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AMONG HISTORY AND MODERNITY: THE FORMATION OF THE HUNGARIAN NATIONAL STYLE IN SACRED ARCHITECTURE BETWEEN 1890 AND 1918

MIĘDZY HISTORIAĄ A NOWOCZESNOŚCIĄ: KSZTAŁTOWANIE WĘGIERSKIEGO STYLU NARODOWEGO W ARCHITEKTURZE SAKRALNEJ W LATACH 1890–1918

Abstract

Hungarian architect Ödön Lechner reinterpreted historical and folk motifs, giving them a distinctive Art Nouveau expression. He aimed to develop a new, original architectural language that would convey Hungarian identity and tradition. His approach was followed by architects such as Károly Kós and Aladár Árkay, who further developed the concept of a national style in a national-romantic spirit. This article, based on source analysis, critical review, in situ research, and comparative studies, examines the early phase in the development of the Hungarian national style—prior to independence—using selected examples of sacred architecture. These include the Church of St. Ladislaus in Budapest, the Church of Our Lady of the Snows in Zebegény, and the Fasori Evangelical-Reformed Church in Budapest.

Keywords: Hungarian national style, Art Nouveau in Hungary, national romanticism, sacred architecture

Streszczenie

Węgierski architekt Ödön Lechner reinterpretował motywy historyczne i ludowe, nadając im secesyjną formę. Dążył do wypracowania nowego, oryginalnego języka architektonicznego, który wyrażałby węgierską tożsamość i tradycję. Jego śladem podążyli kolejni architekci, tacy jak Károly Kós czy Aladár Árkay, którzy rozwijali ideę stylu narodowego w duchu narodowo-romantycznym. Na podstawie analizy i krytyki źródeł, badań in situ oraz przeprowadzonych porównań w artykule omówiono początkowy okres kształtowania się węgierskiego stylu narodowego – przed uzyskania niepodległości – na podstawie wybranych przykładów architektury sakralnej, takich jak: kościoły św. Władysława w Budapeszcie, Matki Boskiej Śnieżnej w Zebegény i ewangelicko-reformowany Fasori w Budapeszcie.

Słowa kluczowe: węgierski styl narodowy, secesja na Węgrzech, narodowy romantyzm, architektura sakralna

1. INTRODUCTION

Art Nouveau—a style born out of metropolitan luxury and the spirit of modernity—in Hungary was transformed into a means of returning to cultural roots: folk ornamentation,

nature-inspired forms, and the myth of a spiritual national community. Ödön Lechner, a visionary architect—who wrote that a Hungarian formal style must be created—adapted the international Art Nouveau style by giving it a local character and, most importantly, a semantic dimension imbued with nation-building significance. This path was followed by subsequent architects and ideologues—Károly Kós, Aladár Árkay, and István Medgyaszay—who sought, within the walls of sacred architecture, a language for the soul of the nation.

This article presents selected findings from a broader research project on national styles in sacred architecture at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries in Central Europe. The study employs a historical-interpretative methodology, drawing on techniques such as source analysis and criticism, in situ research, and comparative analysis. The article aims to capture the moment of emergence and crystallisation of the Hungarian national style in sacred architecture between 1890 and 1918—a period during which this style was still taking shape in opposition to academic historicism and under the influence of national-romantic ideas.

The first part of the article outlines the ideological and aesthetic foundations of this movement—its sources, aims, and inherent paradoxes. The second part—a case study—focuses on three selected sacred buildings that illustrate the processes of synthesising tradition and modernity: the Church of St. Ladislaus in Budapest, the Church of Our Lady of the Snows in Zebegény, and the Fasori Church. This study is based on an analysis of form, material, symbolism, and ornamentation, while also posing a deeper question: What does sacred architecture become when it ceases to be merely a space for prayer and begins to serve as a space of identity?

It was precisely in this “in-between”—between history and modernity, between the sacred and the national community, between art and politics—that one of the architectural paradoxes of turn-of-the-century Central Europe took shape.

