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The Return of Corneille

Exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts Budapest,
16 May-1 September 2002

The Budapest Corneille exhibition will leave the history of Hungarian art one charmingly dotty legend the poorer but will undoubtedly enrich it by a number of exciting works and a number of new conclusions. Legend had it that in 1947 a young Dutch artist was tossing his pictures out of an upper-floor window and one all but knocked the head off a passing young Hungarian woman painter. Apologies were followed by closer acquaintance, a swift grant to travel to Budapest, and success. That is how the Hungarian popular press saw it at the time, at any rate. The truth, as is made clear in Claudia Küssel's book, now published in Hungarian translation in association with this exhibition*, was a bit more prosaic. Transporting his pictures by tricycle one day, Corneille happened to meet Margit Eppinger, wife of a Hungarian industrialist and herself a patroness of the arts, and she subsequently arranged for him to be invited to Hungary. What luggage did Corneille bring with him, then, and what did he leave with? A childhood and adolescence spent in an ordinary middle-class family, succeeded by studies at a school for applied graphics and the academy-in a milieu almost as conservative as that of Fifties Hungary, one that looked on Van Gogh as a crazy ne'er-do-well. Rebellion against teachers still bogged down in the aesthetics of the Haagse School led to adaptation of the innovations of Matisse, Pignon and the École de Paris, but even that mild modernity provoked furious controversy at the opening of a joint exhibition with Karel Appel in 1946.

What could he have got out of a country even poorer than war-ravaged, poverty-stricken Holland, and one of which he knew nothing apart from its Gypsy music? At a rough guess, no doubt the possibility of travelling, with its hint of escape, and a readily accessible exoticism that Tunisia and so on would also offer later on. A particular post-war *couleur locale* with the odd sights of people maimed in body and soul, lush vegetation proliferating on its ruins, May Day parades, and Russian soldiers. That is all natural enough. What is more unexpected is that the intellectual and artistic influences acting on him should bring about a turning point in his work.

His encounter with Imre Pán, one of the founders of the European School, was of decisive importance. The European School had been formed in the autumn of 1945, in a Budapest barely coming to from its war-time battering, in order to win acceptance for modernist efforts, including surrealism and nonfigurative art-hitherto rebuffed at an official level. Amongst its founders were Ernő Kállai, a pre-war editor of the Bauhaus' house-journal and now, after the demise of constructivism, the father of so-called "biromanticism", which proclaimed an intrinsic relationship between nature and modern art, along with Lajos Kassák, long-time apostle of Hungarian avant-garde art and poetry, and a by then somewhat impatient generation of young or barely middle-aged artists who had had enough of scenic painting based on sensitive transcriptions of nature. Through

the stock of art periodicals, books and prints that could be perused on the premises, the Művészbolt (Artists' Shop), a little book shop owned by Imre Pán, was a treasure trove for those interested in modern art; indeed, it put on shows of graphic works that fitted in with the series of exhibitions mounted by the European School. The biggest influence of all on the young Corneille's outlook may well have been the acquaintance he made with the graphic work of Klee. From him and from Miró, another artist whom he got to know from the lithographs stocked by the Művészbolt, he learned fluency and spontaneity; through them he acquired a sense of the spontaneous power of children's drawings, with their straight-to-the-point directness and creation of vigorous stereotypes, and through them studied the symbol-creating capabilities of high culture and folk art. And just as Árpád Mezei, who was to make a name as one of the theoreticians of the European School, had done a few years earlier with the French surrealist Marcel Jean (then working as a textile designer in Budapest), so Imre Pán introduced Corneille to the works of Lautréamont, and it was also here that the Dutch artist first heard about dadaism. And, of course, he also got to know something of Hungarian art. The works of Lajos Vajda in particular made a profound impact on him. Having died young of tuberculosis in 1941, Vajda may have had no direct disciples, but he became the charismatic apostle of a contemporary and authentic way of viewing the world for the young artists of Szentendre, the little town just upriver from Budapest, who were seeking creative freedom to produce an art without conventions. It was more for his intransigence than his versions of surrealism, employing stringy organic structures in which constructivist discipline proceeds as one with nature, that Vajda became an exemplar. His influence on Corneille was not a direct one either; it was more Vajda's free use of associative fields and his facility for precisely mapping natural processes (germination, sprouting, rotting), sensed rather than visible to the eye, that seem to have spurred Corneille to rethink his artistic approach. Judging from the letters he wrote back home from Hungary, he considered Jenő Barcsay, master of the human figure compressed between the forms of Szentendre's houses, to be the best contemporary Hungarian artist. As a representative of the constructivist-surrealist trend of the European School, Barcsay had his first encounter with the experience of dynamic structurability in the rhythm of the hills and dales, the reddish-browns and greens of the ploughed fields, of the Danube bend. His discovery for art of the formerly Serb-inhabited, Danube-bank town of Szentendre, with its steeply tilted roofs, its wall surfaces oddly transected by casements and doorways, only came from the mid-forties onwards. It was Barcsay who took Corneille with him to Balaton to visit József Egrý, a painter whom the younger generation also held in high respect for his transformations of landscapes into expressive, organic visions. Corneille's letters and recollections also record a fond appreciation for the art of Dezső Korniss and Margit Anna. Korniss's strikingly rhythmic works, capturing unbridled good humour and fateful tragedies alike in riveting order between bands of pure colour, may have touched the Dutch painter precisely by virtue of their disciplined emancipation. Margit Anna's puppets, on the other hand, their bulbous heads painted with raw, simple brush-strokes, may well have caught Corneille's attention precisely because of their elementary nature, a primal energy that paid no heed to classical aesthetic and pictorial conventions. There was good reason why it was one of Margit Anna's dumpling-heads that should have featured on the main wall in the Corneille exhibition at Amstelveen in the Netherlands in January 2002. True, one cannot speak of any directly demonstrable influence, but there is no question that the free, experimental atmosphere around the European School, along with the group of abstract painters who seceded from them (whilst still maintaining close

