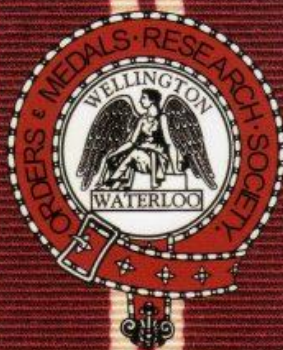


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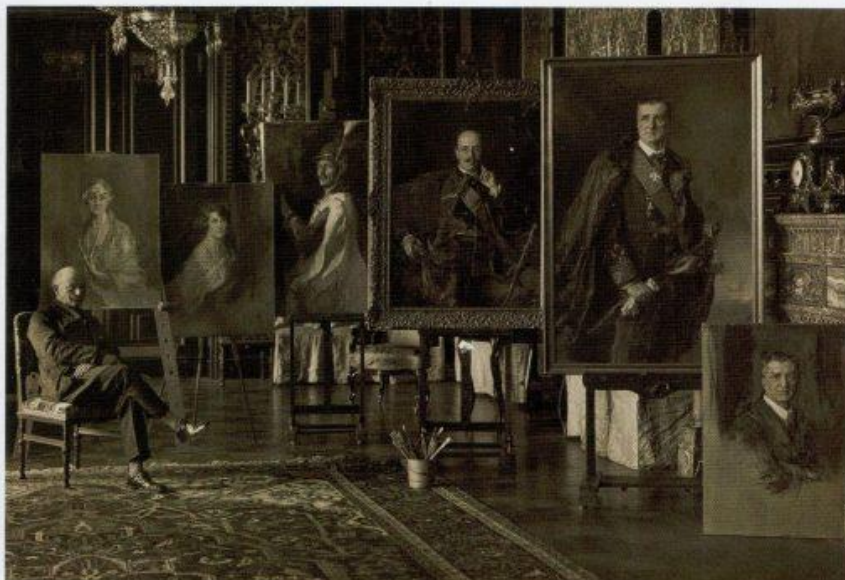
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Philip de László and the Corvin Badge of Honour: a Late Recognition

by Dr Gergely Pál Sallay, Hungary



Fülöp Elek László de Lombos (Philip Alexius de László) in his temporary studio in the Royal Palace in Budapest, Hungary, October 1927

Philip de László, one of the greatest portrait painters of his time, was born in 1869 in Budapest as Fülöp Laub; he emigrated to England in 1907 and became a British citizen in 1914. As a result, both the Hungarians and the British regard the artist as their own. From the early 1890s to his death in 1937 in London, the acclaimed painter lived and worked in a number of countries, commissioned by a plethora of aristocrats (among them monarchs, statesmen and popes). It is no wonder that he soon built up a remarkable collection of orders and decorations. Based on his personal memoirs, we know that Fülöp László – or Philip Alexius de László, as he was known in England – held these badges of recognition in high esteem. His dual nationality makes his Hungarian and

British awards particularly interesting, yet the Corvin Badge of Honour, a medal awarded to him during his last days, has been hitherto unmentioned in specialist publications.¹ Before discussing it in more detail, let us have a closer look at other British and Hungarian references.

Philip de László received official recognition in his native country on several occasions. In 1903 Francis Joseph I of Austria-Hungary decorated him with the Third Class of the Order of the Iron Crown for painting a portrait of him in uniform.² Then in 1912 he raised the artist to Hungarian nobility, following a recommendation by his Minister of Religion and Education.³ In 1927 de László came to Hungary to paint the portrait of Miklós Horthy,⁴

¹ György Ambrózy, Ferenc Felszeghy, György Petrichevich and Imre Rátvay (editors) (1943), *A rendjelek és kitüntetések történelmünkben*. [Orders and Decorations in Hungarian History], pp 466-467. Budapest; Attila Pandula (1991-1992), 'A magyar Corvin-lánc, a magyar Corvin-koszorú és a magyar Corvin-díszjelvény története'. [The History of the Hungarian Corvin Chain, the Hungarian Corvin Wreath and the Hungarian Corvin Badge of Honour] *Numizmatikai Közlöny* [The Journal of the Hungarian Numismatic Society] XC-XCI, pp 171-185.

² Hart-Davis, Duff, in collaboration with Caroline Corbeau-Parsons (2010), *De László: His Life and Art*, p 74. New Haven and London: Yale University Press.

³ *Magyar Országos Levéltár* [Hungarian National Archives] (in continuation: MOL) K27 Minisztertanácsi jegyzőkönyvek [Official reports of cabinet meetings], 2 January 1912, (1st session) 20. 'Javaslat nemesség adományozására László Fülöp festőművész részére.'

