature to the problem statement (4.1.). While I placed great emphasis on Hungarian parallels, I also sought to incorporate the most important international examples, pointing out possible sources. Thus, I aimed to contextualize the scenes in the form of individual case studies.

In the dissertation, I also address other objects through which images could have entered homes, indicating the more typical trends both in terms of representations and the question of genre innovations (e.g., serial products), highlighting practices associated with these objects, such as the place of statues and images in private devotion. Accordingly, I outline the most characteristic objects that could be found in households. This may seem like a slight digression from the dissertation's objectives, but it helps to properly contextualize and interpret the visual program that appears on the stoves.

Results

One of the theses in my dissertation (5) is that the influence of engravings led to a demand for higher quality execution, driven by competition among masters and workshops and the desire to meet the expectations of patrons. This demand influenced contemporary workshop practices, as the techniques had to develop to execute the new, higher-quality compositions. I hypothesize that this led to a greater differentiation of work processes, meaning that alongside changes in decoration (with more refined compositions), there was also technical development in execution. In the case of high-quality artifacts, the model maker could have been a sculptor or goldsmith skilled in carving.

The ceramic stove was a defining object in late medieval spaces and, at the same time, a potential carrier of images, which endowed it with additional functions. These functions included organizing living spaces, serving as home decoration, a status symbol, a decoration of symbolic community spaces, and an expression of identity. It also played evocative, educational, and apotropaic roles, served as a visual anthology representing religious and secular knowledge, and even functioned as an advertisement for the stove maker (6). Overall, I aim to reconstruct and analyze these functions and the elements of visual language used in this region (often unknown from other media) in my dissertation.

The stove tiles from the second half of the 15th century and the first half of the 16th century feature impressively varied iconographic themes. The images on these stove tiles mostly align with the visual themes familiar from the Middle Ages, particularly in terms of Christian iconographic solutions, which have survived in greater numbers. Meanwhile, the documentation and presentation of elements belonging to the realm of profane visual culture supplement the corpus of medieval Hungarian art.

As a result, it was important to dedicate a separate chapter to examining the influences that shaped the distinctive visual world of this period, what contributed to its development, and how these

factors impacted workshop practices. Additionally, I aimed to explore what is worth knowing about the characteristics of the relationship between patrons and craftsmen during this time, particularly in the context of the market's operation.

In my dissertation, I sought to prove that glazed ceramic stoves were often expensive heating devices, not accessible to all social strata, and that the complexity of interactions can be observed in the visual language displayed on them. Late medieval traditions—such as the moralizing spiritual trend—meet the Renaissance "sophistication" and the distinctive modernity of the period, characterized by social critique, individual responsibility, exploration, and satire of character mysteries. This is often dressed in humor, satire, or the pursuit of joy and beauty, or coupled with a belief in the malleability of society. In these images, the topos of the "world turned upside down" is often used, and at times, they present mannered solutions.

A new discovery is that the iconographic topos of *mundus inversus* (the world turned upside down) appears to be the most significant when attempting to grasp the shifts in emphasis among the representations. The visual world is permeated by a sense of "nothing is as it seems at first glance": motifs with messages are lost in the foliage ornamentation, everything and everyone turns upside down, and ordinary, familiar, everyday things are turned on their head. Moreover, the window motif also blurs the planes of image and reality, as is characteristic in many genres (such as jewelry, "pop-up" books), where something (a message) is hidden and works with a network of references (the Neidhart reception is also a good example of this). These scenes and genres also become, perhaps not coincidentally, effective tools in the religious disputes and visual propaganda that gained momentum with the Reformation. In connection with stoves, it can also be said that they echo the three-tiered logic of the "green rooms" decoration, where the sacred space, the earthly realm (illustrated with heraldic representations or court scenes), and a series of figures hidden in the ornamentation are distinguishable, except on stoves, where rosettes and figures relegated to marginal status elsewhere receive their own surfaces.

It is also worth pointing to a process that seems to be a recurring phenomenon in the study of individual iconographic themes, leading from the unique to the reproducible and back to the unique, hinting at the formation of a particular intellectual elite. On the one hand, the figures of the world turned upside down appear on works associated with this layer, which explicitly evoke the medieval carnival world. These grotesque figures are fundamentally familiar to us from *drôlerie* and marginal decorations, meaning they typically remain on unique works (such as miniatures and carvings), where the compositions are characterized by not placing these motifs at the center; on the contrary, they may even be hidden: in miniatures, they are concealed in floral ornamentation, while in misericords, they are not in view due to their function, and discovering them on painted wooden ceilings in secular spaces requires effort. The fact that by the end of the 15th century and the beginning of the 16th century, these motifs take central places—on colorful glazed tiles on the upper body of stoves (such as those in Buda, Csábrág, and Párics), as the main subjects on the Liège panel painting, and as themes of numerous engraving series—indicates a significant shift in emphasis. If we examine the parallels, we can see that the change in the position of the images signifies a shift in content emphasis, and alongside the move from marginal positions to the center, there is also a noticeable change in the production of images: from unique works to reproducible images (such as the stove tile and its engraved counterparts). This naturally correlates with the increasing appreciation of handmade products, which become characteristic creations in homes. By the end of the century, however, we return to the "unique," and these scenes also return to their "place," once again being found in hidden, subordinate positions (e.g., on wall tiles).

