



VAJDA

AND POSTMODERNITY

VAJDA

AND POSTMODERNITY

TABLE OF CONTENTS

CURATORIAL INTRODUCTION	6
LAJOS VAJDA'S ART BETWEEN 1924 AND 1935	10
THE BEGINNINGS (1924-1930)	12
THE PARIS YEARS (1930-1933)	20
THE SZENTENDRE EXPERIMENT (1934-1935)	24
LAJOS VAJDA'S ART BETWEEN 1936 AND 1941	32
TRANSPARENT MONTAGE (1936-1937)	34
FROM ICONS TO MASKS TO CREATURES (1937-1938)	48
THE LAST CHARCOAL DRAWINGS (1939-1940)	56
VAJDA AND POSTMODERNITY	62
EL KAZOVSZKIJ	66
ZSÓFIA SZEMZŐ	70
ÁKOS BIRKÁS	74
PÉTER KOVÁCS	78

CURATORIAL INTRODUCTION

Reopened in April 2023, the Vajda Museum took on the mission of exploring the various periods in the life's work of Lajos Vajda (1908–1941), one of the most significant creators of 20th century Hungarian art, as well as its ideological and historical context and its connections to contemporaneous trends in art, through exhibitions that are updated annually and provide for the presentation of the latest research results. Each of the three displays to date offered a new perspective on the oeuvre, introducing formerly unknown works and ones held in foreign collections and out of public view; revealing the history of Haluskai's farm; and demonstrating, on the basis of extensive research, how individual works by Vajda are related to iconic, archaic details of Szentendre's townscape, its built heritage and the layers of its local history. We also attempted to outline the subsequent history of the motif of the dummy, which was introduced by Vajda, showing its emblematic role in the art of Szentendre after 1968, as well as Vajda's wide-ranging influence on his contemporaries and the artists of the European School.

Vajda and Postmodernity, the last exhibition of the series, adopts a wider perspective to examine the persistence of Lajos Vajda's spirit in the art of the late 20th and early 21st centuries. Through the (neo-)avant-garde, postmodern and contemporary praxes of four artists, we illustrate how autonomous, distinctly different artistic positions can all have Vajda's complex and synthesizing way of thinking as their source.

As before, a selection from Lajos Vajda's major artistic periods forms the backbone of the exhibition, but at the same time, we are again able to present a sensational new work. A montage from his French period surfaced recently, with a subject matter that can be considered atypical, offering new considerations for an interpretation of the oeuvre.

Unparalleled and profound, Lajos Vajda's oeuvre is an invaluable treasure of Hungarian culture. As the custodian of this legacy, the Ferenczy Museum Center has a special responsibility for the physical preservation of sensitive and fragile works on paper. In this spirit, we plan to introduce a new system for the presentation of Lajos Vajda's work, so that his intellectual and material legacy can be preserved and remain accessible to posterity.





Vladimir Lashin
Yellow House, 1999
Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm
Collection of the artist

Yellow House, 1999

Yellow House, 1999

Vladimir Lashin
Yellow House, 1999
Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm
Collection of the artist

Vladimir Lashin
Yellow House, 1999
Oil on canvas, 100 x 100 cm
Collection of the artist

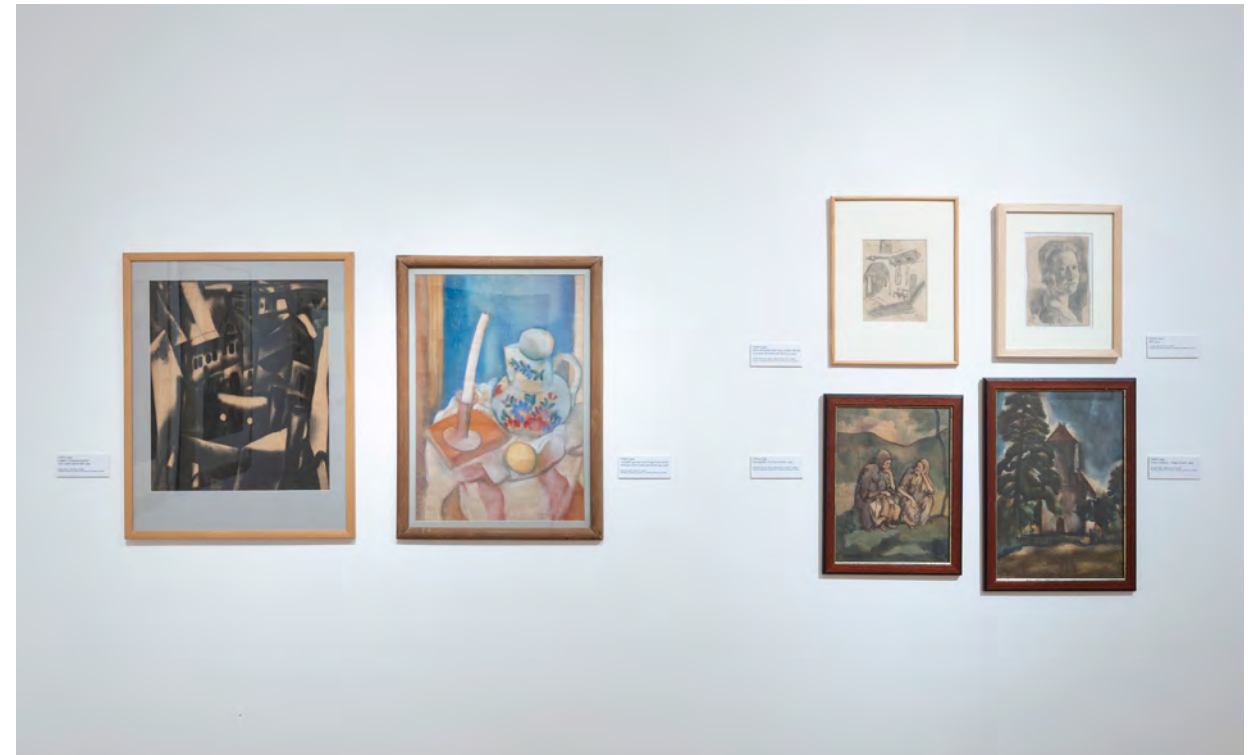
LAJOS VAJDA'S ART BETWEEN 1924 AND 1935

As a child, Lajos Vajda was already noted for his exceptional talent for drawing and his unwavering dedication. In 1917, he moved with his family to Valjevo, Serbia, where the dense, communal atmosphere and visual world of the Serbian Orthodox churches made a deep impression on the sensitive young artist. Moving to Szentendre in 1923 was a similarly defining experience: the town's multi-ethnic, traditionalist atmosphere became a lifelong inspiration.

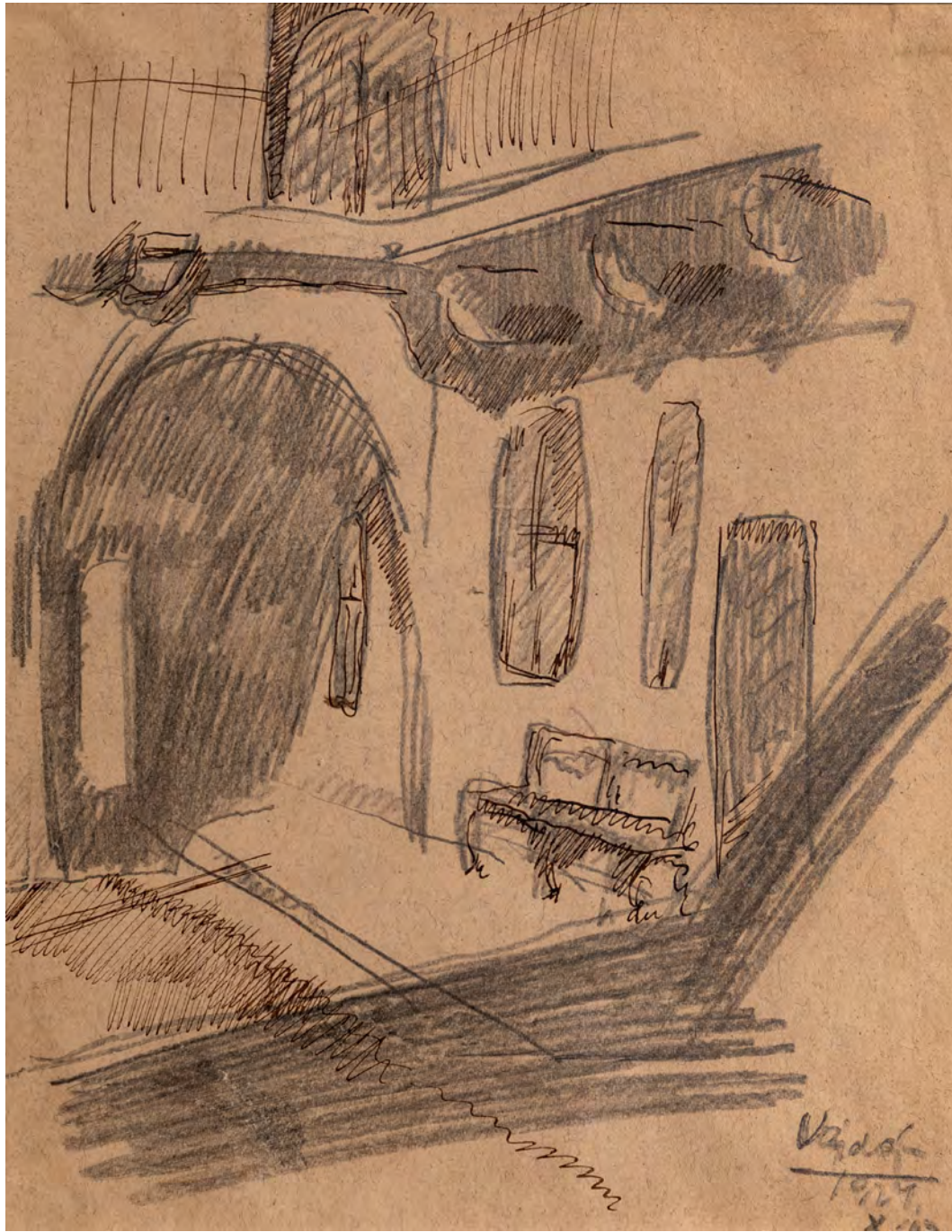
Between 1923 and 1927, he studied at the drawing school of OMIKE (Hungarian Jewish Educational Association), and in 1928 he was admitted to the Academy of Fine Arts. He also became associated with Lajos Kassák's 'Munka' collective, where he and his fellows studied the achievements of the Russian avant-garde and intensively experimented with the montage technique. A great many drawings, sketches and studies have survived from this early period, which saw the young Vajda search for his own voice; these works delicately portray his experiments with the different styles.

