

MOHOLY-NAGY UNIVERSITY OF ART AND DESIGN
Doctoral School PhD in Arts (Design Theory)
PhD Programme in Design Culture Studies

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

In the Light of Her Objects:
Éva Ambrus and the Alföld Porcelain Factory in Hódmezővásárhely

Author:
Piroska Novák

Supervisor:
Attila Horányi PhD, associate professor

Co-supervisor:
Gyula Ernyey DSc, professor emeritus

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*“It is therefore time to remember their names too,
for their tableware, glassware, and vases are steadfast companions in our daily rituals.”*

*(Mai magyar iparművészet: Kerámia, porcelán, üveg [Hungarian Applied Arts of Today:
Ceramics, Porcelain, Glass])*

ABSTRACT

My doctoral research explores the porcelain design work of Éva Ambrus between 1967 and 1984, specifically her connection to the Alföld Porcelain Factory in Hódmezővásárhely.

A graduate of the Hungarian College of Applied Arts in 1967, Ambrus is a pivotal figure in Hungarian ceramic design and her era. Two of her tableware sets, her Bella-207 and UNISSET-212, mass-produced under industrial conditions, dominated Hungary's dining landscape for decades. These sets were ubiquitous in homes, restaurants, and institutions, shaping the nation's culinary and cultural experiences. Remarkably, the UNISSET-212, introduced in 1977, remains in production and sale by the factory's French successor, Alföld Porcelán Edénygyár Zrt. (Alföld Porcelain Dishware Factory), due to enduring popularity. The UNISSET-212, produced almost continuously from 1977, dominated the catering tableware market before the regime change. Known as the "canteen set," it defined Hungarian object culture and shaped the catering experiences of generations for long decades. The set's pieces are ubiquitous in Hungarian memory and encountered by almost everyone, yet the name of their designer, similarly to many others, fades into oblivion, and it didn't get the spot it rightfully deserves in the history of Hungarian design.

Despite their prevalence, the designer's name, similarly to many of her peers, remains largely unrecognized, highlighting a gap in Hungarian design history. The 1960s and 1970s, particularly in terms of material culture, are understudied areas. The Alföld Porcelain Factory itself, a cutting-edge complex combining four silicate industries, is another underappreciated subject, like many other Hungarian factories and manufactories. Literature on Ambrus' design work is equally scarce.

My research aims to introduce Éva Ambrus, deceased in March 2023, to a broader audience, honouring her as a designer, artist, and individual. While historical in perspective, my focus is on Ambrus and her creations, drawing primarily from interviews, discussions, and her surviving works housed at the Museum of Applied Arts, Budapest. I seek to uncover and analyze the impact and cultural significance of her designer career.

THESES

1. The scientific study of the material heritage of socialist Hungary is still ongoing. This process is driven by a focused interest in the fine and applied arts of the 1950s, 1960s, and 1970s that has emerged in recent years among researchers, art institutions, and collectors. This attention also extends to artists, applied or autonomous objects, and consumer and utility goods that received comparatively little attention, publicity, and recognition during their time.

2. Industrial production between nationalization and regime change navigated contradictions between consumer needs, societal living standards, and political developments. The socialist industrial system necessitated a new approach to (industrial) design, which the Hungarian College of Applied Arts adapted to. Instead of individual, handcrafted objects by (applied) artists, the focus shifted to mass-producible designs for large-scale production by industrial designers.

3. Production in the centralized, nationalized factories was governed by quantitative quotas and constrained by production line capabilities. Industrial or overall design principles rarely influenced product aesthetics. Designers employed by factories often held positions on paper, with their ideas seldom reaching the prototype, pilot series, or commercially available product stages. Industrial designers were frequently subordinate to less qualified but higher-ranking engineers or foremen. These challenging conditions deterred many design graduates from pursuing factory employment.

4. Éva Ambrus' work at the Alföld Porcelain Factory in Hódmezővásárhely stands out in the silicate design of the period. Despite the challenges of factory-based design and the isolation of the rural location, two of her tableware sets (Bella-207, UNISSET-212) achieved mass production and reached millions of consumers.

5. Despite the economic and commercial success of Éva Ambrus's designs, recognition from the Alföld Porcelain Factory management, the press, and the design profession was limited during her lifetime, while contemporaries received much greater attention. However, the objects she designed have experienced a resurgence in interest, driven by cultural memory, which offers an opportunity to rightfully position both the designer and her work within the history of Hungarian design.

6. The (designed) objects themselves can be the subjects and sources of scientific research. By expanding the concept and methodology of object biography, a staple of new material culture studies, and integrating the museological practice of autopsy, fresh insights into (designed) objects can be unearthed. This approach converges

perspectives from classical art history, cultural anthropology, and material culture studies under the umbrella of design culture studies, emphasizing its post-disciplinary nature.