

# Art around 1900 in Central Europe

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Before 1900

History painting  
and its context

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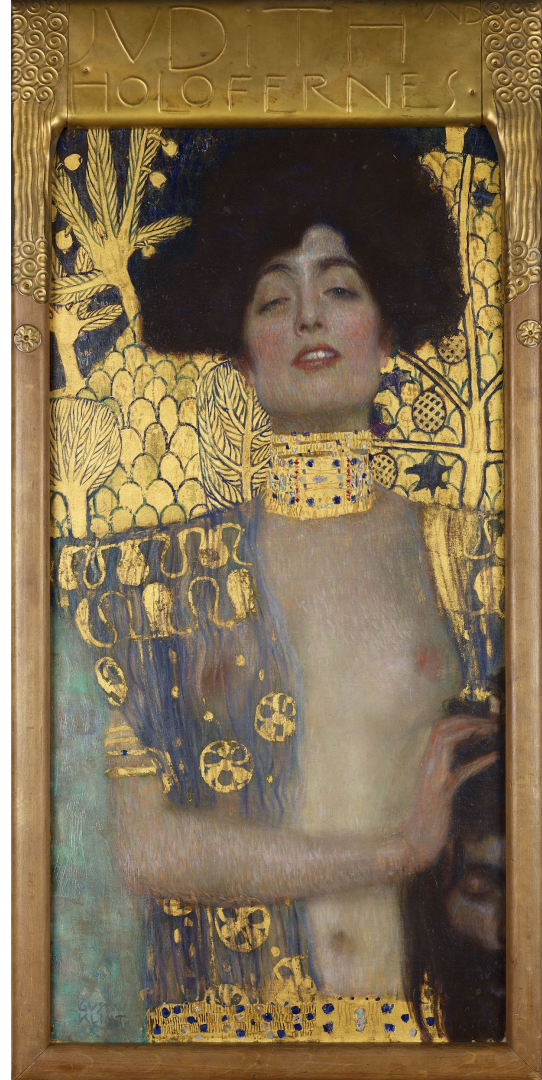
# Art around 1900 in Central Europe

In this popular culture series we will examine one of the most inspiring moments in the history of European culture.

The turn of the 19th and 20th century was a **special period for the art of Central Europe**, with various artistic trends occurring in a short time and an intensified cultural exchange between countries politically connected with the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

We will deal with paintings, architecture and sculpture, but also other important cultural phenomena, such as international exhibitions and art collections. We present a panorama of the **Belle Époque** by comparing artists from Central European countries.

Gustav Klimt (AT), *Judith and the Head of Holofernes*, 1901, Österreichische Galerie Belvedere, Vienna



# Central Europe around 1900

In this series we focus on the art and culture of: **Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, Poland, Hungary, Croatia and Slovenia.**

Around 1900, most of these countries were non-sovereign states part of **the Austro-Hungarian Empire.**

The Empire, although being a multi-national and multi-cultural society, had a strong independence of its constituting countries.





We should note that the present borders of Hungary, Austria, Czechia, Slovakia, Slovenia and Croatia in their entirety were part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

Poland, on the other hand, was divided among three countries in 1795: Russia, Prussia (after 1871 known as Germany) and Austria.

The art and culture of this region formed a whole, however we can still see distinct differences between the individual countries.



Map of Europe before 1914



# Everyday artistic life

The second half of the 18th century ignited the **modern age of European art history**.

The practices known to us today, such as: professional sales, public commissions, art shows and vernissages, as well as modern art critique (texts printed in everyday gazettes), were established prior to the 1840s.

Art shows were considered “temples of art”, but were at the same time considered a common pastime.



Wincenty Kasprzycki (PL), *Fine Arts Exhibition in Warsaw, 1828*,  
National Museum in Warsaw

# Academies of Fine Arts

Academies of Fine Arts became an integral part of everyday culture.

Without completing a degree at an academy, it was near impossible to make a **career as a professional artist**.

Martin Ferdinand Quadal (AT), *Life drawing room at the Vienna Academy*, 1787,  
Academy of Fine Arts Vienna





The education system based itself on tradition and respecting **artistic conventions**. It stressed the role of **composition and drawing** as the most important element of painting.

**Former masters** were particularly recognized (especially Renaissance painters) and were treated as examples for latter generations of artists. An important element of the learning process was copying their works of art.

We will discuss this in more detail in the following presentations.



Henryk Siemiradzki (PL), sketch to *Christian Dirce* (detail), before 1897, National Museum in Warsaw

# Academic Art

A large premise of Academic Art was **striving for ideal mimicry** (mimesis) of nature scenes to the point that paintings would “fool” viewers into believing they are realistic representations. Artists painted with the utmost detail, taking care to perfect the finish of the paint layer itself.