In 1930 he left the academy and went to Paris. Few facts are known about the period between 1930 and 1933, but it is certain that these were the years of real study for him. While he gained first-hand knowledge of avant-garde endeavours, he was greatly influenced by the ethnographic collections of museums and the formal idiom of Russian cinema; he used these to develop his own distinctive, associative montage technique.

In 1934, he returned to Hungary, where, following Bartók's example, he and an old friend, Dezső Korniss, began to collect motifs of 'untouched' folk art for incorporation into their own art. It was during this period that he created line drawings whose key characteristics were crystal-clear line structures and a lack of plasticity, as well as (self-) portraits that evoked the spirit of icons and became key pieces of the œuvre.



THE BEGINNINGS (1924–1930)



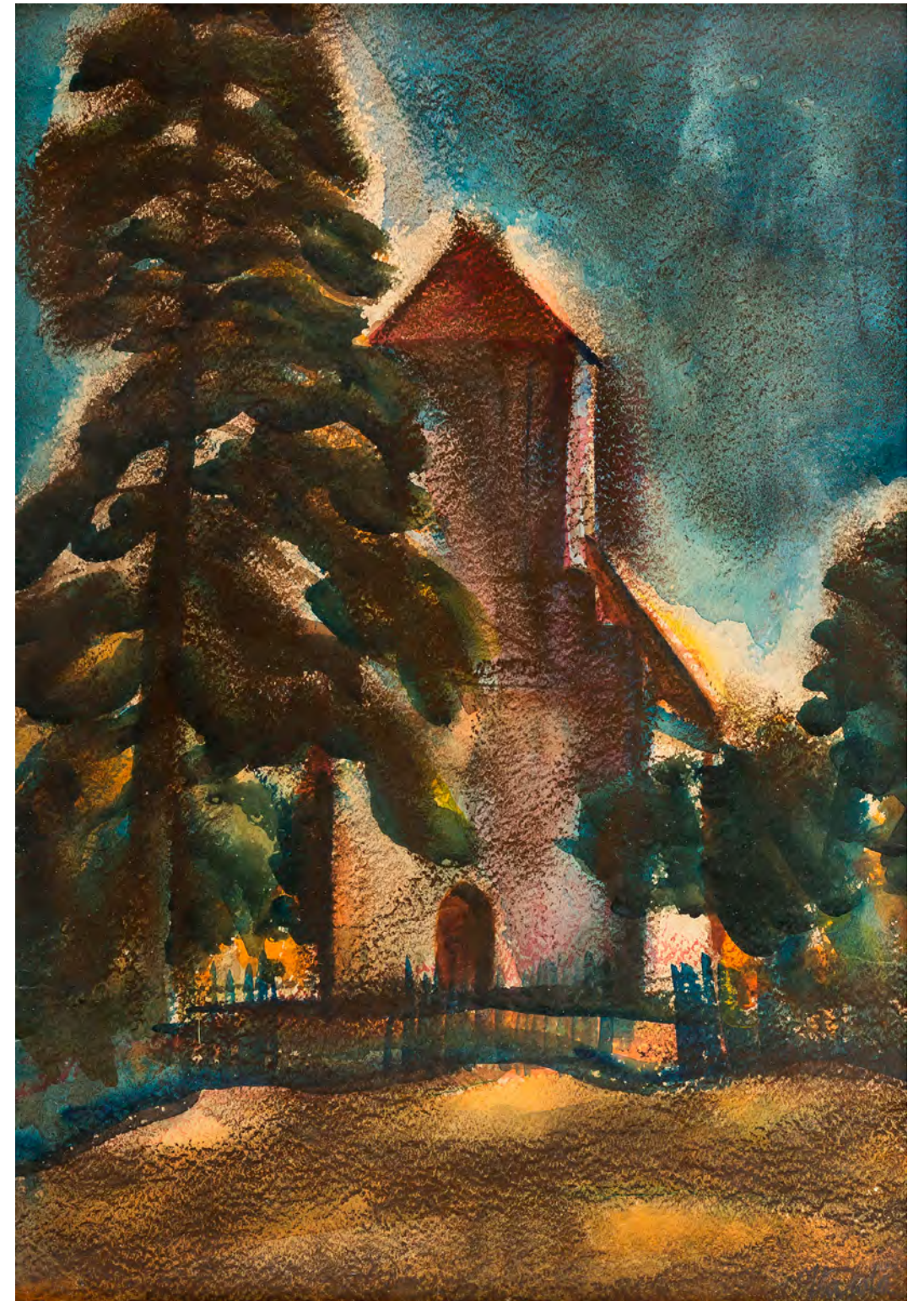
Lajos VAJDA:
Courtyard (Dumtsa Jenő Street 4), 1924
pencil, brown ink on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Teri, 1924
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
In Conversation, 1924
watercolour, ink, pen on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Village Church, 1924
watercolour on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Still Life with Candle and Floral Jug, 1928
pastel on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
View from Church Hill, 1929
charcoal on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Párizsi évek
The Paris Years (1930-1933)

A kezdetek
The Beginnings (1924-1930)

THE PARIS YEARS (1930–1933)



Lajos VAJDA:
Gustave Fleury, 1930–1933
photomontage on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center

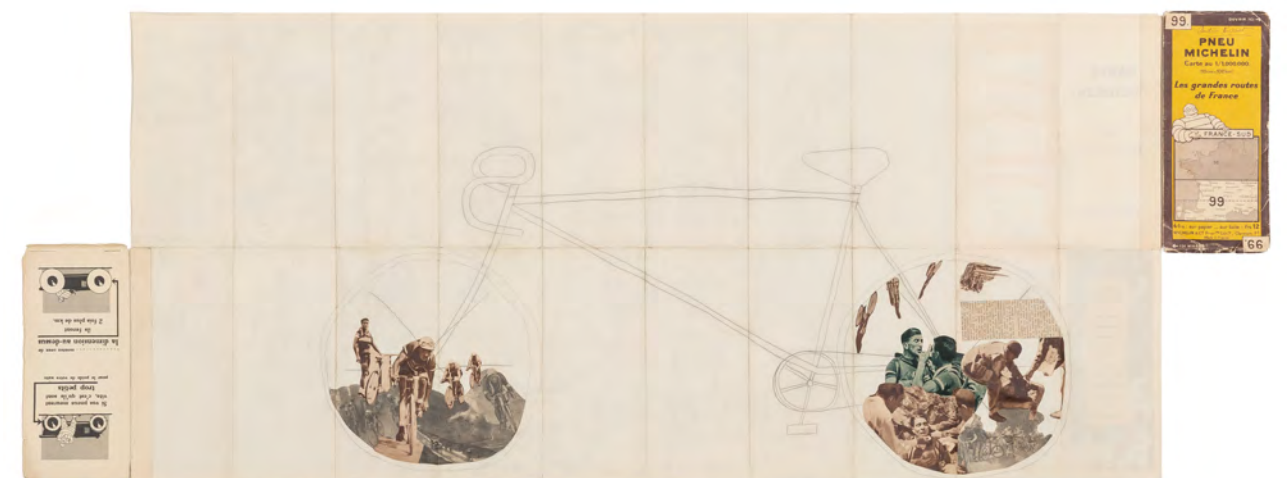


Lajos VAJDA:
Leopard and Lily, 1930–1933
photomontage on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center

In February 2026, the Ferenczy Museum Center became aware of a work of exceptional importance, made, in all likelihood, by Lajos Vajda between 1932 and 1933, during his stay in France. The support of the work is a Michelin map of Southern France, with the drawing of a racing bicycle on its verso, in Vajda's distinctive, clean lineation. There is a montage inside each wheel, made from period press photos and evoking episodes from the legendary race, the Tour de France.

All but a dozen of the montages that Vajda made during his Paris years have been unaccounted for. Both the compositional solutions and the conceptual structure give substance to the assumption that this map-montage was produced during this creative period. The front wheel encapsulates heroic and celebrated moments of the Tour, while the rear wheel shows the dark side of the race: the crashes, the limits of physical performance, the dramatic dimension of human exertion. Several of the cut-out photos can be identified, which suggests the work was made during or immediately after the 1932 Tour.

