

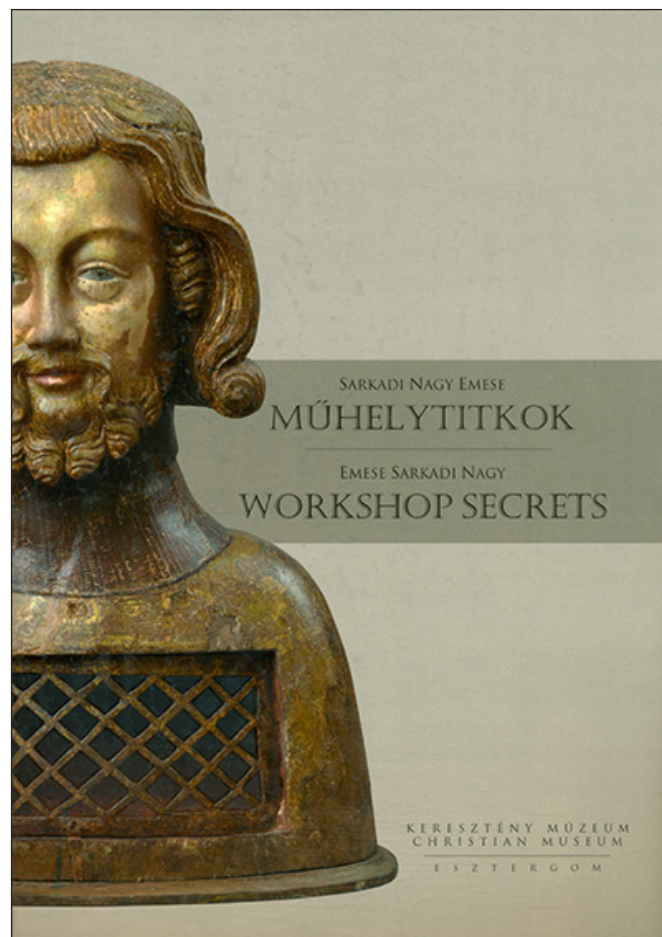
BOOK REVIEW: MŰHELYTITKOK / WORKSHOP SECRETS BY EMESE SARKADI NAGY

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Hungarian Archaeology Vol. 9 (2020), Issue 4, pp. 66–70.

This museum guide is “unique in several respects”. This is the first sentence of the Introduction by the author, Emese Sarkadi Nagy in her volume published in 2019 about the collection of artworks from medieval Hungary as well as German and Austrian territories, housed in the Esztergom Christian Museum. She describes that museum catalogues or guides are usually accompanying a newly opened temporary or permanent exhibition to provide an insight for the visitors to the concept of selection, presentation and the background of the chosen objects. Behind the birth of this volume, however, the intention was rather different. As the author formulated it in her postdoctoral proposal for a research project by the National Research Support Fund (NKFI–OTKA) back in 2013, the “Christian Museum of Esztergom shows a serious default in the scientific treatment of its collections, in spite of the high art historical importance of its art objects”.¹ Consequently, the aim was to compile – as a first step – an up-to-date summary catalogue that offers a clear overview of the collections and provides the basic data of the objects, their short description, provenance, digitalize the preserved documentation of the previous restorations, archive images, prepare new up-to-date bibliographies and detailed photo documentation of each objects.

It is partially due to the unique character of this art historical volume, that it is a historian who writes a review about it in an archaeological journal. Taking the original meaning of the Greek work *arkhaiologia*, namely the study of ancient things/objects, the author approaches her objects in this sense and besides the traditional art historical stylistic investigation also applies such methodological approach that is mainly characteristic in archaeological research. In addition, most part of this catalogue is actually “archaeology” (*antiquitates* with the Latin term), if one considers what these objects meant for those nineteenth-century generations of artwork collectors who laid down the foundations of the modern collection of the Christian Museum Esztergom from which this volume presented a selection. The eighteenth-century distinction between historians (who work with written evidence) and antiquarians (who work with historic objects)



*Műhelytitkok / Workshop Secrets by Emese Sarkadi Nagy
(Second, revised edition.)*

*Esztergom: Keresztény Múzeum / Christian Museum,
2019.*

232 pp. ISBN 978-963-7129-30-8.

¹ NKFI (OTKA), PD 104215: The Hungarian, German and Austrian Late Medieval and Renaissance Collection of the Christian Museum of Esztergom. A Summary Catalogue, 2013–2016. Available online under: <http://nyilvanos.otka-palyazat.hu/index.php?menuid=930&lang=HU&num=104215>, last accessed: 28.10.2020.

was still dominant, and it was the search for objects, the fascination and curiosity about the past that motivated their interest in antiquities and backed their purchases on art markets.

