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National Identity and Architectural Expression

Yugoslav and Hungarian Nationality Rooms in Pittsburgh's Cathedral of Learning

Éva Lovra

Abstract: The interior design of a building provides critical insights into its historical and cultural context. This study examines the architectural and symbolic relationships among two Nationality and Heritage Rooms in the Cathedral of Learning—the Yugoslav and Hungarian Rooms. The research explores how the Hungarian and Yugoslav Rooms illustrate the influence of nation-state formations after the First World War, emphasizing the relationship between national identity and architectural expression. Particular attention is given to the underrepresentation of ethnicity in the decision making and the interior design of the Yugoslav Room, and the integration of folk and neo-baroque elements in Hungarian architecture in case of the Hungarian Room. This research was conducted within the framework of a Fulbright Scholarship and was initially presented at the University of Pittsburgh's Hungarian Heritage Room. Further findings were shared at the forty-eighth conference of the American Hungarian Educators Association at Rutgers University, where the study was awarded the Research Presentation Award.

***Keywords**: heritage rooms, Hungary, Yugoslavia, interior design, cultural narratives, Cathedral of Learning, Pittsburgh*

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Introduction

Studying nationality representation studies in architectural spaces requires a holistic perspective, as the elements are connected with historical, cultural, and artistic contexts. This study does not aim to provide a chronological history of the Nationality Rooms; rather, it examines how historical, cultural, and artistic processes are reflected—or underrepresented—in the Yugoslav and Hungarian Classroom by analyzing their stylistic choices, historical contexts, and cultural influences. Both rooms feature traditional Central European craftsmanship, especially evident in their intricate woodwork and folk-inspired designs. Architectural elements such as carved wooden ceilings and rustic furnishings highlight the regional similarities in rural

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and religious aesthetics. The historical interconnectedness of the Hungarian and Yugoslav rooms implies both territorial and intra-national connections, as the interior design language used in the creation of these rooms reflects.

The Hungarian and Yugoslav Rooms in the Cathedral of Learning reflect shared cultural roots shaped by centuries under the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The Hungarian Room's main stylistic choice is the Hungarian Folk Art represented in Hungary (also in the former Hungarian Kingdom which was a constitutional part of Austria-Hungary, 1867–1918), the interior design of the Yugoslav Room is linked to Ljubljana, Zagreb (Austria-Hungary before 1920) and Belgrade (Hungarian Kingdom in the Middle Ages). After the dismantling of Austria-Hungary by the end of the World War I (Treaty of Trianon, 1920) the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (from 1929, Kingdom of Yugoslavia) took the territory of Croatia-Slavonia and Vojvodina, and the territory of the present day Hungary was formed.

The Yugoslav Nationality and Heritage Room, completed in 1939, was designed to embody the folk traditions of what was then the Kingdom of Yugoslavia. The multiethnic and multinational state faced inherent challenges in crafting a singular architectural identity that could encompass its complex cultural heritage. The room's design reflects a generalized folk tradition rather than an explicit national or ethnic delineation, thereby highlighting the difficulty of establishing a unified national aesthetic within a multiethnic framework. The architectural elements chosen for the room suggest an attempt to forge a cohesive Yugoslav identity, yet they simultaneously reveal challenges of such an endeavor. Jug-o-slav means South Slavic, and Yugoslavia literally means Land of the South Slavs, although the Yugoslav nation was never equal to the nations of Yugoslavia.

The Hungarian Room, also dedicated in 1939, presents a compelling case for the integration of folk traditions with neo-baroque influences in architectural design thanks to the architect Dénes Györgyi. This fusion was particularly prominent during the twenty-year period following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as Hungary sought to establish itself as an independent nation-state.

This study highlights the nuanced ways in which nationality and ethnicity are represented in architectural design, particularly within the Yugoslav and Hungarian Nationality Rooms. The Yugoslav Room reflects the challenges of articulating a unified identity within a multiethnic state. The Hungarian Room illustrates the interplay between folk traditions and neo-baroque influences during a critical period of nation-building. As part of the Nationality Rooms project, both rooms were designed to represent educational spaces from before 1787, naturally aligning their styles and historical themes. Together, these architectural spaces serve as tangible expressions of evolving national identities, illustrating the intersection of tradition, modernity, and cultural memory.