This is the first time the public has been able to see the map-montage, which has been hidden in a drawer for decades. The story of its survival is almost as remarkable as the work itself. According to the family of István Wendl, who founded Pacsirta, a famous restaurant that operated between 1904 and 1951 on a site that now holds a residential building (18 Kútvölgyi Road), the restaurateur received the montage as a gift from Vajda himself. The restaurant was a well-known meeting place for artists, who would often give such gifts to the owner. Vajda's work has been preserved by István Wendl's descendants. It is now impossible to determine when Vajda made the gift, but he is known to have been hospitalized in the tuberculosis treatment centre of the New Saint John Hospital for almost seven months in 1941 (from February to September), and the hospital was a mere 200 metres from Pacsirta Restaurant as the crow flies. He was given to understand that he had to gain weight if he was to recover, as he often mentioned in his postcards to his wife. Might he sometimes have taken his lunch at the nearby restaurant? Of that, there is no evidence—we can only speculate...



Lajos VAJDA(?):
Tour de France, circa 1932–1933
photomontage on paper (back of a contemporary Michelin map of Southern France)
private collection

THE SZENTENDRE EXPERIMENT (1934–1935)



Lajos VAJDA:
Still Life with Horseshoe-shaped Table, 1934
pastel on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



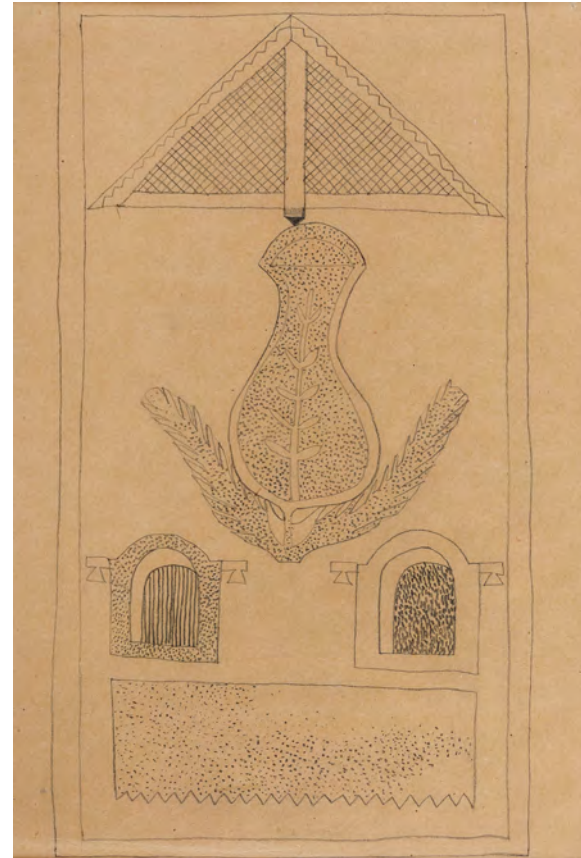
Lajos VAJDA:
Yellow House (Motesiczky House in Szentendre), 1935
tempera on cardboard
Ferenczy Museum Center



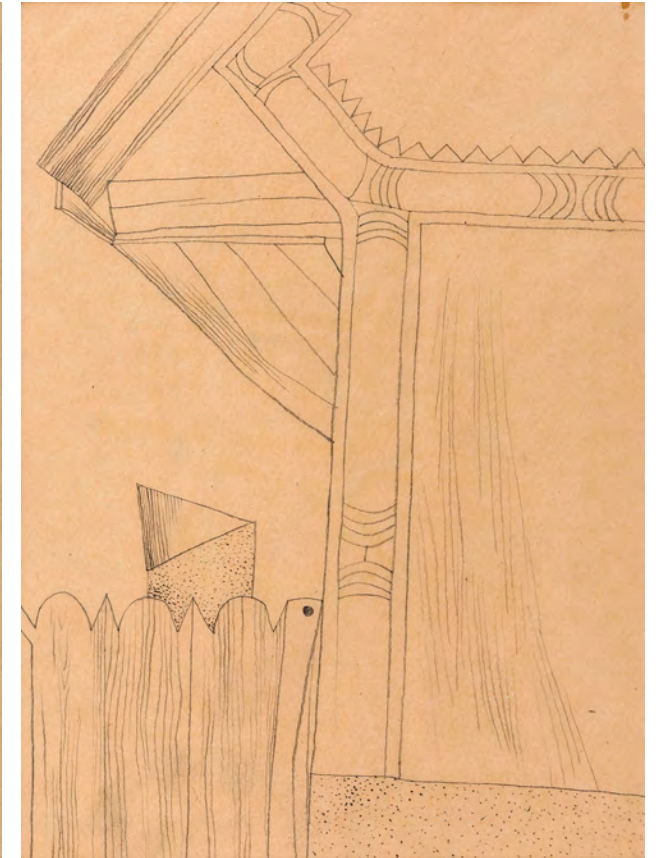
Lajos VAJDA:
Window in Szigetmonostor, 1935
tempera on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
House in Szigetmonostor, 1935
tempera on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
House Wall in Szigetmonostor with Stippled Ornament, 1935
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
House and Fence in Szigetmonostor, 1935
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



LAJOS VAJDA'S ART BETWEEN 1936 AND 1941

The summer of 1936 saw the beginning of a radical change in Lajos Vajda's art. The linear motifs, which were mostly architectural in origin and had been featured one at a time, began to be stacked in drawn montages, creating dense, vibrating meshes of lines and motifs. The compositions' centre of gravity shifted: instead of a closed-off, unified view, he became interested in the relationship between the details, the tension and dynamics between fragments. His transparent montages sometimes opened up expressive, even surreal fields of association.

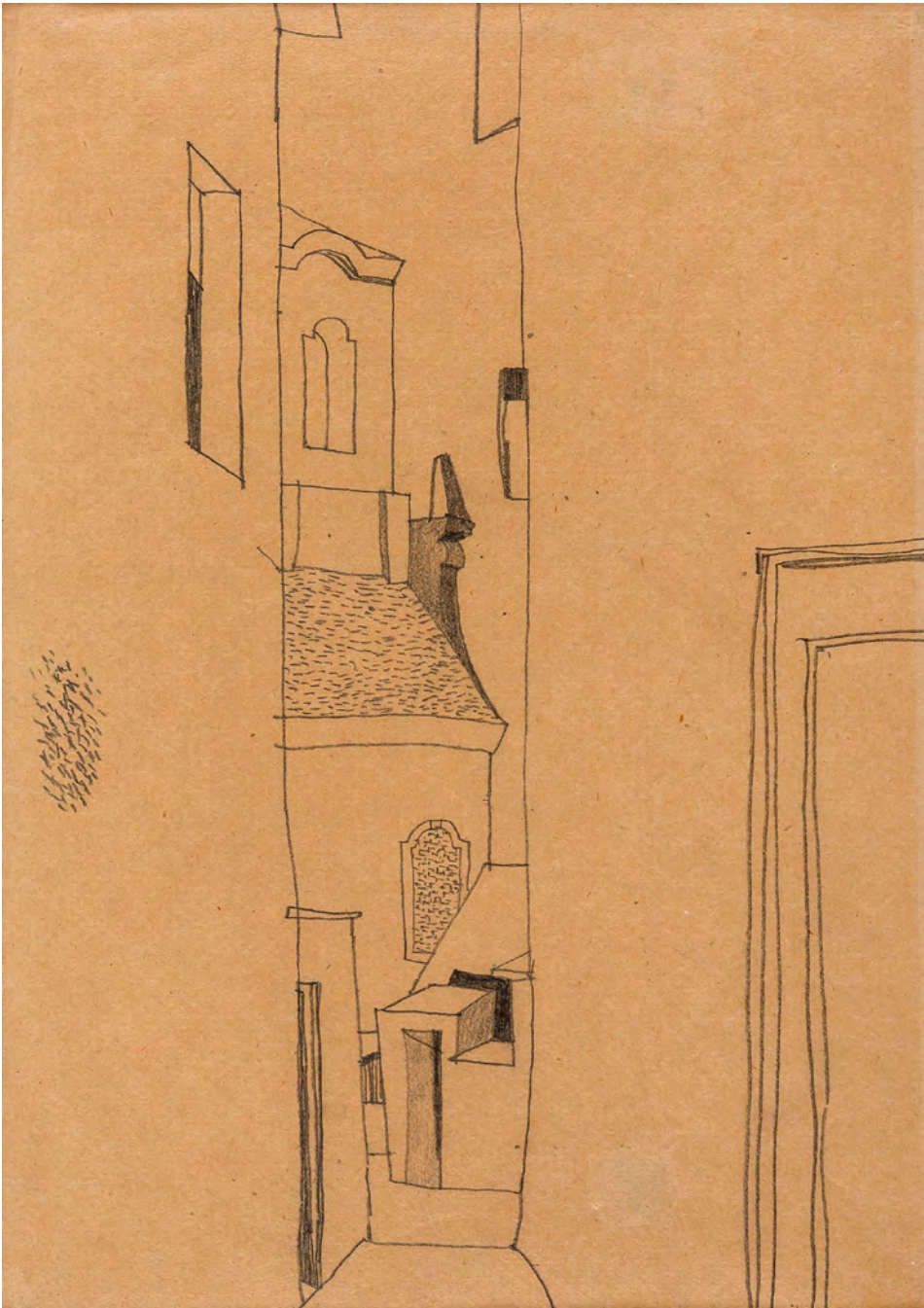
According to a letter, he made several oil paintings during these years, but they were lost shortly after his death, and it is mainly the drawings that give us an understanding of his evolution in this period, tracing the transformation of his outlook.

