



Universal Culture and National Identity: The configuration of national museums in nineteenth-century Hungary

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Abstract

In the absence of royal collections, it was one of the wealthiest aristocrats of the country who set up the Hungarian National Museum in 1802. Initially a library with a selection of other holdings, the *Museum Nationale Hungaricum* gradually widened the scope of its collections, and from the 1870s onwards strove for encyclopaedic coverage of human knowledge. Its legal status underwent significant changes, shifting from private to public foundation (1808) and to state museum from 1867. At the same time, its orientation broadened from a national focus towards a regional, and subsequently European, outlook, finally turning to universal collecting when in the last third of the nineteenth century the representation of non-European civilisations came to be included in its programme. Within three-quarters of a century, a small proto-museum, offspring of the Enlightenment and Romantic patriotism, had developed from accumulating national heritage, though still under Habsburg rule, into a full-fledged national museum in the twin capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, trying to adopt in the 1870s the model of the British Museum. This stunning expansion soon pushed the institution beyond its capacities and led instead to the creation of several specialised collections. With this, the museum idea had achieved its triumph in Hungary, and Budapest became a hub with a series of distinctly specialised national museums, while the mission of the National Museum was redefined and re-scaled. Leaving aside its universal and encyclopaedic ambitions, it became dedicated to the mission of caring for the past remnants of the historical territory of the country. This study examines this process (1802-1902), paying particular attention to the changing relationship of imperial and national, ruler and ruled, in the multi-ethnic Carpathian Basin.

Walking up the staircase of the National Museum in Sofia, Bulgaria, visitors come across a set of golden objects from the Avar period. This treasure, found in Nagyszentmiklós (1799), a village in the Kingdom of Hungary, today situated in Romania, is an outstanding example of Migration Period hoards, which may have been hidden by its former owner in the context of the Bulgarian invasion of the territory [Kovács 2002: 47]. Awed by the shimmer of the griffin-decorated jugs and bull-headed drinking bowls, altogether 23 items that weigh 10 kilograms, most visitors may not notice the inscription at the bottom specifying that this is a modern replica of the originals held in the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna. Another replica of the set can be seen in the National Museum of Budapest, where, unlike Sofia, it is shown not as part of the permanent exhibition among originals, but outside, in the corridor. The three museums mobilise different messages of this heritage of the Danube Basin. The original in Vienna is an imperial trophy, proof of the power of the Habsburg Empire and of its cultural institutions, as much as of the artistic creativity of the centuries that had followed the decline of the Roman Empire. The copy in Sofia refers to the heyday of Bulgarian history when early Bulgarians were expanding their state by defeating Avars and other tribes far north of the borders of today's Bulgaria. In Budapest, in turn, the exhibit of the copy in the corridor is linked to the history of the Hungarian National Museum as the discovery of the treasure two centuries ago had implicitly motivated establishing the museum.

Unearthed by a Serbian inhabitant of the village, the golden vessels came by way of Greek merchants to Pest; from there the Mayor sent them to Vienna. A decree established in 1776 guaranteed that archaeological finds were to enrich the k.u.k. Münz- und Antikenkabinett. Similarly to the Osztrópatka finds of 1791 and the Szilágysomlyó treasure of 1797, the Avar treasures were sent to the Imperial Treasury, thus raising awareness in Hungary for the need of a museum in the country [Pintér 2002: 71]. The Habsburgs being on the Hungarian throne since the sixteenth century, no royal collections were available, which prompted Count Ferenc Széchenyi (1754-1820) to establish a museum in 1802. Two-hundred years later, in 2002, to celebrate the bi-centenary of his donation, the Hungarian National Museum devoted an exhibition to the Nagyszentmiklós treasure, and the original was lent for this occasion by the Kunsthistorisches Museum. It is a rare occurrence to see a national museum look back upon its foundation by exhibiting a set of works of art that belongs to the leading museum of another country (Austria) and that is related to the history of another population (the Avars). This gesture indicates the mission of the Hungarian National Museum, to be in charge of the treasures of the historical territory of the Hungarian Kingdom¹. While the Avars had dispersed and are not related directly to any of Eastern Europe's population, their treasure remains a shared, as much as contested, element of the historical identity of several nations. As the following study of the public collections in Hungary aims to show, museums in these countries, as much as elsewhere, often came into being to claim objects from the past of their region – for the sake of the future identity of their nation.