2. ART NOUVEAU AS A HUNGARIAN NATIONAL STYLE

The emergence of Art Nouveau in the 1890s was a response to the prevailing historicism of the second half of the 19th century. Its creators—primarily associated with the wealthy, cosmopolitan bourgeoisie of Europe’s major metropolitan centres—sought to develop an entirely new style. Intended to be international in character, it rejected historical references and instead drew inspiration from nature and geometry. This approach was particularly evident in cities such as Paris, Brussels, and Vienna.

However, the cosmopolitan ideals underpinning Art Nouveau proved difficult—if not impossible—to implement in societies striving for independence. In these ethnocentric communities, styles emerged that are historically classified as part of national romanticism. While they shared with Art Nouveau a similar approach to ornamentation—its role and formal principles—as well as an emphasis on stylistic originality and a rejection of academic historicism¹, they fundamentally differed in one key respect: unlike the cosmopolitan character of Art Nouveau, they aimed to “reflect the soul of the nation”². In addition to drawing on local

¹ M. Omilanowska, *Nacjonalizm a style narodowe w architekturze europejskiej XIX i początku XX wieku* [in:] D. Konstantynów, R. Pasieczny, P. Paszkiewicz (eds), *Nacjonalizm w sztuce i historii sztuki 1789–1950*, Instytut Sztuki Polskiej Akademii Nauk, Warszawa 1996, pp. 152–153.

² B. Janszky, *A magyar formátörékvések története építészetünkben: 1894–1914*, Közlekedési Nyomda, Budapest 1929, pp. 3–4.

flora and fauna, these styles also took inspiration from historical architecture—and perhaps most significantly, from vernacular art and folk architecture, which they reinterpreted in a new symbolic form³.

Such a situation occurred in Hungary⁴. The resulting style came to be known as the Hungarian national style⁵, national Art Nouveau⁶, or simply Hungarian Secession⁷. Its creator is considered to be the architect Ödön Lechner, who wrote: “There was no Hungarian formal language, but there will be. Because there must be”⁸. He also emphasised that the sources of a national style should be sought in folk art, which the educated urban society needed to rediscover and understand anew: “We must learn this Hungarian folk style as we would a language (...). We must uncover its principles, we must immerse ourselves in its particular spirit, so that we, as cultured people, may carry the spirit of these forms into larger, more advanced, and even monumental architectural tasks of the present day”⁹. This approach echoed the methods of Finnish national romanticism¹⁰.

In addition to drawing inspiration from vernacular architecture, the creators of the Hungarian national style also looked to historical architecture. In the work of Károly Kós, one can observe strong influences of Transylvanian Gothic, while Ödön Lechner referred to the Gothic of central Hungary, combining it with Indian, Moorish, and Persian motifs¹¹. This was a deliberate reference to the Hungarian national myth, which traced the ancient Indo-Persian origins of the Magyars. Throughout these designs, Secessionist ornamentation was interwoven—motifs inspired by local flora and fauna, as well as patterns drawn from Hungarian folk art.

3. ANALYSIS OF SELECTED BUILDINGS – CASE STUDIES

This section analyses three buildings: the Roman Catholic Church of St. Ladislaus in Kőbánya, Budapest, by Ödön Lechner; the Church of Our Lady of the Snows in Zebegény, a collaborative work by Károly Kós, Béla Jászky, and Dénes Györgyi; and the Evangelical-Reformed Fasori Church in Budapest, attributed to Aladár Árkay. These examples represent three distinct approaches to the Hungarian national variant of Art Nouveau. Ödön Lechner drew heavily on national history and myth-making narratives; Károly Kós turned to the vernacular architecture of Transylvania¹², while Aladár Árkay reinterpreted historical and folk motifs, transforming them into Secessionist ornamentation inspired by national heritage.

³ M. Omilanowska, *op. cit.*; B. Jászky, *op. cit.*

⁴ Apart from Hungary, such a solution was implemented in Finland, Estonia, Latvia and Catalonia, among others.

⁵ Hun.: *magyar nemzeti stílus*.

⁶ Hun.: *magyar szecesszió*.

⁷ Hun.: *nemzeti szecesszió*.

⁸ Ö. Lechner, *Magyar formanyelv nem volt, hanem lesz*, “Művészet” 1906, no. 1, p. 2.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 6.

¹⁰ *Ibidem*, p. 7.

