

Philip de László

in Hungary

Gábor Bellák

At the end of a letter written in September 1908 Philip de László (Fülöp László) underlined a passage stating "the artificiality of writing irritates me".¹ From this we might conclude that the painter (who was by then known and celebrated throughout Europe) did not like writing. He was a man of the brush, not of the pen. But the huge volume of letters held in the collection of the Hungarian National Gallery contradicts this, as does the fact that the passage quoted is on the eleventh page of the letter concerned. If we also consider that the artist dictated an autobiography which, edited after his death by Owen Rutter, ran to almost four hundred printed pages,² then we will be obliged to revise any such earlier conclusion. De László's career was not built on paintings alone: he took great care to polish his image as a painter through his letters and speeches.

We should not, however, therefore imagine that he promoted himself as a kind of brand, as if he were the product of an advertising agency. De László's image as an artist was not a composite, not a pose or a manipulated stereotype, but was founded on a precise and conscientious practice and on certain definite artistic and moral values. His value system was a very particular one, although not rare among artists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Nature was at the heart of his credo. Of course, few artists or movements of the time failed to make reference to nature – their diversity is defined precisely by their differing interpretations of nature. But de László's art was also characterized by another idea, which he strongly emphasized, that of appropriate recognition. That de László was passionate about art is shown by many passages of his autobiography and by his letters, but he did not see himself simply as a

footsoldier in the army of artists. In the pages of his autobiography the humiliations he had to endure during his childhood rankle strongly – not so much wounds inevitably inflicted by teachers and classmates, but indignities like that to which he was put by the likes of his first teacher, Moritz Lehmann, a stage designer, who used his knowledge-hungry pupil as a go-between to deliver his love letters.³ De László soon developed a fierce self-esteem that refused to cede either to jealousy or to malice, or to laziness or shoddy work. He was not arrogant about his conscientious hard work or his skill, but modesty did not prevent him from feeling justified in attempting to garner greater respect. In a letter of June 1899 he asks an unidentified well-wisher to petition the King of Hungary to honour him. "I have been working at a German court all summer, and I would be very glad if I could receive an honour from my own King alongside these foreign distinctions. As far as I know, many people have been honoured who have done far less to deserve it than I. I was reluctant to mention it in Vienna. I am happy to make this request of you, because I know you to wish me well, that you understand my ambitions, and you know how dedicated I am to my art."⁴ It is rare to find an artist expressing such an undisguised desire for recognition.

We should respect de László's honesty, and we should add that his desire for honour was entirely understandable. The artist grew up in an atmosphere overshadowed by the conflict between an irresponsible father and a mother who would make any sacrifice for her poor and populous family. The children, including the future famous painter, were forced to work from an early age in order to ward off abject poverty. Thus they learned to respect work but also to expect just payment in return. A similar expectation guided the boy not just through life, but through the art world of the end of the nineteenth century, where it was still the case that achievement was

opposite
The Hofbräuhaus (cat. 8, detail)

