Gambling on Genius: Károly Kotász, *Stormy Landscape with Blue and Red Figures* (c.1928)

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Collection: Birmingham Museums Trust

How is artistic success made, and what does it take to make it last? This article tells the story of a disabled Hungarian artist, who was once a star of galleries in Berlin, London and Paris. His painting *Stormy Landscape with Blue and Red Figures* was donated to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 1940.

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'If only one had the courage – and the spare cash – to gamble on genius!',exclaimed Trevor Allen, art critic of the *Daily Chronicle*, after viewing the exhibition of Károly Kotász (1872–1941) organised at the Abbey Gallery, Westminster, in 1928.[1] Allen was enraptured by the art of the Hungarian painter, who 'exults in a riot of colour and atmosphere' and 'can get beauty out of an old lady standing by a flock of geese in sunny, windy weather, and dynamic drama out of peasants battling against a scirocco.'He compared Kotász's self-portrait to Van Gogh's, hinting at a broader similarity between the two painters: outsiders while alive, both were destined for worldwide fame once their trailblazing genius was recognised after their death. In Van Gogh's case that had already happened – in Kotász's it was due to happen 'twenty, fifty years hence', when, 'perhaps, collectors will be chasing Kotászes as now they chase these others.'It was, however, for the better that Allen did not put his money on that possibility. Today Kotász's name is barely known even in his native Hungary, and completely forgotten everywhere else. Yet, for a few years in the 1920s and 1930s, Kotász was an international phenomenon: besides London, shows of his work were organised in Berlin, Paris (several times), Rome, Milan, Turin, Brussels, and Amsterdam, amongst others. His paintings were sought by collectors such as the conductor Arturo Toscanini, Count Pallavicini, and Baron Rothschild.[2] In 1929 one of his paintings was purchased by the French government for the Musée du Luxembourg.[3] In 1930 the Uffizi Gallery in Florence accepted his self-portrait into its prestigious collection of artists' self-depictions.[4]

Although Kotász's fame has waned, his once-great popularity is evidenced by his paintings in public collections all around Europe.[5] The landscape gifted to Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery in 1940 by a certain John Roberts is one example. As evidenced by its brief object files, it has not been displayed ever since, and has not featured in any publications apart from catalogues of the collection.[6] In this regard, the painting at Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery is typical; today Kotász's works are rarely on view. Yet, if we care to listen, they

tell an intriguing story: the story of a reclusive, disabled man who conquered the international art scene while never leaving his hometown. They pose provocative questions about the transitory nature of fame, the role of institutions in artistic success, and the external factors that influence us when we think we are merely judging paintings by their formal qualities.

Károly Kotász was born on 4 November 1872 in Budapest.[7] The family soon moved to Rákoskeresztúr, then a picturesque small town near the capital (now part of Budapest). Growing up in a working-class family with five children (Kotász's father was a hatter), the boy had no prospects of going into higher education and started training in his father's profession instead. He was, however, helped out by fortune and goodwill: a teacher showed one of his drawings to the well-known artist György Vastagh, who persuaded him to apply to the School of Industrial Design and ensured he received a scholarship there. Kotász studied wood engraving for nine semesters and practised the profession for a year before deciding to enrol at the Academy of Fine Art in Munich, where his professor, Otto Seitz supported him in continuing his studies despite his financial difficulties. Finally, in 1903, he went to Paris to study with the French painter Jean-Paul Laurens at the Julien Academy, a private art school famous for nurturing many talented modernists.

Returning to Hungary, Kotász taught at a private art school while displaying his work at exhibitions in his homeland. In 1911 he was able to buy a house in Rákoskeresztúr, and in 1919 he got married. The couple soon had a daughter. Nevertheless, by this time Kotász's life was made increasingly difficult by an illness restricting his mobility. The exact nature of his disability is not clear from the available sources. According to one account, his fellow students in Munich, who admired his talent and often asked him for advice, built a special scaffolding for him so that he could examine their larger works with ease.[8] Kotász had lived with his disability from birth, but its impairment of his body may have worsened over time – at least, this is one way to explain why the painter, once so eager to study abroad, preferred to stay in his hometown in the later period of his life. Or was it due to his fundamentally introverted personality? Whatever the reason, he never travelled again; not even when international fame finally struck.