I believe this difficult-to-define but recognizable phenomenon can be considered a sign of an intellectual elite—not economic or political, but intellectual—of the time (and among its members, we find the wealthy bourgeoisie, open to criticism of the court). As we have seen, there are examples of this in the Hungarian artifacts as well. These works are the imprints of special and cunning (intellectual) games,

the distinctive memories of the iconography of the world turned upside down, which are as comic as they are grotesque. They reveal to us the very human world of medieval folk festivities. This renewal of visual language is connected with the fact that the period had new messages to convey: this is why these visual motifs could become standard tools in the religious debates of the Reformation, which were also very virulent at the level of images, and even played a role in solidifying (German) national identity.

This phenomenon can primarily be explained by historical circumstances and, no less, by the changing status of artworks and the transformation of workshop practices. Although little has been said about it in iconographic analyses, in addition to the Turkish threat, the Reformation (and its precursor) and its impact on the arts are not negligible. These works subsequently use highlighted common, often coarse motifs as tools for Lutheran visual propaganda, as these well-known motifs were understood and spoken by everyone.

Art and the visual world represent a shared spirit, a common form of expression, and language. The creative activities taking place there, the engagement in art in the everyday sense, and even more so, the capacity for reception, taste, and, not least, passivity, speak of the community's mindset. If we collect all artistic forms within a community, we get a cross-section of the community's taste. In this respect, there is no significant difference between locally made and imported artworks (they assimilate). It may be that the object in question was not made locally, yet it is characteristic of the community because it was selected and accepted. This is particularly true for cities, where those leading a bourgeois lifestyle have all their belongings made by someone else (the craftsman they choose), partly according to their own taste, partly by order, and partly conforming to public taste—demonstrating their belonging to the community, indicating that they know, understand, and accept its taste: using the received symbols and templates in their self-definition.

In the dissertation, I sought to show that although the images on stoves were produced by mass production, this very characteristic makes it even more important to include stove tiles in art historical studies. I hope that the analyses in the dissertation will demonstrate the importance of art historical approaches to the imagery on stove tiles and pave the way for further work.

My publications on the subject

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A metszetek hatása a késő középkori kályhacsempék díszítettségére. Adalék a metszetek hatására átalakuló kályhás-műhelygyakorlathoz. In: P. Kovács Klára – Pál Emese (szerk.): Képváltás. Tanulmányok a Fiatal művészettörténészek V. konferenciájának előadásaiból, Kolozsvár: Entz Géza Művelődéstörténeti Alapítvány–Erdélyi Múzeum-Egyesület, 2017, 27–44.

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In: Hafenscher Károly – Isó M. Emese – Zászkaliczky Zsuzsanna
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Luther Kiadó, 2022, 93–106.

*A világi aggodalmaktól a mennyei szemlélődésig: A késő középkori
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– Sebestyén Ágnes Anna – Juhász Gabriella (szerk.): Opus Mixtum
VI. A CentrArt Egyesület évkönyve 2020, Budapest: CentrArt
Egyesület, 2020, 35–46.

*Változás és maradandóság: Az elmúlás és újjászületés képe az erdélyi
templomi berendezéseken.* Credo 25 (2019) 1–2. 92–104.

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Cserépszobrok a magánáhitat szolgálatában. In: Újváry Zsuzsanna –
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Editing

Fabiny Tamás: *Júdás, az elveszett tanítvány.* A képeket válogatta és a
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Ezt cselekedjétek! Tanulmányok az úrvacsoráról. Szerk. Hafenscher
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Selected Conferences

2024. február 29. *A profán forradalma: Képi tematikák a késő középkorból és a reformáció korából*, előadás a Magyarországi Luther Szövetség, az Evangélikus Országos Múzeum és az Evangélikus Hittudományi Egyetem által szervezett a Reformáció öröksége – 2024 című előadássorozaton (Budapest, Evangélikus Országos Múzeum)

2023. június 9: *Nők, bolondok és tánc. A megrendelői attitűdről egy késő középkori kályha képi programja kapcsán*, előadás a Work in Progress: A műalkotás felé vezető út című konferencián (Budapest, PPKE BTK)

2023. május 30: *Az érsek látogatása. A csábrági vár késő középkori kályhájának képi programja*, előadás az *Elitek, udvarházak, kastélyok és paloták életvilágai (Lebenswelten)* című konferencián (Budapest, PPKE BTK)

2019. október 25–27: *Egy gyakori ikonográfiai ritkaságról – Vadember a késő középkori művészetben*, előadás a Fiatal Művészettörténészek VII. Konferenciáján (Nagyvárad)

2019. június 18: *Nézőpontok. Mire gondolhatott az alkotó? Előadás A középkor hagyatéka. Fejezetek a középkori emlékek utóéletéből és recepciótörténetéből* című konferencián (Budapest, PPKE BTK)

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