The rules and conventions of Academic Art were taught at all Fine Arts academies in Europe, and paintings of this style were displayed at galleries across the continent.

The main epicentre of this style, however, was **France** – primarily the Paris Salon.

Henryk Siemiradzki (PL),  
*Christian Dirce* (details), 1897,  
National Museum in Warsaw







Henryk Siemiradzki (PL), *Christian Dirce*, 1897,  
National Museum in Warsaw



**Historical** antiquity and **mythological** themes held a special place in Academic Art.

In the hierarchy of topics, historical painting was at the top and other topics (i.e. landscape) were considered less important.



Hans Makart (AT), *Charlotte Wolter as Messalina*, circa 1875, Vienna Museum





Mato Celestin Medović (HR), *Bacchanal*,  
1890, Modern Gallery in Zagreb

# History painting

History was considered the “goddess” of the 19th century. The **cult of the past** was refined, and events of former epochs (i.e. the Middle Ages) were considered key to explaining the history of a specific country.

Wojciech Gerson (PL), *Casimir the Restorer Returning to Poland*, 1887,  
National Museum in Wrocław





The “Golden Age” of historical painting was between **1840-1900**.

The cult of the past perfectly matched the assumptions of the historical topics of academic painting.

It should be added that “historical painting” in the broad sense – a painted representation of events from the past – existed since antiquity and continues to this day.

Viktor Madarász (HU), *Felicián Zách*, 1858,  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

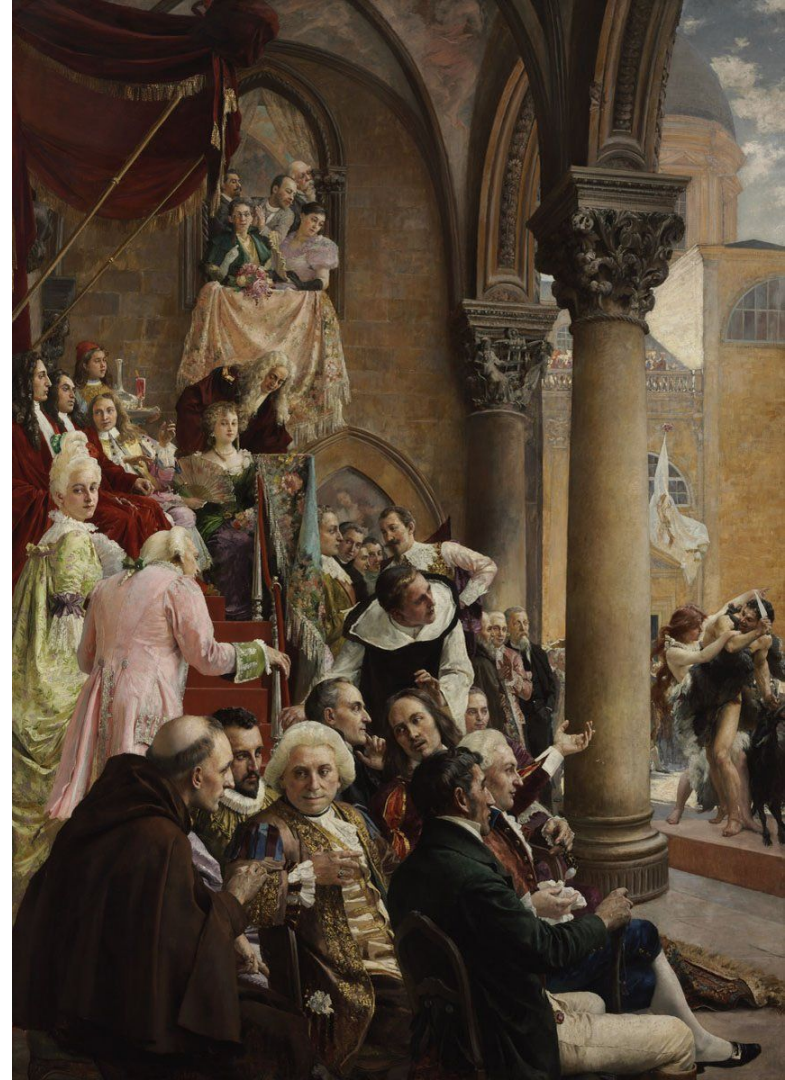


The decline of historical painting came with the advent of impressionism and realism, although for some time (between 1870-1914) these styles coexisted.

