

University of Miskolc
Faculty of Arts
Doctoral School of Literary Studies
The Theoretical and Historical Models of Modern Literature Program

Judit Antónia FARKAS

THE CULT OF FINE BOOKS
Bibliophile Book Culture in Hungary
(1914–1949)

Theses of the PhD Dissertation

Tutor: Dr. Lóránt Kabdebó, professor emeritus
Director of Doctoral School: Prof. Dr. Gábor Kecskeméti

Miskolc, 2011.

Topic and goals

With the expansion of mass-produced books and their large-scale purchasing at the end of the 19th century, Europe saw a growing interest in fine books. As a result of the reforms in book art starting in England, publications designed and illustrated by artists came into being and acquired artistic status. In Hungary interest in the producing, purchasing and collecting of artistically designed, often luxurious, illustrated books aroused with a slight delay, in the first decades of the 20th century. This phenomenon was manifest in, on the one hand, the increasing number of unique, amateur-bibliophile books, and, on the other, the rising of book love and collecting and the institutionalization of these practices. This period witnessed the founding of the first Hungarian bibliophile society and the spread of articles, scholarly journals on book collecting and book art, book auctions and exhibitions.

The goal of this thesis is to describe the cultural history of Hungarian bibliophilia at the beginning of the 20th century. Although there have been many publications on this topic, they lack complexity as regards interdisciplinary examination due to the lack of general and systematic studies on the history of book in Hungary and the unfavorable availability of sources. My intention is to introduce the prominent figures who played a role in the development and prosperity of modern bibliophilia and to give a more complete picture of the production, distribution, popularization and reception of amateur-bibliophile books, exploring their economic, social and cultural context. To this end, first I deal with the entrepreneurs participating in the production and distribution of amateur-bibliophile books (printers, publishers, binders, booksellers), then I describe the reading collectors, and finally, I examine the public sphere. That is, I follow the path amateur-bibliophile books took from their birth to their reception.

The studied period starts with 1914, when the Tevan press and publishing house of Békéscsaba launched its pioneering amateur book series. 1914 also marks the birth of the modern Hungarian book art and the time when book lovers and collectors made an attempt to organize their society for the first time. I close the period with the nationalization of printing and publishing businesses and the spontaneous dissolution of the Hungarian Bibliophile Society (Magyar Bibliophil Társaság) in 1949. These dates do not only mark the turning points in Hungarian history, but are also emblematic in regard to bibliophilia.

The present thesis discusses the impact economic, social and cultural conditions had on the development of the national movement in book art and the marketability of Hungarian fine books. It also addresses questions of relevance to modern Hungarian bibliophilia: How

were the illustrated books of artistic taste, edited in limited and numbered copies, usually of high price, produced and distributed and by whom? In what did the altruistic view of bibliophile book production focusing on quality instead of profit differ from the business policy of publishing? What did the Hungarian bibliophiles collect? Within which institutional frameworks did the initiatives promoting the recognition and the collecting of fine books operate and what opportunities did they have in the public sphere? What influence did fine books exert on publishing and, through it, on the intellectual and artistic life and the public taste of the era?

Structure, methodology and sources

Due to the complexity of my topic and the fact that it has not been thoroughly treated yet, I had to undertake part of the basic research myself. The main difficulty lay in that an important part of the sources related to the functioning of small, mostly maladministered businesses, the activity of societies and collectors of the period and the editing of specialized reviews (complete archives, personal and business correspondences, book collections, etc.) had either been destroyed or dispersed in the Second World War and during the communist era. Also, main part of the literature has been written for the general public without rigorous scientific methods and omitting references. For this very reason, I started by searching for and treating primary sources and applying source criticism. After revising and reevaluating the sources, I needed to expand the research to types of sources neglected before. Interdisciplinary approach best suits the topic. Besides cultural history and the history of books, the present thesis also opens onto the aspects of literary, artistic, institutional, social and economic history and the history of collecting and journalism.

The majority of the various documents related to companies, societies, book events, collectors (for example: registers, company registration documents, legal records, correspondences, memoirs) were collected in different archives and libraries: Archives of the County of Békés, the Budapest City Archives, the Manuscript Collection of the National Széchényi Library, the Library of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences, the Manuscript Archive of The Museum of Literature Petőfi, the Archives of the Research Institute for Art History of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. The diverse small prints (catalogues, notices, publicities, posters, imprints) found in the Budapest Collection of the Metropolitan Ervin Szabó Library and the Collection of Small Prints of the National Széchényi Library as well as

the notices and publicities published in official organs proved to be sources of high importance due to the lack of primary sources.