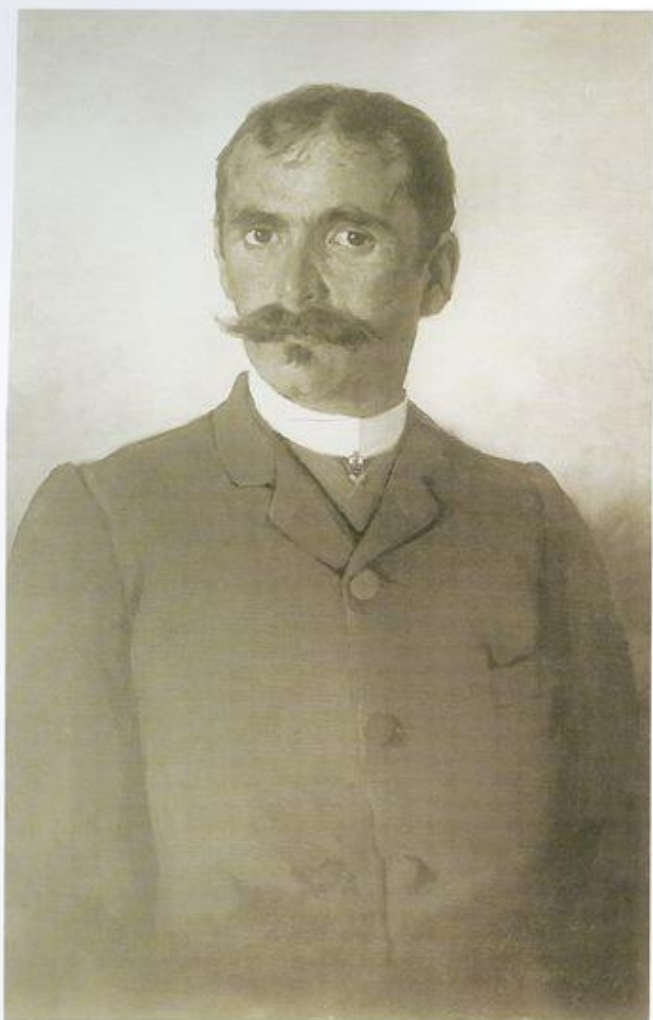


FIG. 2
Sándor Galambos, brother of Pál, Ó-Becse, 1888
Oil on canvas, untraced

measured and the rewards to be obtained – medals, prizes, titles – determined the station of the artist, as if art were some kind of athletic competition.⁵ The surest indicator of artistic success was the kind of social acceptance that raised the artist into the ranks of the élite. In this sense, de László (he obtained the 'de' in 1912, from the Emperor Francis Joseph) was certainly ambitious. By the time he was thirty, the poor boy from Pest had become very wealthy: his studio-villa (fig. 8) was one of the most luxurious in Budapest.

Our knowledge of most aspects of Fülöp László's early career depend on his own accounts, which sometimes vary. For example, when, in London in March 1917, he began dictating his memoirs, initially in German, he began: "It was in the year 1869, on 30 April, that my dear mother bore me, in humble circumstances, in Budapest".⁶ And yet on a questionnaire he completed around 1910⁷ and in the letter of 1908 referred to above⁸ he gives his date of birth as 28 April. While there is a fuller account in Rutter's biography, based on his dictations of 1917, in the letter of 1908 he describes his studies as follows: "In the midst of great difficulties I spent the years of my youth as an apprentice to [Moritz] Lehmann, the Pest set designer (the most famous of the time). I dealt with architectural sculpture above all, and then I moved on to painting maiolica and porcelain, and then I came to art photography. In 1884 I attended the School of Applied Arts, run at the time by the late János Vidéky, to whom I owe a great deal. He supported my passion for art. In 1886 I became Gusztáv Keleti's pupil at the Drawing School, although I could only go to two classes a day. At the end of that year I competed for and won my first state art scholarship. At the beginning of 1887 I became a full-time apprentice of Károly Lotz, now deceased."⁹ Thus he received his first significant training as an artist in the two most important art teaching institutions of the Budapest of the time, the School of Applied Arts and the Drawing School, which would be later the Academy of Fine Art. Among his teachers, not only Károly Lotz but Bertalan Székely deserves particular mention. They were the two outstanding portrait painters of their era, but Székely's principal achievements were in historical paintings on canvas, whereas Lotz's were in genre painting and frescos. László's early interest in genre and historical painting was doubtless due to these two.