⁴ Hart-Davis, *op. cit* pp 208-209.

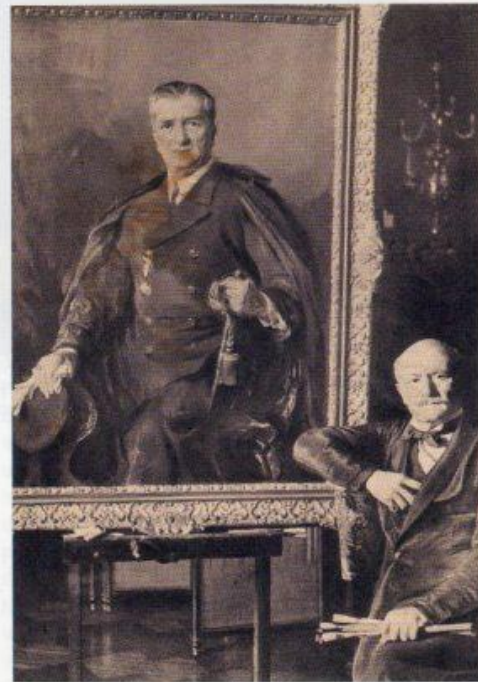


Fülöp Elek László de Lombos (Philip Alexius de László) in Hungarian ceremonial attire in 1929. Among other illustrious medals, he is seen wearing the 2nd Class and Star of the Hungarian Cross of Merit, the Badge of a Member 4th Class of the Royal Victorian Order and the 3rd Class of the Order of the Iron Crown (© de Laszlo Foundation)

commissioned by the Hungarian government, and the Regent personally presented him with the 2nd Class and Star of the Hungarian Cross of Merit 'for an outstanding achievement in the art of painting'.⁵ As the artist was already a British citizen at that time, he was recommended for the award by the Hungarian Minister of Foreign Affairs (or more precisely, by his deputy), and he had to have permission from King George V to wear it⁶ (it is therefore remarkable that the *Hungarian Directory of Office Bearers* lists Philip de László among the Hungarian holders of the award, not among foreigners).⁷ Finally, in 1937 the Regent decorated de László with the Hungarian Corvin Badge of Honour, a medal given only to foreign nationals, 'in appreciation of artistic excellence and for an invaluable service to the cause of Hungarian culture'.⁸ He received similar acknowledgement

as a foreign artist from Britain in 1909 when, as a citizen of Austria-Hungary, he was made an honorary Member 4th Class of the Royal Victorian Order by King Edward VII (honorary membership was granted to foreign nationals, as is still the practice today). So, interestingly, de László received his Hungarian medals as a British citizen, and his British medal as a Hungarian.

Now, back to the Corvin Badge of Honour. What makes it such a special prize? First of all, it is a rare medal awarded to a small number of people. It was instituted in 1930 together with the Hungarian Corvin Chain and the Hungarian Corvin Wreath, to



The painter on 8 March 1935, having finished painting the portrait of the Regent of Hungary (*Tolnai Világlapja* No 13, 1935)

be given to foreigners 'in gratitude for a particularly useful service promoting Hungarian culture'. It was limited to only 12 living recipients at a time, though based on what we now know, it was never accorded to that many people, not even in total during the whole

⁵ De László Archive (in continuation DLA) Letter from the Prime Minister, István Bethlen to Philip de László. Budapest, 17 October 1927; MOL K428 MTT prints, 17 October 1927.

⁶ *The Times*, 9 December 1927; *Yorkshire Herald*, 10 December 1927, and *Universe and Catholic Weekly*, 16 December 1927, reported on the permission. DLA unindexed press cuttings.

⁷ *Magyarország tisztviselői cím- és névtára* [Hungarian Directory of Office Bearers] (1931) XLI, p 454. Budapest.

⁸ Letter of notification on granting the Corvin Badge of Honour. The Minister of Religion and Public Education. 23601/1937, private collection.



Prizes of an exceptional artistic career. Philip de László's family made a collection of his orders, decorations and medals after his death. Bottom left: Hungarian Cross of Merit, 2nd Class and Star; to the right of the exhibition awards, the Corvin Badge of Honour and the 3rd Class of the Order of the Iron Crown (© de Laszlo Foundation)

period leading up to the end of the Horthy era.⁹

A curious aspect of this particular award is that de László was the only recipient of Hungarian origin. If we look into the different steps of the process, more interesting details are revealed. First, it is important to note that plans to decorate de László with the Corvin Badge of Honour had already been on the table years before he actually received it, as we know from letters dated 25 June 1935 and 4 August 1936 written by István Bárczy, Secretary of State and a close friend to de László.¹⁰ In both letters Bárczy informs the artist that he recommended him as a nominee to Bálint Hóman, Minister of Religion and Education, who in turn promised to take the nomination to Horthy.¹¹ The matter was on the agenda because Philip de László was officially commissioned to come to Budapest

once again in March 1935 to paint another portrait of the Regent.¹² The press reported on his visit to Hungary, and *Tolnai Világlapja* even published a photograph of the artist and his latest work.¹³