The incompleteness of the companies' archival materials turned the books produced by the publishers into the sources that revealed the most about their activity. Therefore, I lay particular emphasis on the study of amateur-bibliophile publications. Finding the numbered, dedicated copies of amateur-bibliophile books also required thorough research as in most library catalogues and indexes of bibliographic summaries it is usually impossible to search by publishers and printing houses. I often owed it to mere chance or to the persevering antiquarian and library search that I was finally able to identify some prints. In addition to the literature and the printed catalogues, I also rely on the national bibliographies and the online available data of the last few years' auctions.

Handling the books was necessary partly because of their documentary value. The colophons, that is the detailed descriptions related to producing, along with the publishers' publicities and programs, often neglected by the researchers, contained a lot of information, especially on the publishing policy of the enterprises. Examination of the design and material (ornament, illustration, typography, binding, paper) of the books was needed for their aesthetic evaluation. However, the thesis dispenses with a complete literary and art criticism. For this reason, creators such as writers and graphic artists are only mentioned. To prevent expanding into a lengthy treatise and for methodological reasons, I do not include art historical analyses.

The structure of the thesis is as follows. First, I focus on the development of Hungarian bibliophilia. I give a summary of the late nineteenth-century antecedents and the economic, social and cultural processes that led to the rising interest in the production and collection of artistically designed books. Then, I examine the entrepreneurs. Special attention is given to the highly skilled typographer-printers, educated abroad, and the so-called cultural publishers at ease in intellectual life and devoted to new literary and artistic phenomena, since they took the lead in advancing and popularizing new tendencies in book art and typographic art. Besides their portraits, the intellectual circles they founded are also in the focus. Only those small and medium size enterprises are discussed here which did not only publish fine books for commercial purposes and in the hope of big profit, but in view of promoting book art and bibliophilia in Hungary. The following enterprises fell into this category: Kner Izidor, Tevan Adolf, Biró Miklós, Táltos Ltd, Amicus, Sacelláry Pál, Magyar Szemle Társaság, Hungária Ltd, Officina.

The activity of these companies and entrepreneurs is examined from the point of view of cultural history however, social and economic history was also taken into consideration. In the subsequent case studies, I present the entrepreneurs' social, cultural and educational background, professional training, motivations, social networks and business policies. The thesis also includes a brief description of the various creative groups gathered around these enterprises as they provided the main figures of the Hungarian literary and artistic life of the interwar period with publicity. I find it important to highlight the role the printing houses and publishers played in the intellectual and cultural life of the period.

Different methodology is applied with different cases. Whereas the work of the publishers is investigated in subsequent case studies, that of the binders, booksellers and collectors is revealed in detailed presentations of the activity of one of their members. My choice fell upon the binder Erzsébet Kner and the bookseller István (Stefan) Kellner. Kellner, whose portrait has not been drawn so far, did not only collect fine books, but also published, promoted and sold them. Catalogues, ex librises and the books published by him as well as the company registration documents, probate and litigation documents helped me reconstruct his activity. The thorough examination of the bookseller's stock has proved that all the important new and antique books sought by western European collectors reached Hungary.

As for the collectors, I paint a general picture of their fields of interest and taste along with the emotional, intellectual, economic and social motivations to be found behind their love of books. The documents in possession of the family, a forgotten, short-lived periodical and the printed catalogue of his book collection put up to auction made it possible to present in details Lőrinc Szemlér's book collecting activity, unknown until now.

To reveal the nature of the public sphere bibliophilia was accorded, I describe, on the one hand, diverse book, collector and artistic societies and, on the other hand, periodicals and national and international book exhibitions. The approach of this part of the thesis relies on institutional history and media history. I give special attention to the first Hungarian bibliophile society. Highlighting the activity in publishing, organizing exhibitions and promoting book art of the Magyar Bibliophil Társaság, founded in 1920, I use recently explored archive sources (documents available in the archives of the County of Békés) from a new perspective. I try to discern all the periodicals that gave publicity to book love and book art. I study the influence bibliophile societies and book exhibitions exerted on the research of book history and public taste and I examine their role in cultural policy.

