Lessons from Objects: Designing a Modern Hungarian Childhood 1890-1950

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Abstract

Art and architecture assisted Hungary's delivery into modern Europe, and many Hungarian designs of the early twentieth century invoked the child rather than the adult as the ideal citizen. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Hungarian designers, design reformers and the Ministry of Culture and Education expressed national identity through design, emphasizing objects and spaces for children as a key element in defining a national culture. This research unfolds a vital dimension of Hungarian culture by examining a selection of objects and spaces—nursery designs, children's clothing, school architecture, the Budapest Zoo and book illustrations—made for Hungary's children during different periods of the last century. Working in partnership with the Iparművészeti Múzeum—the Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest—as well as several public and private collections across Hungary, I researched a number of important children's designs that helped to shape the lives and experiences of twentieth century Hungarian children. Central to my research is how social and political forces shaped designs and how these designs helped children identify as Hungarian citizens. Looking at five material case studies, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which designers negotiated issues of Hungarian identity, tradition, and modernity.

Keywords

Hungarian design and architecture, material culture of childhood, objects and education, national identity, applied art, national romantic style, nationalism and childhood

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Art and architecture assisted Hungary’s delivery into modern Europe, and many Hungarian designs of the early twentieth century invoked the child rather than the adult as the ideal citizen. Throughout the first half of the twentieth century, Hungarian designers, design reformers and the Ministry of Culture and Education expressed national identity through design, emphasizing objects and spaces for children as a key element in defining a national culture. This research unfolded in 1890. - William Kennedy Laurie Dickson, Thomas Edison’s assistant, built the first modern motion-picture camera called the Kinetograph. 1891. - Thomas Edison receives patent for wireless telegraphy. - The world’s first permanent movie theatre designed as a venue for showing motion pictures opens in Buffalo, New York. 1898. - George Albert Smith releases single scene short "Santa Claus" (6). Shoe horned into half the Museum of Modern Art’s design department, “Designing Modern Women 1890-1990” is a confusing exhibition but an excellent conversation starter. Organized by Juliet Kinchin, curator, and Luke Baker, curatorial assistant in the department of architecture and design, the show presents design objects by more than 60 women, many of whom collaborated with male partners. Some, like Marianne Brandt and Eileen Gray, are well known to design aficionados. But most will be unfamiliar to a general audience, and there are none whose influence and fame rival that of any number of well