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Hidden treasures rediscovered – the Bigot Pavilion in the collection of the Museum of Applied Arts Budapest

Hidden away for more than a century in the storage of the Museum of Applied Arts Budapest, the monumental ensemble of architectural ceramics known as the Bigot Pavilion can now be admired and studied for the first time since its glorious presentation at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900.¹ The exhibition “The Bigot Pavilion – *Art Nouveau* Architectural Ceramics from Paris” is on view from 26 April 2013 until 4 January 2015 (fig. 1).

The architectural ceramic sample pieces of the pavilion were produced by the Alexandre Bigot & Company Factory. The pavilion was acquired by the director of the Museum of Applied Arts Jenő Radisics (1856–1917) for 5.500 francs directly after the World’s Fair in October 1900.² In a letter to the Hungarian Minister of Religion and Education from the 25th of October 1900 Radisics wrote: “On the amount of credit at my disposal I have purchased 109 pieces for the museum. Special significance should be given to the monumental installation of Bigot, which was among the most well known and most artistic ceramic work of art at the Paris Exhibition, for which Bigot was given a Grand Prix and the Legion of Honour.”³



Fig. 1. View of the exhibition, The Bigot Pavilion – *Art Nouveau* Architectural Ceramics from Paris; Museum of Applied Arts Budapest © Gelért Áment

Alexandre Bigot (1862–1927) who was a trained physics and chemistry instructor developed an interest in ceramics when seeing an exhibition of Chinese and Far Eastern porcelain in Paris in 1889.⁴ Because of his knowledge in chemistry Bigot was able to experiment with different glazing techniques. In the years that followed he created glazes in a large variety of colors and finishes. In 1894 Bigot established a ceramic workshop in Mer, Loire-et-Cher, France. The factory produced earthenware fired at high temperatures known as *grès flamés*.⁵ This material was most suitable for the decoration and paneling of facades of modern ferro-concrete buildings. The ceramic decoration and construction elements were not only easy to produce and less expensive than stone-carved ornamentation but also resistant to frost, weather and air pollution. The surface of the ceramics was usually covered with special glazes in all shades of white, brown, rose, yellow, blue and green, including crystalline glazes, which often flowed down

¹ In 1901, 1975, and 1996 only a few objects of the pavilion were exhibited at the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts. In the inventory book of the museum the Bigot Pavilion was described in 1900 only as “Parts of a hall in 10 units” (No. 12072); a detailed description and a precise inventory is missing. In 1961, the unit was given a new inventory number. As late as in 1995, each object of the ensemble was accessioned. *Style 1900 – A Great Experiment of Modernism in the Applied Arts. An Exhibition from the Collection of the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts, I–II (Periods in European Decorative Arts)*, ed. by A. Szilágyi, É. Horányi, Budapest 1996, p. 93.

² In her recently published article Hilda Horváth gives a detailed report about the acquisition history of the Bigot Pavilion, analyzing historic documents and records. H. Horváth, *Le pavillon Bigot-Lavirotte. L’histoire de l’acquisition d’un objet d’art*, “Ars Decorativa” 2013, no. 29, p. 71–84.

³ *Style 1900...*, p. 93.

⁴ G. Dietrich, *Alexandre Bigot. Steinzeug in der Architekturdekoration*, “Keramos” 1982, no. 97, p. 6.

⁵ *Style 1900...*, p. 267.

on the surface of the plastic forms. Bigot also created special matte glazes using acids to corrode the surface. The glazed earthenware was only fired once, which kept the production costs low. Apart from architectural ceramic elements the Bigot manufactory also produced various dishes and vases. At its heyday, the Bigot factory had about 150 workers and operated ten industrial kilns (at around 1914).⁶