That happened in 1928, when fifty of his paintings was shown at the gallery at 12 Lützowplatz in Berlin. The exhibition travelled on to Brussels, Amsterdam, and then London, garnering praise from critics everywhere. Interestingly, this victorious journey did not follow organically from Kotász's status in Hungary: although he had had a number of one-man shows, he was far from being a household name. The European tour was the result of the tireless labour of some of Kotász's supporters, most importantly his nephew, Károly Kemény, who organised his exhibitions abroad and took care of public relations. In addition, the tour

received official sanction: Kotász's exhibitions were often opened by Hungarian consuls and other official figures. Smart management and official support do not, however, account for the enthusiasm with which Kotász's art was received wherever it was displayed. The famous French magazine *Le Figaro* devoted a two page illustrated article to his work; the entry on Kotász in the Encyclopedia of Contemporary Painters published in Paris in 1931 was nine pages long![9] There must have been something about his art that grabbed the attention of art lovers from Berlin to London.

The painting in the collection of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery (fig.1) is typical of Kotász's work.It shows a rural scene: a group of women wearing folk costumes are returning home from church (the steeple is just visible to the right of the head of the woman on the left). In the sky grey clouds are gathering as a storm approaches. The palette is dominated by soft greens and greyish blues, and there are not many contrasts, yet the blue and red of the figures shine with a gem-hard brilliance. Kotász used his signature technique, applying thick layers of paint and scraping them with a knife. From close up, this results in a rough surface, but from a bit further away the streaks of paint merge into harmony.

Most of Kotász's paintings depict similar subjects: landscapes and peasant women in traditional dress (fig.2). They are all fairly small – a fact probably due to the painter's disability, as he could not carry and handle larger canvases. According to contemporaries, he liked to paint outdoors, seated before his easel.[10] The recurrence of subject matter is the reason why the provenance of the painting in Birmingham is at the moment impossible to trace: although it would be logical to assume that its previous owner bought it at the 1928 show in London, it cannot be identified with any of the pictures in the catalogue, which contains a long list of titles such as *Landscape* or *Storm*.[11] One painting called *Going to Church* (Catalogue no.4, offered for sale for 100 guineas) is a possible candidate, although in the Birmingham picture the women seem to be coming from, rather than going towards the church. The price was by no means cheap: 100 guineas were worth £105, whose purchasing power was the equivalent of about £5,800 in today's money.[12] That said, it is also possible that its previous owner had purchased the painting at a later date. The picture's greyish palette is more reminiscent of Kotász's work in the 1930s, than of the pictures he had exhibited around 1928–30.

In contemporary reviews Kotász was described as an original artist with a distinctive style. The modernist aesthetics predominant at the time expected artists to create something novel no one had thought of before. Hence, when Herbert Furst wrote in *Apollo* magasine that Kotász 'is in no sense an imitator, on the contrary his palette-knife technique is quite personal', he was offering high praise.[13] The expectation of originality was, however, only one side of the coin. Critics and audiences always need reference points to evaluate art. This

is why Furst went on to say: 'one can see he has modified his study of Nature ... under the influence of such different teachers as Rembrandt and Watteau, Mancini and Ostade, Goya and Monticelli.' Thus, he connected Kotász's art into the flow of art history, while stressing that he used his sources in a personal and unique way.