Besides the interdisciplinary approach applied so far, the micro-historical reconstruction of the activity of a single entrepreneur, used in the third chapter, has also contributed to the

successful analysis of the functioning of Hungarian bibliophilia. Detailed presentation of Ferenc Bisztrai Farkas' interwar activity as patron of the arts and publisher proved to be highly inspiring as this intellectual entrepreneur was involved in all functions associated with producing and promoting fine books: he bought a printing press, published demanding books and periodicals, created his own bibliophile collection, organized exhibitions and, in 1937, founded the Alliance of Hungarian Bibliophiles (Magyar Bibliofilek Szövetsége). Owing to the exceptional availability of sources (his wife, Anna Györffy, kept all his documents), I have succeeded in reconstructing his all-rounder publishing activity that lasted for almost a decade. This detailed case study reveals the entrepreneur's personal motivations and his views on books, gives insight into the activity of the artistic groups he founded and shows the publishing strategies that he attempted to adapt to changing economic conditions. The presentation also attempts to cast light on both the differences and similarities in the conceptions and phenomena related to the culture of bibliophilia that the present thesis described previously. It turned out that in addition to the entrepreneurial tasks, Bisztrai Farkas also contributed to the fashioning of the intellectual and artistic trends of his period. He even risked commercial failure for the sake of art and literature patronage and his consistent efforts to produce demanding books always enjoyed priority during his publishing activity. The books and periodicals published with his assistance provided publicity for the prominent literary and artistic figures and the notable personalities in binding and book art of the era.

Results

Besides the synthesis of known sources and scholarly achievements, the thesis brings in new discoveries. Not only did I examine documents from a new point of view and supplemented them with new data (Tevan, Táltos Ltd, Amicus, Könyvbarátok Szövetsége, Magyar Szemle Társaság, Magyar Bibliophil Társaság, etc.), but I succeeded in conducting new research with the help of the sources I had discovered (Biró Miklós, Sacelláry Pál, Kellner István, Szemlér Lőrinc, Libellus, Uj Szin, Bisztrai Farkas Ferenc, Magyar Bibliofilek Szövetsége, Magyar Könyv- és Reklámművészek Társasága, Magyar Nemzeti Nyomtatványkiállítás, etc.). These results enrich the disciplines related to book history as well as other scientific areas (art history, media history, history of collecting). Thus, the thesis is primarily a basic research, but the more complex approach and the new connections permitted me to present modern bibliophilia in a broader context.

As a result of having adopted diverse approaches and methods, it became manifest that, due to the unparalleled cooperation and sacrifices of a few dozen typographers, binders, publishers, book designers, book lovers, authors and critics, fine book publishing came into its own as an important element in the cultural life of the interwar period (exhibitions, societies, foreign successes). In addition to fashion and commercial goals, the intention and the ethos of promoting art and improving public taste, present since the turn of the century, also influenced the appearance of artistically designed quality books. The need for the propagation of culture intensified after the trauma caused by the Treatise of Trianon.

The present thesis proves that the idea that Hungary should embrace new trends in book art and advance the producing and collecting of artistically designed quality books was formulated and spread in the second half of the 1910s, after efforts had passed unnoticed at the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th century. At about that time, the conditions of fine book production and of a better reception were created. The collecting activity of the bourgeoisie gained ground which then had an important impact on the process. Following the economic growth, the number of bourgeois collectors raised. Motivated by aesthetic and economic considerations, their interest turned towards modern books representing intellectual and artistic values. With the narrowing down of the market for rare antique Hungarian books, newer fields of collection gained recognition. As a result, collecting national and foreign modern fine books became a more reputable practice.

The development of Hungarian book art and modern bibliophilia, coming to a halt with the war and the revolutions, speeded up at the beginning of the 1920s. This is when quality amateur-bibliophile books created in collaboration with graphic artists and book designers became fashionable and spread. The slowing down of the economic development, the Great Depression and the Second World War put an end to this favorable process. From the first third of the 1920s, those few small publishing houses that were leading in producing luxury books, costing much more than the average, either went bankrupt due to the lack of trading capital and effective demand or gave up publishing such books. In the 1930s only a number of well-capitalized or diversified companies could publish luxury books on occasions (e.g. Hungária Ltd). Subscription-based networks of readers and publishers functioning as a club offered some kind of an alternative (Könyvbarátok Szövetsége, Magyar Szemle Barátai Szövetség). Due to the low number of members, the societies founded with the purpose of promoting national book art, book love and book collecting (Magyar Bibliophil Társaság, Magyar Bibliofilek Szövetsége) were not able to function successfully and effectively on the longer run.