With the emergence of new trends, the principles of academic (and therefore historical) painting were seen to **tightly constrain the artistic individuality of artists.**

Moreover, the **very perception of the form of art changed:** for example, the colour or way paint was applied. The form, per se, no longer served a thematic topic but was treated as an autonomous factor.

Vlaho Bukovac (HR), *Dubravka*, 1894,  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest





# How to “read” historical painting

Although historical painting may seem incomprehensible for us now, a few assumptions help us understand almost every work.

First – the **story**. It was usually a less popular scene from a well-known event or story, centred around one character the viewer could identify with.

Second – the painting itself was constructed so that the viewer could **feel the time continuum of the entire event** (i.e. could guess what happened and what was about to happen). This “summary” was referred to as the “most fruitful moment”.



Václav Brožík (CZ), *Tu felix Austria nube* (detail),  
1896, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Václav Brožík (CZ), *Tu felix Austria nube*,  
1896, Kunsthistorisches Museum, Vienna



Third – a **historical anecdote**. These were scenes that could be read through the emotions of the characters (i.e. death, parting, greeting), that could emotionally move the viewer.

Fourth – **use of simple painting tricks**. To help viewers understand the work, techniques like contrasts (i.e. the “bad hero” has an unpleasant appearance while the “good” one is pleasing to the eye) and simple compositions were used.

Fifth – care for **historical realities**. Costumes or props need to appear real, and preferably similar to those from the given era.



Jan Matejko (PL), *Military boots from 18th century, second half of 19th century*, National Museum in Cracow

In this example we will show how Hungarian painter Bertalan Székely uses these principles.

Although we don't know the whole story, we can guess what happened. As the couple was running away, their horse had died. The pursuit is drawing near. The woman asks her beloved to kill her – she does not want to fall into the hands of enemies at any cost.

Bertalan Székely (HU), *Mihaly Dobozi and his wife*, 1861, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest





The painter does not depict the murder itself, only suggests it. We see the woman is pointing to her exposed breast and the man is wielding a knife.

The decision is difficult and quick – the chase is coming. We can assume that after killing his wife, the hero will also lose his own life.

Bertalan Székely (HU), *Mihaly Dobozi and his wife* (detail), 1861, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



The main characters are presented as noble. We see this through their expression and embrace, as well as the bright sky above them.

The Turks, in turn, are shown as a swirling mass of attackers, engrossed with fire and dark smoke – symbols of destruction.

We do not need to know the entire historical context (and even the story itself) to accurately understand this image.

Bertalan Székely (HU), *Mihály Dobozi and his wife* (detail), 1861, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest







Certain stories have been depicted numerous times, often by different painters.

Viktor Madarász (HU),  
*Dobozí*, 1868, Hungarian  
National Gallery, Budapest

This picture focuses on the tragic escape of the presented heroes. Darkness plays a symbolic role – in a moment the couple on the horse will be engulfed by darkness and will lose their lives.

Many of the methods used by painters in the 19th century have turned out to be universal.

An example is modern movie posters. They often present the main characters and their stories in such a way that is clear to all viewers “at a glance”.

A couple embracing, while an imminent threat nears. This motif can be found on many posters.





# Historical painting of Central Europe vs. the rest of the continent

Historical painting was very successful in Central Europe. In the case of **nations deprived of statehood** in the 19th century, i.e. Poles, Czechs, Hungarians or Croats, it played a central role.

We will look at examples of these more closely.

Wojciech Gerson (PL), *The Assassination of Przemysł II in Rogoźno*, 1881, National Museum in Warsaw



There are three main ways of linking the past and present through historical painting that are often seen in individual paintings.

First – the **glorious past** used as an argument in discussions with other nations. This was shown especially for nations that were dependent on others (i.e. Poland towards Germany, or Hungary towards Austria).

Józef Brandt (PL), *Departure from Wilanów of John III Sobieski and Marysienka* (detail), 1897, National Museum in Warsaw







Józef Brandt (PL), *Departure from Wilanów of John III Sobieski and Marysienka*, 1897, National Museum in Warsaw

Second – providing nations deprived of statehood with **historical role models** (i.e. outstanding figures from the history of Poland as role models for Poles in the 19th century).

Third – **past events combined with contemporary history** (i.e. the eternal struggle between Hungarians and Austrians).

Moreover, the artist could navigate in **various emotional registers** – from lofty moments and moralizing examples to anecdotes from the lives of famous people.