¹¹ K. Gellér K., *Romantic elements in Hungarian Art. Nouveau* [in:] N. Gordon Bowe (ed.), *Art and the national dream: The search for vernacular expression in turn-of-the-century design*, Irish Academic Press, Dublin 1993, p. 119.

¹² Until the end of his life he considered Transylvania to be Hungarian territory.

3.1. THE ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH OF ST. LADISLAUS IN BUDAPEST (HUN.: *KŐBÁNYAI SZENT LÁSZLÓ-TEMLOM*; DESIGNED BY Ö. LECHNER AND O. TANDOR, 1893)

Towering over Kőbánya—the 10th district of Budapest—the Church of St. Ladislaus initially appears from a distance to be a Neo-Gothic structure. However, upon closer inspection, one begins to notice architectural details inspired by Oriental architecture, along with elements that do not correspond to any historical style, featuring folk, biomorphic, and even amorphous ornamentation¹³.

The original Neo-Gothic design of the church was developed by Elek Barcza. The unsatisfactory outcome led to the commission being handed over to Ödön Lechner, who presented several revised versions. The monumental character of the planned structure, combined with its dedication to St. Ladislaus—one of Hungary's main patron kings—led the architect to introduce national references into his design—replicating solutions from the parallel project for the Museum of Applied Art in Budapest¹⁴. As a result, the Church of St. Ladislaus became one of the first buildings—alongside the Museum of Applied Arts—constructed in the Hungarian national style¹⁵.

In his design, Ödön Lechner replaced the Neo-Gothic stone elements with national Secessionist ceramic details made at the Zsolnay factory¹⁶, with references to the Middle Ages as well as Oriental, folk, and Art Nouveau art¹⁷. The sculptures of angels crowning the wimperg, the capitals of the columns, the roof tiles of the buttress bend, the pinnacles, the balustrade balusters, the crockets, and the richly carved ridge tiles of the roof ridges and hips all took Art Nouveau forms (Ill. 1). The tympanum fields above the entrances take the shape of horseshoe arches alluding to Oriental architecture (Ill. 2). Also in the interior, the capitals and ornaments of the columns and vaulting shafts take on Art Nouveau forms (Ill. 3). The interior decoration was designed by Ottó Tandor¹⁸.

St. Ladislaus Church is one of the first buildings built in the Hungarian National Style—a manifesto of the Lechner style—showing how oriental and folk forms can create a modern and yet historically rooted sacred space.

¹³ J. Sisa, *Lechner: az alkotó Gényusz*, Iparművészeti Múzeum, MTA BTK Művészettörténeti Intézet, Budapest 2014, p. 23.

¹⁴ *Ibidem*.

¹⁵ Maintaining the pre-imposed Neo-Gothic style of the block.

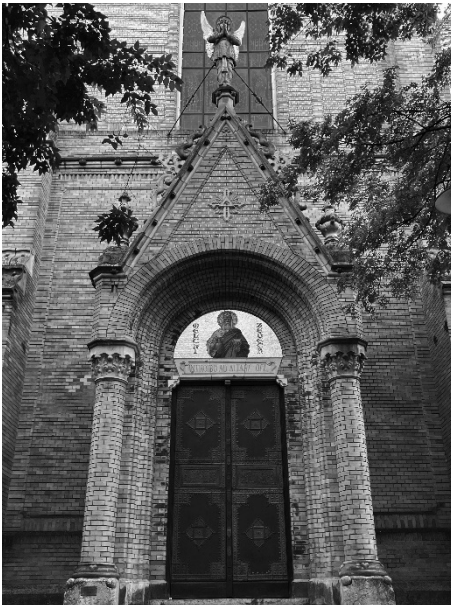
¹⁶ D.Y., *A kőbányai Szent László templom*, “Magyar Gényusz” 1899, no. 16, p. 242.

¹⁷ J. Sisa, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

¹⁸ D.Y., *A kőbányai Szent... op. cit.*, pp. 241–242.



