

An ‘Unconventional Marriage’ Folk Art and Expressions of National Identity in Central Europe, c. 1900

The influence of folk art on expressions of national identity in the developing modern art forms of Central Europe can be described as an ‘unconventional marriage’ – akin to the subject of *The Wedding* (1901), a play by the Polish author and artist Stanisław Wyspiański. A play in which artists and writers from the city marry women from the countryside, and peasants are praised as ‘rulers in the way they act – / There’s power in peasants – that’s a fact’,¹ *The Wedding* provides an insightful commentary on the place of folk heritage in the artistic imagination of fin-de-siècle Central Europe. As Marta Filipová writes, folk art was a key motif in ‘the recovery of national consciousness and reinvention of the historical roots of nations’ under imperial control.² Countries such as Poland and Hungary, for instance, reasserted national identity by creating modern artistic styles based on cultural roots distinct from imperial domination. At the same time, these traditional centre-periphery models do not reflect how the imperial powers themselves interacted with folk art. Incorporation of the vernacular in early twentieth-century Austrian art was inspired by a nostalgic impulse to rediscover traditional art and handicraft amid the mood of anxiety in an age of rapid modernisation. Through examining three works by Polish, Hungarian, and Austrian artists, as well as the historical and cultural contexts of their production, this essay will explore how national identity was represented within modern styles influenced by folk art.

Divided between the Austro-Hungarian, Russian, and Prussian Empires, fin-de-siècle Poland was a fractured nation searching for an authentic expression of its identity. This search contributed to a phenomenon known as *chłopomania*, or peasant-mania, which found its most defined cultural representation in the Austrian-controlled province of Galicia. *Chłopomania* was a key trait within the most influential artistic movements and styles in Poland, including the rustic architecture and interior design of the Zakopane Style, and the Arts and Crafts foundation of the Young Poland movement. The work of artists such as Stanisław Wyspiański, however, demonstrates that *chłopomania* is not a movement that ignores modernity, instead using its vernacular roots to inject vitality and a distinct sense

¹ Wyspiański, *The Wedding*, p. 47.

² Filipová, ‘National Treasure or a Redundant Relic’, section 9.

of ‘Polishness’ into developing modernist art forms. As David Crowley observes, Wyspiański’s works in diverse mediums including stained glass, woodwork, and textiles exemplified the overarching goal of the Polish Applied Art Society to ‘search for modernity while maintaining Polishness’.³ This fusion of Polish folk culture with a modern national style is evident in works such as Wyspiański’s cartoon for a stained glass window in the Lwów Cathedral (1894) [Fig. 1], which combines a traditional medium and national mythology embodied by the allegorical figure of Polonia with curvilinear floral motifs evocative of Art Nouveau.

A union between modernity and tradition is both literally and figuratively epitomised in Wyspiański’s *Self-Portrait with the Artist’s Wife* (1904) [Fig. 2]. The pastel on paper portrait depicts Wyspiański and his peasant wife Teodora wearing traditional Polish clothing. Teodora wears a *krakowska* dress with a necklace of coral beads and medallion of the Virgin Mary, while Wyspiański’s fur-lined sheepskin vest and shirt with a stand-up collar evokes the simple clothing of the Polish peasantry.⁴ Although Wyspiański stands slightly in front of his wife, his muted clothing, sideways gaze, and almost sickly pallor makes him less dominant in comparison to Teodora, whose evenly lit face, confrontational gaze, and brightly-coloured clothing renders her as the focal point of the work. While Meredith Miller argues that the juxtaposition of Wyspiański and Teodora defines urban and rural ‘in opposition to one another’,⁵ I would instead suggest that Wyspiański’s composition represents an ideal unity rather than contrast.