Vlaho Bukovac (HR), *Gundulić's Dream*  
(detail), 1894, Modern Gallery in Zagreb







Vlaho Bukovac (HR), *Gundulić's Dream*,  
1894, Modern Gallery in Zagreb



Václav Brožík (CZ), *Master John Huss before the Council of Constance*, 1883, Brožík Assembly Hall, Old Town Hall, Prague



This is especially visible in Hungarian historical painting. In the 1860s it strongly emphasized patriotic and anti-Austrian themes, while post 1867 (following the Austro-Hungarian Compromise) it lost interest in them.

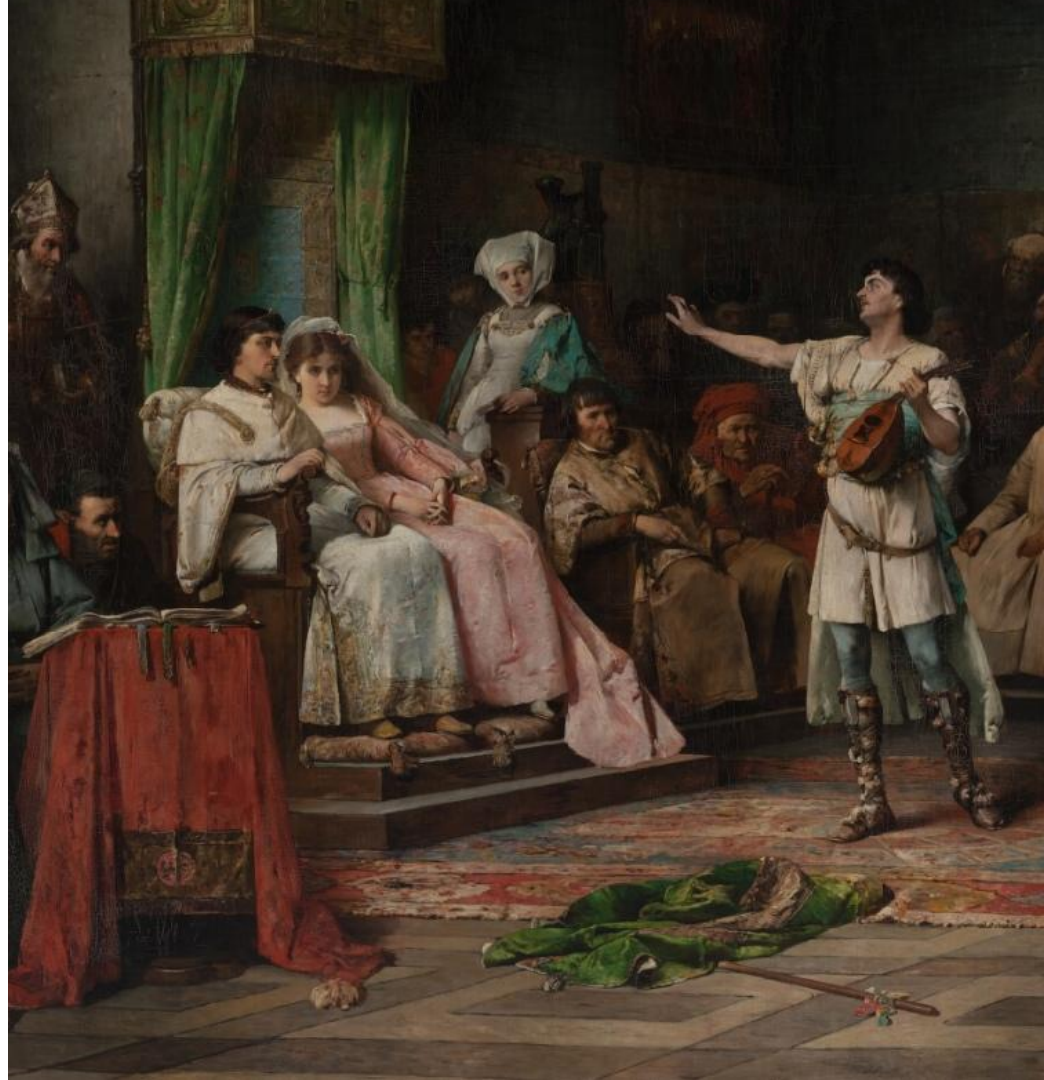
Meanwhile in Poland (mainly due to Jan Matejko), historical painting remained the most important genre until the beginning of the 20th century.

Jan Matejko (PL), *Poisoning of Queen Bona Sforza*, 1859, National Museum in Cracow



It is worth emphasizing the **special status** historical painting held in in Central Europe. It was a reference point for other styles and artistic directions and the painters themselves enjoyed enormous social prestige.

Now we move on to the most important themes (central to all the referred to nations) that determined historical painting in this part of the continent.