Although most of the influences listed by Furst were Old Masters, critics never hesitated to call Kotász a modernist ('one of the most advanced of modernists', no less). [14] By that time, a widely accepted idea of what constitutes the tradition of modern painting was already firmly in place. Centred on French art, it began with Manet and the Impressionists, continued with Post-Impressionists such as Van Gogh or Cézanne, and culminated in the avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, such as Fauvism, Cubism, and Surrealism. To be considered a modernist, a painter had to take a position in relation to this tradition, and Kotász's position was clear. With their smudges of colours and their simplified forms, his paintings made use of the formal inventions of Post-Impressionism. At the same time, he kept a distance from movements that tended towards abstraction, such as Cubism. Apart from Van Gogh, the only other modernist Kotász was regularly compared to was Adolphe Monticelli (1824–1886), a French painter whose dappled and textured surfaces certainly resemble Kotász's pictures. Monticelli's experiments with form and surface were similar to those of the Impressionists, but he kept a distance from the group, and as a consequence his art now rarely features as a crucial milestone in the modernist tradition. The comparison with Monticelli rendered Kotász as a sort of conservative innovator whose art drew its inspiration from an older and lesser-known version of modernism. This offers a solid explanation for Kotász's success and subsequent fall into oblivion: his paintings were easy to understand and yet sufficiently modern for audiences for whom abstraction was still a step too far, but they quickly became outdated in the eyes of those who conceptualised the modernist tradition in the form of the linear, evolutionary sequence reaching from Manet to the avant-gardes of the twentieth century.[15]

There are, however, other factors to consider. Kotász's reclusive artistic persona played an important role in his success. Reviews never failed to mention that he was a disabled person living in a small town far away. His career was a 'romance', as one critic put it.[16] Critics tended to interpret his paintings based on what they knew about his person, attributing the melancholy of his colours to his tragic life. The problem was that this mystery was quickly exhausted; the repetition of the same two or three facts would quickly become boring. Kotász was not able to add to them, because he could not be present at the locations of his success. He could not converse with his critics and audience, network with other artists, or give interviews. His personality remained a sketch made up of a few brushstrokes in the eyes of his European fans, who would eventually move on to find new heroes.

Another aspect to consider is Kotász's nationality. The fact that he lived in a small country in East Central Europe contributed to his intriguing image. As in the Birmingham painting, he often depicted peasants in an idyllic rural setting. Even though he lived on the outskirts of highly industrialised Budapest, the setting of these paintings was sometimes in the steppes in Eastern Hungary, some 120 miles away. This was a form of self-exoticisation, which appealed to West European audiences looking for something new. No wonder it was exaggerated: one article claimed that Kotász lived 'for his art among the peasants of the Hungarian *Puszta* (the Hungarian steppe), whose picturesque costumes and strange customs supply him with inexhaustible material.'[17] It is worthwhile to note that the author of this review, Paul George Konody was a Budapest-born Hungarian himself. He must have been perfectly aware that Rákoskeresztúr and the *Puszta* had about as much in common as Hampstead Heath and the Scottish Highlands, but he used the trope automatically. The wild *Puszta* and its people had by then been central to Hungarian self-image for almost a century; at the same time, they were also part of the exoticised image of Hungary in the West. Presenting the academically educated Kotász as a half-naive painter of Hungarian peasants was a useful marketing tactic. The catalogue of his London exhibition used it unabashedly: 'The culture of the modern artist is vibrating in his nerves; he knows no theories about it. He observes the objects of his environment with simple eyes, without any conscious artistic purpose or pretence; and these simple, rural subjects gain a visionary force in his art.'[18] But this was a double-edged sword. The concept of the modernist tradition spanning from the Impressionists to abstraction was forged in Western Europe. Works that did not properly fit could be attached to it as an interesting curiosity for a while, but were destined to fall away as the years passed.

Why did Kotász's reputation wane almost as quickly as it had surged? The above considerations bring us closer to answering this question, but do not offer one simple reply. His paintings were undeniably repetitive, and may have exhausted his fan base after a while. But his story teaches us that the ups and downs of fame never happen in a vacuum; they are never simply about questions of form and style. Kotász was an outsider who managed to slip through the gates of West European centres where international fame was made; he could not, however, secure permanent access. Had he been able-bodied and French, his fate may have turned out differently; but he would have been a different artist then, and perhaps less interesting to us today. While others gambled on his genius, Kotász sat peacefully by the banks of the Rákos stream in his hometown and painted. It is somehow comforting to think that he did not care about the result of the gamble. But this idyllic image obscures what is maybe the most important aspect here: that even with all odds against him, he still thought it worthwhile to try.