Although de László received a warm welcome in his native country as one of the greatest painters of his time, the prestigious award came late – too late. The 68-year-old master was suffering from a heart condition, and on 20 October 1937 he had a heart attack from which he never recovered.¹⁴ Perhaps the sudden deterioration of his health contributed to Horthy's decision finally to bestow on him the Corvin Badge of Honour on 20 November, following the recommendation of the Minister of Religion and Education. However the recognition came too late for the artist to appreciate. Even though the Prime

⁹ Statutes of the Hungarian Corvin Chain, the Hungarian Corvin Wreath and the Hungarian Corvin Badge of Honour, 1930 p 1, private collection

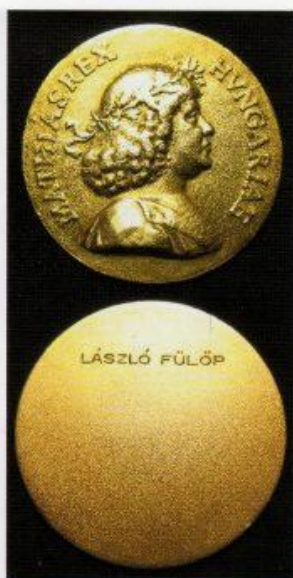
¹⁰ Hart-Davis, *op. cit.*, p 191.

¹¹ DLA022-0127, letter from István Bárczy to Philip de László, 25 June 1935; DLA 081-0059, letter from István Bárczy to Philip de László, 4 August 1936.

¹² Hart-Davis, *op. cit.*, pp 260-261.

¹³ *Tolnai Világlapja* No. 13, 1935.

¹⁴ Hart-Davis, *op. cit.*, p 281.



What is left of Philip de László's medal: the obverse (above) and reverse of the central roundel of the Corvin Badge of Honour. The Hungarian variant of the artist's name is engraved on the reverse (private collection)



The 3rd Class of the Order of the Iron Crown, from Philip de László's legacy. Francis Joseph I of Austria-Hungary rewarded him with the medal in 1903; the emperor sat for his portrait in uniform and spoke to the artist in Hungarian (private collection)

Minister, Kálmán Darányi, and the Minister of Religion and Education, Bálint Hóman, both joined the Regent in congratulating the 'Much Respected and Dear Master' in telegrams, the painter's friends and family dared not share the news with him, so worried were they that the excitement would worsen his condition. Two days later, on 22 November Philip de László died unaware that he was finally given the acknowledgement he so longed for. His affection for his homeland stayed with him till the end; during his last days he spoke to his loved ones in Hungarian. Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl, a Hungarian sculptor living in London at the time, translated his last words.¹⁵

On 21 November both the Hungarian and international press reported on his illustrious prize.¹⁶ His widow was officially notified on 7 January 1938 via a letter from Bálint Hóman, with the award

certificate and a copy of the statutes attached.¹⁷ The medal itself was given to his widow in May 1938 by Ferenc Marosy, Counsellor and Chargé d'Affaires of the Royal Hungarian Embassy in London.¹⁸ The annual general meeting of the Corvin Chain and Corvin Wreath Holders' Association was held between the two dates, on 20 January 1938, when the association approved, with retrospective effect, de László's nomination to the award by the Minister of Education.¹⁹ The fact that the Badge was given to de László's widow is noteworthy because Article 9 of the Statutes stipulates that the Corvin Badge of Honour, similarly to the Corvin Chain and the Corvin Wreath, must be returned to the Regent's office once the bearer is deceased. It must have been out of respect for his widow and in consideration of the fact that the prize was, in effect, awarded to the painter after his death that the family was allowed to receive and keep the

¹⁵ Hart-Davis, *ibid.* pp 282-283.; Prohászka László: 'Kisfaludi Strobl Zsigmond 1935-ös kiállítása Londonban' [The Exhibition of Zsigmond Kisfaludi Strobl in London, 1935.] *Művészet és barátai* September-October 2005. pp 7-9.

¹⁶ Among others, the event was reported by *Az Est* (Budapest) 21 November 1937; *Pesti Napló* (Budapest) 21 November 1937; *Pester Lloyd* (Budapest) 21 November 1937; *Neues Politisches Volksblatt* (Budapest) 21 November 1937; *The Sunday Times* (London) 21 November 1937; *Sunday Express* (London) 21 November 1937; *Paris Daily Mail* 21 November 1937, DLA unindexed press cuttings.