Václav Brožík (CZ), *Ballad Singer*  
(detail), 1882, National Gallery Prague



Václav Brožík (CZ),  
*Ballad Singer*, 1882,  
National Gallery Prague



The **illustrated press** was an important medium through which paintings were more widely popularized (outside individual countries).

The woodcut shown here is a reproduction of a painting of the Balkans by a Czech painter found in a Polish magazine.



Dziewice hercegowińskie, porwane przez Bashi-bazouków. Obraz Jaroslava Čermáka.

Woodcut based on Jaroslav Čermák's (CZ) work entitled *Herzegovinian girls kidnapped by Bashi-bazouks* and published in Polish illustrated magazine „Kłosy”, 1875



# Part of Latin Civilization

One very important topic was the emphasis on the **eternal belonging to the European civilization**. A presence in Europe was manifested on an equal basis with other nations, even if some were larger and more powerful than others (i.e. Austria compared to Hungary).

The best way to show this was through Christianity – a symbol of European civilization. A **baptism of a medieval ruler** symbolized the initiation of a given nation to the European community, all while showing it has been a part of it for a long time.

Gyula Benczúr (HU), *Baptism of Vajk*, 1875,  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



In the painting by Gyula Benczúr we see the baptism of the Hungarian prince Vajk, who then took the name Stephan. He became the first Hungarian king and saint, and a symbol for the beginning of the Hungarian statehood.

According to legend, Vajk was baptized by Adalbert of Prague.

In the background we see the Holy Roman Emperor, Otto III. It is not confirmed whether he was present at Vajk's baptism, but it was he who became Stephan's ally in his coronation efforts.

Gyula Benczúr (HU), *Baptism of Vajk*, 1875,  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest





In the painting by Jan Matejko, the main character of the painting, the Polish prince Mieszko, points to the cross – a symbol of Christianity.

His entire court is being baptized and images of pagan gods are being destroyed.



Jan Matejko (PL), *Christianization of Poland in Anno Domini 965*, 1889, National Museum in Warsaw



# *Antemurale Christianitatis*

Historical paintings in Central Europe also showed the roles these nations played in **defending the continent against the Turks**.

**Invasions by the Ottoman Empire** between the 15th and 17th centuries were one of the main geopolitical problems and were considered a threat to the entire European Christian civilization.

Sándor Wagner (HU), *Self-sacrifice of Titusz Dugovics*,  
1859, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest





The images were more-or-less symbolic. It was emphasized that Poles, Hungarians and Croats defended Austria. For example, Hungarian heroes became important figures for the entire Habsburg Monarch as they defended not only their own nation, but the entire empire.

What's interesting, wherein the siege dominates the paintings, Hungarians, Poles and Croats were not presented as attackers, but as defenders of their own countries.



Ferdinand Quiquerez (HR), *Antemurale Christianitatis* (a study), 1892, Croatian History Museum, Zagreb

Ferdinand Quiquerez showed the personification of Croatia (seen through the white and red Croatian chessboard on the shield), which alone defended Europe (symbolized by Dante in a characteristic red robe) against the Turks.

This painting shows that as Croatia took on the full burden of defending Europe, literature and science had the opportunity to develop in other countries across the continent.



Ferdinand Quiquerez (HR), *Antemurale Christianitatis* (a study), 1892, Croatian History Museum, Zagreb



Sándor Wagner (also known as Alexander von Wagner) showed the sacrifice of Titus Dugovics during the Turkish siege of Belgrade in 1456.

At a critical juncture, as the attackers are breaking through the walls, Dugovics lunges out pushing them down with him.

It is uncertain whether Dugovics really existed. Nonetheless, he has become a symbol of the readiness to sacrifice one's own life in defense of the nation.

An important symbol in this painting is the jagged Hungarian flag. It indicates the siege was difficult and has lasted for some time requiring a persistent struggle.



Sándor Wagner (HU), *Self-sacrifice of Titusz Dugovics*, 1859, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

Defending against the Turks (a metaphor for all enemies) was not only a matter for the nobility, knights, or soldiers, but for all.

During the siege of Eger in 1552, women were involved in the fight due to a need for more soldiers.

In the painting by Bertalan Székely, the contrast between the noble women in bright robes against the burning sky is extremely important.

This scene not only presented the heroism of the women, but also showed that during critical moments, all citizens must do their part to defend the nation.

Bertalan Székely (HU), *Women of Eger*, 1867,  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest





During the battle of Trembowla in 1675, doubt creeps in the ranks of the defenders against the Turkish attackers.

In a difficult moment the commandant's wife, Zofia Chrzanowska, takes command and personally leads the people against the attackers.

