



MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS  
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GRAPHIC DESIGN - JOHANNA BÁRD  
PHOTOGRAPHS - LÁSZLÓ MÁTYUS  
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## HIGHLIGHTED WORKS OF ART

2009 SPRING SUMMER **AUTUMN** WINTER

MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS — COLLECTION OF ANTIQUITIES

## MEDITERRANEAN ANTIQUITIES FROM THE FERENC HOPP COLLECTION

With this, the twenty-fourth exhibition in the series 'Highlighted Works of Art', the Collection of Antiquities and the Museum of Fine Arts pay homage to an extraordinary patron of art and express their gratitude for an act of generosity, one of the happiest moments in the history of the Museum and the Collection.

The extraordinary patron of art is Ferenc Hopp (1833–1919). Born into a large German-speaking family in Fulnek, in what is now the eastern Czech Republic, he arrived in Pest at the age of twelve to become an apprentice in the optician's workshop of Stefano Calderoni. In 1851, having just received his apprentice's diploma, he set out on his years of wandering. Ten years later, following further studies in Vienna and New York, he returned to Pest, where he became a partner (and, for a short period of time, also the son-in-law) of his former master. In 1864, he took over the management of the firm (Calderoni and Co.), and within a decade had made it very profitable. While retaining its interest in traditional optical products, he brilliantly recognized the opportunities that lay in new fields like photography and school equipment.

Photography was becoming popular both professionally and as a hobby, generating a considerable demand for cameras and other equipment. Hopp himself was a passionate photographer, and the shop-window of his downtown studio, with its constantly renewed display of celebrity portraits and current events pictures, was a reference point in the social life of Pest. Word had it that *"Whoever has his picture in Calderoni's window is either already famous or will be soon"*. The growing market in school kit was necessitated by the comprehensive educational reforms of the 1868 Education Act, and by the gigantic school-building programmes which took place at the turn of the century.

Midway upon the journey of his life, Ferenc Hopp thus came into a significant fortune, thanks largely to his own efforts. He chose what in the Hungary of those days was a unique way to make use of his huge financial resources: became a traveller and collector of works of art. Between the ages of 49 and 80, he travelled five times around the world. He was acknowledged among his contemporaries as *"the most widely travelled Hungarian"*. On his journeys he was an enthusiastic buyer of art works and souvenirs. He was mainly interested in the cultures of the Far East and Japan, but he found nothing alien. The inscription he himself intended for his tombstone ran: *"a friend of all nations"*. The most beautiful token of his selfless generosity is the remarkable collection of 4,000 pieces of East Asian art that he left to the Hungarian state, along with the luxurious villa (his family home) which houses it. The Ferenc Hopp



Museum of Eastern Asiatic Art on Andrassy Boulevard near Heroes' Square is the oldest public collection of its kind in Central Europe.

We also owe to Ferenc Hopp the purchase of more than a hundred antiquities. The exact list is hard to compile, as no inventory was ever drawn up following acquisition. It seems that almost all the items were acquired at the same time, during an 1897 trip through Sicily and Tunis (Carthage) which formed part of a longer journey round the eastern Mediterranean. *"Yesterday I was again in Carthage, and bought a great number of vases and lamps there in the museum. [...] Kindly forward them as a gift to the National Museum. [...] I had previously also bought similar vases in Taormina and Girgenti [Agrigento], which will also be of interest to the Museum."* This excerpt from a letter addressed to a Budapest colleague is the fullest account of the purchase. Most of the objects are indeed typical of the two areas indicated by Hopp. The various undecorated jugs, which date from Archaic to Hellenistic times, are characteristic representatives of the Phoenician (Punic) pottery of North Africa. Among the Sicilian pieces, noteworthy is a series of cups made in the second half of the 4th century BC in Agrigento (ancient Akragas). These cups, used as votive offerings, are decorated on the side with floral motifs. The bulk of the material is undecorated household pottery, but there are lamps, unguentaria of glass and clay, incense burners and sling stones as well. Figural vase painting is represented by a few Attic pieces; Roman pottery by two pieces of *terra sigillata*; and terracotta sculpture by the fragment of a female figure from Medma (Calabria). The objects do not constitute a coherent group of finds in the archaeological sense: the group was acquired through individual purchases arising during the trip (in Tunis, for example, duplicates in the Museum collection were offered for sale).



Ferenc Hopp never intended these objects for his own collection. In one of his letters he gave orders to ship the boxes containing the objects straight on to the National Museum without even opening them. Hopp, a lover of Oriental art, was indifferent to Greek and Roman antiquities. Even though the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries was one of the high points in the history of the international antiquities market, Hopp on his Italian trips bought himself modern imitations instead of

genuine ancient marbles. The person who bought antiquities in Sicily and Carthage was not the collector but the citizen. While the collector was not interested in ancient art, the citizen could not remain indifferent when the opportunity arose, and seized it in order to enlarge a public collection. What is more, he was working, as the passage above attests, more probably on his own initiative than on the Museum's behalf. He purchased a rich collection of objects — not very costly, but at his own expense — for donation to the Hungarian National Museum. It shows his modesty that he devoted only one sentence to the whole episode in his memoirs (*A Winter Journey Through the Countries Around the Mediterranean Sea*, 1898). The two main motives of donors, a desire for fame and the inspirational force of personal taste, are both absent in his case. These antiquities testify to an uncommonly selfless and modest patron of the arts. It was this very modesty, and the scanty information surviving about the purchase,



which until very recently prevented any effort to reconstruct the real scope of Hopp's acquisitions. Contrary to what we would expect today, the objects were deposited in the Ethnographic Collection of the National Museum (the forerunner of today's Museum of Ethnography) rather than its Archaeology Department. Under the terms of the 1934 Museums Act, which defined the scope of the various Hungarian national museum collections, the majority of the pieces were gradually transferred in the course of the twentieth century to the Museum of Fine Arts. This process concluded in 2009, when the Museum of Ethnography, with a generosity worthy of the donor, transferred a further 51 objects identifiable as having belonged to the Hopp collection. Today the collection is kept in the Collection of Classical Antiquities. The 1897 donation is significant neither for its outstanding monetary value, nor for its artistic quality, nor indeed for the fact that real, unique works of art, if they are to speak to us, must be surrounded by a mass of seemingly more insignificant pieces — the small and silent flotsam of everyday life. The purchase — as János Jankó, head of the Ethnographic Collection at the time, explained in his recommendation *"on the subject of ministerial appreciation for the gifts of F. Hopp" (1898)* — *"deserves special commendation because with it we have established a collection of artefacts presenting the cultural history of peoples who once lived outside the territory of Hungary, and which hitherto had no place in any Hungarian museum. . . ."* Hopp was the first to bring the material remains of ancient Sicily and Carthage to Hungary, and his collection has remained the country's largest group of antiquities from these places down to the present day. In an intellectual sense, the purchase was a precedent for today's Collection of Antiquities. Both were called into existence by the same need to present the cultures of the ancient Mediterranean world to the people of modern Hungary.

ÁRPÁD MIKLÓS NAGY

