

Gyula Végh and the Corvinas by Endre Liphay

Gyula Végh (1870-1951), art historian, book collector, book historian, graphic artist and painter was a member of several cultural organizations, President of the Hungarian Bibliophile Society, and Director of the Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest.

He graduated from law school, but following a brief office career, he started dealing with painting. He went on a study tour to Western Europe, where he studied painting at Paris-based Académie Julian and Whistler's art school. Later on, he spent a considerable time in Italy.

Returning home from abroad, he settled down with his wife and children in his recently purchased castle in Bozsok, near Szombathely, Western Hungary. He took a plunge in the cultural life of Vas County. Gyula Végh delivered lectures on literature and arts, and he wrote articles and made proposals to help with the work of several county associations. The Gallery Department of Vas County Museum was established on his initiative; his name was also connected with the organization of the highly successful Art Historical Exhibition of Vas County in 1912. The exhibition was held in the local cultural palace (today's Savaria Museum).

Owing to his successful activities, expertise and the good reputation he had earned in social circles, he was appointed Director of the Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest in 1917. He remained on this post until 1934. He was interested not only in works of art and paintings, but also in books. Gyula Végh made a professional catalog of the volumes stored in his private library, which he had consciously built over the years. He was elected President of the Hungarian Bibliophile Society founded in 1920. Initiation and organization of several exhibitions (e.g. *20th Century Book Art*) and publishing of books were associated with his name.

Gyula Végh's activities as a patron of art were connected with National Széchényi Library from several aspects. His close professional relationship with book historian József Fitz, member of the Hungarian Bibliophile Society, then Director-General of National Széchényi Library is clearly shown by their bulky correspondence kept in the Manuscript Collection of NSZL.

Gyula Végh was a member of the committee of experts who had been commissioned to reclaim from Austria historical art treasures belonging to Hungary by virtue of the Peace Treaty of Trianon. In line with the Venice Agreement signed in 1932 as a result of difficult and lengthy negotiations, among others, the Vienna

Illuminated Chronicle, *Gesta Hungarorum (The Deeds of the Hungarians)* by Anonymus and several corvinas were returned from Vienna to Budapest, to National Széchényi Library. Gyula Végh was also instrumental in restoring, via diplomatic channels, two Modena corvinas that had been appropriated from Hungary by the Italians.

From his father's days, Gyula Végh was on friendly terms with several members of the Apponyi family, including the famous book collector Count Sándor Apponyi (1844-1925), who was honorary chairman of the Hungarian Bibliophile Society. He spent a lot of time in the Apponyi Castle in Lengyel, where he cataloged and processed books not belonging to the so-called Hungarica Collection. This was Sándor Apponyi's smaller collection including early, rare prints and manuscripts, the description of which by Gyula Végh was published under the title *Rariota et curiosa gróf Apponyi Sándor gyűjteményéből (Rarities and Curiosities from Sándor Apponyi's Collection)* (Budapest, Library of the Hungarian National Museum, 1925). He played a key role in Sándor Apponyi's donating his famous Hungarica Collection to National Széchényi Library in his life.

Gyula Végh was also interested in book binding and its history, and in his retirement years, he spent a lot of time drawing and painting pictures of book bindings. In 1936 he finished his work entitled *A régi magyar könyvkötések (Early Hungarian Book Bindings)*, in which, using his painter's talent, he painted the bindings of early Hungarian books owned by National Széchényi Library, the Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest and private collectors. Another related work by Gyula Végh is *Régi kőszegi könyvkötések (Early Book Bindings of Kőszeg)*. He compiled his album on printer badges, entitled *Régi magyar könyvkiadó és nyomdászjelvények. Budai könyvtárosok jelvényei 1488 – 1525 (Early Hungarian Book Publisher and Printer Badges)*, based on Hungarian and international literature. Gyula Végh used his drawing skills in the field of historical auxiliary sciences as well, a good example of which is his collection containing 500 crest drawings, summing up the coats-of-arms of Hungarian bishops. The carefully and meticulously wrought, illustrated manuscript volumes were so much appreciated by the then management of National Széchényi Library that not only had they been purchased, but also Director-General József Fitz commissioned him to paint the corvina bindings. Gyula Végh worked for months in the building of the Museum, where an outstanding volume of the series was made, under the title *Corvina-kötések (Corvina Bindings)*. In his work, the corvinas were grouped according to the type of bindings: velvet, silk and leather. Not all the books were drawn but, in addition to the volumes owned by National Széchényi Library and ELTE University Library, illustrations were made of corvinas kept in Munich, Wolfenbüttel and Yale University Library. In addition to the quality watercolors, international outlook has also been a special value of the compilation.

A major part of the written heritage of Gyula Végh's rich public and professional career has been kept in the Manuscript Collection of National Széchényi Library.

Autograph works, literary notes, diaries, correspondence in Hungarian, and partly in French and German, as well as documents belonging to his wife, Countess Mária Wimpfen can also be found here.

Gyula Végh was a versatile professional, a cultivated man, with a command of several languages and a wide international experience. He was a prominent figure of the late 19th and early 20th centuries, a community building European citizen, committed to cultural values and ready to take responsibility.