

Terence Mullaly on Gyula Sajó

It is doubtful whether before 1958 more than one or two people in Worthing had heard of Nagybánya. Indeed it would be hard to think of two places further removed from one another than the Hungarian artists' colony in the countryside at Nagymánya and Worthing. Yet something of the spirit of Nagybánya was to live on in Worthing. The link was Gyula Sajó.

In 1955 he had a one-man exhibition in Budapest. Only three years later Sajó had another exhibition; this time it was in London at Foyle's Art Gallery. Perhaps even more indicative of the spirit of the man is the fact that only two days after he had arrived in England, having left Hungary and Austria following the uprising of 1956, he was busy painting.

The School of Nagybánya, which began in 1896 and flourished in the early years of our century, owed much to individuals. Indeed there was at Nagybánya a very special relationship between Simon Hollósy and others such as Károly Ferenczy and István Réti. It was in this spirit that Sajó established himself in Britain as a teacher, yet links with the Nagybánya do not end there.

The artists of Nagybánya, like the men who gathered at Barbizon, looked directly at nature. The comparison should not however be pushed too far; many of the motives behind a withdrawal to the countryside were shared by these two groups of artists, but the results were very different. A distinguished Hungarian art historian, Gábor Ö. Pogány, has said that "Nagybánya rescued Hungarian painting from the grave of eclecticism." It also affirmed that the world was flooded with light. Beside the works of the artists of Nagybánya men such as Millet and Théodore Rousseau appear somber. It was this gift, extending to a special vibrant handling of colour, that Sajó brought to Britain.

He was born in Hungary in 1918 and studied Art and Architecture in Budapest. Later, in 1953, after lecturing at the Technical University, in Budapest, he moved on to teaching at the Budapest Academy of Applied Art. Echoes of that world are conjured up by two of his earliest works, one of his father, the other of his mother, date from 1939, but already they intimate the assurance that its one of the hallmarks of Sajó's work.

He was an archetypal master of the Hungarian tradition in painting. That in Worthing, the quintessential English seaside town, he was to found the "Atelier Art School" should be seen as a reaffirmation of the European tradition. More than a gesture was involved. His work demonstrates that he deserves place in the history of art in Europe. The man, whom we see in his self portraits, both conjured beauty and helped others to express themselves.

Sajó's range was extraordinary. There are large oils, hastily executed oil sketches, watercolours and prints in a variety of techniques. Sajó loved to experiment, although such was his assurance that it is easy to forget this. Nor did he limit himself to two dimensions, His few pieces of sculpture go beyond competence.

Indeed Sajó's achievement, both as a painter and as a printmaker and sculptor, illustrates the excellence of art training in Hungary, even in difficult times. Equally intriguing for those familiar with the Hungarian 19th and 20th Century painting is the fact that Sajó's work illustrates the qualities and the strength of the Hungarian tradition. It is this that Gyula Sajó brought to Britain.

That after leaving his own country he should be successful in a radically different environment is a tribute to the man. Acknowledgement in the arts is, nevertheless, fickle. All too often with artists fame is posthumous, Nor when they are rediscovered is quality always the touchstone: our own age is one in which fashion exalts forgotten artists. Not infrequently no service is done; comparisons can be cruel, and, in the last quarter of the 20th Century, reputations, often with brutal speed, slip back into the shadows. This leaves no doubt that with Sajó this will not be the case.

His self-portraits are not just measured. They are grave, in the Roman sense of gravitas. His work marks a beginning, not an end. A man who could paint those big pictures of women in an interior, who could experiment with techniques of printmaking, and who could execute deliciously perceptive little oil sketches of the countryside deserves to be better known. Gyula Sajó brought to England a sense of colour rare in British art and a potent awareness of how painting can express joie de vivre. That will live on. Already he can be seen with fellow countrymen Béla Czóbel and Robert Berény. They are all Hungarian painters who matter for Europe and the World.

Terence Mullaly, Art Historian/ Daily Telegraph Art Critic