

Ferenc Veress, one of the pioneers of photography in Transylvania

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Ferenc Veress
The bridge tower
(The same photograph
appears in Veress's
first album about
Cluj-Napoca)
1859
Source:
Unitarian parish
Cluj-Napoca

Ferenc Veress (1832-1916) was among the most important Hungarian photographers of the 19th century, yet his fate was to be forgotten after his death. For many decades there was no interest whatsoever in his work and his legacy. Only since the early 1980s have researchers started to discover Veress's works and his contribution to photography. In 1993 Károly Kincses published a monograph about Ferenc Veress, entitled *Levétellett Veressnél, Kolozsvárt*, and after this some other minor publications appeared about him¹. Fortunately, there is a great deal of information about Veress's life thanks to the articles published in his journal called *Fényképészeti Lapok* (Photographic Papers).

In the 19th century, Kolozsvár (Cluj-Napoca in Romanian, Klausenburg in German) was still

part of the Hungarian Kingdom and, after 1867, the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy. It was a city where Hungarians, Saxons and Romanians had been living together for hundreds of years and many considered it, and still do, to be the capital of Transylvania. Veress was born in this town on September 1, 1832. Little is known about his familial background, except that his father was an office worker².

Although Veress had originally studied to become a goldsmith, his passion for photography proved to be greater. His first camera was a gift from his mother for his 18th birthday³. At first, like everyone in the middle of the 19th century, Veress learnt to make daguerreotypes, but shortly thereafter this process was replaced by new ones, which were less



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Ferenc Veress
Cluj-Napoca and the
statue of Donát
ca. 1870
Source: Romanian
National Archives,
Cluj county office,
Societatea Muzeului
Ardelean fonds,
223/15



expensive, as they made it possible to make more positive images from one negative. Afterwards, he started to experiment with other methods together with three noblemen from the most important Transylvanian families. At first Veress worked together with Baron Károly Apor and Count Zsigmond Korniss and they tried out various photographic methods. Count Korniss and Veress had been close friends and they experimented mostly with enlarging photographs⁴. Later, they also succeeded in preparing collodium-coated glass negatives⁵. This friendship ended with the untimely death of Zsigmond Korniss, and Veress lost not only his friend but also his patron.

Shortly thereafter, Károly Apor introduced Ferenc Veress to Count Imre Mikó, one of the most important political and cultural figures of Transylvania in the 19th century. Imre Mikó bought his camera and started learning how to take photos in Vienna but, being ill, he needed to return home. Veress and the Count experimented together between 1853 and 1855, Mikó being able to engage in such activities because the Habsburgs temporarily made it almost impossible for Hungarian aristocrats to play an active part in the political life of the kingdom⁶.

In 1853, at the very young age of only 21 years, Veress opened the first photographic studio in Transylvania, in his hometown Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca. With Count Imre Mikó's help, the noble families became his first customers, and from their portraits Veress compiled albums and sold them⁷.

The professional breakthrough for Veress was his journey to Western Europe. In Vienna he met Anton Martin, who was a pioneer of photography in Austria, and then he travelled to the World Fair in Paris in 1855. It was there that he saw for the first time photo porcelain and became fascinated with the invention. In Paris, Veress also met Niepce de Saint Victor, who was preoccupied with fixing colours in photographs. Photo porcelain and colour photography later became Veress's two great occupations. The only way to keep up with the innovations in the field of photography was to know at least one foreign language. Veress knew this and he learnt French and German to be able to understand the journals and magazines in which news were published.

In many ways Veress was the first in his field: firstly, he opened the first photographic studio in Transylvania; secondly, between 1882 and 1888 he published the first photographic journal in Hungarian which appeared regularly, called *Fényképészeti Lapok* (Photographic Journals); and last but not least, he was the first to teach photography at a Hungarian university – from 1881 to 1882 he was a tutor at the Ferenc József University in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca⁸.

In his studio, he was helped by 5 or 6 people, and among Veress's assistants there were also women. In the above-mentioned *Fényképészeti Lapok*, he wrote an article in which he reflected upon a piece that had appeared in a foreign journal, which stated that women are not so

capable of taking photographs. Veress expressed his disagreement, declaring that women learn faster and, if they would gain access to a better education, they could be more successful than men in some areas of photography⁹.