Here we see a woman not only supporting a just cause, but also taking initiative and assuming the role of commander.

This illustration shows the culmination of the story – Chrzanowska is about to enter battle, and inspired by her actions, the people will soon join her.



Postcard with reproduction of Aleksander Lesser's (PL) painting, series "Polish Female Heroes", 1906, National Library in Warsaw

# The Battle of Vienna

The **Battle of Vienna** of 1683 holds a special place in the representations of the struggle against the Turks.

The then capital of the Habsburg Empire, and one most important cities of the continent, was threatened. The battle was of great geopolitical importance – the Ottomans were never able to repeat such a bold offensive in Europe.

The event was therefore seen not only as the defense of Vienna, but a decisive victory in the eternal struggle of Western civilization with the Turkish threat.



Jan Matejko (PL), *King John III Sobieski sending Message of Victory to the Pope, after the Battle of Vienna* (detail), 1882–1883, Vatican Museums



Jan Matejko's painting is full of symbolic details emphasizing the decisive role of Polish troops under the command of King Jan III Sobieski – presented as a defender not only of the Habsburg Monarch, but also of the entire Latin/Roman Catholic civilization.

The work was painted for the 200th anniversary of the battle and was presented to the Pope in 1883.



Jan Matejko (PL), *King John III Sobieski sending Message of Victory to the Pope, after the Battle of Vienna, 1882–1883*, Vatican Museums





dove – symbol  
of the Holy Spirit

rainbow – symbol  
of God's covenant  
with the people

Sobieski (middle) hands a letter to the  
Pope, with the words "Venimus,  
Vidimus, Deus vicit" ("We came, we  
saw, God conquered") – paraphrasing  
the words of Julius Caesar

the Emperor taking off his  
hat before Sobieski

the flag considered to be the Prophet's  
Banner (it accompanied Turkish  
leaders during military expeditions) –  
captured and placed at the feet of the  
winner

Jan Matejko (PL), *King John III Sobieski sending Message of Victory to the Pope, after the  
Battle of Vienna, 1683*, Vatican Museums



# „Dolazak Hrvata” and „honfoglalás”

In Hungarian and Croatian painting, an important theme was the semi-legendary moment of the **arrival of these ethnic groups in Central Europe.**

The paintings show the peaceful nature of the occupied area. The artists also emphasize the given nations had lived in the area “since the beginning”.

Ferdinand Quiquerez (HR), *The Arrival of the Croats at the Shores of the Blue Sea*, 1870,  
Croatian History Museum, Zagreb



Josip Franjo Mücke (HR),  
*The Arrival of the Croats*, 1867,  
Croatian History Museum,  
Zagreb





Oton Iveković (HR),  
*The Croats' arrival at  
the Adriatic Sea*, 1905







Mihály Munkácsy (HU), *Conquest [Settlement of the Hungarians in Hungary]*, 1893, Collection of Hungarian Parliament, Budapest



# Defeat as an announcement of rebirth

In the historical painting of the 19th century, **moments that influenced the history** of individual nations were emphasized.

The scenes presented conveyed a deeper message, and not only show how past events impacted the lives of the people. Symbolic analogies and predictions of the future were searched for within them.

Bertalan Székely (HU), *Battle of Mohács*  
(detail), 1862, Hungarian National Gallery,  
Budapest



Bertalan Székely (HU),  
*Battle of Mohács*, 1862,  
Hungarian National  
Gallery, Budapest





A good example are the depictions of the **Battle of Mohács** in 1526.

The Hungarian army was defeated in the battle with the Turks, and King Louis II of Hungary fell in battle.

In the absence of his heir, Austria took over some of the lands under the king's rule, while others were occupied by the Turks for many years.

This marked the end of the independent Kingdom of Hungary.



Soma Orlai Petrich (HU), *Discovery of the Body of King Louis II* [after Battle of Mohács], 1851, Debrecen Reformed College

The paintings not only show scenes from the battles themselves, but also refer to the **discovery of the body of Louis II** as the death of a king was a symbol of the end of statehood.

In terms of composition, they touch upon representations of Christ being taken down from the cross and placed in the tomb. Thus, it was suggested that Hungary like Christ, would one day rise again.