Foundation of the Hungarian National Museum

Coming from one of the wealthiest families of the country, Ferenc Széchenyi began to collect systematically in the 1780s. An enlightened aristocrat, he had first envisaged a universal collection, planning it to offer it to the public from 1786 onwards [Somkuti 2002a: 25]. In

reaction to the centralising politics of the Habsburgs, by the middle of the 1790s he had focused on objects of Hungarian relevance. This was designed to foster the cultural self-appreciation of a nation only just in formation according to the modern sense of the word. In a third step, perhaps in reaction to the archaeological finds ending up in Vienna, he had realised that no matter how ambitious the collecting programme at his estate in Western Hungary was, an official institution was needed to gather and safeguard *hungarica* – defined at the time as objects of and about Hungarian history and culture. The shift from individual passion to an institutionalised national level implied his determination to save his private programme from potential discontinuation by placing it in an administrative public framework. We can also interpret his decision as an act of political responsibility. Having served on various high duties of the Habsburg Empire, Széchenyi was a well-known public figure, who had retired from the active political and administrative career, and returned to public life now with his act of setting up a museum as a private benefactor of a cause for his nation. His move was a model for being influential by far-sighted activity in the terrain of culture, rather than by having high political positions.

When the Emperor consented to his petition to allow him to offer part of his family collection to the Hungarian public, in November 1802 Széchenyi donated to the nation mostly a library, as well as a numismatic collection and a selection of other items, mainly but not exclusively pertaining to Hungarian history, while he retained the bulk of his universal collections for the family. Already as a private collector he had begun publishing the catalogues of his holdings, and the title of the first volume, printed in Sopron in 1799, *Catalogus Bibliothecae Hungaricae Francisci Com. Széchenyi. Tomus I. Scriptores Hungaros et Rerum Hungaricorum* shows that manuscripts, prints and books by Hungarian authors and about Hungary stood in focus.² The Latin wording of his founding declaration – ‘I irrevocably donate to my dear fatherland and for the use and benefit of the community’ – indicates his wish to further the public good of a country the autonomous statehood of which had been suspended for two-and-a-half centuries and was substituted for this reason by the legally vague, yet emotionally cohesive force of patriotism [for a recent edition of the original documents, see Somkuti 2002b].

As the Emperor convened the Hungarian Assembly (seated at that time in Pressburg/Pozsony, today Bratislava, capital of Slovakia) only sparsely, the institutionalisation of the collection moved ahead slowly. The museum functioned until 1807 as a private initiative, when finally the Hungarian Assembly accepted the donation in Act 1807/XXIV, and by naming the institution *Museum Nationale Hungaricum*, strengthened its national character. A private mission had shifted to become a public programme, its national character assuming a further meaning: not only had it been founded *for* the nation, from now it was to be sustained *by* this community. Soon, Act 1808/VIII spelt out that the museum had ‘to incorporate all that can be related to national scholarship [nemzeti literatura]’. As Hungary was a subordinate part of the Habsburg Empire, neither regulation conferred the status of a governmental institution on the museum, which was to function as a public foundation until the Compromise with Austria. Before independent Hungarian government was set up in 1867, allotting a yearly budget to the museum, and turning it into a state museum, over the first 65 years of its existence the museum operated as a non-governmental body, funded by the Hungarian public, and controlled by Habsburg administration [Fejős 1964: 270].

For the first time in 1812 it received the right to have a say in where findings from Hungarian soil would end up. The institution was gradually heading for partnership with the Viennese Treasury, coming step by step closer to fulfilling its *raison d'être*, the responsibility for objects of Hungarian relevance. Although this was a prolonged process, its aims seem to have been clear from the beginning to various strata of the Hungarian population, as suggests the declaration of the representatives of Szabolcs County at the 1808 National Assembly [Mátrai 1868: 13]. This praised the threefold function of the museum: 'the refinement of our nation [nemzetünk pallérozására], the blossoming of our mother tongue and the true knowledge of the history of our fatherland'. Just as 'nation' [nemzet] repeatedly surfaced in these early documents, so did 'museum': being overseen by the Habsburg Governor of Hungary, Palatine Joseph (1776-1847), before 1807 the institution was tentatively named *Museum Statuum et Ordinuum Regni Josephinum Palatinale*. Széchenyi himself had placed greater emphasis on the library, but also appended to it a numismatic collection, and in 1802 formally baptised these *Bibliotheca Hungarica cum Numophylacio Familiae Comitum Széchenyi Patriae Sacrata* [Ferenczy 2002: 35]. First as a collection of written documents related to Hungary, along with groups of other items, the set-up of the institution was to change fast into mainly a museum in the broad sense, incorporating a library. Early documents often attached a telling adjective to the title of the library, naming it *Bibliotheca Regnicolaris*, which highlighted that although the Habsburgs were on the throne and therefore this was no royal Hungarian collection, nonetheless it aimed to represent the intellectual heritage of the Kingdom of Hungary. Documents also used the expression *Instituto Nationalis*, suggesting that the Latin 'natio' referred to the community of Hungary while the country did not enjoy autonomous statehood [Korek 1977: 30].