In *Self-Portrait with the Artist’s Wife*, Wyspiański relates traditional clothing to Polish national identity. This theme recurs in Wyspiański’s *Wedding*, where two characters discuss the significance of wearing ‘national peasant dress’, comparing it to ‘flirting with nationalism’ and contemplating whether it is ‘fashionable’ or outdated.⁶ The double-meaning of ‘fashionable’, referencing both peasant dress and nationalistic ideology – as well as the fashion for the bohemian men of Kraków to marry peasant women – is relevant to the socio-cultural significance of clothing in Wyspiański’s *Self-Portrait*. Weronika Malek-Lubawski observes that the style of dress worn by Teodora was ‘originally worn by

³ Crowley, ‘In Dreams Consoled’, p. 39.

⁴ Malek-Lubawski, ‘Peasant Identity and Class Relations’, pp. 44-45.

⁵ Miller, ‘Portraits of Kraków’s Places and People’, p. 70.

⁶ Wyspiański, p. 35.

folk dancers in villages around Kraków at the turn of the eighteenth century, before being appropriated by the upper classes' and gaining the status of a national costume.⁷ The cultural status of Teodora's *krakowska* dress thus signifies how the fashionable trend of wearing traditional clothing unites the Polish people – regardless of their class – through a collective national heritage.

In Hungary, incorporating folk art into a national style that reflected the country's historically diverse identity involved drawing upon a growing body of cultural and ethnographic research on folk heritage. Katalin Gellér observes how Hungarian artists visited villages to collect traditional art, ornamentation, and folktales as sources of inspiration,⁸ while Katalin Keserü identifies anthropological research on the Asian origins of the Hungarian people as a key influence on nineteenth-century Vernacularism.⁹ These influences manifest in artworks ranging from paintings and photographs of ethnographic groups in Hungary, to folk embroidery motifs and a distinctly Hungarian self-orientalisation in the Neo-Magyar architectural style developed by Ödön Lechner [Fig. 3]. One of the key groups promoting Hungarian identity through an Arts and Crafts-based revival of folk art practices was the Gödöllő Colony, which taught artisanal handicrafts and created works that depicted national legends and folklore.

Such folktale inspirations are found in the stained glass triptychs created by the Gödöllő artist Sándor Nagy for the Palace of Culture in Marosvásárhely (1913). The stained glass windows were made with lead, a traditional method used in the Middle Ages and revived by the Gödöllő artists.¹⁰ Each window illustrates a Transylvanian folk ballad, such as *The Ballad of Kata Kádár* [Fig. 4], one of Hungary's oldest recorded ballads, which can be traced to the Székely people – acknowledged in Hungarian history to be descendants of the Huns.¹¹ Like Wyspiański's *Self Portrait*, *The Ballad of Kata Kádár* tells a story of love transcending social class. The three panels narrate the tale's pivotal moments: the nobleman's mother forbidding him to marry the peasant Kata Kádár, Kata drowned in the lake on the orders of the nobleman's mother, and entwined flowers growing from the graves of Kata and the nobleman – who died trying to rescue Kata – symbolising their reunion in the afterlife.

⁷ Malek-Lubawski, pp. 34-35.

⁸ Gellér, 'Romantic Elements in Hungarian Art Nouveau', p. 118.

⁹ Keserü, 'Vernacularism and its Special Characteristics', p. 131.

¹⁰ Keserü, 'The Workshops of Gödöllő', p. 12.

¹¹ Kadar, 'The Tragic Motif in the Ballad of "Kata Kadar"', p. 19.

The merging of Hungarian folk art into a national style influenced by aesthetics of modern art movements is embodied by the inclusion of floral motifs in Nagy's *Ballad of Kata Kádár*. As Keserü notes, the use of 'floral motifs as vital life-symbols' bridges folk art ornamentation with the visual language of Art Nouveau.¹² The stylized floral motifs characteristic of Art Nouveau are visible in the roots of the water lilies in the second panel, and the ballad's central image of entwined flowers in the final panel. Not only does Nagy emulate Art Nouveau's curving lines and pastel colours in the traditional stained glass medium, the composition of the embracing couple and the surrounding embryonic form is reminiscent of the final panel of Gustav Klimt's *Beethoven Frieze* (1902) [Fig. 5], echoing its theme of divine consummation. Whether a folk-secessionist homage to the celebrated painter or a vernacular-inspired riposte against the art of the imperial centre, Nagy's stained glass panels exemplify a national style which combines aspects of Art Nouveau with ancient folk imagery. The work thus demonstrates that folk art and ballads are part of a living tradition that defines modern Hungarian identity.