Although de László had painted his first portraits in 1888 – most of them during the time when visiting his friend and mentor Dr Pál Galambos in Ó-Becse in southern Hungary (now part of Serbia) – he became known on the national stage through his genre paintings (see figs. 4, 5 and cats. 8–14). He began the first studies for the painting entitled *The Goose Girl* in the summer of 1888. De László gives a lively and detailed account of the *Goose Girl*'s career before the competition juries and at exhibition¹⁰ and of his joy when it was chosen for the 1888 Christmas Exhibition. The truth is, however, that it was not de László's first exhibition piece. At the Hungarian Fine Arts Society, which regularly exhibited the latest 'crop' of Hungarian art – indeed its exhibitions were its most important forum – de László had in autumn 1888 already exhibited a portrait of a child. From this point on his pictures regularly featured in the winter exhibitions. In 1889 he exhibited a picture called *The First Washing Lesson*, in 1890 *Sunday Morning* and *Family Happiness*, all of which were genre paintings. Genre was the most popular theme of the late nineteenth century. Every significant Hungarian painter of the period developed his



FIG. 3
Philip de László and Lucy Guinness on their wedding day, 7 June 1900, at Burton Hall, Stillorgan, Co. Dublin, after their marriage at St Bridget's, Stillorgan

Lucy Madeleine Guinness and Philip Alexius László (later de László) are standing at the back, far right

Second from left in the back row, Elek de Lippich, de László's early mentor; on his right two of the bride's sisters; Dr Gábor de Térey, another friend of the groom

In the middle row, seated, second and third from left, Johanna László, the mother of the groom; Mrs Henry Guinness, the mother of the bride and widow of Henry Guinness of Burton Hall

characteristic genre subjects – the great masters, like Lotz, Székely or Benczúr, as much as the many lesser masters, who by specializing in well composed and easily understandable genre paintings became famous and frequently rich as well.

The popularity of genre painting can be explained not only by changes in taste but also by the fact that 'great', heroic, or historical themes had become less attractive, once the era of revolutions was over. Bertalan Székely, de László's cherished teacher, was forced to conclude in spite of himself and his own work that historical painting was the past, genre painting the future. As the generation of artists born around the 1860s came on to the scene, artists who no longer knew the revolutionary years 1848–67 through personal experience, they took as their theme not Man and his destiny but the ethnographically, psychologically or socially definable individual – the child, the agricultural labourer, the small-town official, the Bohemian, the old man or woman, the cripple; or else the Gypsy, the Slovak (*Tóth*), the Swabian etc. Such painting demanded the creation of a perfect illusion by the precise, painstaking documentation of authentic detail. Indeed the creation of a major genre painting demanded the participation of something approximating a small

film-crew. The choice of location and the organization of appropriate models, clothes and attributes, the assembly of all these closely studied elements into a unified whole – this could take months, or even years, of work. The choice of location and the organization of appropriate models, clothes and attributes, the assembly of all these closely studied elements into a unified whole – this could take months, or even years, of work. De László enthusiastically describes the stages in the birth of one of the major works of his early period, *The Hofbräuhaus* (cat. 8; see detail p. 10). It is characteristic, for instance, of the procedure employed in such paintings that the head and body of one of the figures were painted from two different models. De László's zeal was due in no small part to the fact that one of his models – the English lady standing on the far right – was the same Lucy Guinness whom the artist had met at a fancy-dress ball in February 1892, and with whom he had promptly fallen in love. Eight years later, in June 1900 – de László showed truly biblical patience in his unwavering devotion to Lucy and in gradually winning over her sceptical family – Miss Guinness became his wife (fig. 3). It is an affectingly romantic story, as related in his own words in Rutter's biography.



FIG. 4 *Regret or Love Spurned*, 1892
Oil on canvas, 83.8 × 118.1 cm
Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest

By 1892 de László was living in Munich. He had already spent a year at the Academy there as a pupil of Sándor Liezen-Mayer, himself of Hungarian origin, in 1889–90. After another year studying in Paris at the Académie Julian, de László returned to Liezen-Mayer's classes in 1891, remaining there until the summer of 1892. During these years he continued to take part in the Budapest exhibitions. In winter 1891 he exhibited four paintings in Budapest, including the genre painting *The Storyteller*, which that year won the Art Lovers' Circle's prize of