This is an essential difference to other early museum foundations in the Habsburg Empire in cities other than Vienna, notably the Joanneum in Graz, 1811 and the Ferdinandeum – established as Tirolisches Nationalmuseum in 1823 – in Innsbruck, which were called into life by members of the Habsburg family and, although showing local specificities of their region, did not stand for a nation as an imagined community [Deneke and Kahsnitz 1977: 29]. When in 1802 Samuel Bruckenthal (1721-1803), former Governor of Transylvania, in his testament donated his valuable European collections of art and science, acquired over decades in Vienna, along with the palace he had purposefully erected to house them, to the Saxon community of Transylvania, this museum foundation was closer to Széchenyi's concept, except that the Saxons had never had autonomous statehood in this region. According to Bruckenthal's will, the Saxon Lutheran community came to assume responsibility for the collection in Nagyszeben / Hermannstadt (today Sibiu, Romania) under Habsburg and, from 1867, Hungarian auspices [Bodó 2002: 6]. Bruckenthal's achievement shows not only the close interrelation of religious, ethnic, regional and political aspects in setting up museums in this part of Europe, but also sheds light on the fact that promoting education and identity in a community by way of museums did not necessarily require collections of a specifically national perspective. Instead, Bruckenthal had chosen to strengthen his Saxon community intellectually in the supra-national sense of the Enlightenment, by calling into life a museum that represented the various strands of European knowledge at the time. For him, the attachment to the European model of collecting, classifying and showing artificialia et naturalia, was just as powerful a tool for elevating his community, a would-be nation, as a clear, but narrow focus on a nation's own heritage.

Likewise, Széchenyi's donation also included holdings of no Hungarian specificity, for instance antique Roman coins. In the year following his founding act, his wife, Júlia Festetich (1753-1824) gifted her natural science collection to the National Museum in Pest. The same year, the museum opened to the public free of charge in the halls of the Pauline Cloister in downtown Pest. When the first *Ordo Dierum* was printed – in Latin, Hungarian and German in 1811 – the three pillars of the collections could be clearly identified: ‘constituti sunt Dies Lunae et Jovis pro inspicienda Bibliothecae, Martis et Veneris pro Cimelio Rei nummariae et antiquariae, Mercurii et Sabbathi pro Camera Naturae Productorum’ [Csapodi and Tóth and Vértsey 1987: 3]. By this time, the institution had evolved from a private entity to a public body, from a library to a museum, and in its collections, from a dominantly, almost exclusively national historical orientation to a broader scientific perspective. The affairs of the museum were slow to progress – its building was completed only by 1847, its financial resources remained scant until 1867 – yet further acquisitions from private collections helped the museum continue to build up a varied collection of partly Hungarian focus and partly wider outlook.

Expansion of the collections of the National Museum

In the largest expansion of the collections in the first, semi-autonomous phase of the museum (1802-1867), Miklós Jankovich (1772-1846), of the landed gentry, sold his vast collections to the museum at a modest price (1832-1836), paid by subscription of the Hungarian nobility. This donation, larger in size, broader in scope and superior in quality to the collection given by Széchenyi, extended the profile of the museum. It also raised its scholarly standards as Jankovich had grown into a connoisseur and his collections came to be catalogued more systematically than had been the case with earlier acquisitions. Trained by leading professors of his time, Jankovich, after briefly working at the Treasury in Buda, devoted his whole life to collecting on a professional scale. While his prime concern remained the completion of his library, the nearly 70.000 items of which included a large number of manuscripts and first prints, he collected arms and armour, goldsmith's works, archaeological finds, stone-carvings, musical instruments, jewellery and other artefacts [Belitska-Scholtz 1985: 46]. His interest in this spectrum of what we today call material culture was already manifest in his proclamation-like article, entitled ‘Yearning for Hungarian Antiquities’, where he called upon his ‘Readers in the Hungarian fatherland as well as in Transylvania and other lands affiliated in earlier times with the Hungarian Crown [...] to supply us with remnants of all kinds [...] of HUNGARIAN ANTIQUITIES [capitalised in the original], be they either in our homeland or abroad, moreover with remnants of the Greek, Roman and barbarian nations left here at home’ [Jankovich 1818: 15].