¹⁷ Letter of notification on granting the Corvin Badge of Honour. The Minister of Religion and Public Education. 23601/1937, private collection.

¹⁸ MOL K428 MTI prints 18 May 1938.

¹⁹ MOL K428 MTI prints 21 January 1938.

Badge despite the regulations. Further proof that the family kept the medal is that the Corvin Badge of Honour appears in an old photograph of a mounted display along with other orders and decorations the painter received, and this display could only have been made after May 1938. Unfortunately only the central roundel of the Badge now survives; it was passed down to the artist's descendants, a medal depicting King Matthias with the recipient's name engraved on the reverse in the usual style of the Corvin insignia. It is interesting, though not surprising, that de László's name is inscribed in its Hungarian form. The other orders and decorations in the photograph of the display appear to have been distributed among members of the large family, most likely after the death of de László's widow.

There are no available photographs or information of any kind regarding the whereabouts of the award certificate mentioned in the letter to his widow (note that no award certificate of any other Corvin Badge of Honour is known to exist), but family descendants still have the copies of the letter of notification in Hungarian and in English, together with the statutes in Hungarian. As the actual Badge itself has not survived in its original form, we also present an image of another example, kept in the medal collection of the Hungarian National Museum, as an illustration.²⁰ This medal was presented to Eemil Nestor Setälä, a Finnish politician and linguist, in 1931.²¹ Apart from this one, there is one other known example of the Corvin Badge of Honour in Hungary; one without a name engraved is exhibited in the Lajos Huszár Medal Collection in Gyöngyös, in its original case of issue.²²

Until now, the Hungarian Corvin Badge of Honour given to Philip de László has not been mentioned in publications specialising in faleristics. It is therefore time to include the world-renowned painter on the list of the select few who had the honour to receive this rare award. Though only the central roundel of the badge survives, even this fragment is a real treasure, since there were fewer than 12 Corvin Badges of Honour given out altogether between 1930 and 1945, of which only one other known example has the late owner's name engraved on the reverse, that of Eemil Setälä in the Hungarian National Museum mentioned above.

On Philip de László's death, his fellow artist, Sir



The obverse and reverse of the Corvin Badge of Honour awarded to Eemil Setälä, Finnish linguist and politician; the recipient's name is engraved on the reverse (medal collection of the Hungarian National Museum)

John Lavery said:

No other contemporary portrait painter was so widely known as Philip de László. He was a true modern court painter. His many awards and decorations show how much he was liked and respected by all European monarchs.

Francis Owen Salisbury, a British painter said:

With Philip de László the world has lost a great, strong, likeable personality, but the constraints of a lifetime shall not rob the world of a great artist. His work will live on forever. Very few artists in history

²⁰ Medal collection of the Hungarian National Museum, Inventory no: I.C./2002.

²¹ Dezső Gaskó. *Társadalmi kapcsolataink Finnországgal*. [Hungary's Public Relations with Finland] Vol. I. (1943) p 177. Budapest; The item published by: Ágnes Makai, Vera Héri (2002), *Kereszt, érem, csillag. Kitüntetések a magyar történelemben*. [Crosses, Medals, Stars. Decorations in Hungarian History], pp 126 & 227. Budapest. The authors mention, probably by mistake, that plans failed to award the medal to Setälä in 1935, the year of his death.

²² Huszár Lajos Éremtár, Gyöngyös [Lajos Huszár Medal Collection, Gyöngyös], Inventory no. 1232

left such an abundant and magnificent legacy to their contemporaries.²³

Yet his memory seems to have faded away in his native country. This article aims to honour the memory of a great portrait painter – an artist we Hungarians should be particularly proud of.

Acknowledgements

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their permission to publish the pictures in this article. He would also like to thank Dr Melinda Torbágyi and Dr Lajos Pallos for the opportunity to publish photographs of the Corvin Badge of Honour in the medal collection of the Hungarian National Museum; and to Erik Borbándi (Lajos Huszár Medal Collection, Gyöngyös) and Ferenc Fekete, for assisting with his research. Grateful thanks are also extended to Kati Bumbera who translated the text.

The De László Archive Trust would be pleased to hear from anyone with information on hitherto unregistered paintings by Philip de László, signed as Laub or László, to the following email address: catalogue@delaszlo.com. More details on the work of the De László Archive Trust can be found at www.delaszloarchivetrust.com. The De

Editor's note: Dr Gergely Pál Sallay, PhD is a historian and curator of the Hungarian Military History Museum.

²³ MOL K428 MTI prints 23 November 1937.