Nationality and Heritage Rooms at the Cathedral of Learning

The Nationality and Heritage Rooms at the Cathedral of Learning were designed in collaboration with cultural experts and ethnic community representatives, these rooms function as both active classrooms and scholarly reconstructions that preserve and interpret the material culture of Pittsburgh's immigrant populations. According to the original concept, the thirty-one rooms function as classrooms; in addition to the Nationality Rooms where classes and lectures are held, numerous traditional classrooms within the building also serve university education.

In *Pittsburgh: An Urban Portrait*, architectural historian Franklin Toker describes the Cathedral of Learning at the University of Pittsburgh in Oakland as the realization of John

Bowman's vision. Bowman, who was appointed university chancellor in 1920, sought to "create the most extravagant college building in the world" (83). Charles Klauder, the architect of the building, had experience in Gothic Revival architecture from his work at Princeton, where he assisted James Gamble Rogers before establishing himself independently. The structure was built using a steel framework, which was begun in 1926 and continued until October 21, 1929 (83). The building was completed in 1937 and included the Commons Room, designed in the style of fifteenth-century English Perpendicular Gothic, as well as the Nationality Rooms, which represent the material culture of Pittsburgh's immigrant communities and their connection to the university.

The concept for the Nationality Rooms originated with sociologist Ruth Crawford Mitchell, who published a series of articles about the completed rooms in 1942. By that time, the Yugoslav and Hungarian rooms had been inaugurated. In the foreword to Crawford Mitchell's publication, John G. Bowman expressed his gratitude to her, acknowledging that she "through this long effort has advised and worked with them [various nationalities and committees]" (Bowman in Crawford Mitchell, "Yugoslav Classroom" 3).

Yugoslav Nationality and Heritage Room

The design and symbolism of the Yugoslav Classroom reflect broader cultural and political currents that shaped interwar Yugoslavia. "The Yugoslav Classroom symbolizes the merging of the main streams of cultural influence that have crossed Europe" (Crawford Mitchell, "Yugoslav Classroom" 4–5). From the project's inception, the University of Pittsburgh envisioned the National Rooms as representations of the city's ethnic diversity, rooted in historical and architectural authenticity. In a letter dated June 21, 1927, from the Office of the Chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh (Pittsburgh, PA) to a "selected list of Croatians, Slovenians, and Serbians," it was stated that, as the university had begun work on the interior design of the Cathedral of Learning, "great interest has been expressed in the idea of having some symbol of the cultural background of every nationality group making up the population of the city of Pittsburgh built into this building, which will express in its exterior the best in American architecture"[1] As the letter further notes, the University of Pittsburgh hosted a reception on June 27 for the three Yugoslav groups: "At this time, we would like to consider how a fitting memorial to the art, literature, and history of Croatia, Serbia, and Slovenia could be established in the Cathedral of Learning" (UA 40.25, B1, F1). By July 19, 1927, a Yugoslav Committee had been formed, comprising representatives of Croats, Serbs, and Slovenes, and by October of the same year, the Women Representatives on the Central Yugoslav Cathedral of Learning Committee had been designated. Prior to the establishment of the Yugoslav Committee, a Croatian Committee had been formed on July 8, 1927, with Kosto Unković serving as its secretary; he later became the chairman of the Yugoslav Committee. Archival materials related to the Yugoslav Room (*Correspondence with the Architect*) indicate that the Croatian Committee of the Cathedral of Learning was referenced again in 1929.

[1] Box 1 Folder 1 1927 from Yugoslav Nationality Room Committee Records, 1925-1942, UA.40.25, University Archives, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System in the further notes UA.40.25. Box 1 Folder 1 1927. Further references to this archival material are in the main text.

Despite efforts to create a unified Yugoslav identity, the project was marked by ethnic exclusions and contested representations. The underrepresentation of Yugoslav nations is already evident in this letter: while only three national groups were invited to contribute to the artistic and historical representation, the South Slav ("Jugoslav" in a literal sense) nations also included Dalmatians, Slavonians, Bosniaks, and Montenegrins, in addition to Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes. In 1927, the year of this correspondence, the official name of the country was the Kingdom of Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes (Kraljevina Srba, Hrvata i Slovenaca, 1918–1929). The state was officially renamed the Kingdom of Yugoslavia in 1929 (Kraljevina Jugoslavija, 1929–1941). As Srđan Milošević observed, "The society in the first Yugoslav state (1918–1941) as a whole was specific, but each of its constituent parts had its counterparts within the Balkan or Central European framework" (351).