His other novelty lay in reaching beyond a preference for Hungarian heritage, and embracing the culture of many other “nations”, from Slavs to the German-speaking territories, mainly in Central Europe [Entz 1939: 174]. By retaining the preference for Hungarian heritage, he showed that two strategies of collecting could supplement each other for the National Museum. The continued national focus was to enhance the institution's role as a custodian of the cultural canon of a nation necessary in building up its identity in the absence of a form of political independence, meanwhile opening the collections to a European dimension was to help fulfil the educational promises of the Enlightenment, and thereby contribute to the modernisation of the nation.

This broader perspective allowed him to collect the documents and objects of various ethnic and religious groups in Hungary.³ Acknowledging multi-ethnic heritage suggested that he regarded the museum to be national in the political, administrative, rather than in the ethnic, sense of the word, and wanted it to cater for all nationalities of the Carpathian Basin. His vision of ‘seizing from the whirl of dispersal the heroic deeds, fashions and works of our ancestors [...] detecting and returning their MEMORIES [capitalised in the original]’ [Mikó 2002: 10] was so strong that he published in printed form in Pest in 1830 a description of his holdings and his offer to place these in the National Museum, and applied for the directorship of the museum 1844. Although he was not given the chance to try his hand at managing the museum he had helped to boost, many scholars readily recognise him as the second founder of the National Museum, considering that his contribution allowed the institution to develop at the pace that followed.

Jankovich had immediate followers, most spectacularly in an area of collecting that he had newly established in the museum. Paintings and other works of fine art had barely featured in the museum so far, with the exception of a few canvases as part of donations and portraits commissioned for the institution. Having an eye for painting, Jankovich had assembled a *Collectio imaginum* – as the inventory of 1838 labelled it – including numerous Gothic panel paintings from the Germanic countries, the value of which was even in Germany only being re-discovered at that time. These paintings were scattered in his collection among mixed other works of art, such as Hungarian portraits of lesser aesthetic, and more historical, value. Yet establishing this new direction of collecting in the museum impressed a professional collector of European Old Masters. In 1836, during the year-long session of the Hungarian Assembly that had perfected the Jankovich acquisition, János Pyrker (1772-1847) decided to donate 190 Old Master paintings to the museum. Archbishop of Eger, a city in Northern Hungary, Pyrker had bought most of the works during his time as Patriarch of Venice in the 1820s [Hölvényi 1987: 132]. Having carried the collection to Eger, in 1830 he opened the South wing of his palace there to the public to show a permanent arrangement of the pictures, but now offered them to the National Museum.⁴ Pyrker’s offer is best seen not as patriotic. As an Archbishop, he had had a career at various posts in the Habsburg Empire, and shared the overall values of European civilisation and humanism, rather than those of a national Hungarian programme. His intention had been to turn the collection public, and the sudden development of the National Museum persuaded him that this institution, rather than the original location in Eger, was going to be the right home for it.

It was not only the acquisition of the Jankovich Collection that motivated Pyrker to donate his fifteenth-eighteenth century works from Italy, the Low Countries and France to the museum in Pest. Another factor of persuasion was that the same Assembly of 1836 had raised the necessary funds for erecting the museum’s building. Ten years later, in March 1846, on Joseph’s Day – to honour the Habsburg Governor, Palatine Joseph, who by that time had been efficient protector of the museum for 42 years – the splendid museum building opened with the permanent installation of the Pyrker Gallery [for an account of this history, published on the occasion of the 100th anniversary of the museum, and edited by its then Director, see Szalay 1902]. This was a major turn in the history of the institution. Established as a collection mainly of hungarica, the horizon of the museum had widened over nearly half-a-century to European culture, and when

its building finally opened, the first exhibition presented European Old Masters, instead of Hungarian heritage.