As the leading player in the field of architectural ceramics, Alexandre Bigot cooperated with the most renowned architects and sculptors of the time such as Jules Aimé Lavirotte (1864–1924), Paul Jouve (1878–1973) and Jean-Baptiste Larrive (1875–1928). Most of the objects presented in the Paris World's Fair sprang from cooperation with Lavirotte. A major part of the pieces of architectural ceramics were produced already in 1899. According to photos published in contemporary magazines, apparently the Bigot company introduced its products at the Paris International Exhibition in temporary suites and unites.⁷ The Bigot Pavilion was displayed on the Esplanade des Invalides in the 72nd section. Wall revetments, fireplace frames, columns with plastic decorations, brackets, friezes, tiles, busts, statuettes as well as decorative pots and dishes were arranged in a manner to merge interior and exterior spaces. An open hall with a small roof and a round arch, a staircase with balusters, and a wall with columns and a balcony were very lavishly adorned with tiles and elegant ornaments of various floral and figural shapes (fig. 2). Bigot's Pavilion represents the essence of his architectural ceramic program. It also shows his attempt to become an interior designer for the middleclass home. Extensive advertisement in the form of catalogs, leaflets and business cards – the latter decorated with images of Bigot's awards and medals – were set out to encourage potential customers, clients and architects to purchase Bigot's products. Several of the objects from the World Exhibition were also listed in the second edition of the Bigot catalog from 1902 and could be ordered from the company for the prices listed.

Bigot's oeuvre is characterized by a wide range of motifs. We can roughly distinguish four groups of motifs in the Bigot Pavilion: natural features, human features, geometric,



Fig. 2. Exhibition photograph, the Bigot Pavilion at the Paris Exposition Universelle, 1900, paper; INV FLT 5063, Museum of Applied Arts Budapest © Gellért Áment

stylized forms and curvilinear forms. In the pavilion the world of nature, especially the mystical aquatic realm, are key inspiration for Bigot. Fish, snails, frogs, water and marsh plants as well as entire underwater scenes appear on tiles, friezes and columns. The shapes of the human body had a notable impact on Bigot's work as well. Along with classical and sometimes erotic representations of the female body we can also find a seemingly modern depiction of the human body evoking speed, drive and strength: the cyclists (fig. 3). Stylized, geometric forms and patterns were used mostly in floor tiles, whereas curvilinear motifs, such as the whiplash motive, appear on friezes and railings. Noteworthy is also Bigot's interest in Japanese, Korean, Chinese and Far Eastern ceramics⁸ that is apparent not only in his glazing techniques – copper and iron glaze flammé originate from ancient Chinese glazing techniques – but also in the motifs used on his friezes. Simple friezes are constructed of separate tiles, each tiles decorated with an independent motive. Artists like Henry van de Velde (1863–1957), Pierre Roche (1855–1922) and Alexandre Bigot introduced tiles that showed only part of the motive. In that way the friezes not only had a specific direction evoking movement, also the illusion of the motive entering and leaving the frame was created. This motive evidently originates from Japanese art, where we can also come across this mode of representation⁹ (fig. 3).

⁶ In comparison to other industrial porcelain factories such as the "Porslínfabriker Roerstrand" in Lidköping (Sweden) or the Zsolnay porcelain manufactory (Hungary) that employed approximately 1000 workers at the turn of the 19th/20th century the Bigot factory was rather small. This implies that Bigot focused mainly on standardized products in order to ensure relative economic efficiency. G. Dietrich, op. cit., p. 16.

⁷ *Style 1900...*, p. 93.

⁸ Bigot was fascinated by the shades of red and celadon colors prominent in traditional Chinese pottery. These glazes are achieved by firing the copper- and iron-glazed pottery in a reducing atmosphere kiln. G. Dietrich, op. cit., p. 8.

⁹ *Ibidem*, p. 47–48.



Fig. 3. Pierre Roche, Bigot & Cie (Paris), frieze with cyclists, 1900, grès, 19.5 × 24 cm; INV 2013.63.1-9, Museum of Applied Arts Budapest © Gellért Áment

Bigot's installation of architectural sample pieces at the Paris World's Fair was a huge success. Although Bigot's ceramics were made in various historical styles – very prominent is the style of *Art Nouveau* – he never really limited himself to one particular style.¹⁰ For him the challenge was the material and the glazes. The magic of his ceramic objects evidently lies in the rich, colorful, sometimes mottled glazes which cover the exotic and aesthetically ambitious shapes. A truly fascinating ceramic ensemble is the Bigot animal frieze (fig. 4). The dark blue panels – executed after a design by Paul Jouve – were not only used for the pavilion, the Babylonian inspired tiles depicting a tiger, a bear, a lion, a bull, and a mountain sheep are also decorating the Triumphal Gateway of the Place de la Concord. The French architect René Binet (1866–1911) designed the entrance for the Paris Exposition modeled after an illustration of a microscopic sea fauna. The structure as a whole was adorned with Byzantine motifs and Middle Eastern inspired ceramic ornamentation. The Bigot animal frieze decorating the base of the monumental entrance pavilion was awarded a Grand Prix.