The university administration and committee leaders aimed for a generalized "Yugoslav" aesthetic. In March 1928, Ruth Crawford Mitchell, who oversaw the interior plans of the Cathedral of Learning, stated in the memorandum "Suggestions for the Yugoslav Room" that "the committee feels that while the lesser details might reflect certain sections such as Croatia, Dalmatia, etc., the general effect should be 'Yugoslav'" (UA 40.25, B1, F1.). In her letter to Kosta Unković, chairman of the Yugoslav Committee, she mentioned that the Chancellor "hopes very much that the Yugoslav Committee will be able to persuade Mestrovich [Ivan Meštrović] to come to Pittsburgh" (ibid.) to offer his personal advice on the as-yet-undetermined plans for the Yugoslav Room. However, by the time the letter arrived, Meštrović was already in the United States. His eventual contribution far exceeded what was initially requested—he designed a sculpture for the Yugoslav Room.

Artistic interpretations of Yugoslav identity were contested among cultural figures, illustrating tensions in defining a unified aesthetic. Art historian and university professor Walter Read Hovey described Meštrović's sculpture in a letter to Ruth C. Mitchell on February 25, 1929: "The sculpture of Mestrovic seems to me to be particularly representative of the Slavic temperament (whatever his political leanings may be) and great enough to have a universal appeal. His work, deriving as it does from that stylized art which forms the source of Slavic culture, includes its spirit" (UA 40.25, B1 F2). He also emphasized that it woul d be "more impressive by the comparative simplicity of the rest of the room" (ibid.). Walter Read Hovey refers to the Slavic temperament and culture, effectively generalizing the aspirations that would define the primary purpose of the Yugoslav Room. The term "Slavic" as a descriptor is more than just a broad generalization. However, the 1925 World Fair's wooden portal, designed by Vojta Braniš, the architect of the Yugoslav room, reinforced Yugoslav unity through its painted composition, which depicted an idealized Yugoslav Arcadia. The figures, resembling Ivan Meštrović's archetypes, contributed to the concept of a "initial Yugoslav identity" (Ignjatović 142). Dr. Ivan Švegel, a former member of parliament, did not share Walter Read Hovey's opinion. Representing the Zagreb Committee of the Prosvetni Savez (Educational Union), he wrote to Mrs. Crawford Mitchell on May 7, 1929, from Lake Bled, then Yugoslavia: "I hardly think that his modern and changing conceptions … would fit into a Yugoslav room with the characteristics of a national peasant art …. Under no circumstances should Meštrović's art and types of faces, etc., be called typically Slav or Yugoslav" (UA 40.25, B1, F2).

Despite its symbolic weight, the Yugoslav Room was also subject to practical limitations, including university policy and room size. The University of Pittsburgh owns two sculptures by Ivan Meštrović: a bust of Mihajlo Pupin and a self-portrait (placed in the Fine Arts Department). Mihajlo Idvorski Pupin, also known as Michael Pupin, was a Serbian physicist, physical chemist,

and philanthropist based in the United States and played significant role in the establishment of the Yugoslav Room. These busts could not be placed in the Yugoslav Room in 1939 due to the policy stating that no living person shall be represented in any of the rooms. That same year, the Department of Fine Arts and the Department of Physics requested these sculptures. Among the archival materials, there is a photograph of Meštrović's bust in the Department of Fine Arts.

