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Mihály Munkácsy's *Blind Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to His Daughters*: Contemporary Views

Abstract: At the pick of his career, Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900) was seen in the first rank of living artists. Many of his works were acquired by American collectors, including *Blind Milton Dictating "Paradise Lost" to His Daughters*. This large work had been displayed in many European cities before it arrived in New York City to be permanently displayed at the Lenox Library, the predecessor of the New York Public Library. The article discusses the marketing and the reception of the painting in the late 19th century.

Keywords: Munkácsy Mihály (1844–1900), *Blind Milton Dictating 'Paradise Lost to his Daughters* – Lenox Library, New York Public Library

Słowa kluczowe: Munkácsy Mihály (1844–1900), *Niewidomy Milton dyktuje swoim córkom „Raj utracony”*, Biblioteka Lenoxa, Nowojorska Biblioteka Publiczna

During his best years, Mihály Munkácsy (1844–1900) was seen in the first rank of living artists¹. Some went as far as describing him as the greatest living artist². No other painter commanded higher prices in the United States where more than sixty of his works were acquired³. One of these works was *Blind Milton Dictating 'Paradise Lost' to His Daughters*⁴. Today it hangs in the Edna Barnes Salomon Room on the third floor of the New York Public Library's Stephen A. Schwartzman Building⁵. It is one of Munkácsy's monumental canvas measuring seven feet high and ten feet long⁶.

By Way of Introduction

The future artist was born Michael von Lieb on 20 February 1844 in the city of Munkács, in Subcarpathian Rus', an outpost in the north-east part of the Austrian Empire [present-day Mukachevo, Transcarpathian Oblast', Ukraine]. His childhood was traumatic as he was orphaned at the age of 8 and then taken in by an aunt who was murdered only two years later. He went to work for various carpenters and by the time he turned fourteen had received his master document in joinery. He has also distinguished himself as a draughtsman. At the age of sixteen due to poor health, Munkácsy quit his craft and moved in with an uncle who noticed his talent for drawing. He then worked for and took lessons from a Hungarian itinerant painter, Elek Szamossy (1826–1888), a portrait artist and copyist of old paintings. After going to Pest in 1863, where he was allowed to copy paintings at the National Museum, he spent half a year at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste in Vienna in 1864. Beginning in 1866 he spent two years in Munich where at the Akademie der Bildenden Künste he attended classes by Hungarian historical painter Alexander (Sándor) von Wagner (1838–1919), German muralist Wilhelm von Kaulbach (1805–1874), and German landscapist Eduard Schleich the Elder (1812–1874).

1 *Michael Munkácsy*, "Harper's Weekly" 24 January 1880, p. 57.

2 J. Lukacs, *Budapest 1900: A Historical Portrait of a City & Its Culture*, New York 1988, p. 34.

3 L. Morowitz, *A Passion for Business: Wanamaker's, Munkácsy, and the Depiction of Christ*, "Art Bulletin" 2009, vol. 91, no. 2, p. 184. The NYPL also has three other paintings by Munkácsy: *Luncheon in Garden*, *Study of Flowers*, and *Landscape* [with cows]. The first two are on indefinite loan to the New York Historical Society.

4 The author created a number of preparatory studies for the painting, some of which are illustrated in L. Végvári, *Katalog der Gemälde und Zeichnungen Mihály Munkácsy's*, Budapest 1959. These include a free, color sketch (p. 239), as well as studies of Eva (p. 242), Judity (pp. 243–244), and Milton (p. 245).

5 In the past it hung on the second floor landing of the North Stairway. See: H.H. Reed, *The New York Public Library: Its Architecture and Decoration*, New York 1986, p. 133.

6 A smaller version of the painting measuring 3 by 4 inches was prepared in 1878 and today is at the Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest.

He later studied at a private school for painting battle-scenes run by Adam Eugen (1817–1880).

Munkácsy first visited Paris in 1867. He met Gustave Courbet (1819–1877) there and under his influence turned towards Realism. In order to support himself financially he returned to carpentry. After 1868 he continued his education at the The Kunstakademie Düsseldorf where he was in the circle of Ludwig Knaus (1829–1910), one of the leaders of the Düsseldorf school of painting. It was also in 1868 that he changed his name from Lieb. In 1869 he became an overnight sensation with his painting *The Last Day of a Condemned Man*. Returning to Paris in 1872, Munkácsy married a wealthy widow, Cécile baroness de Marches [née Papier] (1845–1915), and they settled in Barbizon in 1874⁷. Leading composers, writers, journalists, industrialists and politicians frequented both their home in Paris and their mansion in Colpach (Luxembourg)⁸.