1500 forints. This was de László's first significant Hungarian distinction. Five new paintings by de László appeared in the 1892 Winter Exhibition in Budapest. In this outstanding collection we find the *Hofbräuhaus*, now at last finished, on sale for the unusually high price of 1800 forints, although the figure was justified by the respect the work commanded. De László also exhibited a historical character picture, *L'Incroyable* (cat. 7), a portrait in costume recreating a dandy of the French Revolution. The genre painting *Regret*, also known as



FIG. 5 *The Little Girl and the Gardener or Taking a Rest, 1893*
Oil on canvas, 68,5 x 96 cm
Private collection

Love Spurned (fig. 4), showing a young man drowning his sorrows in a village tavern, reprised Hungarian folklore. It was also a kind of *homage* to Sándor Petőfi, the greatest poet of the Hungarian popular romanticism of the 1840s, whose portrait can be seen on the wall of the tavern, in a pose similar to that of the lovelorn young man. Characters and scenes of Hungarian peasant life constitute the main material of de László's genre painting, even though his greatest successes were not such Hungarian themes. Frequently these genre scenes embodied references to transience and the passing of time, for instance *Taking a Rest* (fig. 5). After the *Hofbräuhaus*, de László's second most famous genre painting was his 1895 *Falling Leaves* (cat. 14). In this

widely reproduced work, depicting a veteran of the 1848 struggle for freedom, the aged fighter wearing his old Hussar uniform sits in an autumnal park surrounded by falling leaves, thinking of his youth and of battles for the homeland.

By the middle of the 1890s de László was becoming increasingly well known internationally as a portraitist, but his works were not to be found in the Hungarian national collections. It is for this reason that his 1895 *At Vesper Bell* (cat. 13) is important: it was purchased by the state in 1896 and entered the collections of the National Gallery. This picture, the first of László's works to find its way into a museum, was a reinterpretation of the Angelus theme that was so widespread

in nineteenth-century national genre painting. An elderly peasant drops his work and prays at the sound of the tolling bell. The face of the little girl with him radiates deeply held faith, whereas the old man's broken expression betrays a kind of bitter resignation. The most enchanting feature of the painting is the landscape that shimmers in the background in the twilight, already showing the qualities of de László's late landscape paintings. His final genre painting was *Tired*, which was exhibited in 1897. Its title suggests that it was similar to the artist's other peasant genre paintings. He unveiled a portrait of Sándor Liezen-Mayer, his teacher, before Budapest audiences in 1893 and 1896.¹²

The biggest showcase for Hungarian fine art in the nineteenth century was the 1896 Millennium Exhibition, commemorating the thousandth anniversary of Hungarians' arrival in the Carpathian basin. Like all other ambitious painters, de László was keen to contribute a serious historical composition for this occasion. He wrote to a senior civil servant, Miklós Szmrecsányi, in the summer of 1895 in order to obtain a commission from him.¹³ His copy of Ádám Mányoki's celebrated 1724 portrait of Prince Ferenc Rákóczi II was completed in 1896. Only one serious historical painting by de László, *Zách Felicián* (cat. 15), featured amongst the thirty historical paintings chosen. Zách was a favourite figure in Hungarian historical painting as in Hungarian ballads. He was, according to legend, a powerful landowner who in 1330 sought revenge against the king for seducing his daughter, attacking the queen. De László represented him in his own likeness, as he imagined it transformed by old age.

Besides such genre paintings, de László from time to time showed portraits. Many artists studied and practised portrait painting, but most considered it merely a means to supplement their income. Compared to the complex task of history or genre painting, painting a head was mere bagatelle. However, the portrait is to figure composition as chamber music is to a symphony. In it every stroke, every note has a specific purpose. In the depiction of a battle, who notices one badly drawn figure, or in the performance of a symphony one poor player among twenty to thirty violinists? But in a portrait one inexact, misplaced line can ruin an otherwise powerful effect.