Similar pieces of architectural ceramics displayed at the exhibition in Budapest can be found even today on facades of apartment buildings in Paris. The building on the 29 Avenue Rapp in the 7th arrondissement – built between 1900 and 1901 – is again a joint collaboration of Bigot and Lavirotte. The facade is adorned with glazed earthenware showing rich and exotic forms. On the 5th and 6th floor one can discover ceramic elements which were also shown in the Bigot Pavilion in 1900 such as the balcony railings, columns, arches, and statuettes. Equally captivating is the façade of the building in 3 square Rapp by Bigot and Lavirotte (fig. 5). The balcony over the entrance door as well as the columns with plastic



Fig. 4. Paul Jouve, Bigot & Cie (Paris), animal frieze with lion, 1900, grès, 48.8 × 105.6 cm; INV 2013.61.3, Museum of Applied Arts Budapest © Gellért Áment



Fig. 5. Architectural photograph, detail of the entrance doorway, 3 square Rapp, Paris (Jules Aimé Lavirotte, Alexandre Bigot, 1899); CC BY-SA 3.0 Wikimedia, available online: http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/2/29/Immeuble_3_square_Rapp_Paris_7e_-_Entr%C3%A9e.jpg, accessed 4 September 2014

decoration and the window lintels are similar to the ones acquired by Jenő Radisics at the Paris Exposition.

A question left open to speculation is why among all the exhibits at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 the director of the Museum of Applied Arts decided to purchase the Bigot Pavilion.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 14.

Before becoming the director of the Museum of Applied Arts 1896 – the year of the opening of the new museum building – Radisics had already established international relations with art dealers and specialists in France and Britain. One of them is Louis Delamarre-Didot (date of birth and death unknown), a member of the Board of the Union Centrale des Arts Décoratifs and close friend of Radisics. Delamarre-Didot became the Museum's official agent in France, supplying the museum with exquisite work of art.¹¹ The Museum's initial aim was to create an art collection that would promote the development of Hungarian craft industries and raise the standard of public taste.¹² Numerous national and international exhibitions and fairs at the end of the 19th century provided for the opportunity to acquire historic artifacts as well as objects of the latest artistic taste. Radisics's deep understanding for new developments in modern art and his interest in the *Art Nouveau* movement elevated the contemporary collection of the Museum of Applied Arts to one of the finest of its time. The monumental ensemble of architectural ceramics by the Bigot company was meant to further enrich the collection. Already in 1898 the Museum was able to purchase a Bigot object, a bun-shaped vase covered with thick matte, coulee glaze (fig. 6). The irregular surface is enriched with dark, nut, and rust-brown stains. This was probably the first time that museum specialists in Hungary gained notion of Bigot's technical innovations in the field of earthenware production. Not only the very unique glazing techniques, the extreme variety of forms and colors of Bigot products but also the fact that the ceramic objects were created for the decoration and paneling of facades likewise is what might have caught Radisics's immediate interest. Using ceramics not only as decoration but also as construction elements in modern ferro-concrete buildings was a novelty at the time. When architectural ceramics were introduced at the Universal Exhibition of 1889 the call for such work quickly expanded.¹³ In cities such as Paris the facades of buildings had to express the social status, wealth and taste level of their owners. Colorful glazed earthenware could meet these demands. In Paris facades became *objets d'art* in the truest sense. It was a Hungarian manufactory of stoneware, ceramics and tiles that could keep pace with the Bigot company.



Fig. 6. Alexandre Bigot, ornamental vessel, 1896, clay, 15.4 × 14 cm (base diameter); INV 5419, Museum of Applied Arts Budapest © Gellért Áment

The Zsolnay porcelain manufactory¹⁴ situated in Pécs, Hungary began experimenting with frost-resistant terracotta for architectural purpose as early as in the 1860s.¹⁵ Ornamental architectural terracotta elements in various shapes and forms were at first produced by the factory for local needs only. In the 1880s the factory improved the quality of its construction material – they called the new frost and acid resistant material fired at a very high temperatures Pyrogranite – in such a manner that they could meet the demands of first class Hungarian architects such as Ödön Lechner (1845–1914) and Imre Steindl (1839–1902).¹⁶ The Museum of Applied Arts in Budapest built in 1896 by Ödön Lechner was intended to be a prime example of the modern Hungarian architectural style (fig. 7). The building's entire facade as well as the tiling on the roof came from the Zsolnay factory, since their products were technically and aesthetically of the finest quality. Products by the Zsolnay factory won world wide recognition at world's fairs and international exhibitions. At the 1878 World Fair in Paris Zsolnay even received a Grand Prix.¹⁷ Perhaps it was Radisics's intention to showcase the striking similarities between the

