

Study visit – Visit a landscape



Figure 1 A photograph of the *Republic of Councils Monument (Tanácsköztársasági emlékmű)*, 1969, by the prolific István Kiss at the *Memento Park, Budapest*, by Lucy Dean. Notice the sinister looking water tower in the distance.

For this task I must visit a landscape that I think will make a good subject for a painting – or one that has been painted by an artist or artists in the past. I need to find out as much as I can about the locality and its history in advance. Who has painted it previously? When I visit I must look at it with a painter's eye.

I need to consider the aspect that I would choose and the media that I would use. I must also make notes on the choices that other artists have made.

Why have they tackled the subject in a particular way? Is there a local gallery exhibiting work by local artists? Make notes on how other people have approached this task. I must also draw or paint the landscape for myself and specify the aspect and the medium that I would use.

Am I planning to work in my own style or that of another artist? Make notes on composition, colour and tone. Would I include any figures in the landscape? Make some sketches demonstrating my ideas.

Context and a brief history of the Soviet occupation in Hungary (1956 – 1989/90)

Whilst in Budapest on holiday in March 2016 I visited the *Memento Park*, which is a sculpture park dedicated to the history of Communism in Hungary. I decided to produce a watercolour inspired by my visit as the *Memento Park* is certainly one of the most interesting landscapes that I've ever visited. I worked from photos as my visit was very brief and we were due to travel back to central Budapest by minibus the same afternoon.

The melange of sculptures are challenging to foreign eyes as they symbolise the tyranny and despotism of a regime that brutally quashed any form of opposition. They are known as: "the apparatus of terror" (Trouble, n.d.), due to the ideology that they represent and the era in which they appeared (1956- 1989/1990). The park itself is structured in the form of interlocking circles to explain the history of Communism and the context of each individual statue. The circles also denote each regime change and Communism in Hungary through the decades. Each statue is of a different size and form depending on the desires of the Soviets. For example, some are small to represent Lenin's proximity to his people; whereas others are gigantic to impress upon the audience the power of the Soviet forces. One in particular is designed to intimidate and to strike fear in our hearts and that is the one entitled: *Liberating Soviet Soldier (Felszabadító szovjet katona)*, 1947/58. *The Liberating Soviet Soldier (Felszabadító szovjet katona)*, looms threateningly over the viewer with a fierce look in his eye. He brandishes a large Soviet flag in one hand, with a huge machine gun strapped to his chest. His left fist is clenched, which to the Hungarians reminds them of the Soviet's unwavering strength and refusal to withdraw from the Hungarian territories.

One of the statues that intrigued me the most was the sculpture entitled: the *Republic of Councils Monument*, which depicts a worker hurtling himself forwards with his arms raised. In its original position in central Budapest the figure appeared to charge out of the woods. Hence the Hungarians devised an alternative and more derisive moniker for it: "*The Cloakroom attendant*" (Tang, 2014). This was because the so-called "worker" (Tang, 2014) appeared to charge out of the woods as though running after someone who'd misplaced their belongings. In spite of the tyrannical and despotic regime of the Soviets in Hungary, the Hungarians responded with their own brand of humour. For centuries they had been ruled by foreign forces, first by the Turks, then the Habsburgs and the Nazis; and finally by the Soviets. Their way of managing the opposition was to respond with irony and humour.

After the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1989/90, as in other Eastern and Central European countries many Hungarians wanted to disassemble and destroy the old Soviet monuments which were formerly symbols of terror and oppression. "A foreign tourist, for whom dictatorship is merely

something they have read about, has completely different thoughts when in the Park than the person with a tragic past, who lived here, survived and under the aegis of these statues takes the drama of his own ruined life into the Park with him. But the silence is shared” (Tang, 2014). Instead it was decided that they would be retained to educate future generations and would therefore be better situated within a calm and desolate park on the outskirts of Southern Budapest. This removal and subsequent transfer of the statues works well, as they can now be appreciated in a dedicated area to instruct both Hungarians and foreigners alike on the dangers of megalomania.