Though he, too, had greater ambitions, after his Munich years de László was forced to paint bust portraits to earn a living and to support his mother, with whom he had a very close relationship. From the 1890s onwards, however, he acquired ever more distinguished patrons, of whom the Bulgarian Prince Ferdinand was possibly the most important. In 1894 the Sofia publishing house Cosmos asked Elek Koronghi de Lippich, a department head in the Ministry of Culture, to recommend a young and none too expensive portrait painter who could paint a portrait of Ferdinand for reproduction.¹⁴ De Lippich, who had known the artist from his Munich days and who would continue to support him, recommended

de László. De László's journey to Sofia and his encounter with Ferdinand opened the door to other rulers and persons of distinction.

The portrait of Ferdinand (fig. 6) suggests a comparison of de László's career with that of another great figure of the period, Gyula Benczúr. Benczúr was twenty-five years older than de László and had just completed his own portrait of Ferdinand, in 1891 (fig. 7). De László was poised to supplant Benczúr at the top of the Hungarian portrait painting tree, but, by contrast to Benczúr, who painted the bulk of his portraits at home, commissioned by Hungarians, de László became an international who painted more abroad than in Hungary. De László's activity took him all over Europe, his subjects coming from all strata of society. Benczúr and de László differed, too, not simply in style but also in philosophy or approach. If Benczúr clung to the objective, material world, de László saw endlessly changing people with unchanging souls. De László gives a lengthy and exciting description of his visit to Sofia,¹⁵ and his recollections always show insight and sensitivity. All we have from Benczúr from Sofia is two letters to his family. He himself was taciturn, and what he says in the letters is truculent: "I don't yet know what I'll paint tomorrow. On Monday the Prince will be photographed in several poses and on Tuesday, God willing, I'll set off for home!"¹⁶ Benczúr had no qualms about painting from a photograph; in fact he painted his own self-portrait from one. De László, on the other hand, always worked from the living model. He made his sitters converse with him, bringing them into an emotionally active state that guaranteed genuine facial features, expressions and gestures. For him the picture was born during the conversation and itself flowed and twisted in the making. Here he drew a line, there he covered one over only to go in a new direction. Sometimes he would repeat the stroke, or stop to seek an answer, until he got a malleable, sensitive, exact idea of the other person. For him a portrait was an interactive project. His method and results were consistent. It was the secret of his success. He was a kind of Professor Higgins, able to tell after a couple of words the origins and education of the person he was talking to, sometimes even his age, and whether you could make a lady out of a Doolittle by teaching her to talk. A de László portrait is like a good conversation – reserved, deliberate, and perhaps even unemotional, but also magnificent, humorous and exact. It reveals at least as much about the person as a touching, spiritual depiction. De László's subjects were distinguished people. Their elegance was revealed in their dress and postures alike. De László represented this elegance in graceful, virtuoso paintings. He stressed that dignity was not pompous, bombastic or histrionic, but rather the display of inherent grace – sharing a general trend at the end of the nineteenth century towards a more quotidian, direct depiction of the subject in portrait painting. The heroic, boasting swagger portrait was giving way to a more 'natural' representation, even in prestigious paintings.



FIG. 6
H.R.H. Prince Ferdinand of Bulgaria (1861–1948), 1894
Oil on canvas, 119.4 × 91.4 cm
Private collection, Spain



FIG. 7
Gyula Benczúr (1844–1920)
H.R.H. Prince Ferdinand of Bulgaria
Engraving

In comparison with de László's interactive, conversational paintings, Benczúr's resemble a speech. He used props, costumes and draperies to enliven his works. He left nothing to chance; every tiny detail was carefully planned, defined and explicitly declared. His precision was a consequence, too, of his use of photographs, since in a photograph every part is equal, without distinction of emphasis. "Photography is based on that well-calculated moment when the model is waiting in anticipation, a huge detriment to authenticity," said de László in a 1901 interview.¹⁷ Even when Benczúr was not working from a photograph, he employed a similar approach. The Emperor Francis Joseph (King of Hungary) was used to Benczúr's painting method. When de László came to paint him (see fig. 19, p. 32),

revealingly, the Emperor reacted with great surprise when de László began working at the first sitting on an empty canvas. The Emperor had expected that the painter should already have outlined the portrait from a photograph and was to meet his sitter only to ensure the likeness and to put in final touches. Francis Joseph repeated the story of de László's empty canvas frequently, to many different people.¹⁸