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Images

Fig.1 Károly Kotász, *Stormy Landscape with Blue and Red Figures* (c.1928), oil on canvas, 40 × 50.2 cm ©Birmingham Museums Trust.

Fig.2 Károly Kotász, *A Figure Group* (1920s), oil on canvas, 34.2 × 43.7 cm ©Museums Sheffield.

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[1] Trevor Allen, 'Gambling on Genius', *Daily Chronicle* (2 November 1928). Hungarian National Gallery, Archives, Inv. no.2321/1929.3.

[2] For a list of collectors see Louis Vauxcelles and Armand Dayot, 'Kotasz (Karoly, dit Charles)', in *Dictionnaire biographique des artistes contemporains 1910–1930*, (Paris, 1931), vol.2, p.273.

[3] Artúr Kutas and Dr. Albert Bartók, 'Kotász Károly élete és művészete' [The life and art of KK], unpublished manuscript, (1980), Hungarian National Gallery, Archives, Inv. no.29091/2014, p.9. The painting is now in the Centre Pompidou: *Portrait of a Young Girl,* (1929), oil on canvas, 70 × 50.3 cm, Inv. no.JP469P.

[4] *Self-Portrait*, (late 1920s), oil on canvas, 45.5 × 35.5 cm, Inv. No. 1980 n. 9171. See Giovanna Giusti (ed), *Gli autoritratti ungheresi degli Uffizi* (Florence and Milan, 2013), pp.38–39, 118–123; Ildikó Fehér and Károly Tóth, 'Kotász Károly', in Ildikó Fehér (ed), *Az Uffizi Képtár magyar önarcképei* [Hungarian self-portraits in the Uffizi Gallery] (Budapest, 2013), pp.142–147.

[5] Another work by Kotász in a UK public collection is *A Figure Group*, oil on canvas, 34.2 × 43.7 cm, Museums Sheffield, Accession no.VIS.760. (fig.2)

[6] Most recently: George Breeze, Evelyn Silber (eds), *Foreign paintings in Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery: A summary catalogue*, (Birmingham, 1983), catalogue no.87.

[7] Kotász's biography is based on Kutas and Bartók (1980); Vauxcelles and Dayot (1931).

[8] Maximilien Gauthier, *Charles Kotasz* (Paris, 1931), pp.7, 10–11.

[9] Hubert Daunoy, 'Charles Kotász', *Le Figaro*, supplement artistique (6 June 1929), pp.574–575; Vauxcelles and Dayot (1931).

[10] Kutas and Bartók (1980), pp.13–14.

[11] *Exhibition of Paintings by Karl Kotász at the Abbey Gallery* (London, 1928).

[12] According to the Purchasing Power Calculator at www.measuringworth.com/ppoweruk, accessed 22 September 2017.

[13] Herbert Furst, 'Karl Kotász's Paintings at the Abbey Gallery', *Apollo Magazine* (1 November 1928), p.312.

[14] 'A Painter Encored', clipping from unknown English newspaper, Hungarian National Gallery, Archives, Inv. no.2325/1929.5

[15] The French critic Louis Vauxcelles, who co-authored the 1931 encyclopedia entry on Kotász (Vauxcelles and Dayot [1931]) embodied this kind of taste perfectly. A moderate modernist, Vauxcelles had coined the terms 'Fauvism' and 'Cubism' to mock those movements, but was a fervent enemy of academicism and searched for 'progressivist' and original features in art. See Lee Sorenson, 'Vauxcelles, Louis', *Dictionary of Art Historians*, https://dictionaryofarthistorians.org/vauxcellesl.htm, accessed 22 September 2017.

[16] 'Famous paintings at the Abbey Gallery', *Art Weekly* (11 October 1928), p.1.

[17] P. G. Konody, 'Art and Artists', *Observer* (21 October 1928). Hungarian National Gallery, Archives, Inv. no.2321/1929.6.

[18] Arthur Bárdos, 'Karl Kotász', in *Exhibition of Paintings by Karl Kotász* (1928).