

### Research point: Trompe-l'oeil decorative schemes

For this exercise I must research some of the ways in which trompe-l'oeil has been exploited in works of art, particularly in decorative schemes.

According to the Tate: Trompe-l'oeil is a “French phrase meaning ‘deceives the eye’, which is used to describe paintings that create the illusion of a real object or scene” (Tate, n.d.).

My inspiration for this task was a visit to the Hungarian State Opera House in Budapest in March 2016. Whilst on a tour of the building I encountered the large and expressive fresco of the *Apotheosis of Music*, 1875-1884, by the German-Hungarian painter Károly Lotz.



Figure 1 *The Apotheosis of Music*, 1875-1884, ceiling fresco, by Károly Lotz.

**A brief description of the *Apotheosis of Music*, 1875-1884, by Károly Lotz (in the form of three spider diagrams)**

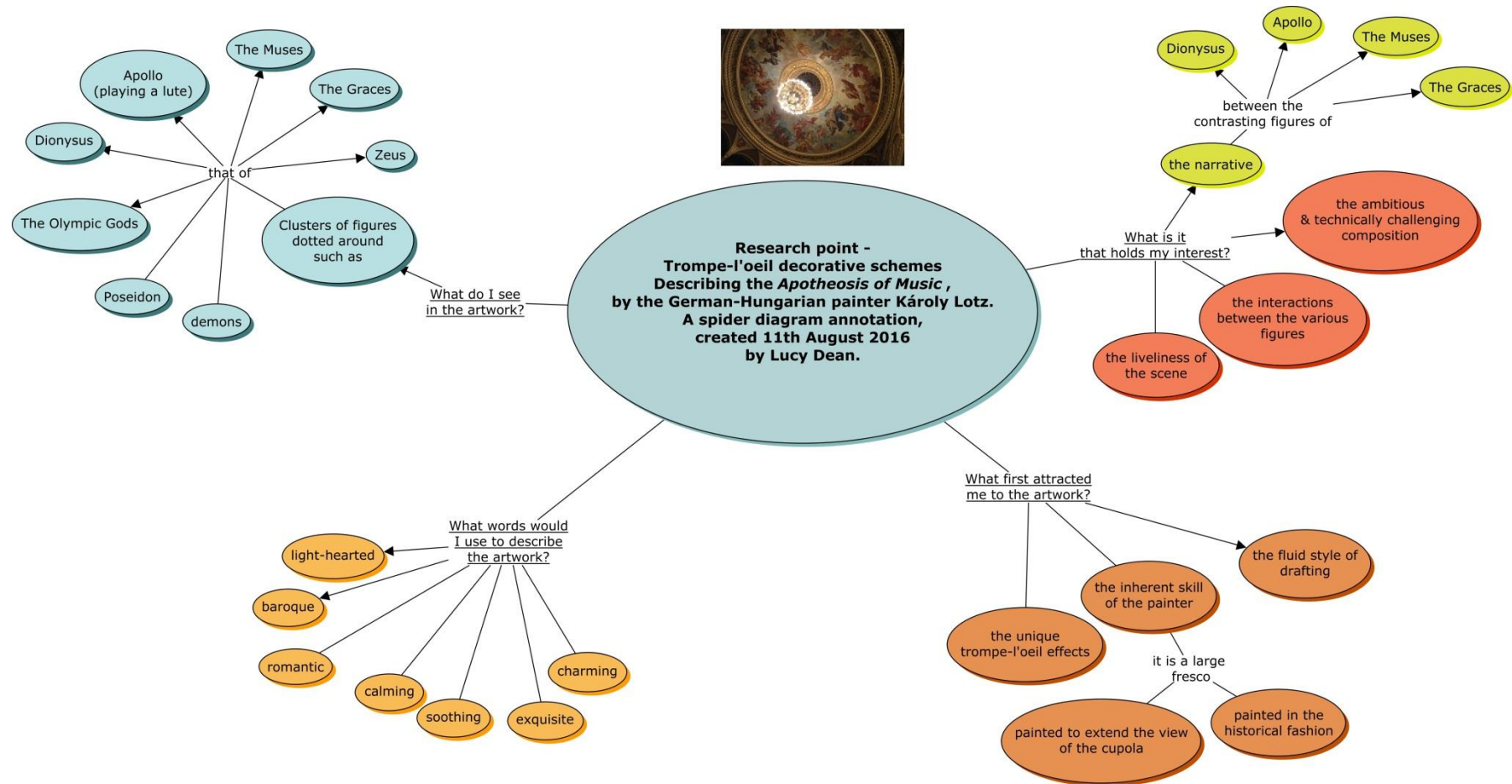


Figure 2 Spider diagram 1 of 3.

