

VISUAL DOCUMENTS IN THE NATIONAL LIBRARY'S COLLECTION OF POSTERS AND SMALL PRINTS THE PAST AND THE FUTURE OF THE GRAPHIC POSTER COLLECTION



The visual world rules present-day civilized man's life to an ever-growing extent: It is almost a commonplace that we live in a visual society. In the competition stemming from the accelerated flow of information, the fastest and most effective communication is visual. The highly subtle printed and electronic press, and especially the Internet, offer a huge daily outpour of still and motion pictures. It goes without saying that these channels of communication are now in operation in the field of culture as well. What is the position of the visual world of the past in this environment? This is the question that the presentation of the collection's visual documents and some recent developments try to address. Special attention is paid to the collection of posters, a type of document that in its own age also counted as the pioneer of visual communication. It often met its function at a high artistic level, taking over streets and other public spaces.

VARIOUS VISUAL DOCUMENTS

Due to its collection scope, the National Széchényi Library's Collection of Posters and Small Prints owns nearly 150 thousand printed visual images from the cultural and historical past and everyday life of Hungary, mostly using applied graphic techniques.¹ The list starts with cuts and lithographs collected from 1711 onwards, as the first copies were donated to the national library by the founder, Ferenc Széchényi. Special prints, the so-called guilds' charters and certificates of mastership, which are also complete with cuts, constitute a small but precious section of our collection. Beside their printed texts, these documents feature 18th and 19th century pictures of Hungarian towns. Graphic prints reflecting and accompanying everyday life show a wide variety. The most important types are calendars, dance cards, leaflets, bills and a smaller number of obituaries. The nearly thirty thou-

sand ex-librises grasp the visual and graphic world of a number of famous artists' and procurers. There are such rarities as well in our collection as the book illustrations of Miklós Borsos, and our portrait collection boasts various historical personalities' and artists' graphic images.

The most distinct and most important section of our visual documents is made up of nearly eighty thousand posters, constituting the largest collection of its kind in Hungary. It is to be noted that although there are several acclaimed artists among the creators of posters and other graphic documents, our collection does its selection according to criteria of librarianship rather than artistic quality. Thus, all documents that belong to our collection scope and arrive as deposit copies from printing houses or through other channels (e.g. purchase, donation or exchange) are entered.

Due to current events and future plans, one section of the above listed collection of visual documents will be given special attention.

GRAPHIC POSTER COLLECTION: CATALOGUING, DIGITISATION AND DISPLAY

First, let us take a brief overview of the graphic posters collection from the beginnings to our days, as it may be useful. Since the first graphic poster created by Gyula Benczúr went into print in 1885, this document type has been added to the national collection's range. However, it is only since the 1920s or 30s that considerable numbers have been arriving at the library as deposit copies.

The economic background to the development of Hungarian poster production, and especially of commercial posters, was brought about by the industrial development following the 1867 Compromise, and later by the interwar economic consolidation. Graphic posters with political and other purposes have always

¹ 1 The Collection of Posters and Small Prints has been an independent collection of the library since 1935. Its collection scope embraces small prints and graphic documents printed inside Hungary after 1711, as well as Hungary-related small prints and graphic documents produced abroad. Small prints are defined as publications of maximum 16 pages in length, are printed or multiplied using other technologies. The collection owns about 3.5 million such documents.

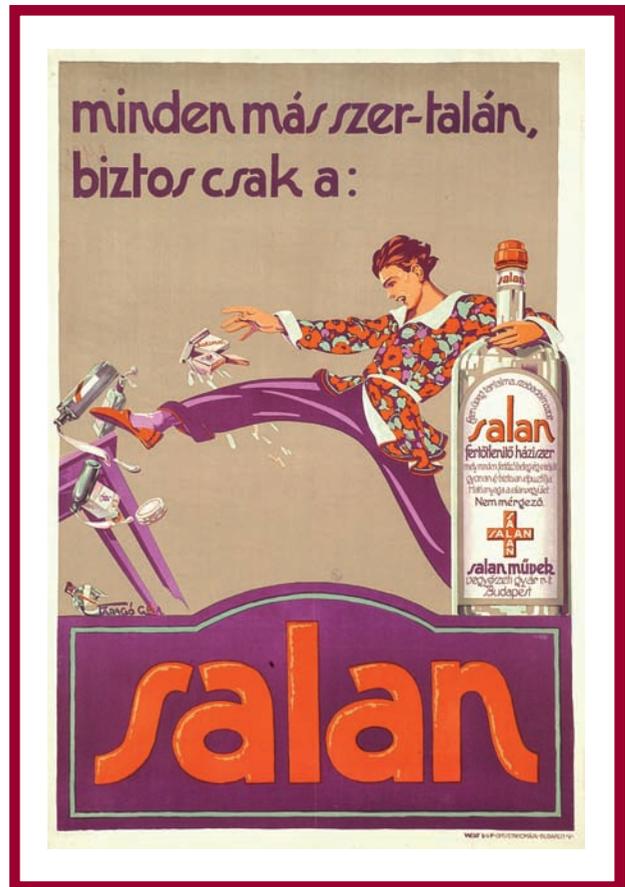
been churned out at the rate and in quantities depending on historical and social events. Anyhow, it is a fact that historical and political events have invariably helped the emergence of posters with such content. The abundance of this genre is characteristic from the 1950s onwards due to extensive nationalisation and the centralisation of political power. Nevertheless, the genre of commercial and occasional posters managed to survive. The first period of the poster collection was devoted to acquisitions; systematic organisation work started only in the mid 1920s. This is when the material on theatres and music was taken out, and a collection focusing on World War I and the proletar-dictatorship was created.