Ill. 1. Church of St. Ladislaus in Budapest – detail of the wimperg with the sculpture of an angel, crockets, pinnacles, and the roof tiles of the buttress bending into Art Nouveau forms (photo by author, 2024)



Ill. 2. Church of St. Ladislaus in Budapest – detail of the side portal, with a tympanum in the shape of a horseshoe arch and details in Art Nouveau forms (photo by author, 2024)



Ill. 3. Church of St. Ladislaus in Budapest – detail of the vaulting shafts (photo by author, 2024)

3.2. ROMAN CATHOLIC CHURCH OUR LADY OF THE SNOWS IN ZEBEGÉNY (HUN.: *ZEBEGÉNYI HAVAS BOLDOGASSZONY-TEMLŐM*; DESIGNED BY K. KÓS, B. JÁNSZKY, AND D. GYÖRGYI, 1908–1910)

At the beginning of the 20th century, the Danube village of Zebegény became a popular summer resort for the inhabitants of Budapest, located 60 km to the south. The summer residents set up a committee to build a new Roman Catholic church. In the spring of 1908, Károly Kós was commissioned to design the church. He had architecture students assigned to assist him, Béla Jánszky and Dénes Györgyi, whose families owned summer houses in Zebegény. Construction started back in 1908 and was completed in 1910¹⁹. In 1914, the interior of the church was decorated with frescoes in the Hungarian National Art Nouveau style, designed by Professor Aladár Körösfői-Kriesch and executed by students of the Hungarian School of Applied Arts under the supervision of assistant György Leszkovszky²⁰.

The original plan envisioned a small neo-Romanesque church built of stone. Ultimately, however, the Church of Our Lady of the Snows in Zebegény was designed in the Hungarian Art Nouveau style, characterised by a vernacular aesthetic. The limited budget available to the architects compelled them to seek out and employ more affordable materials. They did not hesitate to use and openly display these materials, believing it would be a sin to imitate more expensive ones with cheaper substitutes²¹.

The church was given the plan of a small three-nave basilica with an apse, based on medieval village churches. Károly Kós designed a simple façade, with natural stone rustication only in the plinth and on the buttresses, while the rest were to be plastered (Ill. 4). The main entrance on the axis of the nave leads through a stone archivolt portal, decorated with geometric and floral reliefs (Ill. 5), above which are five windows with trapezoidal finials, providing light to the gallery. Between and above them, an Art Nouveau ornament inspired by geometric, folkloric, and biomorphic patterns intended to be scratched into the plaster—but only realised in 2010, on the basis of designs by Károly Kós²² (Ill. 6). The asymmetrical form of the façade was achieved by placing only one tower—on the axis of the side aisle²³—whose final shape was designed by Béla Jánszky²⁴. The gable roof over the nave is separated from that over the side aisles by a narrow band of windows. The side aisles are illuminated by large semicircular windows.

Inside, the naves are separated by massive columns with simple cushion capitals decorated with amorphous shapes. The architects introduced a double roof structure in the church: a proper outer truss and an inner ceiling truss with facets replicating the roof angle. The internal structure is based on double wooden beams, between which there are facets made of gypsum boards, crossed by a horizontal ribbon of windows²⁵. Károly Kós also designed the main altar, pulpit, pews, and stained glass²⁶ (Ill. 7).

¹⁹ A. Gall, *Kós Károly*, Holnap Kiadó, Budapest 2019, p. 59.

²⁰ It is most likely that their design was not consulted with the architects, and certainly not with Károly Kós; after: *ibidem*, pp. 59–62.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

²² *Ibidem*, p. 59.

²³ Originally it was supposed to be on the left side, then it was moved to the right side.

²⁴ *Ibidem*, p. 62.

²⁵ *Zebegényi római katolikus templom* [in:] Kós Károly Virtuális Archívum, <https://kos.bparchiv.hu/hu/alkotasok/zebegenyi-romai-katolikus-templom> (access: 10.07.2025).

²⁶ *Ibidem*.

The church in Zebegény combines material locality, simplicity of form, and national ornament—offering an example of how national style can express a rural community and spirituality that is rooted in everyday life.