Early architectural designs by Iveković reveal constraints imposed by physical space and an intention to emphasize national peasant art forms. Walter Read Hovey's letter indicates that the first designs for the Yugoslav Room were completed shortly after Croatian architect and university professor Cirillo M. Iveković wrote a letter in Croatian on October 10, 1928, from Zagreb (present-day Croatia). A review of these initial designs took place in February 1929. In his letter, Iveković noted: "The limited space and small dimensions of the room preclude all plastic work, even to the height of an average person. Smooth, bare walls are not well suited for a lecture room because acoustics are poor. For these reasons, the room in question is planned in the old Croatian national style, which excludes all plastic work and uses various flat surfaces (boards) (…)" (ibid.). The initial revised plans still included a central panel, referred to in the memorandum ("Memo for Revision of Plans for Yugoslav Class Room, February 21, 1929") as the "Mestrovic Panel," which was reserved for a carving: "The panel has been promised by Prof. Pupin, who talked with Mestrovic about the Yugoslav Room in 1928" (ibid.) The secretary of C. Mitchell mentioned Pupin's involvement in a letter dated January 5, stating that Mihajlo Pupin approved of Ivetović's designs, although he found them "too intricate for the size of the room" (ibid.). The January 5, 1929 letter further states: "Realizing the delicacy of the present political situation, he [Mihajlo Pupin] believes that it will be well to proceed slowly, especially as the most important aspect of the memorial room is the fact that its significance is purely cultural. Therefore, its achievement must not be allowed to be marred by political differences, and all factions must participate" (ibid.).

In interwar Yugoslavia, only Serbs, Croats, and Slovenes were recognized as constituent peoples. On January 6, 1929, King Alexander introduced a personal dictatorship, and between 1929 and 1934, this regime sought to replace diverse identities with a unitary Yugoslav national identity through systematic indoctrination (Nielsen).

One of the reasons for national underrepresentation was described by the Educational Union in Zagreb in a letter to the Croatian Committee of the Cathedral of Learning (May 7, 1929), in which they stated that they did not seek recommendations from the Serbs and Slovenes "because they have no such cultural associations, and it was not necessary anyhow since the room is so small …. In such a room, all the characteristics of our national art could not find expression" (UA 40.25, B1, F2). The letter also reveals that Mestrović declined to create a wood carving due to the room's size: "But this carving could not be placed in our room, but in some large hall or into a place where there will be representatives of all nations" (ibid).This letter further comments on the lack of contributions from other nations and discusses the interior design concept and proposed details by Professor Ćiro Iveković: "There could not be put into this room any plastic work, least of all carving or statue, and I agree in this with Mr. Mestrovic" (ibid.).

As the political context evolved, so did the room's concept, and Iveković's role was gradually replaced by Professor Vojta Braniš, whose plans aligned more closely with state-sponsored visions of Yugoslav unity. Although Iveković was still involved in designing the Yugoslav Room as of the May 7 letter, a letter from August of the same year, along with its attached technical description, twelve original plans, and ten photographs, attribute the work to

Professor Vojta Braniš, an academic sculptor. A comparison of Iveković’s and Braniš’s designs reveals consistency in material choice (wood) and decorative elements (wood carvings). However, no archival records (in the folder *Correspondence with Architects*) indicate why Iveković ceased working on the project.

The plans and correspondence processed up to 1929 clearly reflect Croatian cultural and artistic dominance. By 1929, the new Yugoslav government began to see the Cathedral of Learning’s Yugoslav Room as an opportunity to promote a unified Yugoslav identity and representation. As a result, the government supported the project not only morally but also financially. Dr. Stanko Švrljuga, Minister of Finance, wrote to Prime Minister Petar Živković: “I hope that you will agree with me, Mr. Minister, that it is very essential that our state should be represented in this University of Pittsburgh with a nicely furnished room. It is very necessary to do this, to affirm our cultural progress. Especially when you take into consideration that Hungarians, Greeks, and Romanians have already appropriated enough means to furnish their rooms” (October 18, 1929, Belgrade, ibid.). In addition to the government, the King himself expressed his support in 1929: “His Majesty, the King, was delighted to hear of this unique memorial to posterity and enthusiastically stated that Yugoslavia will do all in her power to help furnish a Yugoslav Room characteristic of that Nation, which will stand as a vivid monument to Yugoslav culture…” (ibid.).