The park officially opened in 1993 and has remained a historic monument ever since. Many of the statues were originally erected in central Budapest from 1956 onwards when the Soviet forces invaded and settled in Hungary. The statues were utilised by the foreign powers to subjugate the population and to spread Communist ideas. “Nonetheless, it must be remembered that for many Hungarians, these works still carry sinister associations as objects of fear and repression. They are the surviving symbols of a once sophisticated and proud country brutally subjugated by the all-pervasive and poisonous Soviet influence, likened to “a spiritual and physical quarantine” (Tang, 2014). Thus many Hungarian people continue to regard them with derision, vilification and humour as an antidote to the horror and persecution that was prevalent during the Soviet period.

One of the principal places to discover more about the Nazi and Soviet occupations is at the renowned *House of Terror* on Andrassy Avenue in Budapest. I visited this museum during my holiday to discover more about the context in which these monuments appeared. During the Soviet occupation of Hungary, many people were persecuted and individual families, friends and neighbours viewed each other with suspicion. Any revolutionary ideas were quickly crushed and people all over Hungary were rounded up, interviewed, executed, tortured or deported to labour camps in Russia. The *House of Terror* is of particular interest as a former site of mass executions, imprisonment, torture and abuse by the Nazis, the infamous Hungarian Arrow Cross party and the Soviets. The Arrow Cross party supported the Soviets and was modelled in a similar manner to the KGB. They persecuted Jews, the Magyars (the Hungarians) and anybody who dared to oppose the Communist way of life.

Interpretation of the *Republic of Councils Monument*, (*Tanácsköztársasági emlékmű*), 1969, bronze, by Istvan Kiss.

Details of the *Republic of Councils Monument* (*Tanácsköztársasági emlékmű*)

- It was created in 1969, by the prolific sculptor István Kiss in bronze.
- It shares similarities with a work by Róbert Berény (1887-1953).
- Berény's piece entitled: *To Arms! To Arms! (Fegyverbe! Fegyverbe!)*, 1919, was designed to stimulate military recruitment. It was created and printed during the 133 days of the Hungarian Soviet Republic.



Figure 2 The *Republic of Councils Monument* (*Tanácsköztársasági emlékmű*), 1969, bronze, by Istvan Kiss.



Figure 3 *To Arms! To Arms! (Fegyverbe! Fegyverbe!)*, 1919, by Robert Bereny.

Due to its similarity to the work of Robert Bereny (seen left), the *Republic of Councils Monument* was utilised as a form of propaganda by the Soviets to reinforce the view that: "Communism was not a 'foreign' politico-ideological system now being enforced upon Magyars by Moscow, but rather it had strong national roots" (Trouble, n.d.).

According to Réthly: "The site of the statue was shocking – if you looked at it from the right angle – a huge giant was running out from among the trees of the City park [Városliget]". "In City folklore, the statue became known as the 'cloakroom attendant', who was running after someone: 'Sir, you forgot your scarf!'" (Trouble, n.d.).

The *Republic of Councils Monument* (*Tanácsköztársasági emlékmű*) reminds me of the work *To Arms! To Arms! (Fegyverbe! Fegyverbe!)*, due to the dynamic gesture of the pose and the similar modes of attire. Kiss's version differs as the anger has evaporated leaving a cool-headed figure who strives onwards and upwards. In both artworks the proletariat is strongly represented.

Watercolour of the Republic of Councils Monument, 2016, by Lucy Dean

The Hungarian artist Robert Bereny was my inspiration

I was inspired to create this watercolour after viewing works by the Hungarian artist Robert Bereny. I felt the medium would help me translate my vision into a graphical reality. It reminds me of propaganda posters of the same period (1919) and Constructivist works by Alexander Rodchenko.

I decided to produce a watercolour of this statue in particular as I was intrigued to learn more about the work and the reasons for its initial production.

The colours are washed out and barely-there to help us focus on the figure

The colours are simplified to avoid distracting the viewer's gaze from my central expressive and highly kinetic figure.

There is a strong sense of movement as the gesture of the pose is highly exaggerated to glorify the energy and enthusiasm of the proletariat.



