Did the deaths of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Koloman Moser, and Otto Wagner in 1918 mark the end of an era in the art of the countries of the former Habsburg Monarchy? What new trends were already emerging before 1914 and the First World War? What effect did the new nation-states have on the common interests of artists, and how did they respond? Progressive artistic movements thrive on the exchange of ideas and reject political and ideological boundaries. A sense of community was fostered, for example, through artists' associations, avant-garde journals like MA, the International Exhibition of Theater Technology in Vienna, and schools like the Bauhaus in Weimar. In 1938, the violent dictatorships that led to the Second World War put an end to this creative period and obscured the perception of a shared culture.
Gustav Klimt
The Golden Knight, 1903
Aichi Prefectural Museum of Art, Nagoya
BEYOND KLIMT

New Horizons in Central Europe
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“The heart of Austria is not the center, but the periphery”—
Avant-Garde Journals in East-Central Europe
Gábor Dobó
Merse Pál Szeredi
“The heart of Austria is not the center, but the periphery”—Avant-Garde Journals in East-Central Europe

Gábor Dobó, Merse Pál Szeredi
“The heart of Austria is not the center, but the periphery. You won’t find Austria in the Alps—chamois, yes, and edelweiss and gentians but barely a hint of the double-headed eagle. The substance of Austria is drawn and replenished from the Crown Lands.” (Joseph Roth, The Emperor's Tomb, 1938, ch. 5)

After the end of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy, the editors of avant-garde journals in the successor states developed radical concepts that questioned the former function of art and artists. In East-Central Europe, until the end of Communism around 1990, the latter were ascribed a prophetic role inherited from the romantic nationalism of the nineteenth century and carried over into the individual national cultures, which the avant-garde of the time sought to overcome. Artists now regarded themselves as members and parts of an international and collaborative network. Of course, the cultural models of the different regions also had an influence on the avant-garde, and they had a marked effect, for example, as charismatic artists in many genres. Mention might be made here of Ljubomir Micić, Karel Teige, or Lajos Kassák, who were themselves influenced by the Romantic Sándor Petőfi or Adam Mickiewicz. After the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and in the ensuing complicated geopolitical and cultural situation (called “histoire croisée” by historians, on account of the parallel interconnections that existed), avant-garde artists stepped out of the routine of their accustomed environments in many respects. This enabled them to bring together the diverse Modernist tendencies on the territory of the former Empire within the avant-garde network.

After the collapse of the Monarchy, avant-garde journals played an important role, as they were by definition a collective cultural product in which a group of artists articulated their complex artistic and social program, which in turn contributed to the international discussion of art. The avant-garde journals did not appear out of the blue. Not only the number of “little magazines,” as they were called, but also their circulation had been increasing significantly since the 1880s, first in Western Europe and then worldwide. By the end of the nineteenth century, these periodicals had assumed the important role of communicating between European cultures and making cultural trends and their new interpretations more widely known. In another respect as well, the “little magazines” of that time and around the turn of the century resembled the avant-garde journals of the 1920s discussed here: They had a distinctive artistic program, their authors frequently profiled themselves as members of some putative movement, and they often attacked the existing institutional system. The avant-garde editors made exceptionally good use of the “little magazine” strategies so as to formulate their own programs in the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy.

This essay will look at the strategies by which avant-garde magazines became part of European art discourse, even assuming a trend-defining role within it. Moreover, they gave writers in the countries of the former Monarchy and beyond a platform that enabled them to remain in contact, despite language, ethnic, and national barriers (fig. 1).

The East-Central European avant-garde journals of the 1920s utilized the ground prepared for them by the “little magazines” in what was a crisis-ridden geopolitical context, to say the least. In fact, in his influential work The Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century, Eric Hobsbawm interpreted the period from the start of World War I to the end of World War II as a single war. The once multilingual and multinational Monarchy fragmented into individual nation-states, which often closed themselves off and, moreover, in which many millions of people found themselves in a minority situation. The governments of the successor states initiated various modernization programs, including cultural policy concepts, but in general these efforts were not intended to initiate communication between the multinational states of the Carpathian Basin. On the contrary, the neo-national program of Kuno Klebelsberg (1922–31 Minister for Religion and Education in the conservative Horthy system) pushed for comprehensive education reforms that were to present a first step toward restoring the “territorial integrity” of the country, meaning a revision of the peace treaties following World War I.