In his early years de László usually managed to lay down the finishing touches after four or five sittings. To many the paintings seemed finished after just one – indeed some were. De László himself claimed that he worked on the entire surface of the painting on each occasion. He laid down the main features, colour schemes and background contrasts without any preliminary sketches, and then

later brought them up. His method is well illustrated in one of his most famous pictures, his portrait of Pope Leo XIII (cat. 18). The Hungarian Catholic Church had commissioned the painting in 1900 to celebrate the nine-hundredth anniversary of the Hungarian Christian state, and arranged the sittings in Rome. Seeing his portrait after three sittings, the Pope found his face to be too much like *Voltaire's*. With the Pope's permission de László began the entire work anew, and after another four sittings produced a painting that was awarded a gold medal by an international panel of judges that same year at the Paris world exhibition.

During the portrait sittings, de László worked out every detail not only of the sitter's face, but of the sitter's clothing as well. De László's technique is illustrated again in his portrait of Cardinal Rampolla (cat. 19). De László was so taken by the Cardinal's exquisite, fragile hands, in sharp contrast to his strapping physique, that he spent one and a half hours painting only his hands: "In the afternoon of the same day I was occupied with the picture of Cardinal Rampolla, and when I came to paint his hands, I found them more difficult to express than those of the Pope, which rested, simply and naturally, on the arms of the chair with the object of emphasizing his age. I placed the hands of the Cardinal so that they rested one on the other on the biretta. My object was to express through his hands the self-control manifested in his expression. Like the Pope, he was a splendid sitter. I explained to him that it would be very difficult to get the same position for the hands and that I wished to begin and finish both hands in the same sitting. 'How long will you need?' he asked. 'An hour and a half, Your Eminence', I replied. 'Bene', he said, and did not move his hands throughout the sitting. Painting with great concentration, I finished the work and I do not think I have ever painted a better pair of hands."¹⁹

De László's paintings continued a recent academic tradition – typified by the style of the Franz von Lenbach in Germany, who was greatly appreciated by de László – based on the flamboyant style of eighteenth-century English portraiture. His work involved a high level of technical skill; it was exact, but never over-detailed, it was not a psychological description but rather expressive of social status; he would use a number of Baroque devices in the composition; he laid in creamy, impasto brushstrokes apparently with great ease, with confident elegance and with calligraphic freedom. The free-floating, fanciful and seemingly instinctive contours, blurred strokes and ridges and furrows of paint looked as if they had emerged spontaneously, even if they were actually the product of a feverish, temperamental work tempo. As an Hungarian obituarist wrote of him, "His lines simply ran, in our age no one compares to his mastery of painted calligraphy."²⁰ Except in his earliest works he never sketched his sitters' faces before beginning. He simply took up his brush and started the picture, beginning by shaping the principal

contours. He considered drawing more important than painting, and found it more valuable to grasp the characteristic features with a monochromatic pencil or chalk rather than with colour. He thought that using colours created a more general impression. Drawing required reduction, and in this sense called for more attention, understanding and skill.