The Business behind the Painting

Munkácsy secured a contract with Adolphe Dolphin (1806–1893) of Goupil & Cie, a leading art dealership in France of that time. Dolphin bought several of his paintings and ordered more. He also initiated the process of introducing the artist's work to the American market through prestigious art dealer Knoedler & Co⁹. With this contract in place Munkácsy did not have to worry about money. However, in 1877 Dolphin opted not to purchase *Blind Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to His Daughters* although he had commissioned the work himself. The next year, Charles Sedelmeyer¹⁰ (1837–1925), an Austrian

7 Biographical information on the artist is from C. Locke, *Mihály Munkácsy: The Painting Prince*, "American Arts Quarterly" 2016, vol. 36, no. 1, [online] <http://www.nccsc.net/aaq/2016/winter> [accessed 01.01.2023] and from entries on the artist by Nóra Aradi (*Art Groove Online*) and unsigned one (*Benezit Dictionary of Artists*) which are both accessible in *Oxford Art Online* database. See also an account of the artist's early years given by his friend John R. Tait, *An Hungarian Artist*, "Lippincott's Magazine of Popular Literature and Science" 1879, no. 23, pp. 175–185.

8 G. May, *Die Bürde der Berühmtheit tragen wir beide. Liszt bei Munkacsy in Luxemburg*, [in:] *Munkácsy et le Grand-Duché de Luxembourg: exposition du 20 septembre au 17 novembre 1996*, Luxembourg 1996, pp. 71–120.

9 GAR, *Art in Hungary and Spain: Notable Examples in the Paris Exposition...*, "The New York Times" 28 July 1878, p. 5. Goupil & Cie had a branch in New York operating as Goupil, Vibert & Co. since 1848. In 1856 it was sold to Michael Knoedler who had previously worked as its employee. See: A. Penot, *The Perils and Perks of Trading Art Overseas: Goupil's New York Branch*, "Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide" 2017, vol. 16, no. 1, [online] <http://www.19thc-art-worldwide.org/spring17/penot-on-the-perils-and-perks-of-trading-art-overseas-goupils-new-york-branch> [accessed 16.10. 2019].

10 One of Sedelmeyer's daughters was married to a Czech painter Václav Brožík (1851–1901). The NYPL has three of his paintings: *Grandmother's Birthday*; *The Rejected Suitor*; and *Rudolf II, Emperor of Germany, In the Laboratory of His Alchemist, A.D. 1576*. All of these paintings are on indefinite loan to the New York Historical Society.

art dealer, collector, and publisher active in Paris from 1866, heard about the painting from the Hungarian landscapist Laszlo Páal (1846–1879), then living in Barbizon. Sedelmeyer ended up buying it for 30,000 Francs¹¹.

The presentation of the painting in Sedelmeyer's salon and later the same year at the Austro-Hungarian Pavilion of the Universal Exposition in Paris¹² was a great success¹³. These moves led to the purchase of the painting by Robert Lenox Kennedy (1822–1887). This purchase marked the beginning of a very successful partnership between Sedelmeyer and Munkácsy which led to the conquest of the lucrative American market. Sedelmeyer added a contractual stipulation to the purchase which guaranteed that the painting remains temporarily a part of a traveling exhibition, so that the painter's fame could be spread throughout the most important European cities¹⁴.

The price Kennedy paid for *the painting of the century* was 200,000 FRF¹⁵. R.L. Kennedy was a collector and banker, most successful as the President of the Bank of Commerce in New York (1868–1878). He was a nephew of James Lenox (1800–1880), the philanthropist and the founder of the Lenox Library to which Kennedy donated the painting in 1879¹⁶. Incorporated in 1870, opened in 1877, the Lenox Library, along with the Astor Library was the predecessor of The

11 Sedelmeyer also gave Munkácsy a ten-year contract during which he guaranteed the artist an annual compensation of at least 100,000 Francs, sharing the revenues from entrance fees to exhibitions of his works in large cities as well as royalties from reproductions. Sedelmeyer was acquiring all paintings produced by Munkácsy and the right to reproduce them, while the pictorial themes (and the size of paintings) were to be determined according to mutual agreement. See: C. Huemer, *Charles Sedelmeyer's Theatricality: Art and Speculation in Late 19th-Century Paris*, [in:] *Artwork through the Market, The Past and Present*, ed. J. Bakoš, Bratislava 2004, pp. 117–118. Clearly pleased with this contract Munkácsy soon painted a portrait of Ch. Sedelmeyer, 1879, housed in Munkácsy Museum, Békéscsaba, Hungary.

12 It was also at the Paris Universal Exposition that a Russian sculptor Matvei Afanas'evich Chizhov (1838–1916) received the Medal of the Third Class for a group of his works among which there was the *Cherezvushka/Frolicsome Girl* (1873), a copy of which is held by the New York Public Library, and it stands just outside the Edna Salomon Room, see: W.W. Story, *Fine Arts*, [in:] *Reports of the United States Commissioners to the Paris Universal Exposition, 1878*. Vol. 2, Washington 1880, p. 143, 175. In French and English, he was listed as M.A. Tchijoff (or Chijoff) and *Frolicsome Girl* was given as *La Petite Folâtre*.

13 Phillip Gilbert Hamerton went as far as claiming that “the Exhibition of 1878 gave him world-wide fame”. See: *Hamerton's Continental Painting at Paris in 1878*, “Princeton Review” January-June 1879, vol. 1, p. 492.