This shift was the result of the interplay of several forces. Planning the museum – initially at another location in Pest, first envisaged as a much smaller building – had begun as early as 1807, yet economic and political factors delayed the project until the Jankovich acquisition had made the political elite represented in the Assembly aware of the urgent need to provide funding for the construction. The decision that the necessary budget (500.000 forints) was to be paid by mandatory subscription from the nobility, a very rare instance at the time, indicates the urgency and importance attached to the matter. Just as the incorporation of the Jankovich Collection had signalled to the Assembly that a proper museum building was overdue for the institution, these decisions pressed Archbishop Pyrker to realise the future potential of this museum.

In turn, once the museum opened with the Pyrker Gallery, its national connotations had changed. If Széchényi's donation was mostly national, the Jankovich Collection could be interpreted as supra-national, with a focus on the whole region of Central Europe, and Pyrker enriched the museum with an even wider European fine art selection. This museum was national no longer because its collections had centred on objects of national culture, but rather in the sense that a series of private contributions had worked towards public benefit, for the education and self-esteem of a socially, ethnically, religiously broad definition of the population in Hungary. Just like the Germanisches Nationalmuseum in Nuremberg, this museum was a joint venture of more and more groups of society. Not the project of a full-fledged nation state, but rather the common effort of a community in its Reform Age. The Jankovich and the Pyrker acquisitions suggest also a clear difference with the Germanisches Nationalmuseum: the Magyar Nemzeti Múzeum did not limit its collections to national culture, but attempted to enlarge its focus and fulfil a national role as an institution by incorporating increasingly international collections. The building of the museum also radiated this growing commitment to shared European roots. Measured by other edifices in Pest – a unified Budapest came about only in 1873 –, a vast temple of the arts in a well-chosen location, this neo-Classical building bore hardly any local features. In line with the European canon of the times, architect Mihály Pollack (1773-1855) applied the Greek-based vocabulary of public buildings, from the colonnade to the tympanum [cp. the most recent examination of the building, including the Symbolism of its architectural patterns, in Pintér 2009]. Here was a new public building in the European idiom of museum architecture of the time, with the collections likewise shifting towards European cultures.

Towards universal collections

The failure of the 1848 Revolution halted this process of opening from a national towards a European museum model. In the 1850s the institution was subordinated as *Pester National-museum* directly to the Ministry of Culture in Vienna. Yet from 1867 onwards the museum enjoyed an entirely new set of opportunities to approximate the level of its leading counterparts in Europe. Regaining its sovereignty, Hungary placed museum development at the heart of its cultural policy. No more than four years after the Compromise with Vienna, the freshly established Ministry for Religious and Cultural Affairs [Vallás- és Közoktatásügyi Minisztérium, from the Compromise in 1867 onwards, ministries had Hungarian names] was already planning a grand overall museum. Minister Tivadar Pauler (1816-1886) envisioned an institution that 'unites the collections of

artworks in the property in the country [... and] that will serve to ornate the capital of the country' [Sinkó 2009: 193]. The task was no longer to make up for missing political independence by cultural accumulation, but rather to compete with other capitals in Europe. In the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, Budapest aimed to be Vienna's twin as capital, and Hungary was eager to assume the role of a regional power in Central Europe. Now a governmental institution, the National Museum had become a key part of state representation.

Beyond working to elevate the institution to the professional standards of the time, its new Director, Ferenc Pulszky (1814-1897) attempted to mobilise this strong governmental backing to broaden the collections universally. A political émigré to London after 1848, Pulszky had been for several decades engaged in the European world of museums and the art market. Both his grandfather and his uncle had been eminent collectors of the art of European (Greek, Etruscan and Roman) antiquities and non-European (Egyptian, Assyrian, and East Asian) civilisations. Inheriting his uncle's collection, he himself had become a connoisseur and avid collector, travelled widely, befriended colleagues internationally. Although this Fejérváry-Pulszky Collection was sold at auction in Paris in 1868, as Director of the museum, supported by his high political and cultural commissions and influential friends, he was in a position to attempt to implant the same universal interest in the leading public collection of Hungary. As Director from 1869 until 1894 – and meanwhile Head of the National Committee of Libraries and Museums, as much as President of the National Hungarian Fine Arts Association, and first becoming an MP, then also holding various offices in Parliament – he was to put to public use the expertise and vision he had gained as private collector [Szilágyi 1995: 913].