Figure 4 A watercolour painting of the Republic of Councils Monument, 2016 by Lucy Dean.

I selected this angle in particular as I admired the rhythmical nature of the pose

Although the figure itself was carved poorly as the sculptor appears to have avoided sculpting him in the round. Thus from certain angles the figure seems one-dimensional and slightly flat.

The contrast between the tonal values is strongest where the light is most prominent

Thus the torso of my figure is comprised of the darkest values to contrast with the areas illuminated by the sun. (The draped cloth, his shoulders and forearms). The limbs are largely comprised of mid-tones as they are situated further away from the light.

Compositionally the figure dominates

The figure dominates as I wanted him to be the centre of our focus.

The landscape is of less importance as the park is situated in an area which is rural and off the beaten track.

This area of Budapest is less affluent and more agricultural.

The sculptures seem half-forgotten and dominate the surrounding landscape due to their over-the-top proportions and gesture.

The face is oddly devoid of emotion

The face itself is rather expressionless. It could be a metaphor for the Communist regime. That is to say, from the outside it looked great; but on closer examination one realises that it was all an elaborate sham, and smoke and mirrors for what was really going on. At best Communism was simply an illusion.

Evaluation

To summarise, the *Republic of Councils Monument* is an oversized Communist statue dedicated to reinforcing the ideals of the Soviet leadership and their supporters. The statue is ideally situated on a corner plot and commands a spectacular view of the environs and enables visitors to rise and look out over the rest of the park and to see some way into the distance.

It certainly represents someone who is pursuing a greater cause. The representation is typical of the Communist style, that is to say that it is highly stylised and that it bears very little resemblance to anyone who is living or who has died. In this respect it could be considered abstract as it is likely to have been an amalgamation of faces and bodies rather than a representation of a single living individual.

This monument symbolises the Soviet ideology that everyone must contribute to the system and meet the economic and political targets set by the leadership. It could also be a metaphor for the Hungarian's struggle to overthrow their foreign rulers. It is clear to me that the Soviet's wished to re-write the history books to suit their own agenda and to continue distributing their own brand of state-level propaganda. Thus the *Republic of Councils Monument* was an important part of this programme.

The subject is familiar to me as I have encountered works of a similar nature before at the *Memento Park* and elsewhere. The *House of Terror* contains fascinating excerpts from people who experienced Soviet oppression first-hand and the leadership's unrealistic agricultural, political and social policies.

The figure in the artwork seems to be galloping towards something perhaps the Soviet future? At any rate one had to toe the party line in Hungary at the time, otherwise life was made really difficult for one's family.

I think the artwork is about Hungary's desire to be free of Soviet oppression, but it is also strongly influenced by the country's leadership. It was commissioned by the Soviets so it is likely that they felt it should represent their ideas of a brighter and better future. Sadly, the reality was very different for ordinary people. Life was made almost impossible as citizens were encouraged to inform on one another in order to avoid interment or imprisonment. The targets the Soviets set were almost impossible for farmers and other factories and producers to meet so many people were greatly impoverished as a result.

I think if the artwork was moved to an alternative location it would alter its narrative dramatically. Its current situation as part of the *Memento Park* is enormously insightful as the park guides provide context and other snippets of information which help visitors to interpret the works. It is particularly important for foreign visitors such as myself to visit, as I previously have only experienced communism through what I have read or seen on television. So parks like this are important to help us understand why people did what they did. I've found a quote that I think best

sums up the relevance of museums or places such as the Memento Park: “Every violent form of society formalises the need and the right to re-analyse, touch up and appropriate their own past in order to shine favourable light on the ‘historical necessity’ of their regime. Democracy is the only régime which is capable of looking back to its past, with all its mistakes and wrong turns, with its head up. The wonderful thing about looking back is that you are free to do this. Democracy is the only régime that has dignity” (Trouble, n.d.). In short the Memento Park is the perfect place to experience these works of art which have been re-established here. As they adopt a new meaning and give us hope for the future. For if we take note and heed the warning; together we can avoid atrocities such as these from ever occurring again.

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