**Describing and relating the *Apotheosis of Music*, 1875-1884, by Károly Lotz (spider diagram 2 of 3)**

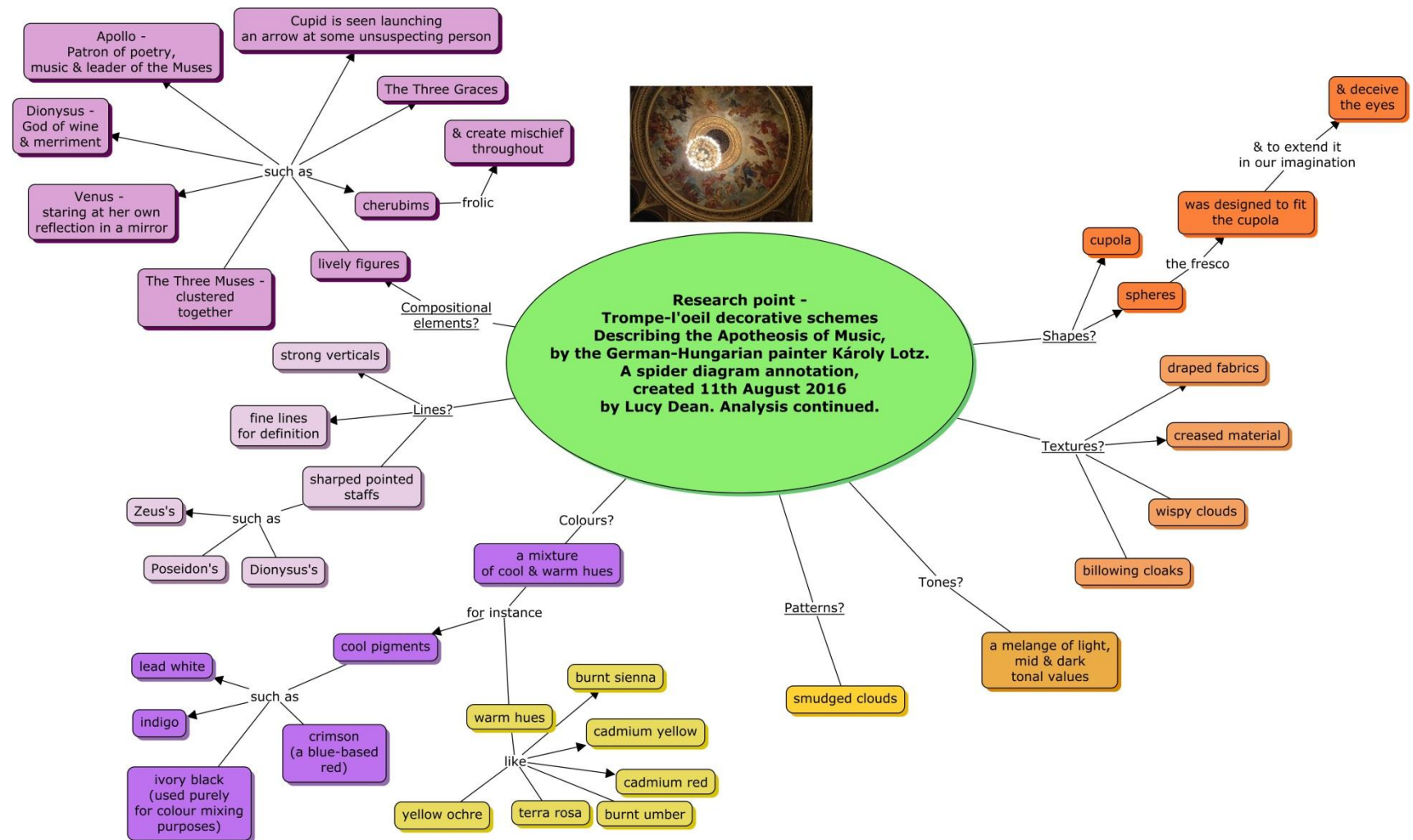


Figure 3 Figure 4 Spider diagram 2 of 3

### Describing and relating the *Apotheosis of Music* (spider diagram 3 of 3)

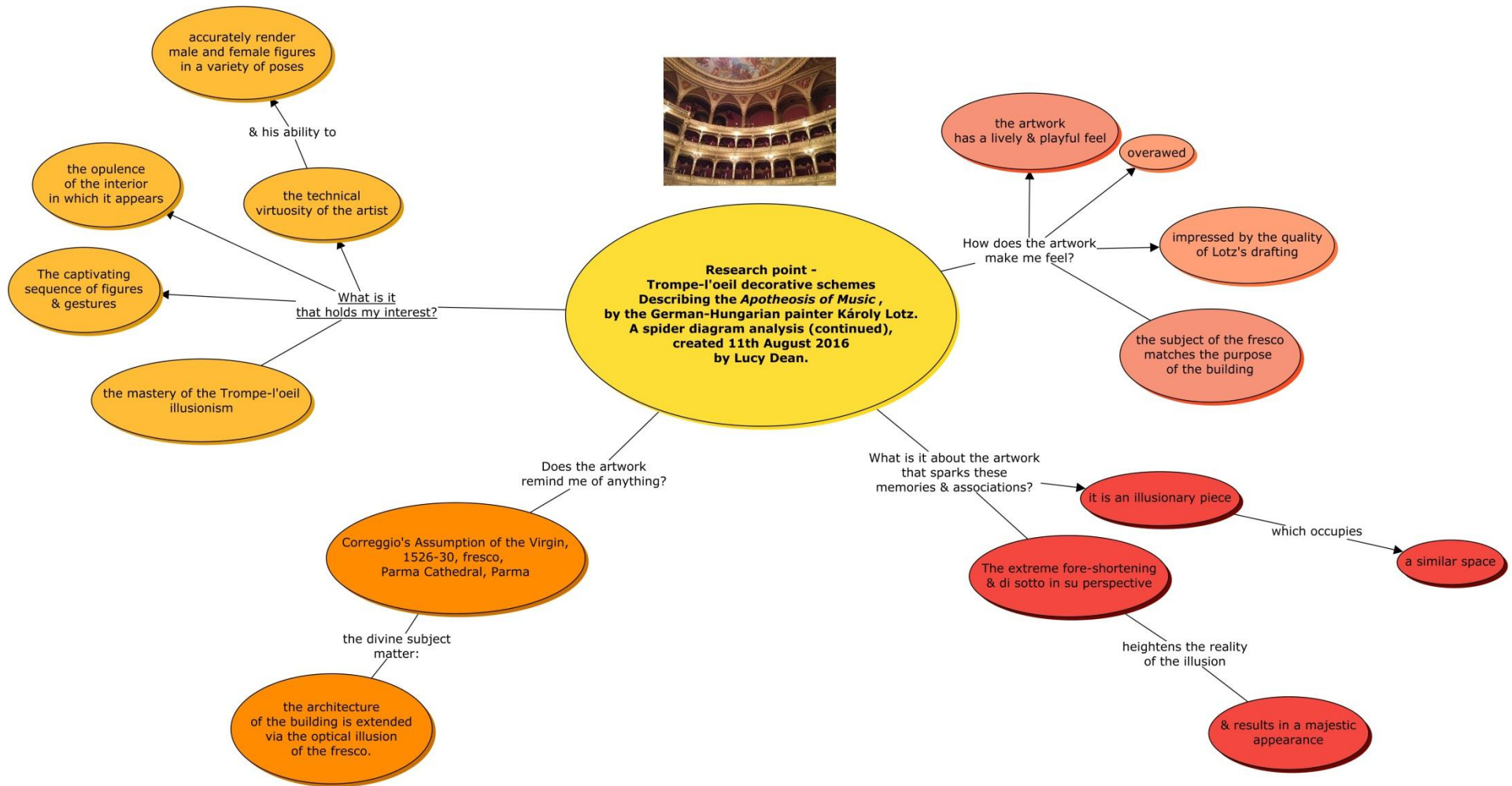


Figure 4 Figure 5 Spider diagram 3 of 3.

## Describing the processes and techniques of the *Apotheosis of Music*, by the painter Károly Lotz

The *Apotheosis of Music* is a large-scale circular ceiling fresco painted in the classical manner, which forms part of the overall design of the cupola in the auditorium.

### How do I think it was made?

The fresco was created by applying earth pigments directly onto a layer of wet plaster. Only enough wet plaster was utilised for a day's work. So any further retouches were completed once the plaster had dried. This process of painting onto dry plaster is known as Fresco Secco (dry plaster).

I strongly believe that the artist would have used a form of scaffolding in order to create his mural as it was painted directly on the ceiling. I think he must have painted some of the elements on his back (in the manner of Michelangelo), as some of the angles are extremely difficult to achieve whilst standing. (His spine would have given way long before he had completed the composition).