De László produced more than five thousand portraits, an astonishing number in itself, even if they had not included many like that of the German Imperial Chancellor Hohenlohe-Schillingsfürst, which so greatly impressed Emperor William II (cat. 40) that he at once wanted to meet the artist, whom he would later consider a lifelong friend. In general it can be said of de László that his consistently excellent portraits not only meant orders and satisfied clients, but good friends as well. At a London award dinner in 1932 he offered the following statement of his art: "To sum up, I feel that a great portrait should, in substance, be as follows: It must represent the painter in its composition and its colour scheme. It must represent a combination of the painter and the sitter in that the sitter is shown in an atmosphere and a pose which the painter has selected to characterise the mind and soul and walk of life of the sitter. And it must represent the sitter, in that he who sees the picture sees not only the human form of the sitter but sees the revelation of all his potentialities."²¹

When he moved with his new wife to Budapest in 1900 he already owned the city's most luxurious studio-villa (figs. 8, 9). His son Henry was born there, as was his daughter, Eva, who died young. It was largely for family reasons that he decided to settle in London in 1907, holding his first solo exhibition in England that same year, at the London Fine Art Society. But for some time before he had hardly been living in Budapest. He was more often to be seen working in elegant spa towns, in the palaces of his distinguished patrons, or in hotels in world cities. After 1903 Vienna had become a more frequent place of stay for him than Budapest. But, with a curious asymmetry, in the year 1907 he also had a solo exhibition in Budapest. The collection of almost a hundred exhibits embraced his entire life's work, from the very beginning to the lavish portraits on which he was working at the time. Thereafter he returned to Hungary on only three occasions (in 1910, 1927 and 1935), but he did not lose all contact with the land of his birth. He immortalized several Hungarian aristocrats in his later portraits, and even painted several portraits of the Regent Miklós Horthy (see cat. 109). In 1925, a small exhibition opened at the National Fine Arts Society, but thereafter the Hungarian press had nothing much to say about him, until his death. Yet, in 1907, Budapest could at last make the acquaintance of this painter: the city could see in its entirety the astonishing oeuvre that had brought acclaim and distinction to its creator. With this exhibition, de László may be said to have truly arrived in Budapest, but he had also left his home town behind.



FIG. 8 (LEFT) Philip de László's studio-villa, Pálma utca 10, Budapest, photograph, 1900



FIG. 9 (RIGHT) Philip de László and his wife, née Lucy Guinness, in the artist's studio at home in Budapest, photograph, 1903

NOTES

1. Bad Kissingen, 10 September 1908, addressee unknown: Archives of the Hungarian National Gallery, MNG Adattár 1029/1920.
2. Owen Rutter, *Portrait of a Painter. The Authorized Life of Philip de László*, London (Hodder & Stoughton) 1939.
3. See Rutter 1939, p. 23.
4. 26 June 1899, London, addressee unknown: MNG Adattár 3495/1937.
5. This issue was addressed in the 1995 exhibition at the Hungarian National Gallery entitled 'Medals, Silver Wreaths. The Cult and Patronage of Art in 19th-century Hungary', curated by Katalin Sinkó.
6. Rutter 1939, p.17.
7. MNG Adattár 1030/1920.
8. See note 1.
9. See note 1.
10. Rutter 1939, pp. 42–43.
11. Rutter 1939, p. 85.
12. *Sándor Liezen-Mayer*, oil on canvas, 102,5 x 72 cm, Staatliche Galerie, Munich, inv. no. G. 11144.

13. Letter by de László to Miklós Szmrécányi, 8 August 1895: MNG Adattár 4353/1-3.
14. Rutter 1939, pp. 131–32.
15. Rutter 1939, pp. 132–44.
16. Gyula Benczúr's letter to his family, no date (end of 1891): MNG Adattár, 6018/1954. The original text of the letter runs: "Was ich morgen male, weiß ich noch nicht. Montag wird der Fürst in mehreren Stellungen photographiert und Dienstag reise ich, so Gott will heimwärts!"
17. *Új Idők* [New Times], 1901, p. 186.
18. *Műcsarnok* [Art Gallery], 1899, pp. 298–300.
19. Rutter 1939, p. 200.
20. Fülöp László and János Thorma: 'Ervin Ybl: Képzőművészeti halottai', *Budapesti Szemle*, CCXLVIII, 1938, pp. 108–14.
21. 'The Art of the Painter. The response of Mr Philip de Laszlo to the toast of G.W. Jones', 1932.