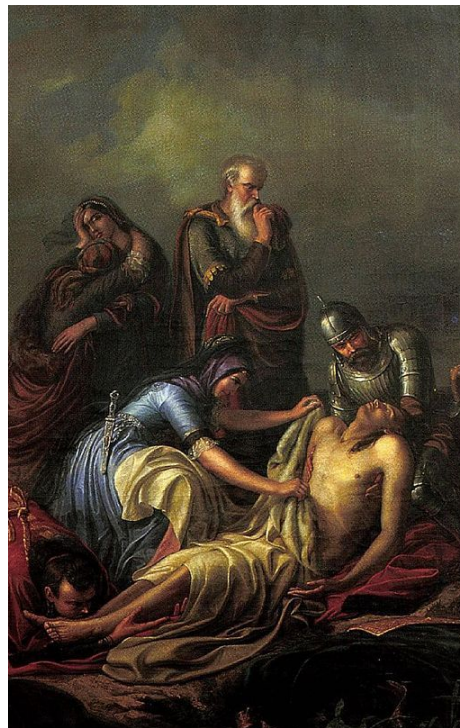
Bertalan Székely (HU), *Discovery of the Corpse of King Louis II after Battle of Mohács*, 1860, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



Caravaggio, *The Entombment of Christ*, ca. 1602–1603, Vatican Museums



Peter Paul Rubens, *Descent from the Cross*, ca. 1617–1618, Hermitage Museum, Saint Petersburg



Soma Orlai Petrich (HU), *Discovery of the Body of King Louis II [after Battle of Mohács] (detail)*, 1851, Debrecen Reformed College



Bertalan Székely (HU), *Discovery of the Corpse of King Louis II after Battle of Mohács (detail)*, 1860, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

# Symbolic resistance – collective scenes

**Building an analogy** between historical events and the contemporary situation of the audience was especially important in the absence of political sovereignty of a given nation, such as Poland.

We see this in the painting by Wojciech Gerson. The message is very clear. The Germans invaded the Slavic lands under the pretext of Christianization, however in reality they enslaved the pagans and destroyed their villages. The Slavs putting up no resistance, were innocent victims.

The historical analogy was clear – in the 19th century, the Germans behaved towards the Poles in the same way as they did towards the Slavs.



Wojciech Gerson (PL), *The Lamentable Apostolic Mission (German apostolic mission on Polabian Slavs's land)* (detail), 1866, National Museum in Cracow





Wojciech Gerson (PL), *The Lamentable Apostolic Mission (German apostolic mission on Polabian Slavs's land)*, 1866, National Museum in Cracow

The history of the Hussites (Czech political and religious movement in the 15th century) was a model for successive generations of Czechs in the struggle for their political independence.

In the painting by Mikoláš Aleš we see the various social groups belonging to the Hussite camp. Thus, it is pointed out that Hussitism was not only a matter of select individuals, but a broader movement.



Mikoláš Aleš (CZ), *Hussite camp*,  
1877, National Gallery Prague



# Symbolic resistance – heroism

As mentioned earlier, a key element of historical painting was a presenting a **specific hero** with whom the audience could identify with.

In other words, characters from the past were meant to be **role models** for today's audience. By pointing to specific heroes and their behaviours it was possible to encourage similar attitudes and actions.

Bertalan Székely (HU), *King Ladislaus the Posthumous and Ulrik Cillei* (detail), 1870,  
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest





Bertalan Székely (HU), *King Ladislaus the Posthumous and Ulrik Cillei*,  
1870, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



In Hungarian painting, the like of **László Hunyadi**, the son of the national hero John Hunyadi and an active figure in political life (1431–1457) emerged.

Sentenced to death by King Ladislaus the Posthumous, László Hunyadi's fate was considered unfair and undeserved. In effect, this led to the exile of the king.

In the painting we see Hunyadi saying his farewell to his friends and accepting his fate with no resistance. He does not know, however, how significant his death will be.

Hunyadi is the perfect hero to show how an innocent death can ignite the beginning of a political movement against a foreign ruler.



Gyula Benczúr (HU), *László Hunyadi's Farewell*, 1866, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

Viktor Madarász's painting depicts the **mourning for László Hunyadi**.

The story is seen as a symbolic reference to the Hungarian war of liberation of 1848–1849, where the Hungarians were defeated by the Austrians.

The main painting trick emphasizes the contrast between the white shroud that covers the body of our hero and the darkness of the interior of the church and weeping women giving the impression that the entire surroundings are in mourning.



Viktor Madarász (HU), *Mourning for László Hunyadi*, 1859, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



In the 19th century, this work was known as the **Hungarian Pietà**.

Indeed, “Pietà” refers to the representations of the Virgin Mary mourning the body of Christ, most often seen resting on her lap.

Here, next to László Hunyadi's body, we see his mother and beloved.

As in the case of King Louis II, the death of László Hunyadi was an allusion of a resurrection of the nation.