With 1938 came another striking change in his art. Szentendre, the town formerly so central to his practice, analysed again and again, completely disappeared from his set of motifs, giving way to the ancient forms of archaic, primitive and tribal art. Timeless and universal, simple, straightforward and dramatic in its forms, this set of motifs well served the expression of Vajda's sense of the finitude of life and his premonition of the destruction of the world around him.

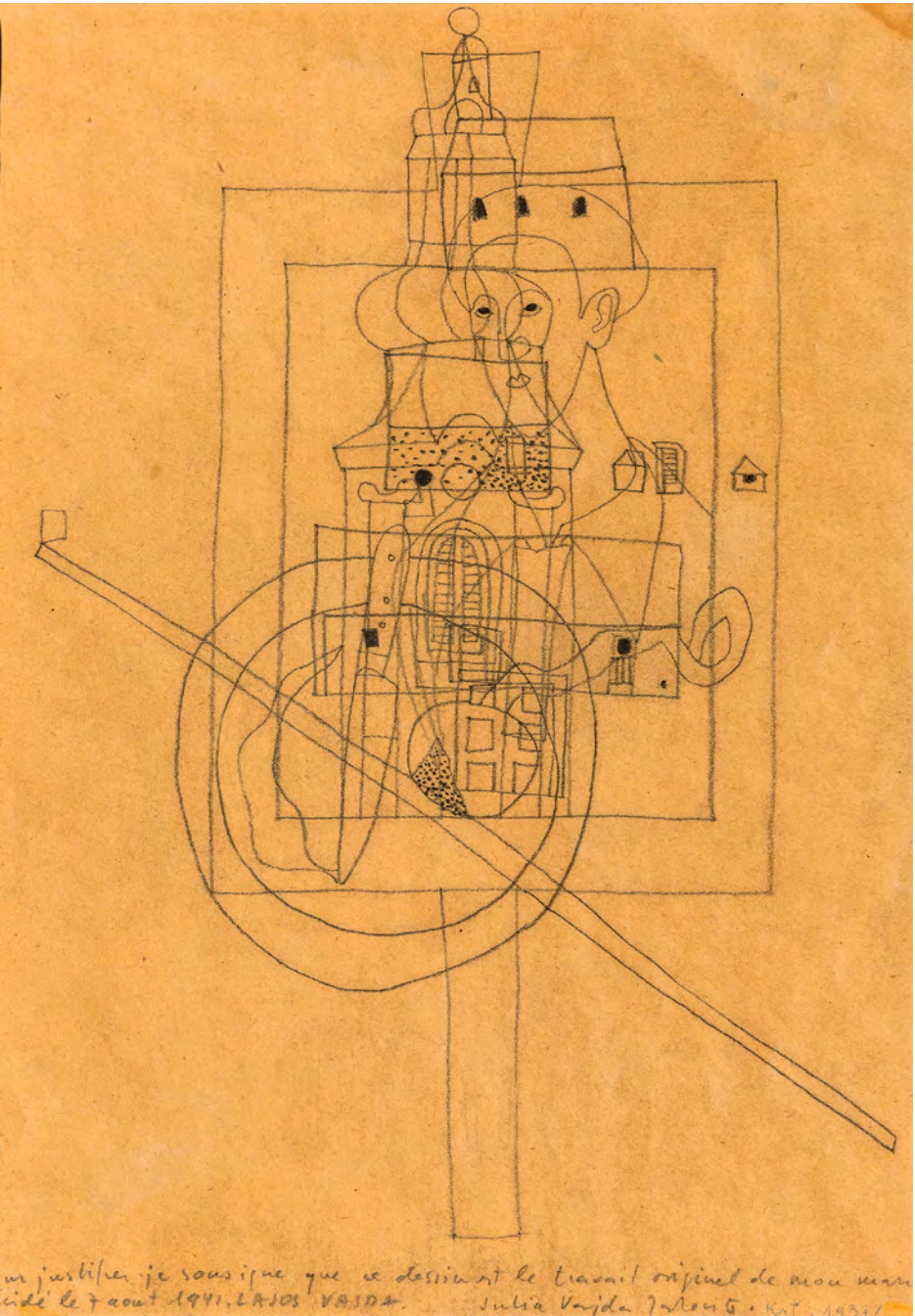
In 1939-1940, he, his wife, Júlia Vajda, and their friends worked on Haluskai's farm in Pismány. This was where he made his last works, the large charcoal drawings, whose organic abstraction and elemental expressiveness caused posterity to look upon them as iconic pieces of a modernity that transcended all conventions. Lajos Vajda died on 7 September 1941 from complications of tuberculosis. His immediate family—with the exception of his wife—fell victim to the Holocaust.



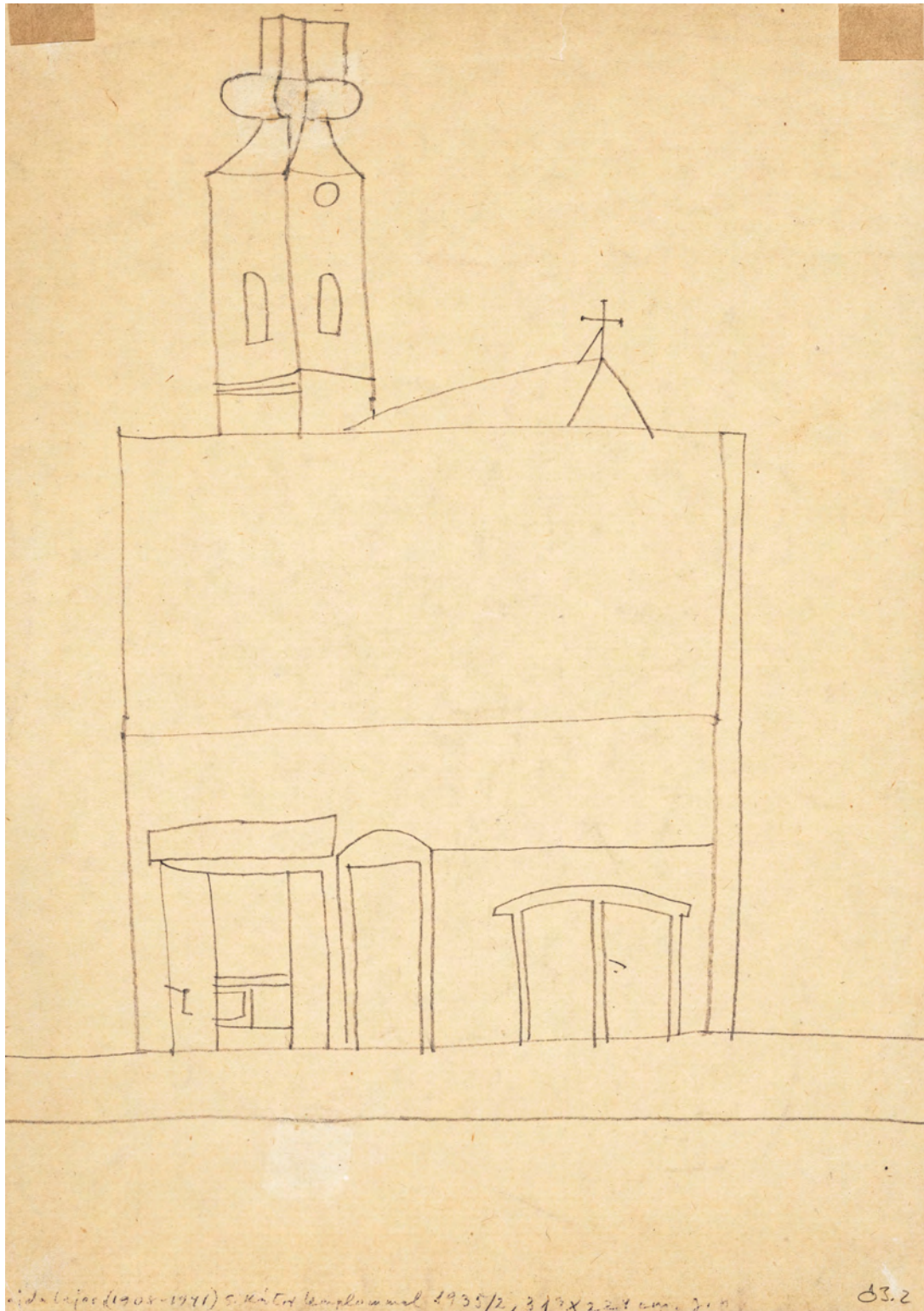
TRANSPARENT
MONTAGE (1936–1937)



Lajos VAJDA:
Alley with Church, 1935
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