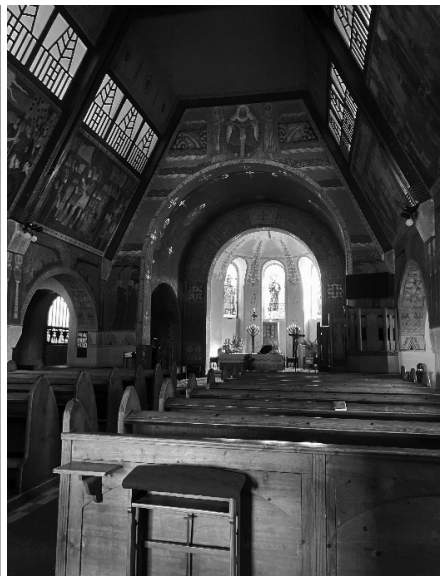
III. 4. Church of Our Lady of the Snows in Zebegény – front elevation (photo by author, 2024)



III. 5. Church of Our Lady of the Snows in Zebegény – detail of the main portal (photo by author, 2024)



III. 6. Church of Our Lady of the Snows in Zebegény – detail of the plaster decoration (photo by author, 2024)



III. 7. Church of Our Lady of the Snows in Zebegény – interior view (photo by author, 2024)

3.3. THE EVANGELICAL-REFORMED CHURCH OF FASORI IN BUDAPEST (HUN.: *FASORI REFORMÁTUS TEMPLOM*; DESIGNED BY A. ÁRKAY, 1911–1913)

Preparations for the construction of the Evangelical-Reformed Church on Városligeti Fasor lasted more than a decade. Funds were raised, and as many as three architectural competitions were held, but all were inconclusive. The design was finally entrusted to architect Aladár Árkay in 1911, who developed it in less than two months. In August of the same year, construction began and was completed two years later, with the church being put into use on 1 May 1913²⁷.

The church was designed on a central plan, similar to a Greek cross inscribed in a rectangle, with a reinforced concrete dome over the intersection of the naves. The adopted solutions are the architect's free reinterpretations of historical and vernacular architecture, as well as folk and biomorphic ornaments. The front elevation was given an asymmetrical form, with a tall square tower on the left (Ill. 8–9) and a much lower semicircular tower on the right. On the axis is a massive canopy portal with a parabolic archivolt, supported by two pillars flanked by a row of massive columns (Ill. 10). The canopy is covered with Zsolnay majolica tiles decorated with Hungarian folk motifs (Ill. 13). Above the portal is a large semicircular window, above which is a small pentaphorium with parabolic arches²⁸.

The interior is centred around the pulpit, with a conch canopy decorated with the same tiles as the main entrance portal, in front of which an altar was set up for the commemoration of the Lord's Supper (Ill. 11). Above the porch and the arms of the transept, empora were placed for the worshippers, giving the church more than 1,000 seats, while an organ gallery was placed in the fourth arm of the cross. The plinth part of the walls in the interior is decorated with monochrome terracotta tiles featuring folk and biomorphic motifs. Floral and folk ornaments appear on the plaster and interior furnishings (Ill. 12). A chandelier hangs from the centre of the dome²⁹.

The Reformed Church of Fasori is an example of the synthesis of tradition and modernity: on the one hand, it draws on Hungarian folk ornament and community symbolism, and on the other, it operates with modern techniques and simplified forms, engaging in dialogue with modernism.

²⁷ A. Árkay, *Az új ref. templom a Városligeti-fasorban*, "Építő Ipar" 1913, no. 27, p. 293.

²⁸ *Ibidem*.

²⁹ *Ibidem*, pp. 293–296; *Idem*, *A fasori református templom*, "Magyar Építőművészet" 1913, no. 6.



