

Permanent Exhibitions in the Hungarian National Museum

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The main function of museums has been for a long period of time collecting, preserving, researching and displaying objects. A greater emphasis has been recently placed on exhibitions, interpretation, learning and audiences. The Covid pandemic has led to the creation of online, or digital exhibitions.

Different new issues have influenced the changes of museum exhibitions, as the number of museums has grown dramatically with an incredible range of themes and subjects covered. This meant the usage of new means and the focus placed on visitors' experience.¹ Museums becoming more audience-centered has brought a new approach to exhibitions as well. Although displays are still constructed essentially around objects, thus making material culture a key constituent of most museum interpretation narratives, but the use of a series of innovative solutions changed the scene (DOLÁK – ŠOBÁŇOVÁ 2018).

The role of museums has also changed in the 21st century – they are businesses, storehouses of collections, exhibition and display venues, educational establishments, research organisations, communal spaces and places of memorialisation. This has brought the change of exhibitions as well – they more and more often highlight present-day issues and curators increasingly consider that history must be viewed from multiple perspectives (HEIN 2010, 357).

A permanent exhibition has the same fundamental function of communication as a temporary or an itinerant one, the difference is, that “permanent” refers to the fact that the exhibition has a multi-year duration.

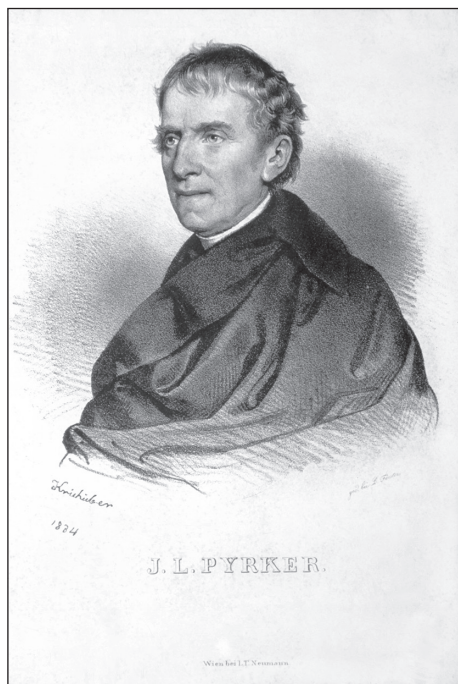
Permanent exhibitions in the Hungarian National Museum

The first permanent exhibition was organized immediately after the opening of the Hungarian National Museum in 1846. The last one opened in 1996 – a quarter of a century ago.

The first permanent exhibition in the Hungarian National Museum included the Pyrker-gallery (192 paintings), the General Gallery (180 paintings) and the National Picture Gallery, or Hungarian Gallery (34 paintings).² The museum's collection of paintings was formed on the basis of two important private collections: the Jankovich collection and the Pyrker Gallery. (Fig. 1) Both were purchased by the state in the thirties, including works of mainly foreign artists. The museum's Picture Gallery could be visited regularly by the public, and students were also allowed to use it for purposes of copying. In the 1850s Director Ágoston Kubinyi asked contemporary artists to donate as many of their paintings as possible to

¹ <https://www.frontiersin.org/articles/10.3389/fpsyg.2019.02092/full>.

² János László (or Johann Ladislaus) Pyrker (1772–1847) was the Patriarch of Venice between 1820–1827, a collector and patron of arts. He offered and donated his painting collection to the newly founded Hungarian National Museum.



• **Fig. 1.** • Josef Kriehuber (1800–1876):
Portrait of László János Pyrker, 1834. Lithograph (Wikipedia)

the Museum, and called 43 Hungarian painters to send their self-portraits to the museum.

By the museum's reopening in 1851 after the Revolution and Freedom Fight of 1848–49 the number of artworks had increased in all the galleries. The material of the Picture Gallery had to be reorganized in the sixties as a result of the large number of newly acquired works. In 1870 the second permanent exhibition was organized by the keeper-curator Antal Ligeti, a painter himself. The six halls of this display started with 51 historical portraits, mainly 19th century pieces. The second hall was dedicated to the works of Hungarian artists representing scenes of Hungarian history. The third hall was named after the paintings of Károly Markó the elder staged there, including works of his family members and contemporary landscapes. The remaining three halls were the so-called Pyrker Gallery, displaying the entirety of his collection together with a selection of the Jankovich collection.³ This was the first attempt in Hungary to create an exhibition similar to those of the famous European museums.⁴

In 1870 this permanent exhibition was rearranged under the guidance of Ferenc Pulszky, the new director. (**Fig. 2**) A decision was made concerning the spending of an annual amount to purchase works of contemporary Hungarian artists. The keeper and curator of the Picture Gallery was himself a painter, Antal Ligeti (1823–1890), and he was the author of the new catalogue published in 1870 (LIGETI 1870). Ligeti listed in it the most important new acquisitions of the fifties and sixties. The collection was displayed in seven rooms, and not only was this a considerable increase compared to the former exhibition, but its material had also changed remarkably. The first room was the place for historical portraits, a kind



• **Fig. 2.** • The great hall of the permanent exhibition organized in 1870.
Photograph (HNM)

³ Miklós Jankovich (1772–1846) was an art collector and historian. His vast collection was offered in two stages to the Hungarian National Museum, purchased for a symbolic amount.