For some years, Veress worked together with a painter called György Vastagh. A painter helping out a photographer was common practice in the 19th century, as the photos needed to be retouched before being handed out to the customers. Up until the beginning of the 1880s, Veress's studio was profitable, but slowly his financial situation started to deteriorate. The reason for his decline was the fact that he invested a lot of money in his experiments, firstly in photo porcelain – he was the first one in Hungary to produce photo porcelain (and of a very good quality, too). He intended to collaborate with the Herend Porcelain Manufactory in order to mass-produce photo porcelain, but there weren't enough customers. After this failed attempt, Veress published the method of producing photo porcelain in *Fényképeszeti Lapok*, with all its secrets, although others requested serious sums for such things. Secondly, he invested in the mass production of dry plates and experiments with colour photography. After some time he needed to sell a part of his vast garden, and in 1890 he had to give over his studio, too. In his later years, Veress only experimented with heliochromy. His photos were exhibited at the World Fair in Paris, bringing recognition from all around Europe. Yet, when he asked for support from the state for further experiments, he was rejected, like all the other times¹⁰.

Transylvania in photographs

One of the most valuable parts of Veress's work are his landscapes taken all around Transylvania and his photographs of Kolozsvár



/Cluj-Napoca. Like photographers from all around Europe, Veress, through his pictures, wanted to immortalize the most important natural surroundings and historical monuments.

Ferenc Veress
Citadelle
in Cluj-Napoca
1874
Source:
Romanian National
Archives,
Cluj county office,
Societatea Muzeului
Ardelean fonds,
223/16

Veress had many plans for editing and publishing photographic albums of Transylvania, but he never got any support, though he never made unreasonable requests. Once he asked for a free train ticket from Budapest to Predeal and pledged to photograph all the important sights along the railroad¹¹. As could be expected, he never got that ticket.

In the early 1870s, Veress travelled around Transylvania and took photographs that he later sent to the World Exhibition in Vienna in 1873. Unfortunately, this also didn't turn out the way he would have wanted: his photographs were shown in a secluded building and many of them were damaged¹². Yet after the incident, Veress did compile an album from his





landscapes, which he sent to the Photographic Society in Vienna. Today his work belongs to the collection of the Höhere Graphische Lehr- und Versuchsanstalt¹³.

His earlier albums are related to his hometown, Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca, and thus are very precious for the city, containing information about life in the 19th century. Veress took his very first landscapes and photos of Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca in 1859-60 and these can be found in an album entitled *Kolozsvár 1859*. Ede Heidenhaus had also been taking photos of Buda and Pest around this time but these were not part of a consciously planned album. The significance of Veress's work lies in the fact that he was among the first in Hungary to present a city through the medium of photography. The album was a gift to the newly founded *Erdélyi Múzeum-Egylet* (Transylvanian Museum Society), a society founded to patronize art and science, and having Imre Mikó as one of the most important promoters of the cause. Some years later, Veress also became the photographer of the *Erdélyi Múzeum-Egylet*.

Ferenc Veress
The Bánffy Palace
in Cluj-Napoca
ca. 1868
Source:
Romanian National
Archives,
Cluj county office,
Societatea Muzeului
Ardelean fonds,
223/13

The album contains 46 photographs and these are divided into two volumes, each page containing one photo. Veress used the dry collodion process, a much easier method for making photos outdoors than with wet plate. Still, the quality of these early photographs is not so good, given the fact that Veress started to experiment with dry plates only at that time. The vast majority of the images present the most important buildings in Kolozsvár – the first one in the album depicts the Gothic church, devoted to Saint Michael, in the city centre. One common trait of the photographs is that there are no people on the streets, only shadows. The several-minute-long exposure time made it impossible to capture moving objects and because of this, the people in motion appear only as ghostly silhouettes.

Most of the photographs are topographic, as Veress was not looking for interesting angles to take artistic images. What he actually wanted was for the buildings' architectural side to dominate. Among the images there are a few landscapes, taken from a hill near the city. On these, Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca is still a small settlement, with empty fields that would be built on in the next decades.