¹⁴ The Zsolnay porcelain manufactory (Zsolnay Porcelánmanufaktúra Zrt) was established in 1853 by Miklós Zsolnay (1800–1880) in Pécs, Hungary. The factory received worldwide recognition for its eosin glazes and pyrogranite ceramics in world expositions and fairs. S. Weber Soros, *Foreword*, [in:] *Hungarian Ceramics from the Zsolnay Manufactory. 1853–2001*, ed. by É. Csenkey, Á. Steinert, New Haven 2002, p. 9–10.

¹⁵ Z. Mendöl, *Zsolnay Ceramics in the Service of Architecture*, [in:] *Hungarian Ceramics...*, p. 169–180.

¹⁶ É. Csenkey, *A Brief History of the Zsolnay Factory*, [in:] *Hungarian Ceramics...*, p. 18–20.

¹⁷ É. Hárs, *Zsolnay in the World Market Expanding Exhibitions and Export Activities*, [in:] *Hungarian Ceramics...*, p. 55–67.

¹¹ H. Horváth, *Jenő Radisics and the Art Nouveau Collection of the Budapest Museum of Applied Arts*, [in:] *Style 1900...*, p. 10–11; eadem, *Le pavillon Bigot-Lavirotte...*, p. 71–84.

¹² Eadem, *Jenő Radisics...*, p. 10.

¹³ G. Dietrich, op. cit., p. 33.

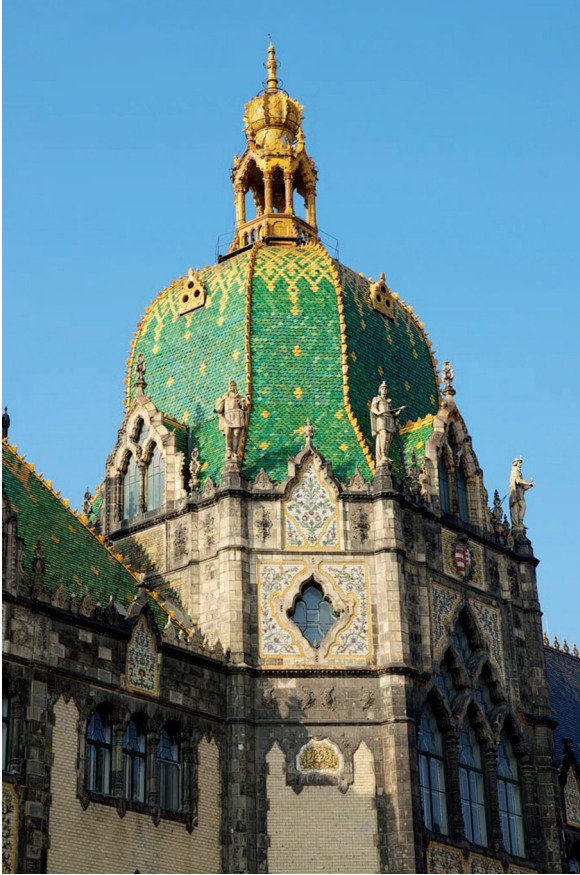


Fig. 7. Architectural photograph, Museum of Applied Arts, main dome; INV VLT 38.3.1, Museum of Applied Arts Budapest © Gellért Áment

successful interconnection of architecture and applied arts (i.e. ceramics) in France and Hungary. Groundbreaking innovations in the field of ceramic production put forth new construction materials and thus triggered novel aesthetics in architectural expression. The cooperation of Bigot and Lavirotte, Zsolnay and Lechner during the *Art Nouveau* period led to the creation of unique total works of art.

Thanks to the dedicated work of the employees of the Museum of Applied Arts the objects from the Bigot Pavilion are restored in their former glory and presented in a temporary exhibition. The EU co-financed Partage Plus project provided for the opportunity to also digitize and research this monumental architectural ensemble. The objects from the Bigot Pavilion were published for the first time online via Europeana.eu and in the online collection database of the Museum of Applied Arts. Moreover, a 3D virtual tour of the Bigot exhibition was created, which allows users from all over the world to enjoy the installation of Bigot ceramics.