Intellectually, he had taken a long road to mature for this challenge. In his first noteworthy publication on museums, entitled 'On the use of art collections', 1838, he advocated focusing on national antiquities, yet already in two senses of the word:

It would be, nonetheless, a narrow-minded interpretation if one derived from these views that only national art and antiquities collections served a purpose, as the ancient relics uncovered in Hungarian soil had also been produced in this geographic area and as our country and our nation cannot be separated from each other, what counts as antiquity of the country is at the same time souvenir of the nation. [reprinted in Marosi 1997: 26]

This approach is quite close to what Miklós Jankovich adumbrated at the same time. The objective of collecting for public use was reached by safeguarding the nation's past relics. This was not to be limited to an ethnically and historically strict concept of Hungarian heritage, but rather to embrace all remnants of the past of a given territory, also of the past that had preceded the presence of the nation there. This view could be seen as up-to-date not only for Hungary but also responded to the general spirit of the time in appreciating local antiquities against the Greek-centred normative canon of Winckelmann.

Soon Pulszky was to be influenced by his lasting stays abroad, and particularly his years in London (1848-1961) that widened his horizon. In his 1851 lecture delivered at University Hall, entitled 'On the progress and decay of art; and on the arrangement of a national museum', his ideal museum was already to represent the art of all civilised nations, ranging from one-time Etruria to current China, including 'the productions of the untutored imagination of India; [...] the awe-inspiring sculptures of hierarchical Egypt; [...] the master-pieces of youthful Greece', along with 'the monuments of imperial Rome' [reprinted as Pulszky 1996: 27]. All this was to be

installed in chronological arrangement, in order to serve the chief objective of a museum: the education of the public. As David Wilson – former Director of the British Museum – identifies in his essay on Pulszky’s intellectual background during his time in England, Pulszky’s close ties with the arts establishment in London and his exposure to the changing set-up of the British Museum, as much as to the hugely impressive Great Exhibition of 1851, had a complex effect on his thinking. This experience prompted him to ally now with the model of the British Museum, centred on universal art, rather than following the traditional museum mission in Hungary [Marosi and Klaniczay 2006: 127].

Nearly a quarter-century later, Pulszky himself puts this bluntly in his treatise, ‘On Museums’ (1875), which can be interpreted as his Director’s programme for developing the Hungarian National Museum. Upon describing a number of museums he had visited in Italy, Germany, France and elsewhere, he contrasts powerful countries whose forward-looking museums show that ‘nothing is alien to them that testifies to the civilisation of the human race’, with ‘nations of restricted aspirations, which feel their secondary or tertiary statute and therefore make up for the self-esteem of grand nations by vanity’ and which sustain ‘rather provincial museums [... as] tools for showing off their country to foreign visitors’ [Pulszky 1875: 53]. While he did not spell it out, this reference to ‘provincial museums’ can be read as a hint at the earlier state of the Hungarian National Museum and as a farewell to his own views expressed in 1838. Dwelling at length on the merits of the British Museum, he continues that ‘[it] is also from other points of view exemplary’ and ‘differs from the museums on the continent primarily’ in that the latter are subject to the changing fortunes of royal collecting whereas ‘the British Museum has from the beginning borne the character of national ownership, received its funding from Parliament, with its management entrusted to connoisseur hands. The accumulation of art treasures has been happening according to plan [...] with Parliament feeling the powerful impact of this institution of public education on the enhancement of scholarship and the refinement of taste’. As he continues, the budget provided to the British Museum exceeds the funds made available to their museums by other countries, which explains how the British Museum is able to amass the broadest possible universal collections. By contrast, Pulszky barely mentions national museums *strictu sensu*. In his chapter-long treatise, merely a few lines are devoted to these. ‘National museums, which would be of an exclusively national feature, number hardly more than the Germanisches Museum in Nuremberg, the Bavarian one in Munich, the Römisch-germanisches [sic] in Mainz and two more in Copenhagen and Stockholm, yet even in these, slowly foreign elements make their way in’ [Pulszky 1875: 59].