collaborative links), the lively, variegated milieu that was Hungarian art in that period, had a big hand in Corneille's ever more radical endeavours.

Just as important a source of inspiration must have been the lacerations suffered by the Hungarian capital, the seas of rubble that were to be seen all around. He was particularly preoccupied by the fantastic forms into which the maimed stumps of Castle Hill in Buda had been petrified, and the contrast supplied by the plant shoots and shrubbery proliferating around them. On the evidence of his letters to the Netherlands, he was well-nigh transfixed by the experience of the mobile surfaces created by the vegetation in which the inorganic rubble was so swiftly smothered. (That experience was somewhat akin to Korniss's shocking war-time memories, his vision of fields strewn with decomposing corpses yet luxuriating in marvellous flowers and insects; but of course Corneille, not least by dint of the different artistic traditions he was part of and by intention, did not come up with a synthesis like that of one of Korniss's major works *Crickets' Wedding* of 1948.) The water colours, organising the horizontals and verticals into organically playful structures, may not yet completely rewrite the visual field, but their looser structures and involuntary playfulness already point to the wayward compositions of the COBRA period. Alongside those works, better looked on as outline itineraries for the future, there are still screamingly passionate collages (*A Hungarian Sun*), which, although they have precedents in Corneille's oeuvre, are nevertheless the pieces that are most compatible with the European School. Another group of works that have discernible links with Hungary show the influence of Barcsay. The squeezing of figures between blocks of subdued colour by that artist (who on this evidence was admired by Corneille not merely for his long beard) turns up here in a perhaps somewhat more surreal packaging. In other works what shine through are the graphic skills: with the aid of a touch of more strident colour here and there, the slim, dynamic, radial contours give rise to stylised cockerels, birds and other kinds of animals, and by now clearly adumbrating the individual approach that became characteristic in the COBRA period.

Corneille profited considerably, then, from his not particularly long stay in Hungary, and there was every chance for the European School to have continued to enrich its international links. That this did not happen was not the Dutch artist's fault. He did not forget about the Hungarians even when, shortly afterwards, he found himself at the epicentre of a group that almost overnight gained international acclaim. This (like the European School itself) was a revolt of the fringe against the centre to which they were tied, a number of Paris-based young artists from Belgium (Alechinsky, Dotremont), the Netherlands (Corneille, Appel) and Denmark (Jorn, Heerup, Pedersen), dissatisfied with the stagnating *École de Paris* and the increasingly esoteric, introspective surrealist cliques, attempted to realise their own ideas, based on uncorrupted instincts, man's elemental desire for freedom and playfulness. They were impetuous and radical, and their activities were accompanied by noisy scandals, banned exhibitions; nevertheless (or perhaps precisely on that account), they became widely known and recognised. For that to happen, it was, of course, also necessary that they insert themselves into the lineage of European art that preferred elementality and rawness, that they range their own way of seeing things—a revolutionary surrealism and a rediscovery of Scandinavian vernacular art and German expressionism—alongside Dubuffet, Fautrier, Wols and the rest. Taking their name from the initial letters of the main cities of their respective countries (Copenhagen, Brussels, Amsterdam), the group operated little longer than the European School itself,

being disbanded in 1951, but in that short time it brought into being a movement and a periodical that, together with the artists (German, Swedish, Icelandic, British) who subsequently aligned with them, served as an expressionist-elemental counterpoint to the École de Paris.