While Polish and Hungarian artists engaged with folk art to revive a national identity and artistic style under imperial dominance, the imperial centres themselves were also engaging with traditional craft and subjects. Although scholars such as Carl Schorske and Peter Vergo focus on the dominance of avant-garde impulses in fin-de-siècle Viennese art, the relevance of folk art was acknowledged in Austria as early as 1873, with a section at the Vienna World Exhibition promoting the national style and modern-day utility of artisanal crafts.¹³ Even in the gathering place of the avant-garde Secession, the Wiener Werkstätte's *Cabaret Fledermaus* (1907) [Fig. 6], vernacular influences were evident in its patchwork quilt-like walls. While imperial Austria had no political or cultural need to promote a distinct national style, artists looked to rural settings and folk art as an escapist rejection of urban sensory overstimulation. In a letter to Erwin Lang, Oskar Kokoschka described his experience of the anxieties created by the Viennese metropolis:

It's all as ossified as if the screaming had never been heard. [...] People are such eerie consequences of their type, like marionettes, that it is possible to pick things from this person or that, and be sure of producing specific torments.¹⁴

¹² Keserü, 'The Workshops of Gödöllő', p. 4.

¹³ Ibid, pp. 2-3.

¹⁴ Kokoschka, 'To Erwin Lang, Winter 1907-08'. In *Letters*, p. 16.

Recognising the psychological torment inflicted by the urban centre, Kokoschka was motivated to incorporate nostalgic folk motifs into his early works, such as his *Poster for the 1908 Kunstschau* [Fig. 7], depicting a cotton-picker in rural dress. Studying in the Kunstgewerbeschule, Kokoschka acknowledged he was ‘equally interested in craft subjects’ in addition to academic art.¹⁵

Kokoschka’s fascination with folk art is reflected in the series of eight prints illustrating his poem entitled *The Dreaming Youths* (1907, 1917). Originally commissioned by the Werkstätte as a children’s book, Kokoschka’s photolithographs emulate the thick linework and stylization of woodcut prints, lack depth and perspective, and are executed in a minimal palette of primary colours. The protagonists of *The Dreaming Youths*, the young boy and the girl Li, are autobiographical representations of Kokoschka and Lilith Lang, Erwin Lang’s sister with whom he was in love. The first image of the series, *The Sleeping Girl* [Fig. 8], is the clearest example of Kokoschka’s folktale inspiration manifesting as escapism and romantic fantasy. In its Arcadian setting, Kokoschka transforms Lilith into an archetypal fairytale character, obfuscating her identity in the Viennese metropolis as his friend’s sister and fellow Kunstgewerbeschule student.¹⁶ In the foreground of the print, a girl sleeps in the centre of a lake, with a pine forest and a castle-like structure in the background, while depictions of fish and reindeer echo the magical animal archetypes of folktales. Embodied by the theme of dreams, Kokoschka’s incorporation of fairytale and folk motifs in his prints derives from introspective motivations. The ambiguity of the fairytale realm where *The Sleeping Girl* is set, whether real or conjured by the central dreamer, reflects the sense of uncertainty accompanying the desire to escape the metropolis.

Discussing his early works including *The Dreaming Youths*, Kokoschka wrote: ‘when you strive to create what people are not yet prepared to understand, you are bound to suffer the consequences.’¹⁷ While his works were indeed negatively received at the time of their production, Kokoschka experimented with folk influences from a personal perspective of exploring the mental states evoked by rural settings. When Austria eventually arrived at its own search for national identity

¹⁵ Kokoschka, *My Life*, p. 18.

