

# PREFACE

The late 1980s marked a significant turning point in the venerable discipline of art history, mirroring broader upheavals across the humanities. This period witnessed the rise and heyday of post-structuralism, which challenged foundational methodologies and interpretive frameworks. Three seminal works—W. J. T. Mitchell's *Iconology* (1986), David Freedberg's *The Power of Images* (1989), and Donald Preziosi's *Rethinking Art History: Meditations on a Coy Science* (1989)—served as cornerstones in this transformation. Together, they critically interrogated traditional art historical approaches, particularly those focused on the search for meaning. Established figures such as Ernst Gombrich and, especially, Erwin Panofsky came under intense scrutiny and criticism, and the methods of iconography and iconology were widely declared outdated.

It was during this intellectually turbulent time that a group of scholars at the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences of the University of Szeged began to revisit those very subdisciplines. What prompted this seemingly untimely return? Until the late 1970s, Hungarian research in cultural history operated under the strictures of an ideologically driven socialist cultural policy, mandating adherence to a rigid form of Marxist interpretation. One of the three editors of this volume, György E. Szőnyi, belonged to a generation that sought to escape these constraints in search of more nuanced, ostensibly objective theoretical frameworks—ones that could simultaneously avoid censorship and open new interpretive vistas for understanding cultural representations across diverse media.

The methodologies of the Warburg School, together with emblem studies, offered a compelling alternative. These approaches were adapted to analyze both literary and visual representations and eventually coalesced into what became known as the “Szeged School of Cultural Iconology.” Founding members Professors Tibor Fabiny, József Pál, and György Szőnyi were soon joined by a new generation of enthusiastic students, among them Attila Kiss (now Professor and Head of the English Department), who also serves as a co-editor of this volume. This younger cohort integrated insights from emerging fields such as New Historicism, semiotics, visual culture, and gender studies.

This evolving body of research was institutionalized in the *Research Centre for Cultural Iconology and Semiography* at the English Department of the University of Szeged. In 1993, the Centre hosted its first international conference, *European Iconology, East and West*, which aimed to foster dialogue between scholars from the West and those from the recently liberated post-socialist bloc. The conference proved a success and established a tradition of quinquennial gatherings, culminating in a 30th anniversary event in 2023. Selected papers from these conferences have been published by JATEPress, the University's publishing house, as well as by other respected academic publishers.<sup>1</sup>

Due to institutional restructuring, the 2013 conference papers could not be published in Szeged, despite the scope and ambition of that year's "conference on the move," which spanned the University of Rijeka (Croatia), Central European University (Budapest), and the University of Szeged. However, papers from the Rijeka session were published in *IKON*, a journal hosted by Rijeka and published by Brepols. This collaboration laid the groundwork for the launch of a new book series, *IKON Studies*, which will include selected papers from the most recent Szeged conference, *The Iconology of Theatrum Mundi*.

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1 Including the following titles: Tibor Fabiny (ed.), *Shakespeare and the Emblem* (Szeged: JATE, 1984, Papers in English and American Studies [PEAS] 3); Attila Kiss, *The Semiotics of Revenge. Subjectivity and Abjection in English Renaissance Tragedy* (Szeged: JATEPress, 1995, PEAS 5); György E. Szőnyi and Rowland Wymer (eds.), *The Iconography of Power: Ideas and Images of Rulership on the English Renaissance Stage* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2000, PEAS 8); György E. Szőnyi, *John Dee's Occultism. Magical Exaltatio Through Powerful Signs* (Albany, NY: SUNY Press, 2004); György E. Szőnyi, *Pictura & scriptura. Hagyományalapú kulturális reprezentációk huszadik századi elméletei* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2004, Ikonológia és műértelmezés 10); Anna Kérchy, *Body Texts in the Novels of Angela Carter: Writing from a Corporeographic Point of View* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2008); Attila Kiss, *Double Anatomy in Early Modern and Postmodern Drama* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2010, PEAS 20); Ágnes Matuska, *The Vice-Device. Iago and Lear's fool as agents of representational crisis* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2011, PEAS 19); Attila Kiss, *Contrasting the Early Modern and the Postmodern Semiotics* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 2011); Anna Kérchy, *Alice in Transmedia Wonderland: Curiouser and Curiouser New Forms of a Children's Classic* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016); Anna Kérchy, *A nő nyelvet ölt. Feminista narratológiai, esztétikai, testelméleti tanulmányok* (Szeged: JATEPress, 2018, Ikonológia és Műértelmezés 14.); Anna Kérchy, Björn Sundmark (ed.), *Translating and Transmediating Children's Literature* (London: Springer, 2020); Anna Kérchy, *A viktoriánus nonszensz poétikája és politikája, Metamedialis játék Lewis Carroll fantáziavilágában* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 2024); Attila Kiss, *Kettős anatómia Shakespeare színpadán: Angol reneszánsz tragédiák a kora újkorban és ma* (Szeged: Szeged Humanities Press, 2024); György E. Szőnyi, *The Mediality of Culture: The Emblematic Way of Seeing and Thinking* (Thurnout: Brepols, 2025, forthcoming).

Despite proclamations of the “death of iconology,” the field remains vibrant. Research centers across Europe—in Glasgow, Leiden, Rijeka, and Szeged, to name a few—continue to thrive, and specialized journals provide forums for disseminating new scholarship.

By the 1990s, a third generation of scholars had joined the “Szeged School,” including Professor Anna Kérchy, the third editor of this volume and Director of our doctoral program in *Literatures and Cultures in English*. Today, many of our doctoral students choose to explore topics in literary and cultural iconology as well as visual studies.

While some of our publications are now issued under the auspices of Brepols Publishers, we are especially pleased to present this volume through the newly founded Szeged University Press. *Iconicity, History, and the Cultural Imaginaries of Body and Soul* comprises a wide array of topics; yet, all contributions share a commitment to investigating the practices of cultural symbolization. The volume includes revised and expanded versions of selected papers from the 2013 conference, alongside newly commissioned essays. It is organized into three thematic sections: “From Theory to Practice,” “The Iconology of Body and Soul,” and “Reimagining the Corporeal and the Spiritual.”

The twenty-one contributing authors represent a diverse international community of scholars from the United States (including W.J.T. Mitchell, a keynote speaker at the penultimate conference), Canada (notably David Graham, a constant participant since 1993 who has missed only one conference), as well as Bosnia, the Czech Republic, the United Kingdom, Germany, Hungary, Italy, Romania, Slovakia, and Spain.

We hope this rich and varied collection—also available in open access digital format—will serve as a valuable resource and source of inspiration for scholars and students worldwide, whether they are practitioners of classical iconological methods or pioneers seeking to rethink and revitalize the field’s enduring legacy.

Anna Kérchy, Attila Kiss, and György E. Szőnyi