His Imprimatura (first paint layer) is likely to have been applied whilst he was painting in a reclined position, in order to accurately render the "di sotto in su" (from below to above) perspective (Khan Academy, 2016). When Michelangelo created his designs in the Sistine Chapel he too painted whilst lying down on the scaffolding in order to create the right angles of perspective for the viewer. The gestures of the poses in Lotz's mural are particularly challenging as he has multiple characters engaged in various activities. He also crops his figures in strange places to give us a sense of these figures appearing high above us and hovering within our lines of sight. The trompe-l'oeil illusionism suggests that the cupola is open to the elements, thus allowing the gods to descend to our level. Their descent is almost another performance in addition to the ones taking place on stage.



Figure 5 Figure 1 The Apotheosis of Music, 1875-1884, ceiling fresco, by Károly Lotz. Photograph by Lucy Dean.

I think the artist would have worked quickly during the first day of painting as the plaster was drying and in effect setting the earth pigments to the surface. After his first few layers were applied he is likely to have worked slower in order to make adjustments and to correct any errors. The entire opera house took around nine years to build so I think the mural would have taken considerable time to get right. It is the crowning glory of the auditorium so the pressure would have been on for Lotz to deliver his mural on time and to the high standards expected. The King and Emperor of the Austro-Hungarian Empire at the time of the construction was Franz Joseph. He stipulated that the Hungarian opera house must be smaller than the Viennese version as Vienna was his primary seat of power. This stipulation was because he believed that the Hungarians would try to outdo the opera house in Vienna. The Hungarians complied with his directions with regards to the size of the venue; however theirs is far more beautiful and ornate. On the Emperor's visit, he conceded that it was indeed smaller but far more stunning than his one in Vienna.



**Figure 6 The auditorium of the Hungarian State Opera House.**  
**Photographed by Lucy Dean, March 2016.**

On the Emperor's visit, he conceded that it was indeed smaller but far more stunning than his one in Vienna.

It seems to me that Lotz used a different brush for each pigment to avoid muddying his values and to generate the right effects. This mural has a certain clarity which is best achieved when the artist is disciplined and experienced enough to know that using the same brush for every colour is folly. If he had used the same brush for each pigment then the values would have looked very close together and thus one loses a sense of definition, scale and gesture. The result would have been lacklustre and the audience would have been hugely disappointed. Also, I think Lotz used the plain plaster as his base colour (rather than a white ground) because the warm values of the yellow ochres, terra rosas and the cadmium reds are enhanced by this coloured ground. Not only that, the cyan blue looks absolutely sensational against these warm values and ties the whole palette together. The overall effect is playful and harmonious and the values literally sing as though in chorus.