In the context of this rising nationalism in the successor states, the role of the avant-garde journals, which were published in several languages and distributed internationally, took on increased importance—and not only in Hungary. Their format and the ease with which the “little magazines” could be distributed made them ideal as vehicles for relatively rapid transborder communication, even after several of them had been banned in some countries. Such was the case with MA (1916–25) by Lajos Kassák, who in the first half of the 1920s worked as an exile in Vienna. Kassák’s colleagues smuggled it under the name of 365 or Kortárs from Austria to Hungary, and also distributed it in Czechoslovakia and Romania. An indication of the connecting and integrative role of these avant-garde journals is the fact that their contributors included a strikingly large number of artists who were multilingual and at home in several cultures. Among Kassák’s collaborators in MA were the painter János Mattis-Teutsch, who worked for the journal in Budapest in the 1910s. In the 1920s he contributed to the periodical Contemporanul (1922–32) in Bucharest, although he continued to live in the Transylvanian-Saxon city of Kronstadt (now Brașov, Romania). Róbert Reiter (pseudonym Franz Liebhard/t) began as an avant-garde poet and literary translator, working initially for MA in Temes-war (now Timișoara, Romania) in Hungarian and German. The avant-garde poet Lajos Kudlák was also initially involved in MA, becoming known later under the name L’udovit Kudlák as a Slovakian Modernist painter. The Hungarian-born Serbian
painter Petar Dobrović / Péter Dobrovits, who also worked for Kassák’s journal early on, was later active in the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes.

The avant-garde journals of the region continued to have a sustained impact during the time of the disintegration of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the associated reduction in the territory of the Kingdom of Hungary. One of the consequences of the new geopolitical situation was the loss of importance, absolutely or relatively, of previous cultural centers. Even Vienna, capital of the former Monarchy, was no exception, losing its significance as an obvious point of reference for the artists of the successor states. For the Eastern European avant-garde journals of the 1920s, however, Vienna retained its important role, albeit for different reasons than before. After the collapse of the Hungarian Republic of Councils, the Social Democrats’ “Red Vienna” became the most important emigration destination. It was in this context that the avant-garde émigrés founded their own periodicals, in part because they regarded Kassák’s publication MA as being insufficiently politically committed. Among these new journals was Akasztott Ember (1922), which was influenced by left-wing Berlin Dadaism, Egyseg (1922–24), which advocated the program of the Soviet Proletkult, and Ék (1923/24), created out of an amalgamation of the two concepts and editorial boards. Vienna thus still functioned as a catalyst, even though no significant Viennese avant-garde journal was published at the time. Historians explain this with the dominance of the highly institutionalized Modernist trends of the Secession and, later, of Expressionism, while some contemporaries drew attention to the “petty bourgeois” character of the Vienna art scene. At the same time, Vienna retained its importance as one of the meeting places of the avant-garde of the region and of Europe, and major events taking place in the city often provided a basis for friendships, discussions, and later collaborations, as was the case with the International Theater Exhibition organized in 1924 by the architect and set designer Frederick Kiesler. The artists saw in theater technology the possibility of creating a “synthesis,” a total work.
of art. Leading international avant-garde artists exhibited at the Konzerthaus, with pieces as diverse as Ferdinand Léger’s *Ballet mécanique*, a “dynamic” futuristic play directed by Filippo Tommaso Marinetti and Enrico Prampolini, and Kiesler’s revolutionary *Raumbühne* (Space Stage). Many avant-garde journals—*MA*, *Pásmo* in Brno, *Periszkop* and *Contimporanul* in Romania, *Noi* in Rome, and The Little Review in the USA—published special issues on the exhibition. It gave rise to feverish activity in the art world, particularly among critics, and sparked lively discourse between European avant-garde journals (fig. 2).