14 C. Huemer, op. cit., pp. 117–118.

15 *Foreign Notes*, “The New York Times” 17 March 1879, p. 3; *Foreign Notes*, “Detroit Free Press” 21 March 1879, p. 6. With the exchange rate at that time roughly at 2 to 1 ratio this was about 100,000 USD.

16 *Lenox Library: A Guide to the Paintings and Sculptures Exhibited to the Public*, New York 1882, p. 22. The painting was a fitting addition to the Milton's collection held at the Lenox Library. Among 191 publications of Milton's works that the library held there were many editions of *Paradise Lost*, including the first one (1667). See: *Contributions to a Catalogue of the Lenox Library*. No. 6: *Works of Milton, etc.*, New York 1881.

New York Public Library. As of March 1879, the Lenox Library at 1001 5th Ave (between 70th and 71st streets) had 145 paintings and 15 sculptures on exhibit, available for viewing by the public from Monday to Friday 11 A.M. to 4 P.M. with tickets obtained in advance¹⁷.

Less than a month after a "New York Times" article suggested that the city was waiting with some curiosity to see the painting¹⁸, it was showcased on the Lenox Library gallery's south wall¹⁹. A bronze bust of Munkácsy by Louis-Ernest Barrias (1841–1905)²⁰, a French sculptor of the Beaux-Arts school that Sedelmeyer donated to the library was placed at the entrance to the gallery²¹. In order to promote the painting in New York, ads in "The New York Times" announced that the exhibition of paintings and sculptures at the Lenox Library were accessible for free on Thanksgiving Day 1879 and on every weekday in December, except for Christmas Day. In both instances the ads underscored that Munkácsy's *Blind Milton* has been placed in the gallery²². During November and December of 1879, the number of visitors, admitted solely on application, amounted to 13,266²³.

The Praise

Even before the painting reached the Lenox Library it was noted that

the Paris papers say it is the best piece of painting the century has produced and are now making superhuman efforts to conceal their rage because the United States has stepped in and carried off the prize²⁴.

17 Among the painters represented one could find Joseph Mallord William Turner (1775–1851), Gilbert Stuart (1775–1828), John Constable (1776–1837), Albert Bierstadt (1830–1902), Frederic Edwin Church (1826–1900), Thomas Gainsborough (1727–1788), and Thomas Cole (1801–1848). See: *Lenox Library: A Guide to the Paintings and Sculptures Exhibited to the Public*, New York 1879.

18 *Artists and Their Works: Pictures at Goupil's Gallery*, "The New York Times" 10 October 1879, p. 5.

19 S. Webster [at al.], *A Digital Recreation of the Lenox Library Picture Gallery: A Contribution to the Early History of Public Art Museums in the United States*, "Nineteenth-Century Art Worldwide" 2018, vol. 17, p. 2, [online] <https://doi.org/10.29411/ncaw.2018.17.2.22> [accessed 16.10.2019].

20 *Artists and Their Works...*, p. 5.

21 *Tenth Annual Report for the Year 1879 of the Trustees of the Lenox Library of the City of New York*, Albany 1880, p. 7. The bust of Munkácsy was later housed at the Woodstock Branch. Today the bust and the painting are together in the Edna Barnes Salomon Room.

22 See: "The New York Times" 25 November 1879, p. 5 and 23 December 1879, p. 7.

23 H. Miller Lydenberg, *A History of the New York Public Library*, New York 1923, p. 102.

24 "The Daily Post", Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 7 February 1879, p. 2. Albert Wolf who wrote an article about Munkácsy's *Milton*, "Le Figaro" 15 May 1878, claimed that "*M. Munkácsy est un peintre française né en Hongrie!*".

The unsigned author of a substantial piece on the painting which appeared in “The New York Times” noted that it was already so well known in etchings and wood-cuts that a description was not necessary.

This has already been done by the European press to a degree bordering on satiety; the cry has been taken up on this side of the Atlantic, and the picture extolled as one of the marvels of the century. Seldom, indeed, has a picture been ‘managed’ better²⁵.

The ‘management’ of the painting included the issuing of a pamphlet containing an etching of a self-portrait of Munkácsy, as well as reprints of enthusiastic praise in the European press²⁶. Not surprisingly, the master marketer Sedelmeyer himself coordinated, published, and released the pamphlet just in time for the presentation of the painting in London, England. The pamphlet also included an introductory text on Munkácsy by Gotthold Neuda (1846–1918) who among other admirations stated that

Munkácsy is not only an artist of great individuality; he is also the creator of a genre; he is original, not only by his style of painting, but much more so by the choice of his subjects and by the characteristic comprehension of his times, the spirit of which is reflected in his works (p. 3).