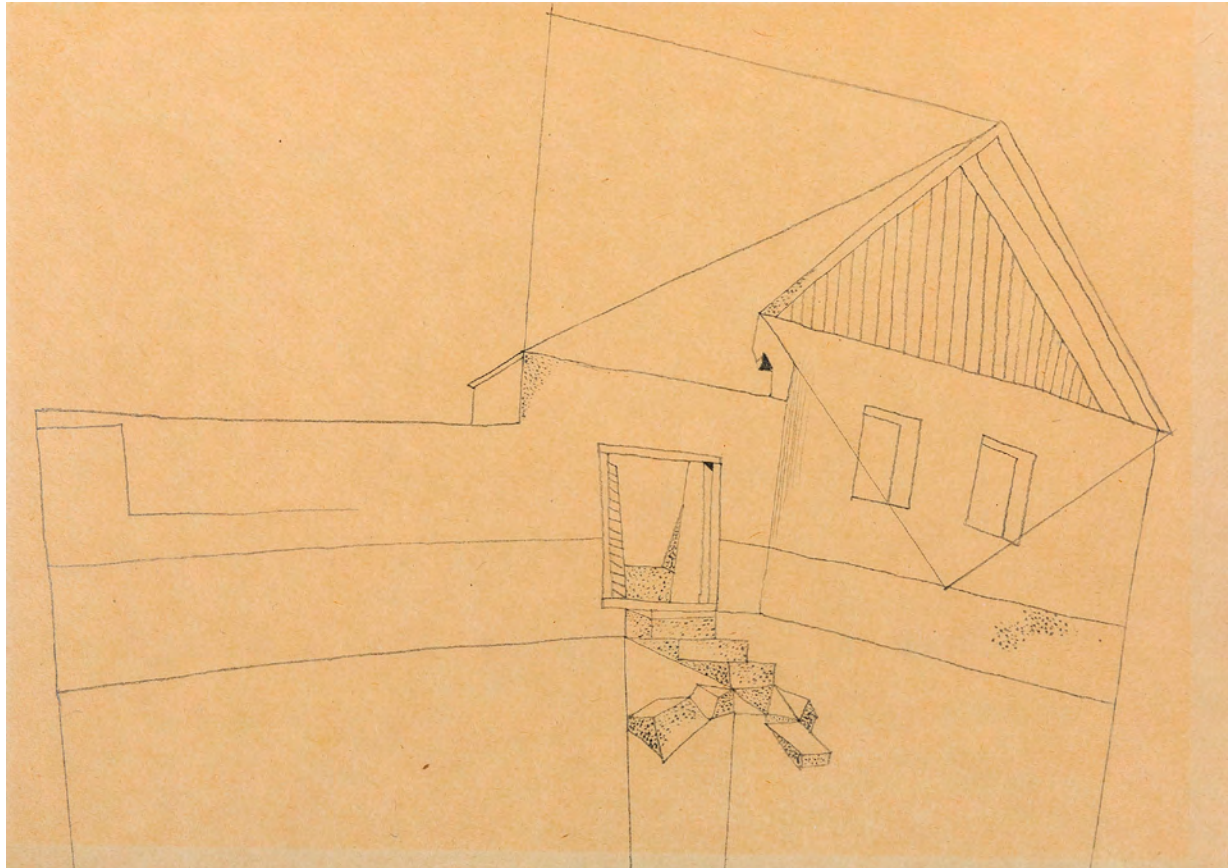
Lajos VAJDA:
Drawn Montage with Self-portrait, 1937
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



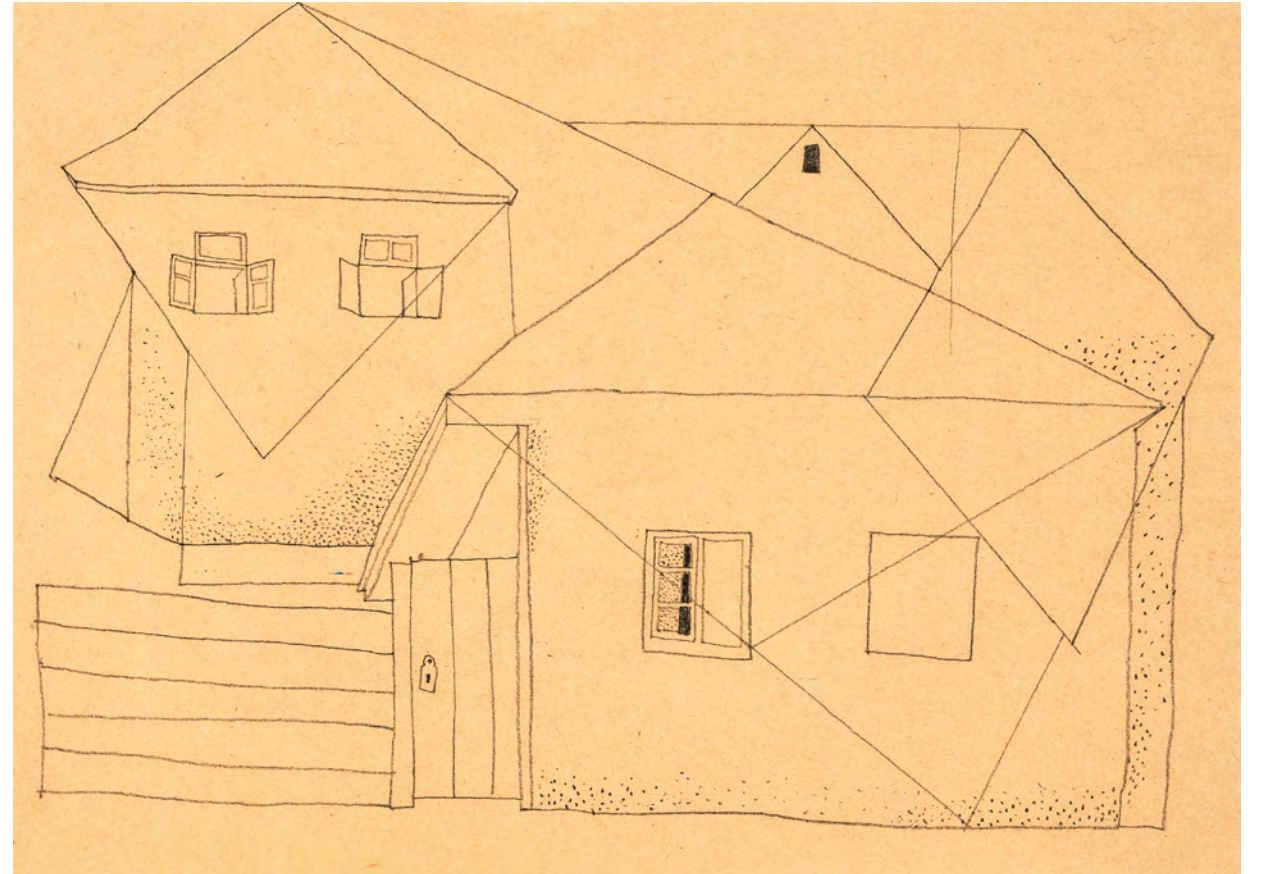
Lajos VAJDA:
Church behind House, 1935
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



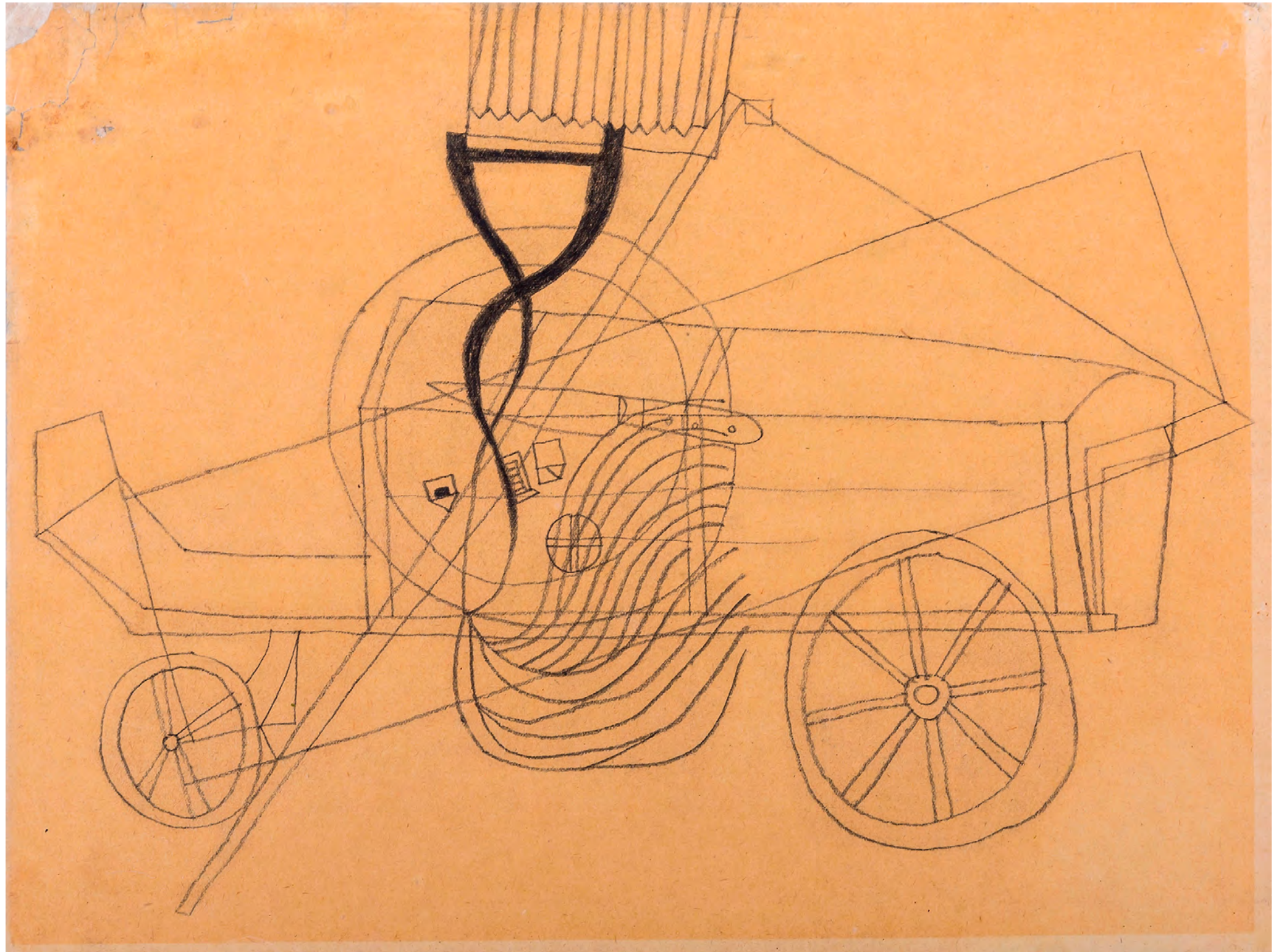
Lajos VAJDA:
Self-portrait with Church, circa 1935
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