The single classical catalogue of the Christian Museum that contained all the objects was published back in 1948 (GENTHON et al. 1948), and this was updated in other representative volumes prepared by outstanding scholars in 1964 (BOSKOVITS, MOJZER & MUCSI 1964) and in 1993 (CSÉFALVY 1993), which definitely needed refreshing in many respects to meet the scientific expectations of the twenty-first century. The Christian Museum in Esztergom being the most important ecclesiastical collection in Hungary and the oldest public collection established in 1875 by Archbishop and Prince Primate János Simor (1813–1891) from his own “Privatsammlung”, owns the third largest medieval art collection in the whole country.² With the mediation of Arnold Ipolyi (1823–1886), bishop of Besztercebánya and later that of Nagyvárád, whose significant art collection arrived to Esztergom in 1920, János Csernoch (1852–1927), politician, parliamentary deputy, archbishop first of Kalocsa and later of Esztergom, and finally Jusztinian Serédy (1884–1945), Benedictine monk, cardinal and archbishop of Esztergom, approximately two hundred Central European medieval and Renaissance panel paintings and wooden sculptures reached the museum and placed it among the most excellent collections of the whole Central European region (p. 6; JÉKELY 2017). Within the scope of her research project(s),³ Sarkadi Nagy not only updated the knowledge on the medieval art works, but she also prepared the way for a modern presentation both for the scholarly and the general Hungarian and international public. The launch of an online bilingual catalogue on the Hungarian, German and Austrian late medieval art objects of the whole collection in 2017 happened exactly when the museum, as part of the castle complex, became part of the national realms of memory (*lieux de memoire*; PIERRE 1989).⁴ By the decision of the Hungarian Parliament (June 2016), the whole Castle Hill of Esztergom – with the archiepiscopal basilica, the famous Renaissance Bakócz chapel, the building as well as the archives and library of the primate’s palace and the Christian Museum with its cabinet – together with the historical Water Town under the castle, became an outstanding and distinguished part of the national heritage ([listed](#) by the Hungarian National Heritage Institute), thus the online availability of the precious “medieval works from Hungary and the German and Austrian territories”⁵ definitely promotes the visual accessibility of an important Central European medieval heritage collection.

The presented bilingual guide and/or catalogue is, to some extent, a by-product of the scientific research accomplished by Emese Sarkadi Nagy during the preparation of the online catalogue and afterwards her study on the several individual art objects. As a follow-up project within the framework of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences Premium Postdoctoral Research Programme (MTA PPD 462027; “Art historical research, restoration and natural scientific analysis of the medieval Hungarian, German and Austrian collection of the Christian Museum in Esztergom”, 2017–2020), she intended to fulfil the collection’s comprehensive art historical research – especially those pieces which so far were not necessarily in the focus of academic interest –, restoration and natural scientific investigation of the objects. During that work several new scholarly discoveries were made, old ideas and interpretations were questioned and new explanations and analysis were provided instead, which were and will be published in scholarly journals (see several catalogue items written by E. Sarkadi Nagy in HUBER 2015; SARKADI NAGY 2019; MAJOROSSY & SARKADI

² The largest medieval collection is at the Museum of Fine Arts (Budapest), while the largest Hungarian medieval art historical material is to be found in the Hungarian National Gallery (Budapest).

³ Besides the above-mentioned NFI–OTKA, it was partially also financed by a Human Resources Development Operative Programme (EFOP) project support of the Ministry of Human Capacities (EMMI) won by the Károly Eszterházy University in Eger (2016).

⁴ On (cultural) heritage and *les lieux memoire*, see e.g. several articles in *Korall: Társadalomtörténeti Folyóirat* 41 (2010) and 75 (2019).

⁵ On the new homepage of the Christian Museum Esztergom, so far it is the only detailed and full-scale [online catalogue](#) of the hundred and two pieces of art objects (panel paintings and wooden sculptures). From the other collections, a few pieces of information are available on the most outstanding objects. The digitalization of the whole collection is, however, continuous.

NAGY 2019).⁶ Nevertheless, it is also important – especially in the light of the heritage site character of the museum and its collection – to present these new results to a much wider, interested general public. In addition, in a museum context from an educational point of view, it is also an important factor how this presentation happens.

The overall aim of the volume was to bring the general public closer to the art historians' and museologists' work – as the title suggests, to their “workshop secrets” – in order to demystify these “crafts” and also to demonstrate how complex art historical analysis can be and how many other disciplines should be involved in order to reach a satisfactory answer to the research questions. Thus, the structure and presentation of the included hundred and thirty items from the museum inventory (forty-nine artworks discussed in the subchapters) are rather different from any other museum guides and catalogues. It is the series of art historical (and interdisciplinary) research methods that provided the skeleton of the volume. Throughout the main chapters it is well demonstrated that one method in itself is insufficient, and it is the complexity of all these approaches that brings us closer to the “secret” of the art objects. Already the given chapter titles allow an insight into the everyday work and problems that should be faced and the questions that should be asked.