Reprints of critical acclaim from newspapers were divided into four sections. A lengthy article by a poet, playwright and essayist Émile Bergerat (1854–1923) which appeared in “Journal Officiel de la République Française” (15 September 1878) preceded twenty-two reviews from the French press. There were also (only!) two reprints from newspapers published in Budapest followed by seven articles from the German press. The longer Hungarian piece was by a painter, graphic artist and art critic Gusztáv Kelety (1834–1902) while among the German texts there was one by a prolific writer Fanny Lewald (1811–1889). The exhibition of the painting at the Vienna Künstlerhaus yielded eight reviews included in the booklet. They were headed by an editor and writer Emmerich Ranzoni (1823–1898) who in his piece published in “Neue Freie Presse” (9 January 1879) stated among others that:

Several of the most dainty critics of France have openly confessed that, in the presence of this incomparable creation of the art of painting, they were embarrassed how they should utter the smallest word of blame. The reason of this rare unanimity is, that the painting gives expression, in the grand style of the art to one of the profoundest thoughts of the modern

25 *Munkácsy's Milton. The Painting Now Displayed in the Gallery at the Lenox Library*, “The New York Times” 7 November 1879, p. 4.

26 *Opinions of the Continental Press on Michael Munkácsy and his Latest Picture Milton Dictating “Paradise Lost to his Daughters”*, Paris 1879. Articles from the French press appeared in their original language but everything else that was not in English was translated for the booklet into English.

theory of life, and in a manner that conquers all hearts. It is a historical picture, and in keeping with the ideas of the most independent and matures thinkers of the present age, a picture of the history of culture.

In the early June of 1878 “The Daily Arkansas Gazette” reprinted correspondence from Paris which first appeared in the New York Post. It was noted that *the poetic side of the Munkaczy's nature have [sic!] never been shown so fully as in his delineation of England's blind poet. This work is full of highest inspiration*²⁷. “The New York Times” special correspondent in Paris wrote in early July 1878 that *Milton with His Daughters has found favor with everyone, and more especially with the English, who hitherto have not liked him*. This correspondent also suggested that it was the best of Munkácsy's paintings to date, and stated that the painter while not departing in the least from his usual style of extreme high lights and gray tones, has warmed up the latter very considerably and has introduced a very careful gradation in them²⁸. The painting also received praises from William Wetmore Story (1819–1896), an art critic and artist himself who served as one of the United States Commissioners to the Paris Exposition. He stated among others that the painting is

simple and direct in character, with great truth to nature and to the highest sentiment in the attitudes and expression of all the figures, masterly in its free painting, and striking in the values of color. The tones are a little black, but everything is relatively in its place. Nothing cries out for notice, and the main interest is concentrated, as it should be, in the figures²⁹.

The Criticism

While the reception of the painting appeared to be largely positive (at least from what Sedelmeyer splendidly highlighted in the booklet), the raves were not universal. In early November 1879 “The New York Herald” substantial piece on the painting's literary and artistic qualities stated that *from the first standpoint it is far from satisfactory, while from the second it is, notwithstanding its faults, a great and noble work*³⁰. The unsigned critic based his ‘literary’ argument on a monumental work on Milton by David Mather Mason (1822–1907),

27 *Art at the Exposition. A Splendid Display of German and Austrian Art*, “Daily Arkansas Gazette”, 6 June 1878, p. 3, [online] *Chronicling America*: <https://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/>; *ProQuest Historical Newspapers and Nineteenth Century U.S. Newspapers*, both available at The New York Public Library [accessed 12.11.2022].

28 GAR, op. cit., p. 5.

29 W.W. Story, op. cit., p. 76.

30 *Fine Arts: Munkacsy's 'Blind Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to his Daughters' at the Lenox Library-Second Article*, “The New York Herald” 4 November 1879, p. 6.

a Scottish literary critic and a professor at the Edinburgh University³¹. He argued that Milton's eldest daughter could not write and the two younger ones were simply too young at the time Milton wrote *Paradise Lost* to be in a position to help him. The author of the article in "The New York Herald" also added that

the comfortable and elegant, if not rich accessories (...) with which the painter has surrounded his characters (...) are in no way to be justified as being a correct representation of the fittings of the home of a man who sold the poem he was composing among them for 5.00 GBP³².

Clarence Cook (1828–1900), a graduate of Harvard College and an influential American author and art critic probably penned this piece³³. In his later book he repeated the same criticism and added a harsh assessment of Munkácsy's depiction of the scene.

It would be idle to push this sort of criticism too far in dealing with such a painter as Munkácsy. He cares nothing for such things and had probably never heard the name of Milton before he was asked by the agent who exploits his talent to paint it for the market³⁴.

Similar doubts were expressed by Theodore Child (1846–1892) who was well-known in literary circles and lived for twenty years in Paris where he was an intimate of the greatest writers and artists of France, including Munkácsy. It was argued that Child's *judgment upon art was especially good, and his essays upon paintings and sculptures and etchings which have appeared in the Sun and elsewhere were notable both for matter and for manner*³⁵. In what was possibly his last larger work before he died prematurely of cholera during a visit to Persia, Child had this to say about Munkácsy and his work:

Personally, Munkácsy is a most good-hearted and amiable man, simple, unpretentious, but far from brilliant. He has very little to say for himself, and if the truth were known I dare say he is perfectly ignorant both about Milton and about his *Paradise Lost*, although such is the subject of his best picture³⁶.