The gradually more extensive systematic collection was accelerated in these years. Processing was launched in the mid-1930s; the first batch to be put into alphabetical order was the Hungarian artists' autographed posters. By 1942-43 the selection and the yearly grouping of the full material accumulated up to that point had been completed. The more thorough processing of posters took place only after World War II.

The title description of posters, with annotation and grouping in the Universal Decimal Classification was started in the 1950s led by Piroska Munkácsi. As a result of this project, in 1961 the first bibliography of graphic posters in the collection was published.² In processing, it has become possible to stock the material in a much simpler system, according to a numerical order increasing by year, a system still used for the stock-taking of graphic posters. Thanks to our predecessors' conscientious work, the card catalogue contains titles and nearly complete descriptions of posters in the collection from 1885 up to 1995 in alphabetical order, using the Universal Decimal Classification. The more recent material is still under organization and cataloguing.

A new chapter in processing is opened up by on-line catalogues and databases. In NSZL special collections, data for incoming current and old documents are to be recorded in the so-called AMICUS system. This requirement, however, is impossible to meet for certain collections, even in the case of current material.

It might be a shocking statistic for readers that our full collection grows by at least 32 thousand independent documents each year,³ which is close to the figure in the core collection. It is clear that its processing and description in AMICUS cannot be done by a small staff. It is a major challenge for the management and



Géza Faragó: Salan: Disinfectant for the home
Lithograph, 63 x 95 cm. Weiss, Budapest, 1928.
(NSZL Collection of Posters and Small Prints, PKG 1928/132)

staff of the Collection of Posters and Small prints to make descriptions of older materials accessible in the library's online catalogue. Several non-visual (i.e. verbal) sections of the collection have been processed in AMICUS as the 1848-49 and the 1956 special collections. Small prints of a few pages in length published since 1850 accessible in the online catalogue have been constantly growing in number. Despite strenuous work, no more than about one per cent of the full stock (about 15 thousand items) has been processed over the past year and a half. How is the problem of visual documents in the collection related? It is related because a priority list has had to be set forth for processing. The collection of graphic posters (about 80 thousand items) is one of the main visual stocks in NSZL. It is also a major consideration that in Hungary this is the most complete collection of graphic posters. Because of their attractiveness and significance in art history and culture, they are among the most researched and most frequently supplied

² See: Az Országos Széchényi Könyvtár Grafikai Plakátjai 1914-ig [Graphic Posters of the National Széchényi Library to 1914.] (ed.: Munkácsi Piroska). Budapest, OSZK, 1961.

³ The exact figure for growth in 2007 is 32,290 items.

documents in our collection. It is due to these deliberations that the present management of the collection has decided to place considerable emphasis on this section in coming years.

