

GÁBOR KARÁTSON

biography of the artist and writer

I was born in Budapest on 21 May 1935. My father, Dr László Karátson, was a lawyer, and my maternal grandfather, Viktor Olgyai, was a graphic artist and painter, the founder of the Graphics Reproduction Department at the Budapest College of Fine Arts, and the mentor of some renowned Hungarian graphic artists. I don't remember going through a "drawing phase" as a child (although this means nothing: my childhood was essentially obliterated by my mother's death, falling bombs, and flight. As an adult, I would show far greater interest in the drawings chalked on the street by children in the 1970s, relics of a lost Atlantis submerged by the power of television: I published much of my collection in my 1997 book *Az együgyű Isten* [The simple god]). I must have been about seven when I was introduced to a newly published collection of etchings by Rembrandt, which made a huge impression on me. In fact, I produced my own "Rembrandt collection". At the age of 10, while sheltering in the basement during the siege, I even produced "Japanese woodcuts", based on memories of my grandfather's Japanese woodcut collection. These have all disappeared, although the watercolours I happily painted on the shore of Lake Lucerne in Switzerland at the age of 12, inspired by the mountains and the lake, survive to this day.

In that charmed and peaceful world, safe from the hell of war, I was fortunate to encounter the works of Leonardo da Vinci, Albert Dürer, and Konrad Witz in the museums and touring exhibitions. Strangely, the Chinese characters that would later come to mean so much to me are already apparent in the skies of these Swiss landscapes: I had carried with me from Budapest to Switzerland a 10-year-old's burgeoning love of Lao Tzu and Confucius.

So it would have been quite natural for me to want to be a painter, had not my boundless yearning for freedom and my multifarious interests prevented me from "wanting to be" anything at all.

As it was, it took time and many decades of work for it to become clear, to me at least, that painting, poetry, writing, and the translation of Chinese philosophy are all the same field of work in my case — that they are one and the same workpiece.

I find it rather amusing that while the avant-garde and postmodernism never tire of talking about the breaking down of genre constraints and boundaries, they fail to interpret the phenomenon when it actually happens. But one should not expect too much: understanding of this kind would require in-depth research.

As I say, things did not go so smoothly, even if, with hindsight, I can see in them the fulfilment of some kind of plan for my life. In my final years at secondary school, I was all set for a career as a poet (writer); even so, I initially applied, unsuccessfully, to study architecture, and then applied to the Faculty of Humanities to study Hungarian and German. I was offered a place, but because of the "redirecting" typical of that period I eventually ended up studying law. I continued to experiment with poetry, being determined never to become a lawyer. It all went more easily than I could have imagined. As a participant in the 1956 uprising, I was sentenced initially to three years in prison, later commuted to one and a half, and was barred from every university and college in the country. I was convinced that from then on, the Hungarian language was fit only for telling lies, which I had no wish to do;

this may have contributed to the revival of my interest in painting, the “silent language” of Leonardo, on my release from prison. Of course, as I realised later, there was an even deeper significance that went beyond mere danger and that was also linked to my later interest in ecology: painting is able to express thoughts long excluded from the official, technical language of the world, and in some sense can therefore be seen as the complement to poetry.

I came into contact with a circle of friends, the most important among them from my point of view being Ilona Keserű, János Major, and Dóra Maurer; I learned an enormous amount from all three of them. I sketched studies and began to paint almost immediately. My early oil paintings were also studies of a kind, of course — landscapes, portraits, animals, trees, stones — which, for me, were never distinct from the interpretation of existence, or being. Initially, I supported myself as a physical labourer before working as a theatre extra and as a proofreader in Hungarian, German, and English. In 1963, I married Szilvia Granasztói, a puppeteer and art teacher, the daughter of the architect Pál Granasztói. We have two children, Dávid (b. 1964) and János (b. 1966), both of whom are now university teachers. In 1964, I joined the staff of Corvina Printing House, working part-time for many years, which brought in a sufficient income to support my family, albeit modestly, and which also left me time to paint.