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Lotz also used a variety of different sized brushes to create his masterpiece as each brush generates a different effect. Larger brushes are useful for applying large amounts of pigment to a surface, whilst smaller brushes are utilised for the finer details such as the portraits. A careful balance would have been required as it is easy to overdo a scheme such as this. Therefore I strongly believe he used the Renaissance methods of massing in and finding the largest shapes first before pursuing the finer details. For example, many of the female nude figures are comprised of simply two or three values in order to provide clarity and to avoid overworking the anatomy. This is sufficient as the entire mural pulses with activity and movement as though we are watching the gods of Olympus in action.

I believe the artist must have had help and support in the delivery of this grand decorative scheme as he must have used a scaffold to transfer his design onto the ceiling. Also, he created many other murals in the opera house so I am certain that he had a team of people to help him. Unfortunately I was unable to find any specific information pertaining to his team or how he precisely executed this particular mural, but judging by what I saw and heard on my tour of the building this how I believe it was achieved.

The mural itself is beautifully framed by a series of delicate gilded cornicing around the outside and inside. The scheme complements the intricacy of the chandelier and the light source serves to illuminate both the auditorium and the painting.

It is a highly ambitious fresco as each figure has a purpose and that is to say that music and singing are the highest and purest forms of art (in the eyes of the artist and his patrons). Also, the work itself is a testimony of the skill and ambition of the Hungarians who contributed to the design of what is a truly remarkable interior. Its purpose was to impress upon the Emperor and King of the Austro-Hungarian Empire that like Vienna, Hungary too had its own pool of talented artists, designers, opera singers and carpenters; and a truly exceptional eye for design and grandeur.

### ***Interpreting the Apotheosis of Music***

In the *Apotheosis of Music* I believe that Lotz is trying to communicate that the opposing sides of Man's nature can be unified by music. His mural depicts the figures of Apollo and Dionysus who each symbolise different aspects of Man's nature. Apollo is pictured with his lyre in hand and appears to be performing to his followers, The Muses. The Muses appear to cluster around him as though to listen to his sweet music.

Dionysus is proudly displayed brandishing his pine cone staff amongst his followers, the Maenad. This is a significant addition to the overall scene as he traditionally represents the darker and more untamed side of mankind. Unlike the saintly Apollo, Dionysus is associated with passionate outbursts, savagery and drunkenness.

The other Gods of Olympus such as Zeus and Venus are also pictured hovering on or near to the Mount of Olympus regarding the overall scenery. Many other figures are also shown such as incarnations of various goddesses and demons gathered around as though they are enjoying the festivities.

The artwork was created between 1875 and 1884 at a time when Hungary was a province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This empire existed from 1867 until 1918. The 19<sup>th</sup> century was a period of great change in Hungary as the Hungarians tried to rule independent of foreign power for the first time in many centuries. During the 1840s many people across Europe revolted against the monastic governments running their countries. Like their neighbours, the Hungarians wished to have greater control over affairs of the state, rather than having to put up with

Foreign rulers. So in 1848 the Hungarians revolted against their Habsburg ruler, Emperor Franz Joseph. After several defeats in Italy and elsewhere, the Emperor with Russian support, suppressed the Hungarian Revolution and War of Independence. To supplicate the Hungarians he then began a process of devolution, thus allowing more powers to be granted to their own government. These concessions became known as the constitutional Compromise (Ausgleich).

Following this agreement Austria and Hungary were ruled jointly by Emperor Franz Joseph and as such formed a dual monarchy. Although the King had made some concessions to the Hungarian people, in essence the majority of important decisions continued to be made either by him or his central parliament in Vienna. For example:

- The October diploma of 1860 decreed that there would be a central parliament of 100 members whose role it was to advise on matters of finance, commerce and industry in all of the provinces.
- Authority in other matters such as government and legislation were granted to the Hungarians
- The Emperor remained responsible for issues such as the military and foreign policy.