In Hungary, the consumer group with adequate income to develop a demand for purchasing and collecting fine books could not gain strength due to the unfavorable development of economic, political, social and cultural conditions. Those who could have aided fine book production by virtue of their profession or interest did not dispose of the required income, while the wealthy bourgeois and upper-bourgeois layers usually did not show much interest in collecting or did not value fine books. Neither did economic and political uncertainty and the threat of the expansion of the totalitarian systems favor the costly passion needing immersion of fine book collecting.

In this light, the role of the few dozen figures in the developing of Hungarian bibliophilia have gained recognition. Especially as most of the book lovers discussed in the present thesis did not only design, publish, sell and collect fine book, but wrote books, launched periodicals, gave lectures, organized exhibitions and were active members of diverse societies reinforcing thus the legitimacy of bibliophile culture.

Books illustrated and designed by the well-known typographers and graphic artists of the era, comprising just a small proportion of the national book production, were received favourably and found compatible in western European countries where the printing culture was more developed and the taste for fine books more pronounced (international book exhibits, articles published in foreign journals, awards). Owing to the wide-spread national propaganda of the publishing profession (book competitions and exhibitions), luxury editions also influenced the level of the mass-produced “ordinary” books (Magyar Szemle Társaság, Officina, Pantheon, etc.). Even if the dream of Imre Kner about the naturalizing of mass-produced fine books created for a wider audience did not come true, publishers tended to ask graphic artists and book designers to design and illustrate their publications. This practice still existed in the 1950s and 1960s. My thesis does not deal with this phenomenon, though an important research could be conducted on this topic.

Although I have done the quantitative and qualitative analysis of as many books as possible, a lot is to be done in this field as well. It would be worth extending the limits of the studied period and compiling the corpus of nineteenth- and twentieth-century books that are relevant to book art and bibliophilia. The research could be done by completing the manuscript of Frigyes Varga Sándor and Alajos Milhoffer entitled *A Magyar bibliofil kiadványok bibliográfiája* (The Bibliography of Hungarian Bibliophile Publications). This further research could also determine the proportion of fine books in book production.

Publications and conference presentations on the topic

Edited book

„Aki nem ír, hanem úr” Bisztrai Farkas Ferenc emlékezete. Tanulmányok, visszaemlékezések, dokumentumok. /The Memory of Ferenc Bisztrai Farkas. Studies, memories, documents./ Judit Farkas (ed.). Budapest: Ráció kiadó, 2007.

Articles

Két bibliofil vállalkozó: Reiter László és Kellner István. /Two Bibliophile Entrepreneurs: László Reiter and Stephan Kellner/ In: *Ars Hungarica*, 2011. (37) 4. pp. 32–54.

„Ebben a társaságban együtt szeretnők látni a könyv minden barátját, kultuszának minden odaadó hívét” A Magyar Bibliophil Társaság története (1920–1949) I–II. /History of the Hungarian Bibliophile Society (1920–1949) I–II/ In: *Magyar Könyvszemle*, 2011. (127) 3. pp. 341–358; 2011. (127) 4. pp. 483–497.

Erotika és bibliofília. Kellner István tiltott könyves tevékenysége az 1920-as években. /Erotica and Bibliophilia. Stefan Kellner's Clandestine Book Selling and Publishing Activity in the 1920s/ In: *Korunk*, 2010. 3. XXI/3. pp. 89–95.

Ars Hungarica. Bisztrai Farkas Ferenc és a két világháború közötti művészeti könyvkiadás. /Ars Hungarica. Ferenc Bisztrai Farkas and Art Book Publishing in the Interwar Period/ In: *„Aki nem ír, hanem úr”...* pp. 24–82.

Bisztrai Farkas Ferenc és a bibliofil könyvkiadás. Adalékok a két világháború közötti magyar könyvkultúra történetéhez. /Ferenc Bisztrai Farkas and Bibliophile Book Publishing. Contributions to the History of Hungarian Book Culture of the Interwar Period/ In: *Korall*, 2002. 10. pp. 163–186.

Conference presentations

Erotobibliomán a vádlottak padján. Kellner István tiltott könyves tevékenysége az 1920-as években. /An Eroto-Bibliomane in Court. Stefan Kellner's Clandestine Book Activity in the 1920s/. Hajnal István Kör, 2009, Miskolc University.

Az első magyar Villon-kötet. A 30-as évek bibliofil könyvkiadója. /The First Hungarian Edition of Villon. The Bibliophile Publisher of the 1930s/ Ferenc Bisztrai Farkas' Centenary Conference, 2003, Hungarian Academy of Sciences.