31 *The Life of John Milton: Narrated in Connexion with the Political, Ecclesiastical, and Literary History of His Time*. 7 vols., Cambridge-London 1859–1894. Five volumes of this work had been published by the time Munkácsy's work was exhibited in New York. Volume 5 covers 1654–1660. Milton who had become totally blind in 1652, started working on *Paradise Lost* about 1658 (with some parts most likely written earlier) and finished in about 1663.

32 *Fine Arts...*, p. 6.

33 *Clarence Cook Dead*, "The New York Times" 3 June 1900, p. 1. Cook wrote for "The New-York Tribune" in which a critical article on Munkácsy's Milton appeared. I was unable to locate that article.

34 C. Cook, *Art and Artists of Our Time*. Vol. 2, New York 1888, p. 90.

35 From his obituary published in "San Francisco Call" 18 November 1892, p. 8.

36 T. Child, *Art and Criticism: Monographs and Studies*, New York 1892, p. 158. In light of what Child had to say (whether he was right or not) it is interesting to mention that Munkácsy's depiction of this historical event has added to what became a part of the poet's mythology. See: R. Flanagan, *John Milton: A Short Introduction*, Oxford-Malden, Massachusetts 2002, p. 29. Among painters who

More criticism of Munkácsy's painting was offered by Philip Gilbert Hamerton (1834–1894), an English artist who eventually devoted his life to writing art criticism. In his works he was both concerned with the purely historical aspect of art in which fact is of the first importance and in the artist's imagination. Writing about the former he compared Munkácsy's *Milton* to a work by a leading, fashionable portrait painter of the late 18th century, George Romney (1734–1802) who painted *Milton and His Daughters*. Hamerton preferred Romney's very simple room setting to that of Munkácsy's painting with just a small dose of doubt as to whether Milton's furniture was in fact so extremely simple. He also added that

the Milton of Munkácsy is thoughtful, but his form is too small and shrivelled; it has no reminiscence of the manly beauty of his prime. [...] Both artists have to venture on a guess with regard to the daughters, who were probably quite unlike the young women in either picture, yet authentic portraits of the daughters were indispensable to the historical value of the representation³⁷.

In Munkácsy's Defense

Earl Shinn (1838–1886), who studied at the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts and École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts in Paris was one of those who responded to the criticism of the interior of Milton's house as it was painted by Munkácsy. Shinn, who often wrote under the pseudonym Edward Strahan, turned a series of articles about private art collections in America into a book. In the late 1879 he devoted one of those articles to the Lenox Library's art collection. More than half of it was about the newly acquired Munkácsy's painting which he described as *an exhibition of itself*³⁸.

Shinn made sure to disparage American art critics' attitude to the painting and the artist. He criticized their questioning of its historical accuracy including such details as whether Milton might possibly have possessed a Flanders jug and tapestry furniture and whether Milton's daughters could actually write. He did not agree that Munkácsy should have painted a Hungarian scene instead of an English one. He underlined that he was not interested in whether Munkácsy was a good archaeologist but rather in the artistic value of the painting which he summarized as follows:

before Munkácsy depicted the same scene from Milton's life there were: Henri Jean-Baptiste Victoire Fradelle (1776–1865); Jean François Hyacinthe Jules Laure (1806–1861), Alexandre Marie Guillemin (1817–1880), and François Cautauts (1810–1881) according to *Oxford Art Online* database.

37 P.G. Hamerton, *Man in Art: Studies in Religious and Historical Art, Portrait and Genre*, London-New York 1892, p. 184.

38 E. Strahan, *Art Collection of the Lenox Library*, "The Art Amateur" 1879, vol. 2, no. 1, p. 8.

The caressing light plays upon the figures of the poet and his three daughters, upon the faded furniture and dark dingy walls, as a composer plays upon his orchestra. No mere academician can get this sort of a triumph. It is one breath of truth and color and harmony and poesy, wrapping together in an imperial unity the different details of the scene³⁹.

Perhaps the most ardent defender of Munkácsy's *Blind Milton* was Mariana Griswold Van Rensselaer (1851–1934), a well-known and influential art and architecture critic⁴⁰. In her lengthy article she explained her stance on the issue as follows:

Munkácsy has not sinned, in altering the facts of Milton's biography, to suit his artistic purposes, and to emphasize his artistic ideal, unless Shakespeare has sinned in numberless plays, and Goethe in *Egmont*, and Schiller in *Mary Stuart*, and the *Maid of Orleans*, and every artist in words or color who has been an artist, and not a mere copyist of the prosaic surfaces of actual things⁴¹.