Consequently, the volume starts with the question of provenance (*Ch. 1 Provenance Research: Its Significance and Limitations*) in order to demonstrate how important this step can be to avoid misinterpretations and incorrect conclusions. With the selected examples, the author's aim is to demonstrate that the knowledge about the place of purchase without further precise documentation can be rather misleading, and that one should approach any piece of information with a critical attitude and should place it into the wider context of all the other pieces of information, be them historical, natural scientific, or stylistic. The panels of a winged altarpiece from Aranyosmarót (p. 21) or the four panel paintings from a winged altar prepared most probably by a master trained in Vienna (p. 34) well demonstrate how easily a single information as the basis of interpretation can glance aside: parish church of Aranyosmarót (Zlaté Moravce) versus Migazzi castle art collection in the same settlement, or Kapeller family versus “Kapelle” (chapel) of the episcopal palace of Arnold Ipolyi. Nevertheless, one finds similar examples also later in the volume. The importance of iconographic (*Ch. 3 Startling Stories: Christian Iconography*) and stylistic analysis (*Ch. 4 Art History with Style: Stylistic Criticism*) are discussed in the following chapters, and several cases illustrate that iconographic and stylistic elements together with historical knowledge on the collection from where a given piece comes, as well as the historical ecclesiastical context of the possible place of origin, can bring us closer to the original location of an artwork. For example, the several wings depicting Sts Catherina, Dorothy, Barbara and Margaret and the predella of an altar (pp. 114–115) are thus linked to the Corpus Christi chapel of the Wiener Neustadt castle. In such cases, the careful observation of the images together with the historical sources (later inventories, reports on the refurbishing of churches, or relevant archaeological findings and observations), in other cases the correct reading and interpretation of the possible inscriptions, and the identification of heraldic signs are similarly important. As shown in another chapter (*Ch. 5 People Behind the Artwork: Patrons and Masters – The Historical Backdrop*), they can serve as a reference to actual facts, people, events and places that can be linked to the paintings. The identification of the coat of arms of Bernhard Praun (p. 164), the correct reading of Stephan Geinperger's (p. 173), a Premonstratensian abbot's (p. 170) or a Thuringian vicar's (p. 182) name can bring to the light “new”, detailed histories behind certain images. In relation to the significant and mostly discussed item by art historical literature, the late Gothic furnishing of the Benedictine abbey church of Garamszentbenedek (Hronský Beňadik), the unique approach of the volume is that not only the single objects are under inspection, but the author presents them in relation to each other and thus these well-known pieces are reviewed and presented in a separate – final – chapter (*Ch. 6. Under the Protection of the Holy Blood*), demonstrating that one should never forget about the spatial surroundings and the context (of other liturgical objects) when analysing a single piece of art.

⁶ Additionally, there will be forthcoming articles that are still in preparation, on the so-called Madonna of Alistal (see pp. 56–59 in the referenced volume) or on a Bavarian altarpiece depicting St Margareth with a donor (pp. 168–170).

Nevertheless, the most “unusual” part of the volume in the light of the previous museum catalogues produced for the general public is the second chapter in which the material – the wood itself – is put under scrutiny (*Ch. 2 What an Autopsy Can Show: Scientific Examinations in Art History*). It was the German archaeologist and art historian, Johann Joachim Winckelmann (1717–1768), one of the founders of scientific archaeology who pointed to the importance of the direct inspection of an artwork. The importance of repeated view, close observation again and again together with bringing in new and modern methods, was very much highlighted. The methods of natural sciences, dendochronology, infrared reflectography, UV luminescent photos, X-Ray and CT scans, microscopic investigations of the wood, vertical and cross-sections and/or the pigments of colours were explained and the author tried to present and interpret how these methods “teach us to see” and broaden our knowledge about medieval artworks. For instance, the CT scan of the Madonna of Alistál (Dolný Štál), revealed the unusual technique used by the given medieval master and proved that the statue – as opposed to many similar altar sculptures – was carved from one single piece of wood that pointed to the exceptionality of the sculptor/the workshop (p. 58).⁷ Concerning the panels by the Master of Schloss Lichtenstein (p. 51), it was the dendochronological examinations, the analysis of the growth of tree rings that contributed to the more precise dating of the survived pieces of a winged altar-piece. Throughout the volume, there are several further examples, where these scientific methods contributed to the overall knowledge about the presented objects.

Finally, it should be mentioned that each item included in the “catalogue” – similarly to the online catalogue mentioned above – has a detailed description with the relevant literature and contains the latest state of research concerning the given images. In addition, the volume contains not only excellent, brand-new and pin-sharp reproductions by Attila Mudrák, but in many cases these photos highlight the important details and otherwise neglected back or bottom views of sculptures and panels. Consequently, although the volume was intended to a non-scientific public, allowing an insight into the everyday work and problems an art historian and museologist should face, with the updated summary of the previous scholarship, the new findings achieved through the combination of the above-detailed methods and with the excellent coloured reproductions it also fruitfully benefits to any further research.

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⁷ The Catholic news portal *Magyar Kurír* also [informed](#) the general public about the unusual CT investigation on a medieval sculpture.

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