With his directorship based on this programme, Pulszky opened a new chapter not only in the history of the Hungarian National Museum, but, as we shall see, in overall museum development in Hungary. Departing from an earlier understanding of the museum being national by way of its content, i.e. its collections of *hungarica*, he gave to the adjective ‘national’ the meaning of being sustained by state funds, managed by scholars appointed on professional account, and serving the intellectual advancement of the country. Over the quarter-century of his directorship, yearly attendance rose from 65.000 in 1869 – the first year we have official records of visitor numbers – to 440.000 in 1895. Swaying between 8-10 persons before 1867, museum staff soon numbered 35. Practical details, such as the heating of the huge building, as well as key scholarly issues, such as catalogues and other publications, were taken care of [Fejős 1965: 298]. The museum’s budget

rose exponentially, with the state providing separate allocations for specific acquisitions, for example in 1870, when Pulszky – using his position in the Finance Committee of Parliament – arranged for an extraordinary item in the national budget to cover the purchase of the mineralogy collection of the Prince Lobkowitz family, which was regarded as second only to the Imperial Collections in the Austro-Hungarian Empire. A year later, the Hungarian state purchased the Prince Esterházy Picture Gallery of high-quality European Old Masters.⁵ This expansion earned international recognition for museum development in Hungary, as a summit of which in 1876 the National Museum hosted the 7th International Congress of Anthropology and Prehistoric Archaeology [Szilágyi 1998: 14].

Whereas details of this rise of Hungarian museology to a European level are richly examined in writings on museum history in the country, for our argument two aspects need to be stressed. First, Pulszky strove for an encyclopaedic orientation, to represent all aspects of human knowledge in the collections. Second, he aimed for a universal level, by stepping beyond the national, regional and European limitations and embracing all civilisations. Where sufficient funds were beyond the reach of the country, he sought for compromises. In the representation of Antiquity, first-rate originals were no longer available for Hungary, yet replacing them with plaster casts in a complete overview of Greek, Roman and other, mostly classical Mediterranean Antiquities appeared to be a viable alternative [cp. the critical analysis of a contemporary, himself an applicant to the position of Director, reprinted in Henszlmann 1990: 231]. Public education being high on Pulszky's agenda among the tasks of a national museum, copies offered several advantages in arts instruction, and during the 1870s, a cast collection of several hundred pieces was acquired for the National Museum, with a selection put on permanent show in specifically decorated halls.⁶

Looking beyond European heritage proved possible in new areas of collecting. Non-European ethnography was establishing itself among museum curators in Hungary just as it had been appreciated in countries with long-time overseas connections. When a joint Austro-Hungarian commercial and scientific expedition set out for East Asia, covering from 1868-1871 a vast territory between Indonesia and Japan, one of the best Hungarian ethnographers, János Xántus (1825-1894) joined the crew and, commissioned by the Minister of Culture, sent home over the course of years altogether over 160.000 items, a selection of which was exhibited in the National Museum immediately upon his return in 1871 [for stunning twists and turns in Xántus' biography, see Bodó and Viga 2002: 963].

The return to national history

A whole range of further examples could illustrate the spawning collections. The Golden Age of Hungarian museum development (1867-1914), the half-century preceding World War I, witnessed the country trying to assume the position of a ruling state between the Imperial Court in Vienna and the cultural aspirations of various nationalities in Central Europe – indicated by museum foundations in Prague, Ljubljana, Zagreb and elsewhere in the region – that were to gain national independence only after the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. However, for two reasons, the success of the museum project in Hungary soon led to the break-up of the National Museum. First, the once monumental building proved to be too small for the collections from the 1870s onwards. Second, as elsewhere in Europe, specialisation of knowledge

initiated a gradual turn away from encyclopaedic thinking, and advocated sharply-profiled institutions and curators instead of all-embracing museums and polyhistorians. These practical and intellectual pressures prompted the set-up of independent departments first within the National Museum – such as that of natural history (1870), ethnography (1872) and applied arts (1872) – and successively the split-up of the National Museum into specialised museums. Some received a purpose-built new home. The Museum of Applied Arts moved into its characteristically Hungarian-fashioned Art Nouveau palace in 1896, whereas the Museum of Fine Arts, whose collections accumulated from 1871-1896, opened the door of its Greek Revivalist and neo-Renaissance monumental building in 1906. Other specialised museums came to be housed in various non-purpose-built locations, with the re-arrangement of the museum network lasting well into the twentieth century [Vadas 1998: 140].⁷