An unsigned author who wrote for "The New York Times" agreed with Shinn and Rensselaer and went as far as stating that the interior as it was depicted by Munkácsy meant so much to the overall success of the painting. He argued that

The taste is wonderful that put together the withered hues of the old tapestry on the wall, the similar yet different tones of the cloth on the table around which the three daughters of Milton sit or stand, the shades of red in the back of the chair or the daughter who acts as amanuensis, those on the chair behind the table, and on the red velvet one to the extreme left, finally, and toward the foreground, on the reddish Turkey rug under the table. What a harmonious, peaceful interior!⁴².

Munkácsy after *Blind Milton*

Critical assessment of Munkácsy's *Blind Milton* alone soon gave way to writings about his other works. During his later years, under the influence of Sedelmeyer, Munkácsy painted more large-scale canvases which could be exhibited on their own. His successful trilogy followed Bible subjects and included *Christ*

39 Ibidem.

40 J. Early, *Van Rensselaer; Mariana Alley Griswold*, [in:] *Notable American Women, 1607–1950*. Vol. 3, eds. E.T. James, J. Wilson James, P.S. Boyer, Cambridge, Massachusetts 1971, pp. 511–513.

41 M.G. Van Rensselaer, *Munkacsy's Picture of Milton*, "The American Architect and Building News" 1879, vol. 6, no. 208, p. 195.

42 *Munkácsy's Milton. The Painting...*, p. 4.

before Pilate (1882), *Golgotha* (1884), and *Ecce Homo* (1896)⁴³. They became known to the audience through multi-cities tours⁴⁴, catalogs, and inexpensive reproductions⁴⁵.

In the meantime, affluent Munkácsy travelled extensively in Italy, Spain, and Holland. In 1886 Sedelmeyer arranged a tour for him in the United States. The front-page news of Munkácsy's arrival in New York rivalled the coverage reserved for a monarch's state visit. President Grover Cleveland (1837–1908) received the painter at the White House and the Secretary of the Navy William C. Whitney (1841–1904) hosted a dinner for him in Washington. Celebrations in his honor were abundant⁴⁶.

The same year Munkácsy painted a portrait of a Hungarian composer, pianist and conductor Franz Liszt (1811–1886), Wagner's father in law who occasionally performed in Munkácsy's home in Paris. The idea to produce this portrait was a few years old. In 1882 Liszt wrote in a letter that Munkácsy was to paint him in a tableau that would be a counterpart to the artist's depiction of Milton. Liszt's portrait, however, turned out to show him alone with no sign of compositional activity⁴⁷. Despite that, it is considered one of the best portraits of Liszt ever painted⁴⁸.

In 1899, an author and translator Nancy Regina Emily Meugens Bell (1844–1933), whose husband Arthur George Bell (1849–1916) was also a painter, described Munkácsy's *Blind Milton* painting as his most beautiful perhaps of all. She went on to write about his work:

43 The first two paintings were purchased by an American merchant millionaire John Wanamaker (1838–1922) who paid the highest price ever paid for a painting in America at that time. In 1907, during the fire at his summer home in Lindenhurst, N.J. his butler cut the canvases of Munkácsy's *Christ before Pilate* and *Christ on Golgotha* out of their frames and carried them out to safety before saving any other pieces of art. See: N.C. Kirk, *Wanamaker's Temple: The Business of Religion in an Iconic Department Store*, New York 2018, pp. 146–147.

44 About two million people went to see *Christ before Pilate* in its three-year European tour of Vienna, Budapest, Warsaw, Berlin, Stockholm, Brussels, Amsterdam, Liverpool, Manchester, Leeds and Glasgow. See: C. Huemer, op. cit., p. 120. In 1899 *Ecce Homo* was exhibited in Dublin where it was viewed by James Joyce (1882–1941) who subsequently wrote an essay about it, one of his earliest art criticisms. See: M. Gula, *Reading the Book of Himself: James Joyce on Mihály Munkácsy's Painting 'Ecce Homo'*, "European Joyce Studies" 2013, vol. 22, pp. 47–60.

45 K. Schwain, *Consuming Christ: Henry Ossawa Tanner's Biblical Paintings and Nineteenth-Century American Commerce*, [in:] *ReVisioning: Critical Methods of Seeing Christianity in the History of Art*, eds. J. Romaine, L. Stratford, Eugene, Oregon 2013, p. 289.

46 J. Lukacs, *Budapest 1900: Colors, Words, Sounds*, "The American Scholar" 1988, vol. 57, no. 2, p. 254.

47 D. Pesce, *Liszt's Final Decade*, Rochester, New York 2014, pp. 29–30.

48 *The Death of Franz Liszt Based on the Unpublished Diary of His Pupil Lina Schmalhausen*, ed. A. Walker, Ithaca, New York 2002, p. 32.

With but one or two exceptions, the works of the great Hungarian master are of a sad and tragic character, altogether wanting in the light of joy. The struggles of the artist's boyhood, the intimate acquaintance he had with poverty and with privation of every kind, seem to have given a permanent tinge of melancholy to his character, or it may be that even in the midst of his great prosperity, he may have had a premonition of the clouds which were to obscure his mighty intellect and culminate in that death in life in which he still lingers, though the end is evidently not far off⁴⁹.