Having become acquainted with Endre Bálint, and, through him, with the work of Lajos Vajda, my ideas were channelled in a new direction. Between 1964 and 1967, I produced what might be called abstract paintings, some of them large-scale works (*The Country*, 1965; *How the rain falls*, 1966), in which I approached the question of painterly form from a new angle. (Ever since, my painting technique has comprised the use of canvas stuck on wood, tempera, and oils.) Of course, if one examines my influences, all sorts of other things were present from the outset: the concepts of Paul Klee, Rudolf Steiner, Paracelsus, and Jacob Böhme in relation to form, all of whose writings I studied intensively, and most of all my unwavering fascination with nature, which very quickly drew me away from the clearly defined sphere of the Vajda School (even though, to this day, I am full of respect for the greatness of Vajda’s intellect and have discussed his art in several of my studies and books: *Hármaskép* [Triptych], 1975, etc.). Following my large-scale biblical paintings (*Scene with Sun, Moon, and Stars*, 1968, Hungarian National Gallery; *Jesus at the age of 12 among the Doctors in the Temple*, 1969) and historical paintings (*The Battle of Mohi*, 1971–1975); and after an existential and artistic crisis brought about by a realisation of the global environmental situation, I began to produce my press-inspired paintings (*Recovering the body*, 1974), a series that I continued until 1996. These pictures were always inspired by a single, possibly even poor-quality, press photograph, although the exercise had nothing at all to do with photographic naturalism: I chose egg tempera and oils, media ideally suited to this purpose, and by layers of overpainting, interpreting, and repainting, my aim, to use the Buddhist concept, was to “achieve a worthy image”, as if translating into the abstract language of cosmic processes the excessive passion of our human concerns. From the initial, more or less realist depictions (*Pintér celebrates his goal with Fazekas*, 1978–1979; *Out of play. Injured Dutch player*, 1979), I thus returned to the “almost abstract” concept of the painted image between 1992 and 1996 (*Against the putschists*; *C’est véritablement un athlète complet*). These paintings were not in fact abstract, any more than the old ones had been. Apart from the fact that the concept of abstract painting is itself a snare, a road leading nowhere — either contradiction or tautology — the question did not even concern me: it was always the body that interested me, its circumscribability, its translation into

space, which is naturally to be understood together with its meaning. Perhaps this explains why, for me, the theme apparently reached completion with the last two works in the series, which I believe were also its zenith — or rather the path continued elsewhere, with biblical watercolours, which I had begun painting back in 1992, of course.

In terms of their subject matter, they represent another form of the epic authenticity I had discovered earlier in press photographs, and which was apparently indispensable for me. I had already worked on a cycle of this kind in 1979, in the Faust watercolours that were published in book form in two volumes in 1980; compared to them, however, the biblical watercolours were something entirely different in almost every respect. They have little in common with traditional iconography, or with the interpretation of certain scenes sanctified by the centuries, partly because they were the outcome of my own struggle to understand the Bible; on the other hand, however, and more importantly from my point of view, it was once again entirely a question of three-dimensionality and transformation into space.

Although not entirely as one might imagine. Three-dimensionality, as opposed, for example, to the dream-like quality of the Chinese landscape paintings that I hold in infinitely high regard, is almost the essence of European painting, resulting from the complex interconnections partly arising from the Bible. In this way, for me, the work I produced in the biblical watercolours, at the extraordinarily imperilled point at which we find ourselves in the continuity of past, present, and future, represents at the same time and in the same way a quest for the life-giving power of European history and painting. Nevertheless, in terms of my own watercolours — to make things even more complicated — after completing an individual picture or an entire series I would become aware that their construction — primarily that of individual paintings, in themselves, although in a certain sense that of the series, too, in their interrelationships with one another — was akin to the construction of archaic Chinese characters. Not the “modern” characters with which we are familiar nowadays, but their archaic forms, as found on ancient oracle bones, which are, in reality, tiny images; and this kinship is only present in an entirely figurative sense. Not as in the paintings of Paul Klee, where the similarity is so striking that one might even consider it deliberate (which is not, of course, very likely, although it still has a great deal to say about the connection points between such disparate eras). For my part, it would anyway seem interesting from the point of view of my professional biography that, after long alienation from Klee, the mentor of my youth, I returned, if not stylistically but in an essentially relevant way (how to visualise thoughts in images) to a domain that neighboured his own. My literary activities are also demonstrably connected with my work as a painter in this respect. I spent 10 years working on my translation of the *I Ching* (the Book of Changes); for the footnotes, I copied out hundreds of the archaic Chinese characters referred to above, from a variety of sources. For me, my work as a translator was exclusively a poetic and philological activity, nothing else; it never occurred to me that anyone would wish to produce illustrations of any kind for the book, which, in many respects, is the Chinese equivalent of the Bible. The images are already present in the characters of the *I Ching*, in their archaic forms. This is not the case in the Bible, where the painting of watercolours, for me at least, creates an opportunity for a deeper exegesis, something that is not in fact present in the text.

All this speaks volumes about the interdependencies between the fine arts and Western religion, far beyond the scope of my own work as a painter. Thus, almost independently of my own original intentions, these biblical watercolours can also be regarded as a series of studies on the relationship between text and image.

From 1992 until 2003, I taught Chinese philosophy and its Western parallels at both the University of Pécs and the Eötvös Loránd University in Budapest, and I continue to teach this subject today at the University of Fine Arts in Budapest.

I am a member of the Association of Hungarian Fine Artists and the Szinyei Society, and was president of the Society of Hungarian Painters between 1994 and 2002. I was awarded the 1956 Commemorative Medal, the Nagy Imre Memorial Plaque, and the Order of Merit of the Republic of Hungary, Commander's Cross (1995); in 2003, I received the Munkácsy Mihály Prize and the József Attila Prize, and in 2005 I was awarded the Kossuth Prize.