These new museums lent the expression ‘national museum’ a new layer of meaning. While we have seen the gradual shift in the adjective ‘national’ from historical content and Hungarian heritage towards the classification of a museum as first a public, then a state institution, these new specialised museums were ‘national’ explicitly in the sense of the government establishing and maintaining them, for the cultural enrichment of a multi-ethnic state. This was a political statement of the ruling Hungarian community in the country understood as a small regional empire with a mixed cultural, religious and minority set-up. While the early nineteenth century brought about – in the vein of the Enlightenment and budding Romanticism – one National Museum in Hungary, by the end of the century a complete network of national museums had come into being in Budapest. Each of these new museums had as its mission to pay attention to its specialised collections as much within Hungary as abroad. National and international heritage – in fine art, applied art, ethnography and the other disciplines – complemented each other. By contrast, the National Museum underwent a process of re-nationalisation. As the new museums moved out, they carried with them their part of the collections, leaving the National Museum with a focus on national heritage, with no international collections and, in terms of academic disciplines, solely with a focus on the history and archaeology of the territory of Hungary, with no other encyclopaedic orientation.⁸

Although from time to time, this division of labour between the National Museum and the specialised museums was re-negotiated – with the network of national museums being subject to re-shuffle ever since, even today – we can say that the history of the National Museum had come full circle over its first one-hundred years. By the time it celebrated its centenary in 1902, the museum’s mission had first expanded from national to universal, and then retreated to a focus on the heritage of Hungarian lands. The second century of the museum reinforced this vocation from one more aspect. With the break-up of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, following World War I, the Paris Treaties made Hungary cede two-thirds of its former territory, along with significant groups of ethnic Hungarians, to new neighbour states. Having no longer political control over much of its one-time land and population, the country came to rely more than ever before on its National Museum to represent the past of its historical territories, now partly abroad. Set up in 1802 in a subordinated country that was part of the Habsburg Empire, in the second stage of its history, after 1867, the National Museum became cultural flagship of a newly-autonomous country that was itself a ruling state, while becoming in a third step, in 1918, a

museum in charge of the heritage of a historical country of a new small nation state that had been considerably reduced compared to its previous form.

This explains the continued concentration on Hungarian lands, a basically territorial definition of the national feature of the museum. No wonder that when the bi-centenary of the museum had arrived, in 2002, the institution chose to celebrate it, as have seen at the beginning of this paper, with the Avar treasure that not only recalled the circumstances of the foundation of the museum but also testified to its territorial mission. Various nations and countries – along with their museums from Vienna to Sofia – share the attachment to this archaeological hoard. The place where it was discovered is no longer situated in today's Hungary, but was so at the time of its finding. In 1802, the museum was called into life to claim from Imperial Vienna exactly such remnants found in the soil of the country; in 2002, the museum sought to underline its continued task to represent the heritage of the whole Carpathian Basin. Despite that the Avars are no longer directly related to any of the modern nations in this region, their treasure has remained part of the antiquity of this territory, just as this territorial approach has remained central to the self-understanding of the Hungarian National Museum.

Notes

- ¹ Beyond the replica in the museum, over the two centuries, the charming motifs of the golden objects had been reproduced innumerable in Hungary, from schoolbooks to public sculpture in Budapest.
- ² He also provided funds to regularly enhance these collections and to set up a publicly accessible institution for their care. Other aristocrats successively contributed to the costs of the land, the building and the running of the museum.
- ³ Collecting deliberately for the National Museum, he used the modest sum he had requested at the transfer of his holdings to the museum to pay off his debts and immediately to begin with a second collection, also expressly for the museum, which, however, dispersed on his death.
- ⁴ As there was only one single piece by a Hungarian master in the collection – and the painter, Károly Markó, lived in Italy, and had painted the work as illustration to a poem by Pyrker written in German – this donation bore no national feature.
- ⁵ The collection had been displayed since 1865, on permanent loan, in the third-floor galleries of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences – founded in 1825 by Ferenc Széchenyi's youngest son, István Széchenyi [sic] (1791-1860) – which now, with the governmental acquisition of the works, turned into a kind of external exhibition location of the Hungarian National Museum.
- ⁶ This did not exclude attention to Hungarian works, either. From 1873, enjoying the re-discovery – which had been taking place all over Europe – of neglected periods of national art, such as the Middle Ages, plaster casts of the forgotten Hungarian centuries were also commissioned and exhibited.
- ⁷ Eventually, also the founding collection of the National Museum assumed independence as the National Széchenyi Library became a separate institution in 1949, today housed in the Western Wing of Buda Castle, renovated after World War II.
- ⁸ Although Pulszky's programme lived on – for instance a national programme for collecting aegyptiaca was announced in 1902, and in Greco-Roman Antiquities, originals were acquired, next to the plaster casts, from 1908 – these new collections enriched the specialised museums, the offspring of their musée-mère, the National Museum.

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