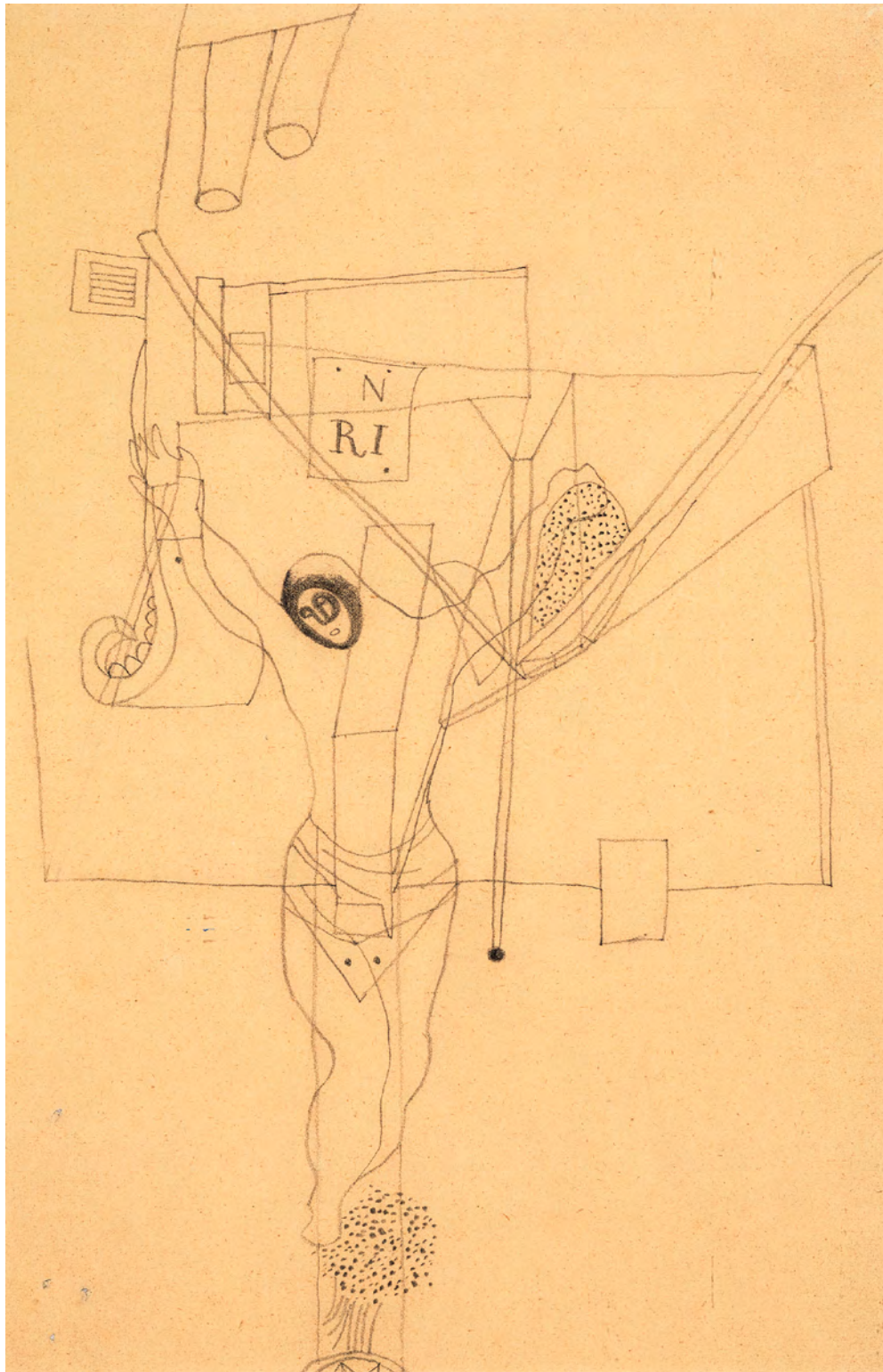
Lajos VAJDA:
House on Munkácsy Street, 1936
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



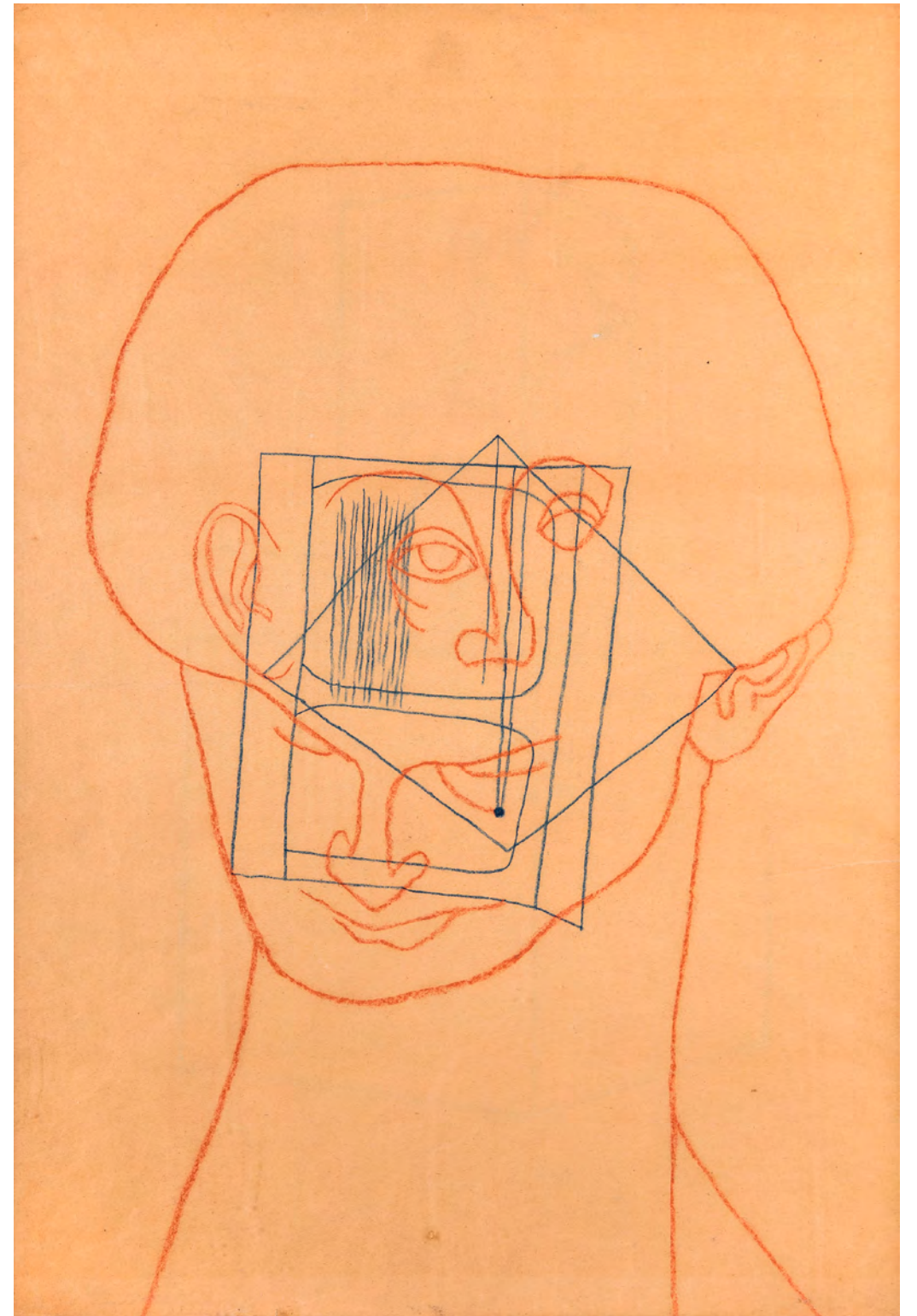
Lajos VAJDA:
House Walls in Szentendre, 1936
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Still Life with a Cart, 1936
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Tin-plate Christ, 1936
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Double Self-portrait, 1937
blue and red chalk on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Houses in Szentendre with Crucifix, 1937
tempera, photomontage on cardboard
Ferenczy Museum Center