¹⁶ Reinhardt, ‘The Hidden Fairy Tale’, pp. 39-40

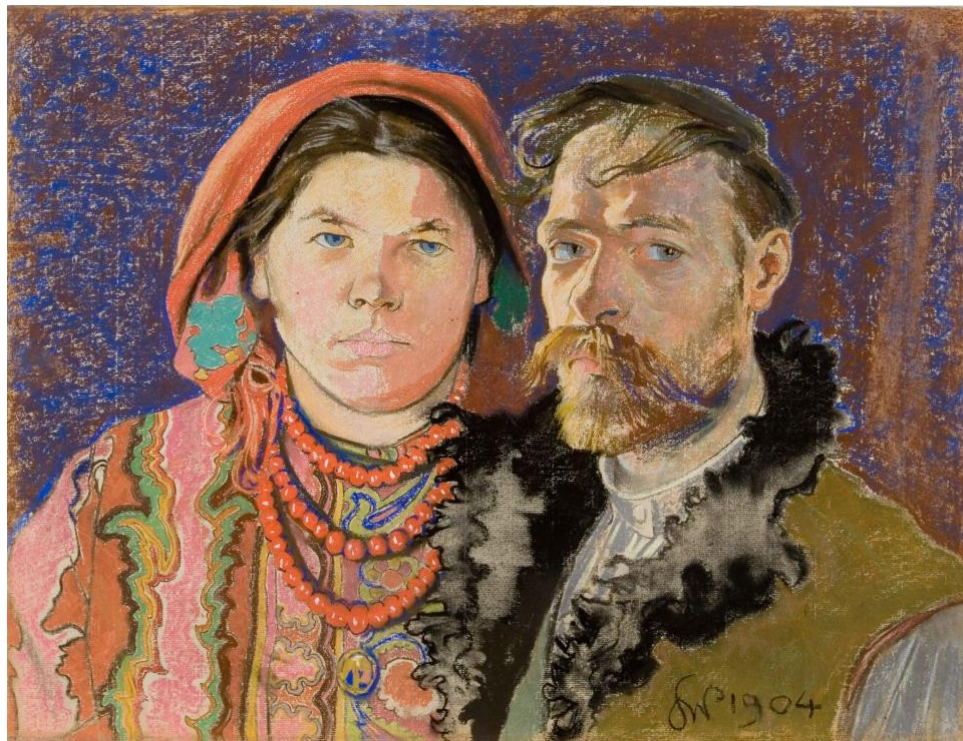
¹⁷ Kokoschka, *My Life*, p. 21.

in the art of the inter-war period, particularly drawing on Tyrolean influences, interaction with folk art expanded to the level of the collective. At the same time, folk influences had already emerged within the avant-garde art movements that would define fin-de-siècle Viennese culture.

Although different in their mediums and contexts of production, the works by Wyspiański, Nagy, and Kokoschka share two key attributes. Firstly, the works all use techniques and subjects of folk art within new modernist art forms. While Wyspiański's portrait represents traditional folk dress as an expression of a common Polish heritage, and Nagy's stained glass window exemplifies a national Romanticist revival within a uniquely Hungarian Art Nouveau style, Kokoschka explores folk art as a nostalgic escape from the Viennese metropolis. Secondly, the works all share the subject of love, incidentally reflecting the metaphor of an 'unconventional marriage' used to describe the union of folk heritage with modern Central European art. Despite the differing methods and ideologies of the artists, each work expresses love, whether nationalistic or nostalgic, for a vernacular-inspired art that reflects the contemporary national consciousness.



[Figure 1] Stanisław Wyspiański, *Polonia: Design of the Stained-Glass Window for the Cathedral in Lwów*, watercolour on paper, National Museum in Kraków, Kraków.



