

The Outstanding Life of an Outstanding Artist

The Art of the Calligrapher George Bocskay. By Borbála Gulyás. Budapest: Research Centre for the Humanities, Institute of Art History, 2023. 408 pp.

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The revised English edition of Borbála Gulyás's 2020 *Bocskay György kalligráfus művészete*, which derived from her PhD thesis defended in 2013, was published in 2023.¹

The monograph introduces the lifework of George Bocskay, who was the sole calligrapher of Hungarian descent recognized for his contribution in calligraphy at the Habsburg court in Vienna. After giving a historiographic survey, Gulyás delves into the history of George Bocskay's family.² Born into the Slavonian side of the family, also known as the 'Raszinyai branch,' he was the second cousin of Stephen Bocskay, the later prince of Transylvania, who belonged to the 'Kismarja branch.' The family had owned estates in the southern region of the Kingdom of Hungary since the fifteenth century. Concerning Bocskay's family, in this richly illustrated chapter we see the letters patent in part (p. 28) and in full (p. 34), along with its verbatim Latin text (pp. 32–34), issued to Bocskay and his siblings, which is addressed in a separate subchapter, indicating the thorough scholarly research conducted by the author. The following subchapter presents Bocskay's immediate family, his wife and his children, while the subsequent one exhibits the calligrapher's last will and testament. The recently discovered testament is crucial due to its reference to Bocskay's calligraphic activity, because in it he bequeathed his related books and tools to his sons. The verbatim Latin text of his will is also displayed (pp. 38–41).

The second chapter follows Bocskay's administrative career from the inception to the conclusion of his thirty-year tenure at the Habsburg court in Vienna. He embarked on his journey as a scribe (*notarius*) at the Hungarian Court Chancellery, later served

1 Gulyás, *Bocskay György kalligráfus művészete*.

2 For the author's other works on the topic, see: Gulyás, "Festivities Celebrating the Coronations," 77–95; Gulyás, "The Second Letters Patent," 37–50; Gulyás, "Triumphal Arches in Court Festivals," 54–82.

as a Hungarian Royal Court Secretary *secretarius*, and ultimately attained the position of Royal Councilor *secretarius et consiliarius*. The development of Bocskay's administrative career was significantly influenced by his connections to certain members of the Hungarian nobility. His first patron was Miklós Oláh, through whom he was admitted to the Hungarian Court Chancellery. Apart from Oláh, the Batthyány and Nádasdy families were crucial, as Bocskay was in patron-client relationship with them. This relationship is the focal point of the last subchapter of the second chapter. In this section, the Nádasdys are emphasized with good reason, as this was the family that maintained the closest relation with Bocskay. Their strong relationship is proved by his involvement in preparing the inscriptions on the sepulchral monuments of Tamás Nádasdy and his wife, Orsolya Kanizsary.

The third and, at the same time, largest chapter, divided into five subchapters, covers Bocskay's art. The first subchapter focuses on the art of calligraphy or, more precisely, on the process of its gaining autonomy and becoming a 'distinct art form' in the sixteenth century. The recognition of calligraphy as an art form first emerged in Italy, but by the end of the sixteenth century took root in other parts of Europe, including England and the Netherlands. This shift was especially notable after the organization of the *Prix de la Plume Couronnée* calligraphy competition in Rotterdam in 1589. The chapter offers a thorough description of Bocskay's contemporaries and the artistic influences he had experienced, which not only shaped his own art but also defined his position among his peers. The role of the Flemish illustrator and painter Joris Hoefnagel is vital in this context, as his illuminations repeatedly feature in Bocskay's own work. Among these, his epigram seems to stand out: it is depicted in the chapter (p. 73) where Hoefnagel identifies himself and Bocskay with Zeuxis, one of the greatest painters of antiquity. This subchapter is also illustrated lavishly, guiding the reader through the influences that Bocskay was exposed to and the path leading to the development of his calligraphy. The following subchapter focuses on Bocskay's calligraphic work. Gulyás shows us the way Bocskay utilized printed manuals by Italian and German masters, remaining faithful to tradition while producing unique works of the highest quality. Bocskay was proficient in both the Gothic script and the humanist hand, a versatility that was uncommon among his contemporaries. Not only did he merely imitate the prominent personages of his field but also transformed and varied the letter types of printed manuals. In addition, he adorned his works with distinctive decorative elements that distinguished him from his contemporaries. The third subchapter explores the writing model books Bocskay compiled for Emperors Ferdinand I and Maximilian II, visualizing not only their interior contents but their exterior designs (pp. 158–59). The fourth subchapter delves into the charters and letters patents Bocskay designed for some members of the Hungarian nobility, which have been largely ignored by historical research.

Similarly, this subchapter also highlights the exceptional nature of Bocskay's calligraphic art and his utilization of various stylistic variations. His single-folio letters patents can be divided into two groups: the *Neudörffer* and the *Amphiareo* groups. Within the latter, there are two additional subgroups, the combinations of Gothic and Antiqua typefaces, which this subchapter thoroughly examines. This analysis is again supplemented with visuals. The final subchapter examines Bocskay's inscriptions on sepulchral monuments, among which that of Maximilian I is one of the most significant. We read extensively about the circumstances of how this inscription was produced. The details, their visualization, and the Latin transcription offer an insight into the meticulous study conducted by the Gulyás (pp. 210–11). The inscriptions were designed in *all'antica* style. This can explain why Bocskay imitated ancient epigraphic works in his manuscript dedicated to Ferdinand I in 1562, which might have been the reason behind Bocskay accepting the commission. In this subchapter, the author describes the Nádasdy family crypt in Léka (Lockenhaus in present-day Austria) and the inscriptions made by Bocskay, for which the Latin transcription, along with the illustrations are also provided (pp. 244–45).

In conclusion, *The Art of the Calligrapher George Bocskay* is a pioneering work. Previously, no comprehensive study had been conducted on the activities, administrative career, and calligraphic endeavors of George Bocskay, despite the significance of his persona as the sole artist of Hungarian descent acknowledged for his contributions to calligraphy. The monograph is excellently structured; the first of the three main chapters presents the life and activities of the calligrapher in the context of Bocskay's family, the second chapter deals with Bocskay's administrative career, and finally we are introduced to Bocskay's outstanding art. The book highlights Bocskay's artistic and technical prominence, illustrating how he shaped his own style while adhering to contemporary calligraphic traditions. Beyond these, what makes the book impressive is that the chapters are richly illustrated. In addition, numerous illustrations come with Latin transcriptions, thereby fully visualizing the abundant source material. The analysis introduces Bocskay the calligrapher; as Borbála Gulyás wrote: "Bocskay was unequivocal in identifying himself as a calligrapher, a scholarly artist who hoped his fame would live on eternally" (p. 83). This monograph greatly contributes to fulfilling his aspirations, as it not only acquainted us with the calligrapher Bocskay, but also helped ensure that his fame would indeed 'live on eternally.'

Literature

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