After the Compromise was reached the Emperor Franz Joseph was crowned King of Hungary in the Summer of 1867. Feudalism was still a main source of contention as small landowners struggled to make a living from their land. However, industry flourished and many railways were constructed throughout Budapest which helped to create a modern metropolis.

The towns of Buda, Pest and Obuda were unified in 1873, which created Hungary's capital city, Budapest. Budapest then became one of the most prominent cities in Europe due to rapid developments, cultural innovations and the implementation of local infrastructure. To celebrate the settlement of the original Hungarian tribes people (the Magyars) in the Carpathian Basin, many new and grandiose structures were erected to celebrate the Millennium in 1896.

I believe the fresco is influenced by the political, social and cultural issues which were occurring concurrently as all of these were important factors in the development of the opera house. The structure itself was built just after the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, at a time when Hungarians were celebrating their unique cultural heritage and sought to preserve their language, literature and arts. For centuries they had been oppressed by Foreign rulers such as the Turks, and then the Habsburg dynasty of Austria took their place. Under the Habsburgs the official language at a state level was German rather the Latin and Hungarian that they were accustomed to.

According to the writer Ervin Ybl, Karoly Lotz is a forgotten master: "Károly Lotz (1833-1904) was one of the most productive masters. But cruel fate decimated his creations, many of his oil paintings are hidden in unknown places, more than some of his frescos have perished for good," (Budapest Design Week, 2012).



Karoly Lotz was born in Germany in 1833 and four years later moved to Budapest. He began his artistic training as a student of the court conductor Destouches and then later at the Academy of Painting of the Venetian Master Jacopo Marastoni. He consolidated his training with the Hungarian history painter Henrik Weber in Budapest before visiting Vienna to study alongside the Viennese history painter Carl Rahl (1812-1865). Lotz is renowned for his romantic landscapes and grand decorative murals and frescoes. His style is similar to that of the Venetian artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo in terms of the light and airy feel and sumptuous colour palette. Lotz is also known for his portraits and nudes; the portraiture would have provided his main source of income between his large-scale public works. Towards his later years he worked as a professor at art academies throughout Budapest, sharing his knowledge and experience with his students. His work can be seen inside the grand palaces, the Parliament building and also at the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest.

It seems to me that the *Apotheosis of Music* is a fresco with a political and ceremonial function. The mural itself celebrates Hungarian skill and is sublime in its mastery of execution, colour and composition. The Italian influence is clear for all to see and admire in the exquisite colour palette and cheery scenery. The scheme is hugely successful as it serves to remind visitors to the opera house that like the Viennese the Hungarians can aspire to huge levels of success. The auditorium is far grander than its Austrian counterpart as the latter lacks the artistic flourishes and beautiful detailing of the former. It is today considered to be a national monument due to its neo-Renaissance façade and was unveiled by the King himself in 1884.

It is clear that the mural was conceived to be displayed in an expansive place on the ceiling for all to see and enjoy in the tradition of the great Italian Renaissance villas and royal palaces.

The *Apotheosis of Music* describes the two-opposing sides of man's nature (in the forms of Apollo and Dionysus). But it could also be regarded as a mirror to the two main parts of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. Austria could be interpreted as the character of Dionysus as he typically represents the darker, more wilful and passionate side of mankind. Meanwhile the saintly Apollo might symbolise the Hungarians and their desire to rule their own country for themselves. In the Feszty Bar there are a series of murals by György Vastagh which are of a less political stance and instead venerate music and the arts via the life and loves of Dionysus. They are similar in nature to the mural in the auditorium as great emphasis is given to the passions of the gods and their indulgences. The ceiling paintings in The Feszty Bar are situated there in the tradition of the royal palaces. There are also two levels, so those on the upper levels command an even better view than those viewing from the lower floor. I believe they are affixed to the ceiling to provide a sense of luxury and richness to the proceedings.