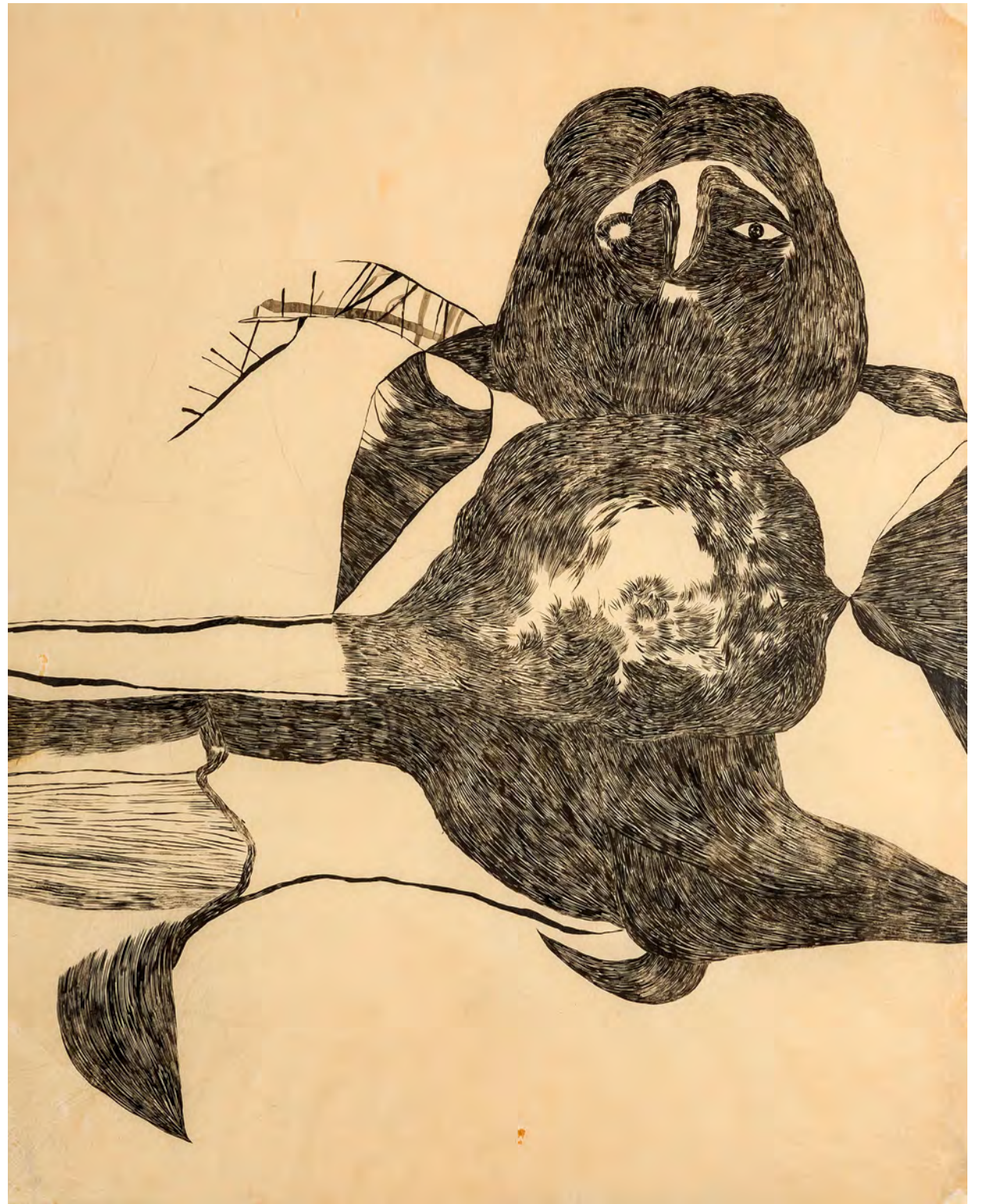
FROM ICONS TO MASKS
TO CREATURES
(1937–1938)



Lajos VAJDA:
Black Icon, 1936
oil on cardboard
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Giant Landscape Mask, 1938
pencil, ink, pastel on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Owl-Headed, 1939
ink on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Tied-up, 1938
charcoal, pastel on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



THE LAST CHARCOAL
DRAWINGS
(1939–1940)



Lajos VAJDA:
Forest Demons, 1940
charcoal on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



Lajos VAJDA:
Primitive Vegetation, 1940
charcoal on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



VAJDA AND POSTMODERNITY

Marked by consistent development and radical turns, Lajos Vajda's oeuvre became a fundamental reference point in Hungarian art history, thanks also to his remarkable theoretical learning and critical attitude, as well as his bold, sensitive and uncompromising attitude as an artist. His influence can be detected not only in the artists of the European School (1945–1948) and the generation of artists who made their debut in Szentendre from 1968 onwards, but also in the thinking and practice of many contemporary artists.

This room, which holds what can be considered a mini exhibition in its own right, is a thought experiment on the part of the curator: it aims to outline how the strikingly different artistic paths and creative positions that stem from Vajda's complex spirit branch out from the 1980s to the present, from postmodern to contemporary trends. Instead of direct correspondences of influence and styles, we are looking at such autonomous artistic attitudes that are deeply informed by Vajda's complex, 'pictor doctus' sensibility.

Through the gesture of appropriation, El Kazovszkij transformed and rewrote one of Vajda's drawings from 1936 into a narrative comic strip. Sensitive, gesture-based and dramatic, Péter Kovács's drawings are closely related to Vajda's last charcoal drawings, while Ákos Birkás's intellectually complex relationship to portrait painting has a deep intellectual kinship to Vajda's icon-like pictures. The anthropological way of thinking that marks the photo-based monumental collages of Zsófia Szemző, who is of a younger generation, reveals the same interest in the social experiences and collective ambivalences of humanity that characterizes the montages Vajda made in Paris.

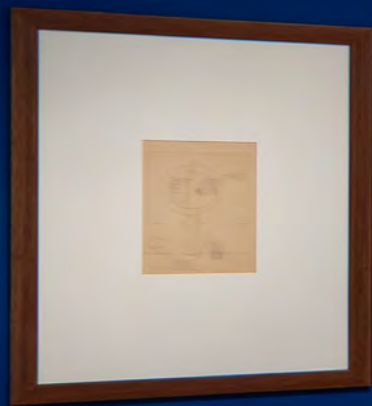
Thus, four radically different artistic worlds—each coherent and autonomous—enter into dialogue with the same distant source, Lajos Vajda's art.



EI KAZOVSKIJ

SZEMZŐ Zsófia

BIRKÁS Ákos



EI KAZOVSKIJ

EI Kazovszkij (1948–2008) was one of the most distinctive and evocative artists of the late 20th century. Her art unfolded in a baroque lushness, into a Gesamtkunstwerk in which painting, performance art, theatre and fashion were inseparable. His paintings are almost always stages, dramatic spaces where figures, symbols and gestures become part of a passionate, highly strung mythology.

Her so-called Vajda Sheets, created between 1981 and 1986, manifest this attitude particularly vividly. The series was based on two drawings by Lajos Vajda, *Still Life with Plate and Bird* and *House Walls in Szentendre*. Kazovszkij scaled down the original compositions, arranged them into the narrative order of a comic strip, and then radically rewrote them. She overwrote Vajda's subtle, surreal, translucent montage structure with rough contours, loud, decorative patterns, chaotically swirling shapes and inscriptions.