In early 1897 Munkácsy's mental health had deteriorated so much that he was placed in an asylum in Bonn, Germany. In addition to his traumatic youth some claimed that it was his *ardent devotion to his work*⁵⁰ that impacted his well-being. Munkácsy died 1 May 1900. Reports of his death and reflections on his life and art were published in numerous newspapers. He was buried in Budapest at the Kerepesi Cemetery after a grand funeral.

In his native Hungary he has remained to this day one of the best known national figures⁵¹. Elsewhere, however, he fell into near obscurity shortly after his death⁵². Perhaps those few studies about the painter which have appeared in English outside of Hungary only recently⁵³ will revive the once huge interest in, and fascination about his work in the United States.

49 Mrs. Arthur Bell (N. D'Anvers), *Representative Painters of the XIXth Century*, London-New York 1899, p. 168.

50 M. A. P., *Munkacsy's Madness*, "Brooklyn Eagle", 7 May 1899, p. 16.

51 In 2005 there was an exhibit of some 120 of his works in Budapest. See: *Munkácsy a nagyvilágban. Munkácsy Mihály művei külföldi és magyar magán- és közgyűjteményekben / Munkácsy in the World. Mihály Munkácsy's Works in Private and Public Collections at Home and Abroad*, ed. F. Gosztonyi, Budapest 2005. Hungarian National Gallery in Budapest has a separate gallery dedicated to his works.

52 L. Morowitz, op. cit., p. 186.

53 A. Davison, *Painting for a Requiem: Mihály Munkácsy's 'The Last Moments of Mozart' (1885)*, "Early Music" 2011, vol. 39, no. 1, pp. 79–92; C. Humer, *Globetrotting Wall Paintings: Munkácsy, Sedelmeyer, and Vienna's Künstlerhaus*, "Fine Art Connoisseur" September/October 2012, pp. 50–54; I. Polenyák, *The Role of Vienna in the Life of Mihály Munkácsy, the First World Famous Hungarian Painter*, "International Journal of Social Sciences and Humanity Studies" 2012, vol. 4, no. 1, pp. 205–214 and other works cited in this article.

Illustrations

1. Mihály Munkácsy, *Blind Milton Dictating "Paradise Lost" to his Daughters*, 1877. New York Public Library, The Edna Barnes Salomon Room.



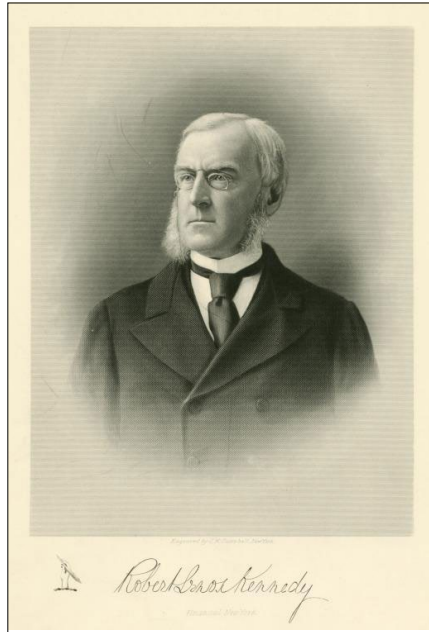
Source: NYPL Digital Collections, Image ID 57487998, <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/66760d80-c7f1-0135-7e34-49d3fe482577>. Photographer unknown.

2. Bust of Mihály Munkácsy by Louis-Ernest Barrias, 1878. New York Public Library, Edna Barnes Salomon Room.



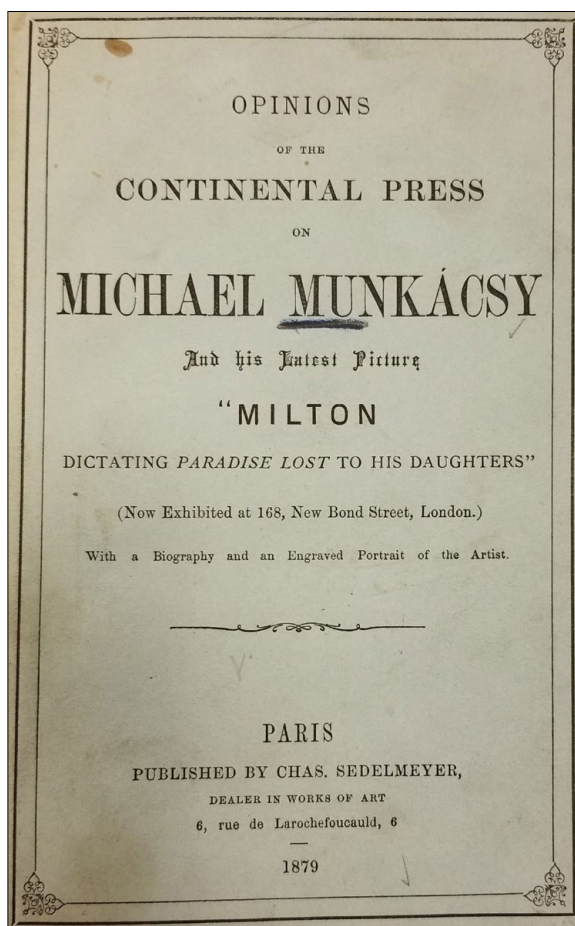
Photography: Jonathan Blanc.