## Evaluation

The *Apotheosis of Music* is a circular ceiling fresco painted in the style of a great history painting. At first glance, the figures of Apollo and Dionysus accompanied by the other gods and goddesses of Olympus might suggest a classical theme, but I think there is a certain amount of politics at play also.

The representations of Apollo, Dionysus, The Muses, Venus, The Graces and many others are distinguishable due to their accompanying instruments/attributes. The artist has portrayed each and every one of them with care and according to the classical ideals.

In my opinion the fresco is symbolic for all that the Hungarians wished to achieve and the opera house as a whole was destined to become an important national monument. The entire building both inside and out represents the Hungarian national pride, and their desire to take back control of their country and its former dominions.

The stories which are depicted in the mural describe the lives of Apollo and Dionysus according to the themes of classical antiquity. Apollo appears with a lyre in hand and is surrounded by several of his Muses. They listen to him playing eagerly. Apollo has a crown of laurel leaves to symbolise his achievements in the arts. The Muses are significant as they are the goddesses of poetic inspiration and of the creative arts. Apollo was considered in the classical period to embody the rational and civilised side of man's nature, while Dionysus represents the opposite.

Dionysus is envisioned standing proudly brandishing his staff. His staff has a pine cone on the end which is an ancient fertility symbol. He often appears drunk in the art of antiquity and like Apollo has a troupe of female devotees known as the Maenad. In antiquarian times Dionysus was the god of wine and of lusty passions. Hence he was worshipped during fertility rites. Like Apollo he is imagined as a young and healthy youth. The humanists of the Italian Renaissance believed the spirit of Bacchus (Dionysus) contrasted with the sober rationality of Apollo.

Venus also makes an appearance in the mural in the form of the Toilet of Venus. She stands regarding her reflection in a mirror held aloft by Cupid. Her companions are the Three Graces. In the antiquarian period, Venus symbolised the physical female ideal of beauty.

An example of a similar work is *An Allegory with Venus and Time* about 1754-8, by the Italian artist Giovanni Battista Tiepolo. It is a ceiling fresco venerating the fecundity and jubilation of Venus. The mural is indicative of the fact that a baby boy has been born to the proud parents. The artist depicted Venus being attended by Cupid whilst on her chariot. Two doves appear overhead. The colour palette and sympathetic treatment of the composition are similar to the ceiling mural in the opera house.

An apotheosis is the deification of a god or king. This is a popular theme/idea which originates in antiquity. In essence, an apotheosis as a concept has existed for millennia and stems from mankind's desire to elevate certain people to positions of power or notoriety. In our times we venerate celebrities, royalty, religious figures and athletes rather than the ancient gods and goddesses of earlier times. Therefore, I believe that the artist and his patrons are venerating the power of music, song and dance to bring us all together and to put aside our differences. Both the figures of Dionysus and Apollo are pictured playing musical instruments so this suggests that music is an apotheosis and is of more importance to the commissioners and the painter than any single historical figure. The Hungarians wished to reinvent themselves, modernise their language and reinstate their independence so the opera house was an important tool for doing so. Foreign visitors continue to flock to the opera house today as it is associated with high achievements in the arts.

In terms of the Hungarian State Opera House, the overarching theme is the idea that music is king and that it deserves to be celebrated and elevated to the highest reaches of society and even to the heavens.

I believe the artwork would have been very different if it had been painted on canvas as the fresco looks absolutely stunning as the plaster base provides a lovely warm finish.

The reason the decorative scheme is so successful is purely due to its cohesiveness and its location. Therefore if the mural had been situated elsewhere in the building I feel this would be a great shame as it can be enjoyed by many more people in the auditorium. It is a true tour-de-force and deserves to be recognised as such. It is situated on the ceiling of the horse-shoe shaped auditorium as a celebration of the music and arts. The trompe-l'oeil effect is highly accomplished and when one stands beneath the mural it truly looks as though the gods are trying to join in on the enthralling performances on stage.

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