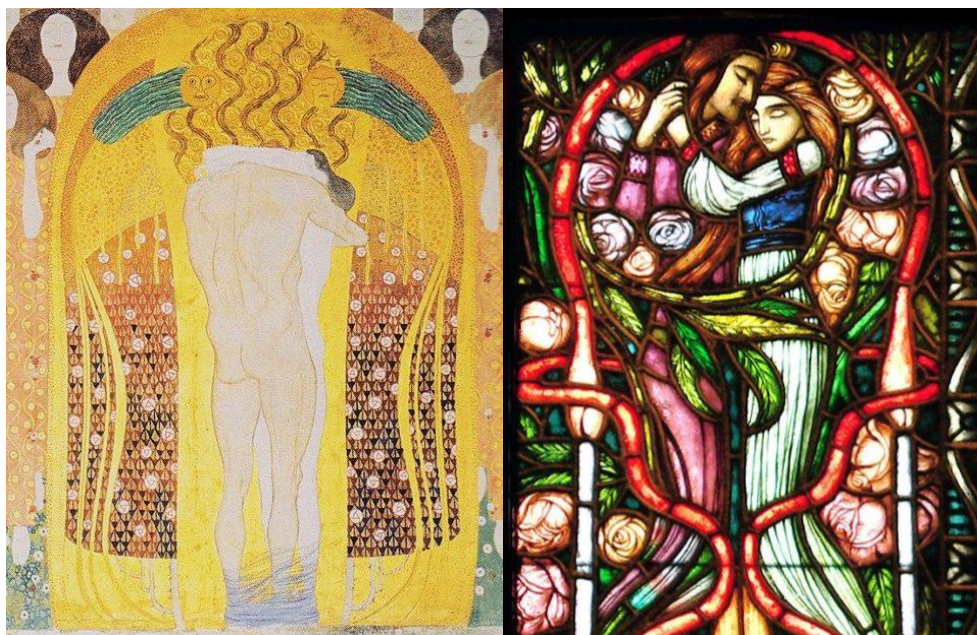
[Figure 2] Stanisław Wyspiański, *Self-Portrait with the Artist's Wife*, pastel on paper, 47.7 x 62.2 cm, National Museum in Kraków, Kraków.



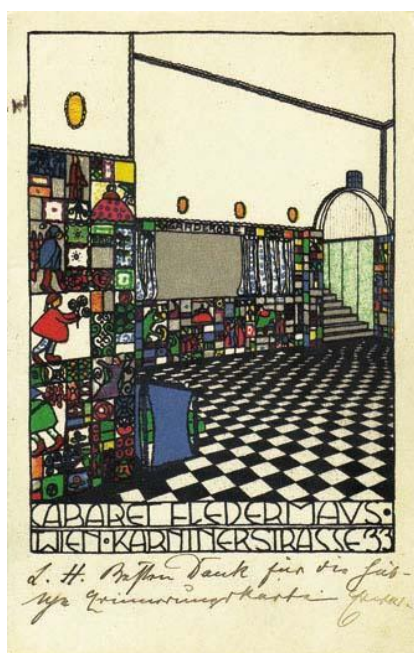
[Figure 3] Detail from Ödön Lechner, *ceiling of the Museum of Applied Arts*, Zsolnay ceramic tiles, Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest.



[Figure 4] Sándor Nagy, workshop of Miksa Róth, *The Ballad of Kata Kádár*, stained glass window, Palace of Culture, Marosvásárhely.