3. Robert Lenox Kennedy, 1822–1887.



Source: The Miriam and Ira D. Wallach Division of Art, Prints and Photographs:
Print Collection Portrait File. Digital image available in NYPL Digital Collections, Image ID 1548942,
URL <https://digitalcollections.nypl.org/items/510d47e2-a045-a3d9-e040-e00a18064a99>.
Photographer unknown.

4. The title page of *Opinions of the Continental Press on Michael Munkacsy and his Latest Picture "Milton dictating Paradise lost to his daughters"*. Paris, 1879.



Source: Földvári Books.

5. An ad from The New York Times March 2, 1879.

FINE ARTS.

LENOX LIBRARY,

NO. 1,001 5TH-AV., 70TH AND 71ST STS.

The EXHIBITION OF PAINTINGS AND SCULPTURES will be open (free of charge) every week day in December, (excepting Christmas Day,) from 11 A. M. to 2 P. M. On and after TUESDAY, Jan. 6, 1880, it will be open on TUESDAY and FRIDAY in each week during the same hours, until further notice.

The picture of "Blind Milton Dictating Paradise Lost to His Daughters," by MICHAEL MUNKÁCSY, presented to the Library by Mr. Robert Lenox Kennedy, has been placed in the gallery.

. For tickets, without which no person will be admitted, apply by postal card to the Superintendent,
GEORGE H. MOORE, No. 1,001 5th-av.

Source: "The New York Times" (1851-2019) w/ Index database.

6. An ad from The New York Times Nov. 25, 1879.

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The exhibition of paintings and sculptures will be open (free of charge) on Thanksgiving Day from 10 A. M. to 2 P. M.

The picture of "Blind Milton Dictating 'Paradise Lost' to His Daughters." by Michael Munkácsy, presented to the Library by Mr. Robert Lenox Kennedy, has been placed in the gallery.

. For tickets, without which no person will be admitted, apply by postal card to the Superintendent,
GEORGE H. MOORE, No. 1,001 5th-av.

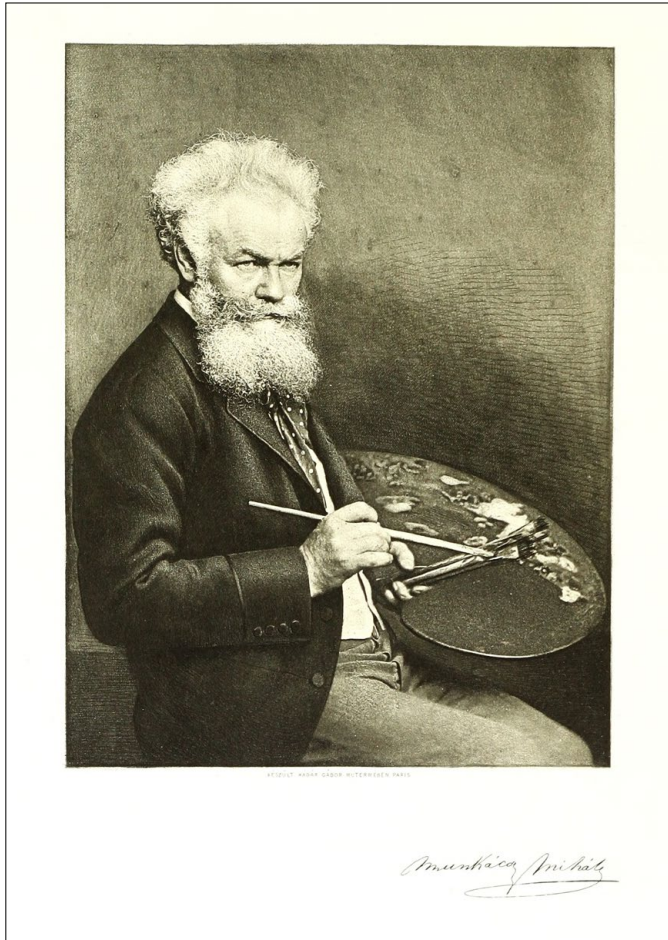
Source: "The New York Times" (1851-2019) w/ Index database.

7. Mihály Munkácsy, *Blind Milton Dictating "Paradise Lost" to his Daughters*, 1877, exhibited at the Lenox Library.



Source: New York Public Library Visual Materials, Photoprints and Negatives, Lenox Library, call no. MssArc RG10 5928. Image from the NYPL Digital Collections, Image ID 56997371. Photographer unknown.

8. Portrait of Mihály Munkácsy. The author is not identified.



Source: Irta Malonyay Dezső, Munkácsy Mihály élete és munkái, Budapest 1898.

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