Viktor Madarász (HU),  
*Mourning for László  
Hunyadi*, 1859, Hungarian  
National Gallery, Budapest



Jusepe de Ribera, *The Pietà*,  
1633, Thyssen-Bornemisza  
National Museum, Madrid

The painting shown here depicts two leaders of the **Zrinski-Frankopan Conspiracy** – an unsuccessful attempt to overthrow the Habsburg rule in the 17th century. The heroes shown were brothers-in-law.

Captured and awaiting death in a Viennese prison, the scene shows their last conversation. There is no despair. They are content with their fate and convinced of the rightness of their actions.

The artist points that the desire to end the Habsburg domination united the people. The long-fought resistance against the Austrians in Hungary and Croatia always existed, though was not always successful. The painting here was interpreted as a reference to the war of liberation of 1848–1849.



Viktor Madarász (HU), *Petar Zrinski and Fran Krsto Frankopan in the prison in Vienna*, 1864, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



**Ilona Zrínyi** was the daughter and niece of Petar Zrinski and Fran Krsto Frankopan.

For three years (1685–1688) she led the defence of the Palanok Castle in Munkács – the last unoccupied fortress by the Austrians, and a symbol of Hungarian resistance.

Thanks to this, Ilona Zrínyi became a Hungarian national heroine.



Viktor Madarász (HU), *Ilona Zrínyi in the castle of Munkács* (detail), 1859, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

The painting by Viktor Madarász depicts a scene where the heroine is forced to surrender the castle.

The painting also shows her son – the then young **Francis II Rákóczi** – who would later become the leader of the war of liberation of 1848-1849.

Thus, the artist symbolically shows that although the Hungarian resistance to the Austrian sometimes ended in failure, it was a matter that connected successive generations.



Viktor Madarász (HU), *Ilona Zrínyi in the castle of Munkács*, 1859, Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest



## Anecdote from the lives of famous people

Apart from political events themselves, one of the themes of historical painting were scenes from the lives of important figures – but not necessarily presented in a heroic way. Often these events were considered to be legends.

It was more so about showing interesting, sometimes anecdotal, events of their lives. **Stories with a strong emotional charge** were used, i.e. the fate of lovers.

Wandalin Strzalecki (PL), *John III Sobieski and Marysienka* (detail), 1881, National Museum in Warsaw



**Zygmunt August's** mother, Queen Bona Sforza was opposed to her son's relationship with **Barbara Radziwiłłówna**.

Although the wedding in the end did take place, Barbara soon died leaving her husband in deep mourning.

This 16th century story was one of the most famous love stories in Polish history, and became extremely popular in the 19th century.

Jan Matejko (PL), *Sigismund Augustus and Barbara at the Radziwiłł court in Vilnius*, 1867,  
National Museum in Warsaw





The painting by Jan Matejko shows the seemingly happy couple in an embrace. However, on the canvas we see the details that foreshadow their tragic end.

Queen Bona looks at the lovers with distrust, implying she will become an obstacle for their love.

A shooting star, or comet, is a symbol of impending misfortune.

Jan Matejko (PL), *Sigismund Augustus and Barbara at the Radziwiłł court in Vilnius* (detail), 1867, National Museum in Warsaw



Józef Simmler (PL), *Death of  
Barbara Radziwiłł*, 1860, National  
Museum in Warsaw





According to legend, **Šimon Lomnický**, a Czech writer from 1552-1623, was forced to beg on Charles Bridge in Prague after losing his property.

In the painting, we see the curiosity of other beggars, as they cannot believe that such a man is begging alongside them. In the background, we can see wealthy passers-by looking at him with contempt.

The artist portrays Lomnický as a figure completely unsuitable for the job he had devoted himself to. This underlines the drama of the moment in which he has found himself.



Jaroslav Čermák (CZ), *Šimon Lomnický on Charles Bridge in Prague*, 1853, National Gallery Prague

# History painting's afterlife

As mentioned previously, the decline of historical painting took place around 1900, and lost its importance after the First World War.

The works, however, are permanently ingrained in the culture of Central European countries and continue to **shape the collective imagination**.

In Poland, Jan Matejko is still considered one of the most famous painters and reproductions of his works are illustrated in school textbooks to this day.

In addition, in June 2020 one of Matejko's paintings achieved a record price on the Polish auction market.



Polish banknotes – images of Polish rulers inspired by Jan Matejko's (PL) *Gallery of Polish kings and princes*



Shown here – the Jubilee  
Hungarian banknote from 2000.  
On the back we see a fragment of  
the painting, “Baptism of Vajk”  
by Gyula Benczúr.



# About the Authors

## Jakub Zarzycki, PhD

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