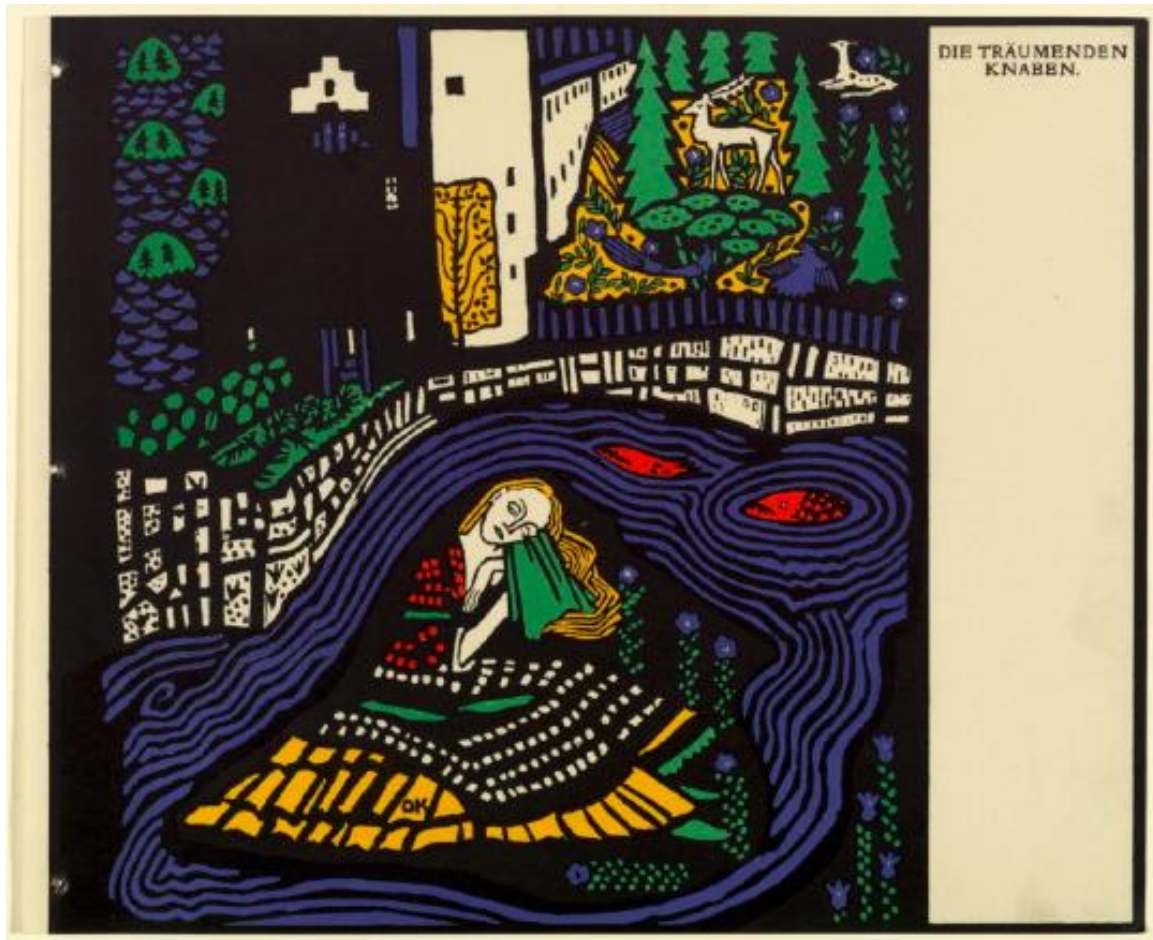
[Figure 5] (L) Detail from Gustav Klimt, *Beethoven Frieze*, mixed media on mortar render over reed matting, 2.15 x 34 m, Secession Building, Vienna. (R) Detail from Sándor Nagy, workshop of Miksa Róth, *The Ballad of Kata Kádár*, stained glass window, Palace of Culture, Marosvásárhely.



[Figure 6] Josef Diveky, *Wiener Werkstätte Postkarte No. 74* (Interior view of the bar at the Cabaret Fledermaus), Collection of Leonard A. Lauder, New York.



[Figure 7] Oskar Kokoschka, *Poster for the 1908 Kunstschau*, colour lithograph, 94.6 x 39.1 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.



[Figure 8] Oskar Kokoschka, *The Sleeping Girl*, from *The Dreaming Youths*, colour photolithograph, 24 x 29.3 cm, Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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