III. 8. Fasori Reformed Church in Budapest – view of the tower with the side elevation (photo by author, 2024)



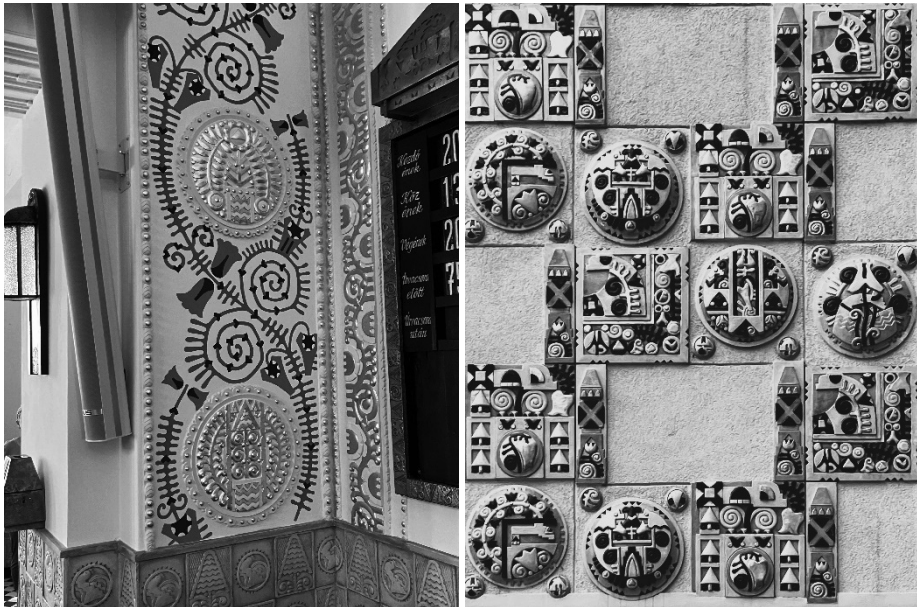
III. 9. Fasori Reformed Church in Budapest – view of the tower with the front elevation (photo by author, 2024)



III.10. Fasori Reformed Church in Budapest – detail of the main entrance portal(photo by author, 2024)



III.11. Fasori Reformed Church in Budapest – interior with a view of the pulpit and organ gallery (photo by author, 2024)



III. 12. Fasori Reformed Church in Budapest – detail of the interior ornament and terracotta tiles of the plinth (photo by author, 2024)

III. 13. Fasori Reformed Church in Budapest – detail of the tiles of the portal and of the canopy of the pulpit (photo by author, 2024)

3.4. COMPARISON

St. Ladislaus Church, designed by Ödön Lechner, is a clear manifestation of the national style—the monumental volume combines Gothic layouts with Art Nouveau and oriental details. The architect replaced Neo-Gothic elements with folk and oriental Zsolnay ceramic ornaments, creating a completely new quality—a sacred space that is modern yet deeply rooted in national tradition.

In contrast, the church in Zebegény, the work of Károly Kós and his colleagues, is a more intimate realisation in the spirit of National Art Nouveau with a vernacular character. Working with a limited budget, the architects deliberately used modest materials and forms inspired by medieval village churches. The building is characterised by simplicity and asymmetry, with subtle decoration representing a stylisation of folk designs.

The Church of Fasori, designed by Aladár Árkay, is an example of the conscious synthesis of national style and modernity. The composition is based on a central plan. The simplified forms and the use of reinforced concrete give the building a modernising touch. The decorative elements inspired by folk ornamentation carry national content but remain subordinated to the functionality and symbolism of the Protestant community. The Church of Fasori demonstrates that the national style can be both a carrier of identity and a dialogue with modern aesthetics.

4. EPILOGUE

Contrary to the cosmopolitan “international” Art Nouveau, which lasted from around 1890 to 1905 and disappeared as quickly as it emerged, Hungarian Art Nouveau, as a Hungarian national style continued and developed until the end of the Second World War, as evidenced by the religious buildings designed in the 1920s by Aladár Árkay, and in the 1930s by Bálint Szeghalmy and Rezső Csaba. There was progressively less reference to historical architecture, while more vernacular and Art Nouveau-Modernist architecture was created. This is also evident in the style names used, which were increasingly referred to as Folk Style,³⁰ or Folk Art Nouveau³¹.

5. CONCLUSIONS

The Hungarian national style in sacred architecture between 1890 and 1918 is not only a unique synthesis of historical, folk, and modern forms but also an expression of the deep need to build national identity through art. The transformations that took place during this period show how architecture can become not only a place of worship but also a vehicle for memory, community spirit, and the expression of national pride. Buildings such as the churches in Budapest and Zebegény are testimony to the fact that the national style in Hungary was not a fad but a sustained movement that shaped local architecture and culture for decades. This unique tradition shows that history and modernity can coexist and complement one another, creating a space where the spirit of the nation finds its material expression.

Translated by Joanna Striker

³⁰ Hun.: *népies stílus*.

³¹ Hun.: *népies szecesszió*.

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