
Conflicting Narratives: Commissioned vs. Non-Commissioned Art

Holocaust-related art created in Hungary during the communist period fell into two distinct categories: state-commissioned or non-commissioned, i.e., initiated by the artists themselves without state involvement. (Lacking an art market, there were no private commissions.) This division goes deeper than the mere sponsorship of the works: it concerns the actors, their motivations and approach, as well as the meaning, scale, and material of the works. I have already analyzed non-commissioned works in depth elsewhere, therefore only a short characterization of the differences of the two groups of works will be provided here before examining the major state-funded projects in greater detail.¹

Non-commissioned works exploring the theme of the Holocaust were almost exclusively created by Jewish survivors, whereas to my knowledge, none of the artists contracted for early state-funded art projects had a Jewish background. The personal experience and interest evident in the first group of artists was mostly lacking in the second, which had a clear effect on the works. It cannot be said for certain whether the choice of non-Jewish artists for the commis-

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sions was a conscious one. However, taking into account the different approach manifested in their works, this choice might have indeed been intentional. Artists without a personal link to the Holocaust might have been more susceptible, more willing to follow the suggested historical narrative than survivors of the Holocaust, who could have insisted—as they did in their non-commissioned works—on depicting or reflecting upon their own personal experience.

Comparing the two types of works, non-commissioned ones attest to a plurality in their style and artistic approach, while commissioned works occupy a narrower spectrum, subscribing to more traditional forms of realism and figuration. The scale of the works differs as well: state-funded projects—such as memorials, as well as paintings conceived of as a representative means of decoration—tended to be monumental in size, while non-commissioned works tend to be smaller and more intimate, befitting the space of artists’ studios. (While a few non-commissioned, small-scale sculptural models exist, the creation of monumental sculptures was a state monopoly.)

In terms of meaning and message, non-commissioned works visualize the victims’ perspective; they focus on commemoration, some even raise the question of the perpetrators’ responsibility. Contrarily, state-commissioned works tend to visualize official memory politics, that is, the antifascist historical narrative. They emphasize the antifascist fight and its heroes, namely the communists, overshadowing the victims of genocide. Consequently, figures depicted in the commissioned works often assume an active role as opposed to the passivity of those in the non-commissioned works.

Introduction: Official Memory Politics and State Funded Projects

This study examines official memory politics, in particular the earliest state-funded Hungarian art projects related to the memory of the Holocaust during communism. These include the erection of a Hungarian memorial in Mauthausen (1955/1958–64), the art collection commissioned for the permanent Hungarian exhibition in Auschwitz (1964–65) and the exhibition titled Hungarian Artists Against Fascism, organized in 1965 at the Hungarian National Gallery in connection with the congress of the International Federation of Resistance Fighters (FIR). All of these endeavors shared certain characteristics. First, none of the projects stemmed from popular domestic or political initiatives to commemorate the Holocaust; rather the initial calls always came from—or at least were connected to—foreign organizations and institutions. Secondly, these projects