

EMBER/ÖLTŐ INTERWOVEN / GENERATION

2027

IX. NEMZETKÖZI
TEXTILMŰVÉSZETI
TRIENNÁLÉ

IX. INTERNATIONAL
TRIENNIAL OF
TEXTILE ARTS

IX. INTERNATIONAL TRIENNIAL OF TEXTILE ARTS

CALL FOR ENTRIES 2027

THEME · INTERWOVEN/GENERATION

Author: **Horányi Attila PhD** art historian and critic, MOME

EMBERÖLTÉS

*You spend forty years moving a porcelain clock and
garniture of two vases and a pair of candelabra.
You put this here and set off small chords, echoes and
repeats and caesuras.*

*It is what I do in my studio. I make my porcelain
vessels and I'm keeping a phrase from a poem or the
shape of a fragment of music in my hands and head.
Edmund de Waal: Letters to Camondo, XXII*

EMBERÖLTŐ.

In Hungarian, the compound word for generation/lifespan (emberöltő – its semantics will be explained in some detail later) is a curious one. It feels familiar at first sight, yet as I began to use it in recent months, it seemed to recede, losing contour, its meaning becoming less certain.

I am not alone in this. For over a century, scholars have debated exactly what Hungarian poet, writer, translator and journalist János Arany meant when he first introduced the word from his own regional dialect into literary Hungarian when writing the Prologue to his epic poem *Toldi*:

*"As on an autumn night a herdsman's fire / Across the sea-like prairie flashes higher,
/ So Nicholas Toldi to my gaze is cast / Out of his time, ten generations past."*

The question is whether the word in question refers to the span of an (average) human life, or rather to the length of a generation. Simply put, does it refer to sixty or twenty to twenty-five years? Or less simply put, does it define an individual in his/her wholeness, or in relation to others, to the shared traits of a given age group? And again simply put, should I be speaking of the human condition in this text or of generations X, Y and Z – perhaps even Alpha? Should I include, for instance, our relationship to the digital realm? Or adopting the spirit of the Textile Triennial, should I focus on how the decline of industry, and the devaluation – and then renewed appreciation – of craftsmanship impact the different generations? Should I weave in technological, economic or social threads?

The elements that make up the Hungarian word for lifespan – emberöltő – offer little guidance. The first half of the word 'ember' denotes an individual, any one of us, and also the human race of conscious beings that are neither angels, nor beasts. And as for the other half of the compound, 'öltő', there is a whole series of meanings: 'ölt' (to stitch), 'öltés' (a stitch) and 'öltő' (one who makes stitches). Whether that leaves me any clearer,

I cannot say.

So, as always in times like these, let us set out with what we have. First of all, let us savour the word a bit. Let's sense all that it conceals, what it compresses into itself.

No matter how long I savour it, its focus will remain the same: man.

"But what is a man?" I might ask, dramatically, but instead of providing a definition, I will provide examples to illustrate the different 'flavours' of this word.

Hungarian writer and poet Imre Madách wrote: "Why strove I greatness to achieve in Man. Who kneaded is of sunlight and of dust, / A dwarf in knowledge, and in blindness great." (The Tragedy of Man, Scene 15); poet Endre Ady said: "I am, like every human: Highness" (No heir, no happy ancestor...); and in another Hungarian poet Attila József's words: "I say that man is not grown-up yet / but, fancying he is, runs wild, / May his parents, love and / intellect watch over their unruly child." (Ars Poetica).

The Son of Man is the second person of the Trinity; there are those from whom "a man must be made"; and perhaps, at some point in our lives, all of us have been shouted at: "Man, what are you doing? Are you out of your mind?!" Some people are referred to as a "man" because they are not a woman; while some others because they are not a child; one may be a "man of words"; another "a good man" ("my good man), who may also be my man, if I'm his wife. There is the man who came from afar; and in the Hungarian version of the English proverb "birds of a feather flock together" sounds like this in Hungarian: you can tell a bird by its feathers, a man by his friends; and as we all know "Clothes do not make the man."

The Son of Man is the second person of the Trinity; there are those of whom it is said that "a man must be made"; and perhaps, at some point in our lives, all of us have been shouted at: "Man, what are you doing? Are you out of your mind?!" Some are called a man because they are not a woman, others because they are no longer a child. One may be a man of words; another a good man / my good man, who may also be my man if I am his wife. In Hungarian, the proverb "birds of a feather flock together" takes the form: You can tell a bird by its feathers, and a man by his friends. And, as we all know: Clothes do not make the man.