Corneille, as one of the leaders of the group, was also counting on participation from artists in Czechoslovakia and Hungary. He planned an exhibition, wrote letters, sent out reports, and did not understand why he was getting no responses from countries that by then were being browbeaten by the terror of one-party rule. Members of the European School were then, for a long time, denied any chance to show their work publicly. During the 1950s they earned bare subsistence doing work such as painting pins or hand-colouring posters; Jenő Barcsay was the luckiest of them in being able to teach anatomy at the Academy of Fine Arts, but even he was not allowed to exhibit his pictures, which were officially deemed "formalist". The group did make an attempt to reorganise during the days of the 1956 Revolution, but in its wake they again had to go back to their separate struggles. Only from the early to mid-Sixties were they re-admitted into Hungarian art life, but even so still subjected to many cruel humiliations at the hands of art critics and bureaucrats, holding them to the ever more obscure dictates of socialist realism. It was younger artists who had embarked on careers in the meantime-the neo-avant-garde generation of the Iparterv Group (the name comes from the industrial construction planning office which was the venue for that group's exhibitions)-who discovered the European School as their own domestic precursors in the battle to create a modern artistic formal language. Although by the Eighties the School even gained a measure of official recognition, their international contacts had been lost, and with the Western art world by then promoting simplified schemata, and thus barely deigning to accord them any attention, they found they were unable to make good that tragic rupture. The European School announced its involuntary dissolution at the end of 1948, abandoning any international activity that might be interpreted as "official". The Dutch painter slowly took on board the reality of what the Iron Curtain rolling down across Europe meant; his Budapest adventure increasingly faded in significance. After the passage of years (and decades) the by now garlanded master only re-discovered his beginnings when his Hungarian works came to light in the course of renovation work on his studio, and by dint of persistent detective work on the part of Claudia Küssel. A golden jubilee exhibition of the 80-year-old painter's work at Amstelveen's COBRA Museum was mounted under the banner of that "Hungarian adventure", with a joint show that presented works of the European School proving a resounding success.

By way of reciprocation for that exhibition, a first show of Corneille's work was brought over to the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest. Apart from its instigator, Zsuzsa Jegesi, director of the Stichting Europeer, who has worked so tirelessly to build up Hungarian-Dutch cultural relations, particular credit must go to the Museum itself for not just simply hosting an exhibition pre-assembled by others, but actively contributing by mounting a display of its own selection and putting out its own catalogue.

Even within the relatively limited confines of the gallery space available, Ferenc Tóth, the curator of that show, made an attempt to evaluate certain stages of the oeuvre. Naturally, the aforementioned pieces that were actually completed in Hungary were given particular prominence, whilst the COBRA period represented the other main highlight. Corneille was possibly the tamest of the poisonous snakes amongst the founding members of that group, preferring to be playful rather than stomach-churning, to stylise

rather than distort. His tiny beings and impish creations cite Miró but are scrawlier, more unpredictable. In the nicest possible sense, they are the progeny of an infantilism born in a state of grace, genial responses, experiments in release, to the torments of an era (and art) that had been afflicted by a long succession of traumas. No panacea, of course; not a salve for wounds, but a balm that did at least give relief to lesions that would not readily heal.

Corneille's later beings are further simplified, becoming earthier, losing their humanoid character. That growing non-figurative aspect did not save him from the second flowering of abstract expressionism in Europe in the late Fifties, with works that edged the vertical and horizontal bands increasingly towards a wriggling, writhing organic structure. By the Sixties, Corneille had unquestionably joined the modernist discourse of that time. He found the possibility of rejuvenation in a return to the stylised simplicities of his own early years. In his old age, Corneille composes without inhibitions or shackles, with resoundingly vigorous, lively colour surfaces squeezed, mosaic-like, between thick contour lines typical of paintings and sculptures that play variations on several Pop Art-influenced, strongly figurative symbols (bird, flower, woman).