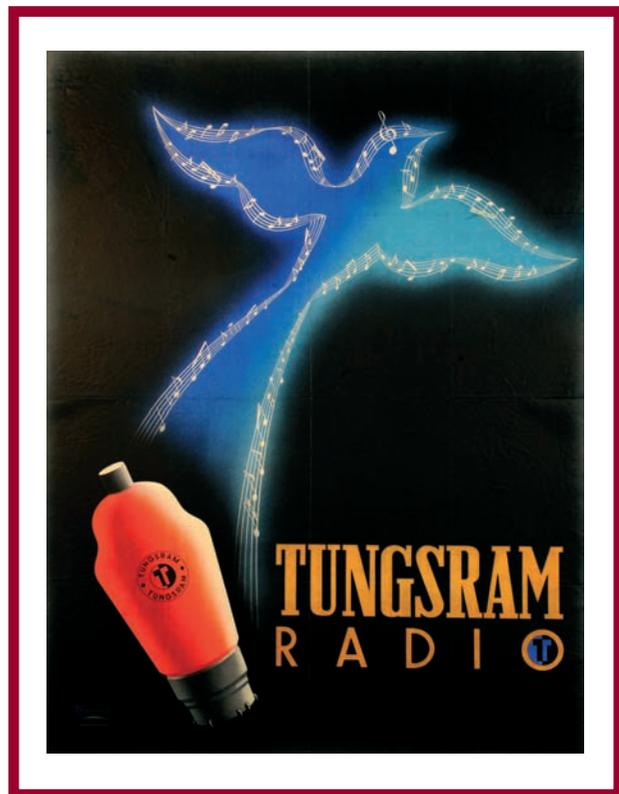
In the framework of a tender (Hungarian 'Digital Visual Library') with the help of outside staffing, in the last quarter of 2008 we were able to record data (using retro-conversion) in our online catalogue for 3040 old Hungarian graphic posters. As a result, our home page makes the 1885-1926 section of the NSZL's Hungarian graphic posters accessible to the public. Related to this tender, but using the institution's stock protection budget, digital copies are made of the some three thousand items mentioned. This step has been necessitated by the fact that the single copy posters, frequently requested by scholars, museums and the public alike, require urgent protection. This form of stock protection has advantages for both users and the librarian. The old slides made of posters that readers have been using are now faded and have lost their original colours. Providing digital images within the library is a major step forward towards higher quality standards. In addition, with digital copies we can stop supplying fragile original documents, a usual practice so far due to the poor quality of photos. Digital versions are easy to supply at any time, without having to move their originals.

It is our hope that in the not so distant future, low-resolution digital images of the mentioned posters can be attached to the items in the online catalogue, thus making the user's search even easier and more effective.

Our graphic posters are on regular loan to top Hungarian museums and public collections (e.g. the Hungarian National Gallery, the Castle Museum, the Museum of Ethnography, etc.). It is a sign of wide-ranging interest that Hungarian masterpieces in our poster collection are reckoned with on the international level as well. For example, the Spanish Museu Valencià de la Il·lustració i de la Modernitat (MuVIM) is to hold an exhibition of modernist art posters from 24th September to 29th November 2009, presenting 103 original graphic posters from the NSZL Collection of Posters and Small Prints. In Valencia, the Spanish public will encounter works by such deservedly famous Hungarian painters and graphic artists as Tibor Pólya, Róbert Berény, Lajos Kassák, Sándor Bortnyik, István Irsai, György Konecsni, and Gyula Macskássy.

Related to the exhibition, a trilingual catalogue will be issued, in Spanish, English and Hungarian, which will include the photos on display, as well as an introductory study and other papers, and contemporary reviews. This publication will later be available in Hungary too. The Hungarian experts requested by

the Spanish partner are art historian Dr. Katalin Bakos and Professor Dr. László Scholz, who originally initiated the exhibition. Owing to their help and cooperation, as well as to successful negotiations, the exhibition enables our library's collection of posters to be introduced to the international public. The size, expected level and professional background of the exhibition in Valencia give us the inspiration to show the material to the Hungarian public as well. This will take place in the year 2010, when the catalogue may



Gyula Macskássy: Tungsram radio
Lithograph, 125 x 95 cm. Athenaeum Budapest, 1942
(NSZL Collection of Posters and Small Prints, PKG 1942/181)

also be launched. The Hungarian exhibition is expected to have the title *Modern Hungarian Posters 1925-1942*. In the meantime, we intend to raise Hungarian visitors' interest by offering a virtual exhibition on the NSZL homepage at the time of the Spanish event.

In conclusion, it may be said that due to the cataloguing and digitization described, the future of a valuable, although small part of the collection of graphic posters seems safe. We have similar long-term plans for the remaining tens of thousands of graphic posters. If we manage to realize these plans, problems related to an important partial collection will be solved. Spreading information about collections will be made possible by Internet-based virtual exhibitions, major exhibitions inside and even outside Hungary and by

top quality publications. The future of the 125-year-old art of poster-making and its largest collection in Hungary is in our hands. It is our responsibility to recognize the potentials of the most up-to-date channels of communication rather than to shy away from them. In fact, even more is to be done. In addition to earning decision makers' goodwill, using modern means of visual communication, primarily the worldwide web, we should convince the general public of the justification for presenting the visual world of the past.

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