The stem of the second element of the compound noun 'emberöltő' is the verb 'ölt', which, according to the Hungarian dictionary, means <insert, thread through or stick a thin sharp object into something and typically move it in a different direction> or <make a stitch with thread threaded into a needle>. But there are many other, nuanced meanings too: "put one's arm into another's arm", "attach one object to a body part or tool by inserting, pushing or hooking it onto that part or tool", "slip a cloak onto one's arm", "thread straw onto a spit, fork, or sharp stick", "link one word to another", "stick out one's tongue at someone or something", "don a garment by slipping the arm into its sleeve", "put on a mask", "assume a certain face, image, colour" and "embody, assume a form."

Perhaps the essence of all this is the act of linking together different things, these things being linked, which creates a new situation, a new form, a new quality that others can also see. Like when we don a suit (ölt+öny), or simply get dressed (fel+ölt+özünk) or dress up (ki+ölt+özünk), putting on the appropriate attire for the soirée and 'become' ladies/gentlemen for that evening.

(Let us resist here the easy but etymologically unfounded resemblance between öltő (meaning the one who makes stitches) and ölt/öl (meaning killed/kill), though perhaps, somewhere deep down, irrationally, it may add to the complexity of the many 'flavours'. Let us not ask: Who kills whom? Bitterness kills the soul? The slow killing of poison? But let's leave the killing to others, even if a thin sharp object would make it easy.)

The peculiar twist of the Hungarian language is that in 'emberöltő' the first element donned the second: man donned stitching/linking/donning/embodying, suggesting a kind of reshaping of the image of man (seeing a man/person in his/her connections, not as isolated individuals), but also the revaluation of an individual's presence in his/her physical and/or sensual/aesthetic and/or cultural and/or social-economic experience of stitching/donning/dressing.

Our chosen theme tells us something about man/humanity and is a tool that facilitates our discourse about humanity. Since it belongs to the Textile Triennial, it invites us to speak about the human condition by engaging with textiles, and about textiles through engaging with people.

But what does it mean to speak about the human condition with textiles? Threads, weaving, materials, colours, patterns, shapes and seams, if any are placed in contexts – on the body, on the wall, on the table, in the pocket, in space, in a book. They cover, separate, bind, protect or reveal and mark. They seduce, challenge aesthetic norms, conceal or display. They clothe. And why is this a conversation at all? Perhaps it is not, at least not as spoken words are; yet, it is a form of speech: a confession about the human condition (la condition humaine) and about the unique life of the individual: about situations and absences, communities and connections, desire and fulfilment, everyday and festive days.

And what kind of confession is born within a person about textiles: about material, objects, processes and ideas? The technical or technological aspect is not 'born', because it is ready-made or perhaps developed by those who work in the field. What is born is sensations and their reflections – experiences conveyed through – at times faltering – metaphors: a scarf being worn (and giving a sense of safety / protection), the grin of a frill (a tiny gentle subversion within order, the immaculate whiteness of a dress (unstained by others/the world/sensuality), the cheerfulness of a tapestry (but how? for it is we who become cheerless, not the tapestry as it cannot feel), the way a fabric 'falls' (although it doesn't really fall anywhere) or its stiffness (though it never swallowed a stick). These brief, half-glimpsed 'stories', their words, similes and metaphors, the language at the service of expression, the richness of experiences and knowledge thus evoked all reveal that textile is interwoven into our culture.

In contrast, lacking some or all of the above could also speak of the absence of being interwoven. What, for instance, does/can an alpha- or even a z-generation member know of wall-hangings and fabric handkerchiefs, damask table cloths, overcoats, burlap and silk in today's world of 3D printing, globalised production, fast-fashion and commercialisation? And, of course, they don't/cannot know what they should: that the state of technology and economy in the early third millennium has shifted the focus and rendered the culture of stitched clothing and textiles obsolete. But even so, the depletion of resources and the emergence of the circular economy, our longing for what is lasting, reusable, crafted and authentic seek to recreate the need for the state of being interwoven.

But what does this textile discourse about humanity – and this human discourse about textiles – reveal about stitching/donning/dressing and the ones carrying out these? About being interwoven or its absence? About its possibility or our longing for it?

And what does it reveal about the human lifespan? The sixty or seventy years? The twenty or twenty-five? A single life? A generation?

It reveals so much – and that is precisely the challenge.

At the end of my tentatively unfolding and occasionally faltering exploration, I want to highlight the significance of connecting: partly in the spirit of belonging, which endows each individual with a new quality, and partly in the interest of interweaving generations (and cultures and knowledge). Our fragmentation and atomisation have grown so strong in our deeply felt individual freedoms that they have nearly crushed many of us, while generations have become helpless in the face of the conditions that thus emerged and were created.

Let us connect then and be interwoven!

This essay was commissioned by the Cultural Foundation for Textile Art.

All rights reserved © Attila Horányi PhD