Although Vienna remained a catalyst for the journals of the East-Central European avant-garde, regional avant-garde periodicals no longer regarded the city as a center but saw the network in which they operated as transnational and polycentric. They therefore rejected the idea that the cultural transfer radiated from the “center” to the “periphery,” the center naturally being the “West” and the periphery the “East.” The avant-garde periodicals, including the journals published in the successor states to the Monarchy, saw themselves as equal members of a network, unlike the Modernist publications, like *Nouvelle Revue Française* (1909–), *La Ronda* (1919–23), or The Criterion (1922–39), which sought to rebuild cultural life in postwar Europe on the basis of the Western cultural canon and rejected the avant-garde.

By contrast, the editors of the avant-garde journals believed that statements about the new art could be made from Novi Sad, Bucharest, or Lviv just as well as from Vienna, Paris, or Berlin. These cities remained important but were no longer the absolute points of reference for East-Central European avant-garde journals. The declining importance of earlier cultural centers is illustrated by the fact that avant-garde artists sought their modernization models not in these cities but in the Soviet Union, which they saw as their future reality, in the USA, or even in the Jewish settlements in Palestine (fig. 3).

The journals of the polycentric avant-garde network offered a cultural transfer in several directions. These publications not only had knowledge of innovations in art but also interpreted them and actively shaped contemporary cultural discourse. East-Central European journals like *MA* in Vienna, *Zwrotnica* in Kraków (first series published in 1921/22), *Zenit* (1921–26) in Zagreb and later Belgrade, the journals of the Devětsil Group in Prague and Brno, or *Blok* (1924–26) in Warsaw contributed to international discourse with reproductions of major artworks or original theoretical essays. Through their network, these avant-garde journals were able to establish connections between the successor states of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and also between the multilingual cultures within the same country. The East-Central European publications were written not only in the language of the country but also in German and French, both of which served as a *lingua franca*, and often in other local languages as well. This was of particular importance in the successor states created after the 1919 peace treaties, which were fraught with
nationalist tensions. Thus the Hungarian avant-garde journal Út (1922–25) described itself as “Yugoslavian” in Vojvodina and published Hungarian translations of texts by authors from the Zenit group. At the same time it also remained in contact with the Vienna and Budapest avant-garde at a time when the majority of intellectuals in Hungary were suffering—in their new situation as a minority—from the “trauma of Trianon,” as it was referred to, and did not see the cultural transfer between the new states as a priority (fig. 4).

Apart from articles in Slovenian, French, and German, the periodical Tank (1927) in Ljubljana also used Italian, a remarkable gesture given the wartime conflict in the region between the Italian and South Slav inhabitants and the subsequent new border arrangements. The avant-garde journals Yung-Yidish (1919) and Tel-Awiw (1919–21), published in Yiddish in Poland and Ukraine (previously Galicia, which belonged to the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy), also had a transborder readership, using the avant-garde network and the mediating force of Yiddish to reach readers from Łódź to Poznań, and even as far as New York. With its “Balkanization of Europe” slogan, the magazine Zenit vehemently attacked the paradigm that saw cultural transfer in relation to “center” and “periphery,” provocatively and (self-)mockingly describing Europe as an “extension of the Balkan peninsula”18 (fig. 5).

Not only the number of “little magazines,” as they were called, but also their circulation had been increasing significantly since the 1880s, first in Western Europe and then worldwide.

The avant-garde journals of the 1920s, including the East-Central European ones, possessed a common code system, “synthetic" editing, as it was called, which investigated connections between contemporary (avant-garde) art, science, and technology, and their communication through different media. Avant-garde artists believed in the potential of synthesis and envisaged its implementation through linking the achievements of contemporary art with those of non-related fields (science, technology, and social sciences). László Moholy-Nagy, a member of Kassák's circle, who had quickly become an important European avant-garde figure, investigated the question of these “synthetic" avant-garde journals as early as 1925. He was a professor at the Bauhaus at the time, but published his study on this subject between 1924
and 1926 in numerous contemporary avant-garde journals, including Dokumentum (1926/27) and Pásmo (1924–26). The latter was published in Brno, a mid-sized city that had become acclaimed for its Modernist architecture and thus grew into one of the regional centers of Modernism during the 1920s. Moholy-Nagy saw the promotion of the “new lifestyle” and its manifestations as a key feature of the “synthetic” art journals. They therefore included fields that, from a Modernist point of view, promised the most innovations, from architecture to education and typography. The visual appearance of these journals reflected developments in typography and bookmaking that made them recognizable and attracted attention.