⁴ It has to be added, that till the turn of the 19th and 20th century beside the above-mentioned permanent exhibitions, materials from only two other collections were on display, consisting of a relatively small selection, similar to today's visible storages.

of national portrait gallery of fifty paintings. The second one was dedicated to the works of Hungarian artists, mainly 19th century historical compositions, a representative selection of the best works of the period between the Freedom Fight of 1848–49 and the 1867 Austro-Hungarian Compromise, together with a few representations of religious subjects, and landscapes. The third room was named „Markó Hall” as the majority of its paintings were the works of the Markó family members, including the water-colour series of Hungarian fortresses and castles of Károly Markó the Elder. A series of other landscapes proved the fashion of this type, but genre-pieces were enjoying an increasing popularity as well. The fourth, fifth and sixth rooms were presenting mainly paintings of the Pyrker Gallery together with a few precious pieces of the Jankovich collection. They were grouped according to the different „schools” including outstanding works, such as those of Claude Lorrain, the follower of Rubens, George Hamilton, Anthony Van Dyck. The room of the „different schools” showcased the so-called „Imperial”, or “Habsburg Gallery”, with famous portraits of Queen Elisabeth and Franz Joseph I. And finally, the last room proved the knowledge of the great European museums displaying portraits of artists and their self-portraits.

In 1877 the old masters’ collection was transferred to the newly built palace of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences. By the end of the seventies the collection had increased to such an extent, that a committee was set up to investigate the collections and exhibitions. The foundation of a new museum was planned, the Museum of Fine Arts, which was established in the year of the millenary celebrations of 1896. Simultaneously, the paintings of the Hungarian National Museum were divided into two groups: those of outstanding esthetical value, and those more important from the point of Hungarian history. The former group of paintings were transferred to the possession of the new Museum of Fine Arts, while the latter became the basis of the Historical Gallery opened in 1884. The opening of the Museum of Fine Arts took place in 1906.

Lajos Ernst (1872–1937)

He was a collector and patron of contemporary artists, a founder and director of the exhibition hall National Salon. His private museum opened in 1912 in Budapest. The collection was displayed in fourteen rooms in a permanent exhibition. Solo exhibitions for contemporary artists and auctions were also organized. At the beginning of the 1930s he offered his collection of Hungarian history for a permanent exhibition in the Hungarian National Museum. Ernst was a government counsellor, and this exhibition opened in 1932 was the first permanent exhibition of Hungarian history in the Hungarian National Museum. Its catalogue was published as the 7th in the series of the volumes of the National Museum exhibition catalogues (ERNST 1932). In the preface, director Bálint Hóman, Minister of Education and Religious Affairs, stressed, that the museum collection “was not enough to show the whole national history”, so the offer of Ernst “had a positive welcome”, moreover, Ernst had such a vast collection, that the available exhibition halls did not have enough space to display the total material. Ernst was on the one hand concerned with the authenticity of the objects and artworks representing a certain historic period, but he was also keen on presenting the works of 19th century historicism. It was emphasized by many critics, that displaying original works together with the historicising interpretation of the same events was a unique characteristic and a special value of the exhibition.

The structure of the exhibition

As it was stated by one of the curators, the Hungarian National Museum was a museum of the national past, so the permanent historical exhibition had to suggest the same message. This was the concept guiding the curators in organizing the exhibition. The first room was presenting Hungarian prehistory exclusively with the works of 19th century artists. The next room dedicated to the age of the Kings of the Árpád Dynasty was different: it displayed parallel archaeological finds, objects and documents from the 11th–12th centuries, and 19th–20th century paintings and graphic works. The room staging Hungary’s “great age” had a very impressive selection of artworks, as the collector, Ernst had a special taste and affinity for the acquisition of artworks with outstanding value. (Fig. 3) The same applied to the next three halls

(IV. The Age of Anti-Ottoman Wars, V. Kuruc World, VI. From the Szatmár Peace Treaty to the Freedom Fight of 1848–49). The exhibition was closed with the gallery of Hungarian literature.



• Fig. 3. • Room III of the Ernst exhibition. Photograph (Ernst 1932, Illustration III)

This first permanent exhibition, organized of the material of a private collection, showcased almost four thousand objects (far from using the entire Ernst-collection), which proved its value and importance. Still, the fate of both the owner and the collection material was tragic and gloomy. The exhibition closed in 1936. Ernst, when after a long series of negotiations, his offer was not accepted by the museum leaders and the cultural government, committed suicide. The collection was auc-

tioned two years later, and was dispersed, as many of the Hungarian museums – including the National Museum – purchased selecting from the artworks, but even today pieces of the Ernst collection appear on different auctions (RÓKA 2002).⁵

Further permanent exhibitions in the HNM

Following the closing of the Ernst-exhibition, a new one was organized based on the concept of the Ernst exhibition, with a larger number of archaeological materials and leaving out the historicising artworks. The permanent exhibition reorganized after WWII was still based on the concept of the Ernst exhibition. (Fig. 4)

The last permanent exhibition opened for the 1996 millicentennial festivities. It is a quarter of a century old by now, and is still open for the visitors of the Hungarian National Museum.

⁵ The Ernst Collection at the Research Institute of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences: <https://mi.abtk.hu/hu/reperitorium/38-regeszta-a-i/101-a-i-2-az-ernst-gyujtemeny>

- **Fig. 4.** • The permanent exhibition of the Hungarian National Museum in the 1960s. (HNM)



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