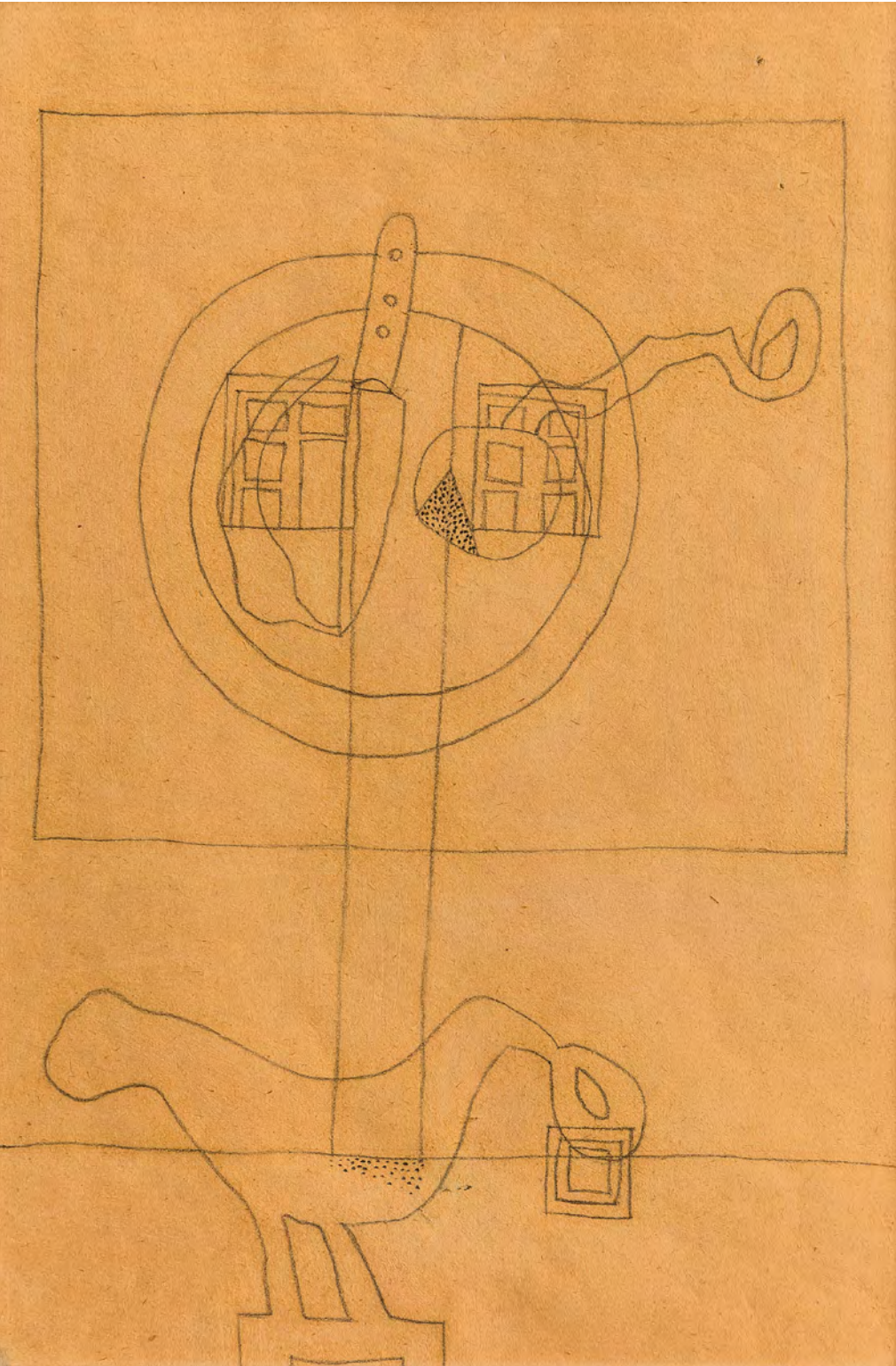
The works feature words, phrases and dramatic allusions; the application of foreign elements and the theatricality of the visual narrative produce new levels of meaning. Kazovszkij creates a theatrical space on the paper: the motifs are not merely layered on top of each other, but become characters in a harried, intense visual narrative. EI Kazovszkij's appropriation of Vajda's works has been most aptly characterized by András Rényi: 'The punky aggressiveness, the boundless multiplication, and the endless and directionless proliferation of the quick and redundant variations, which bring to mind music videos: in the end, they perfectly erode the unique compositions of Vajda, which represent the most advanced degree of painterly modernism and demand concentrated observation.' Viewed this way, Kazovszkij's postmodern gesture is not a salute but an act of appropriation: the dissolution and dramatization of modernist concentration. The tradition is no longer an untouchable heritage, but material that can be prised apart and rearranged, to be incorporated into the dense, theatrical layers of EI Kazovszkij's mythology.





E. KÁSOVSKÁ:
Comic Strip (Vajda Pages), 1981–1986
mixed media on paper
Kozák–Stomp Collection

E. KÁSOVSKÁ:
Vajda Pages XII. Selected Monuments IV., 1981–1986
mixed media on paper
First Hungarian Spectacle Collection, Tapolca–Diszel



Lajos VAJDA:
Still Life with Plate and Bird, 1936
pencil on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center

Zsófia SZEMZŐ

A contemporary artist of the middle generation, Zsófia Szemző (1982) is the youngest creator at this exhibition. She studied at MOME and in Paris, and received her DLA from the Hungarian University of Fine Arts in 2018. Above all, she makes drawings, collages, ceramics and various objects, which she often presents in complex installations. Her works are montages of objects and visual elements, creating points of connection between stories and meanings.

She has been making collages since 2016, drawing her material from old books and magazines. The anthropological approach of her works weaves together human diversity, biological and social correlations, everyday practices and ethnographic observation in the service of understanding. Many of Szemző's projects are participatory: 'In some of my projects, the study of humans' positions in social and historical contexts also opens paths towards participatory practices, with the experience of the viewer or participant given centre stage.'

Szemző's handling of collage is closely related to the Hungarian avant-garde tradition of the 1930s, and in particular to Lajos Vajda's montage-based approach. Both artists create new meanings by juxtaposing motifs of different origins, and their compositions often rely on the tension between such antitheses as good and evil, construction and destruction, life and death. While Vajda synthesized a distinctive visual language by connecting motifs from folk art and the urban environment, Szemző often uses the visual fragments of the past and the found images to tell some personal story. More than a formal means, the collage is also a way of thinking in her works: as they are layered one over the other, the different times, cultures and experiences come into contact to produce new, often mythic or archetypal meanings.





Zsófia SZEMZŐ:
Everybody Drinks Water, 2019
collage, satin print
Balázs-Dénes Collection



Lajos VAJDA:
Chinese Execution, 1930-1933
photomontage on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center

Ákos BIRKÁS

Ákos Birkás (1941–2018) built his oeuvre in radical yet consistent steps. He worked in several mediums over his career, but every turn concerned the same essential question: what is painting and what is the role of the painter? Instead of narratives, his works offer introspection—analyses of the possibilities and boundaries of the image.

His early works—the mangled portraits of the 1960s and the photo-based conceptual pieces of the 1970s—already explored the temporality and ontological status of the portrait. This inquiry found its most concentrated form in the *Head* series, begun in the mid-1980s and counting almost two hundred works. Initially expressive and mask-like, the face gradually closed in on itself in the form of concentric ovals. Though he started from the genre of the portrait, he gradually discarded individual characteristics until the face became an archetypal sign that simultaneously refers to the Self and the Other. Those compositions that comprise two panels utilize the shifts, overlaps and gaps between the canvases to dramatize the search for the centre and to question the notion of unity. Layered and overly worked, the surfaces create a meditative silence, and then, in the 1990s, the intensification of the palette dynamizes, even breaks up, the order. Birkás aimed for the 'mute picture,' a density of meanings that points beyond verbal expression.

This is where the spiritual affinity with the art of Lajos Vajda can be felt. It is a parallelism not of form, but of attitudes: it is about radical reduction, the search for the centre, the existential stakes of self-portraiture. Just as Vajda's *Self-portrait as Icon* attempts to represent the possibility of reconciling the individual and the general through a synthesis of the theme of the artist-saint in an emblem-like image, so does the oval become a concentrated emblem of being in Birkás's art—self-examination carried out in the silence of painting.





Ákos BIRKÁS:
Kopf-Head, 1994
oil on canvas
Town Museum of Paks – Paks Gallery



Lajos VAJDA:
Self-Portrait as Icon, 1936
pastel on cardboard
Ferenczy Museum Center

Péter KOVÁCS

The work of Pet'R, aka Péter Kovács (1943–2019), rests on two pillars: a radical commitment to the autonomy of drawing and 20th-century existentialist thought, above all the ontology of Martin Heidegger and Jean-Paul Sartre. The consistent development of his œuvre was marked by subtle shifts, rather than impressive turns. While man as a being remained the exclusive focus of his art, it was the figure itself that he came to deconstruct over the course of his career. His works are without narratives, specific stories and historical references: rather than a means, he looked upon drawing as the subject itself. 'The freedom I need is the way I draw,' he said, and this freedom is a key concept of his life's work.

His art is often associated with the tradition of Francis Bacon, Alberto Giacometti and Béla Kondor. There is, however, a particularly strong affinity with the late charcoal drawings of Lajos Vajda; not in a formal sense, but in terms of sensibilities. In addition to the denial of subject and space, the primacy given to the line, the two artists share an interest in movement, flows and powerful dynamics.

Kovács's figures are never stable; they always inhabit a fluid state. They are doubled, multiplied, mark different phases, record momentary states of being. They evolve, accumulate and coil without contours or plasticity—always incomplete, on the line between assuming form and disintegrating.





Péter KOVÁCS:
Creature (Worm), 1997
mixed media on paper
private collection



Lajos VAJDA:
Eye with Roots, 1940
charcoal on paper
Ferenczy Museum Center



The catalogue was published on the occasion of the exhibition *Vajda and Postmodernity*.
Vajda Museum – Ferenczy Museum Center
Szentendre
17 April 2026 – 3 January 2027

Published by: FERENCZY MÚZEUMI CENTRUM

Responsible Publisher: BORBÉLY-TARDY Anna

Author, curator: SZABÓ Noémi

Graphic design: KISS Krisztina Noémi

Proofreading: ZELEI Bori

English translation: MIHÁLY Árpád

Photo: DEIM Balázs

Contributing staff:
BÉDA Andrea, DR. LAUTER Éva, GERGELY Gabriella,
GYÖRGY Gabriella, HERCZEG Zoltán, LUKÁCS Katalin,
NOVÁK Levente, PETRIK Zsolt, PINTEA Alíz Ráhel,
RIBÁR Kitti, SÜTŐ Tünde, SZÉLES Nóra, TAKÁCS Erzsébet,
TÓTH Mátyás

Special thanks to:
HIDVÉGI Dzsénifer, KOVÁCS Péterné Enikő, KOZÁK
Gábor, PETŐCZ György, RADÁK Judit

On the cover:
EI KAZOVSKIJ: Comic Strip (Vajda Pages) detail, 1981–1986,
mixed media on paper, Kozák–Stomp Collection
VAJDA Lajos: Still Life with Plate and Bird (detail), 1936,
pencil on paper, Ferenczy Museum Center

© author
© translator
© photographers
© HUNGART
© Ferenczy Museum Center, 2026

This catalog is protected by copyright.
No part of this publication may be reproduced
without the prior written permission of the publisher.

Ferenczy Museum Center
2000 Szentendre, Fő tér 2-5.
www.femuz.hu

ISBN 978-615-5860-47-8