Some years later, Veress took out his camera to capture his hometown again, in order to create a new album – this time to serve as a gift to Empress Elisabeth of Austria. In 1869, Veress sent the album, entitled *Kolozsvár és környéke: fényképalbum Veress Ferenc műhelyéből* (Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca and its surroundings: photo album from the studio of Ferenc Veress), to the Empress through Ferency Ida, one of her ladies-in-waiting. The gift was appreciated and Veress got a golden brooch as a reward.

The 59 photographs had been taken between 1867 and 1869 with different methods, the



overall quality (and composition) of the images being much better than the ones from the first album. Veress also took some photographs near the city – capturing the railroad

constructions at Sztána/Stana, the Bánffy castle at Bonchida/Bonþida and the ruins of a medieval castle in Torockószentgyörgy/Coltești. This last one is similar to the po-



Ferenc Veress
The inside of the
lutheran church
in Cluj-Napoca
Ca. 1868
Source:
Unitarian parish
Cluj-Napoca





pular engravings and paintings from the 19th century, but the ruins are not so prominent, the mountains being much more monumental. Veress's photograph summarizes the philosophical idea of perceiving nature as an almighty power and confirms that photography is also capable, like painting, of visualizing such subject matter.

Among the photos taken in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca, the most important are the ones of the towers and gates of the medieval wall, because these were demolished some years later. In the album, Veress included the images of religious buildings, too, as he had photographed the most important churches and chapels of all confessions. The most interesting ones are those taken inside the churches, because in those days it required great skill and competence to be able to take pictures inside a building that was not a photo studio.

The album sent to the empress is today in the possession of the Szabó Ervin Library in Budapest and the first, created around 1859, can be found in the Lucian Blaga Library in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca.

After this, Veress did not compile any other albums about his hometown, but he continued to take pictures of the city. Today, these photographs are scattered around in different institutions in Kolozsvár/Cluj-Napoca. The most interesting pictures taken after 1870 are the ones he took on a market day in the centre of the city. In just a few decades, the progress of photography had shortened the time needed to take a picture from long minutes to just one second. Thanks to these new developments, Veress managed to immortalize a market day from the middle of the 1880s, with actual figures in it, instead of mere shadowy silhouettes.



Veress's work is very diverse and rich, as was his life. Still, one of his greatest achievements is that he recognized the value of photography, the fact that the images captured through a camera have documentary value and can preserve information for a long time. In 1860, he spoke of "...creating a great photographic collection and thus exposing and preserving our historical monuments as they stand today, but which could perish tomorrow or the day after, and by my humble art imparting it to future generations"⁴. He did everything that he could to remain true to his statement, but when he asked his fellow photographers in the country to do the same, all he ever met with was refusal.



1. Károly Kincses: *Levétel Veressnél, Kolozsvárt*. Budapest: Magyar Fotográfiai Múzeum. 1993.; Miklósi-Sikes Csaba: *Fényképészek és műtermek Erdélyben 1839–1916*. Székelyudvarhely: Haáz Rezső alapítvány. 2001.

2. Kincses, op.cit. p. 11.
3. Fényképészeti Lapok. 1882. 6, p. 97.
4. Csaba Miklósi-Sikes, op.cit. p. 23.
5. Károly Kincses, *A photographer without limits. In: Photography and Research in Austria – Vienna, the Door to the European East*. Vienna: Dietmar Klinger Verlag, 2001, pp. 21-26, p. 23.
6. Kincses, op.cit. p. 32.
7. Kincses, op. cit. p. 34.
8. Kincses, op. cit. p. 56.
9. Fényképészeti Lapok 1883. 1. 20.
10. Károly Kincses, op.cit. p. 75.
11. Kincses, op. cit., p. 47.
12. Kincses, op. cit., p. 48.
13. Károly Kincses, A photographer ... op.cit. p. 26.
14. Ferenc Veress, *A fényképészet haladása napjainkban II. In: Kolozsvári Közöny*, 1860. 11. 4, p. 390. (own translation)