One innovation was the fact that the reproductions and photos placed between the text sections not only illustrated the articles but were also items in their own right. The photos showing technological innovations or modern cityscapes, often published without comment, functioned as visual calls to action. Their message was that these beacons of modern life were a true reflection of the time. The “synthetic” journals used multiple resources, providing space for a wide range of creative expression, from architectural sketches to musical scores. They were also multilingual, with articles written in the national languages being summarized in the major European languages, and special issues published on topical subjects.

The synthetic editorial work appeared in its purest form in almanacs and anthologies, because, unlike newspapers, these publications...
were also typographically consistent. Typical works of this type include Moholy-Nagy’s and Kassák’s Buch neuer Künstler from 1922, the anthology Revoluční sborník Devětsil, edited by Jaroslav Seifert and Karel Teige, of the same year, the almanacs by the Polish Futurists in the early 1920s, and Tisztaság könyve by Lajos Kassák from 1926 (fig. 6).

The synthetic journals of the East-Central European avant-garde were not at all devoted to the promotion of a single direction but endeavored to present the latest artistic developments in an integrative (eclectic or syncretic) form. The titles alone were an indication of this: Integral (1925–28), Zenit, Dokumentum, Contimporanul, Periszkop (1925/26), etc. The power of these synthetic journals as a code can be seen from the fact that the Communist periodicals published in the late 1920s, such as 100% (1927–30) or ReD (1927–31), used the same typographical design (fig. 7).
This study was written in connection with the research project of the Petőfi Literary Museum–Kassák Museum, financed by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office — NKFIH, project-no. NKFI-K 801779.

1 This study was written in connection with the research project of the Petőfi Literary Museum–Kassák Museum, financed by the National Research, Development and Innovation Office — NKFIH, project-no. NKFI-K 801779.

2 Michael Werner, Bénédicte Zimmermann, eds., De la comparaison à l’histoire croisée (Paris, 2004), pp. 15–49.

3 We use the term “Modernism” to designate cultural movements in the early twentieth century that refer to the era of “modernity”; Peter Brooker, Andrzej Gąsiorek, Deborah Longworth, Andrew Thacker, “Introduction,” in ibid., eds., The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms (Oxford, 2010), pp. 3–4. “Avant-garde” is used to describe the critical art movements that radically revised modernity and Modernism. There is no sharp boundary between Modernism and avant-garde and there were numerous overlaps.

4 See, e.g., Evanghélia Stead, Avant-garde and There were numerous overlaps.


10 On the Vienna experience of avant-garde artists, see, e.g., the introduction by the pro-Bauhaus reviewer Ernő Kállai to Lajos Kassák’s 1924 exhibition at Galerie Der Sturm: Ernst Kállai, “Ludwig Kassák,” in Der Sturm, 13, Ausstellung: Ludwig Kassák und Nikolaus Braun, exh. cat., Galerie Der Sturm, Berlin (Berlin, 1924), p. 3.


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Cover (museum edition BOZAR): Gustav Klimt, Johanna Staude, 1917/18, Belvedere, Vienna & Gustav Klimt, Johanna Staude (detail), 1917/18, Belvedere, Vienna
Did the deaths of Gustav Klimt, Egon Schiele, Koloman Moser, and Otto Wagner in 1918 mark the end of an era in the art of the countries of the former Habsburg Monarchy? What new trends were already emerging before 1914 and the First World War? What effect did the new nation-states have on the common interests of artists, and how did they respond? Progressive artistic movements thrive on the exchange of ideas and reject political and ideological boundaries. A sense of community was fostered, for example, through artists’ associations, avant-garde journals like MA, the International Exhibition of Theater Technology in Vienna, and schools like the Bauhaus in Weimar. In 1938, the violent dictatorships that led to the Second World War put an end to this creative period and obscured the perception of a shared culture.