Final designs by Braniš introduced new elements to the room integrating both aesthetic and symbolic components. The following year (1930), the development of the room’s design continued under Professor Braniš. In a letter dated July 25, 1930 (UA 40.25, B1 F3), Ruth Crawford Mitchell expressed her hope that Braniš will not fail to see Pupin during his visit to Yugoslavia so they could discuss the details of the room’s design. Braniš had completed a perspective plan for the room on May 6, 1930, in Zagreb, which included a new fireplace design on the right side—an element particularly praised by the Interior Plans Cathedral of Learning committee. The letter also mentions a bust to be created by Meštrović, which was planned to be placed either in the bay window or above the fireplace. The statue had already been included in previous plans designed by Iveković, and its original concept was proposed by Mihajlo Pupin.

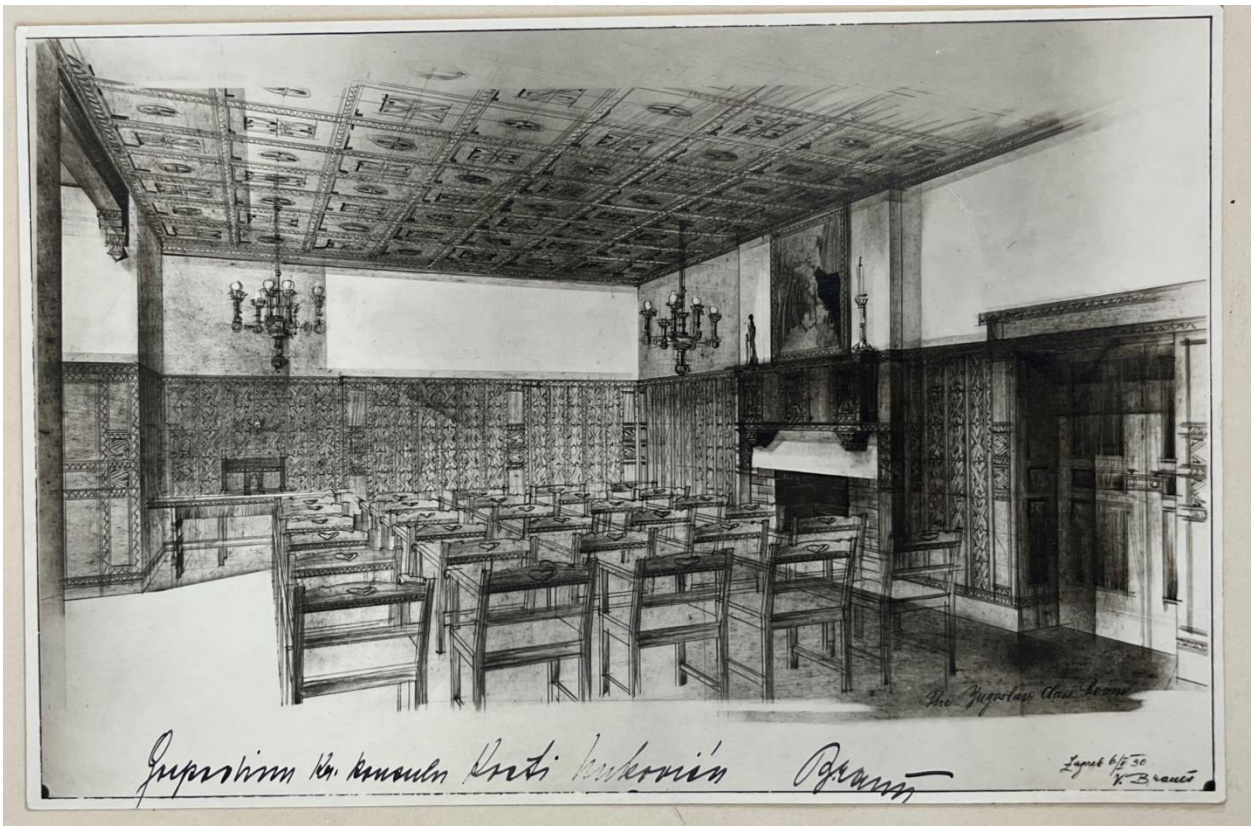

Figure 1. Perspective of Yugoslav Classroom drawn by Vojta Braniš in 1930. Designed by Vojta Braniš and presented to Kosto Uniković. (Source: Box 3 Folder 7, Yugoslav Nationality Room Committee Records, 1925-1942, UA.40.25, University Archives, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.)

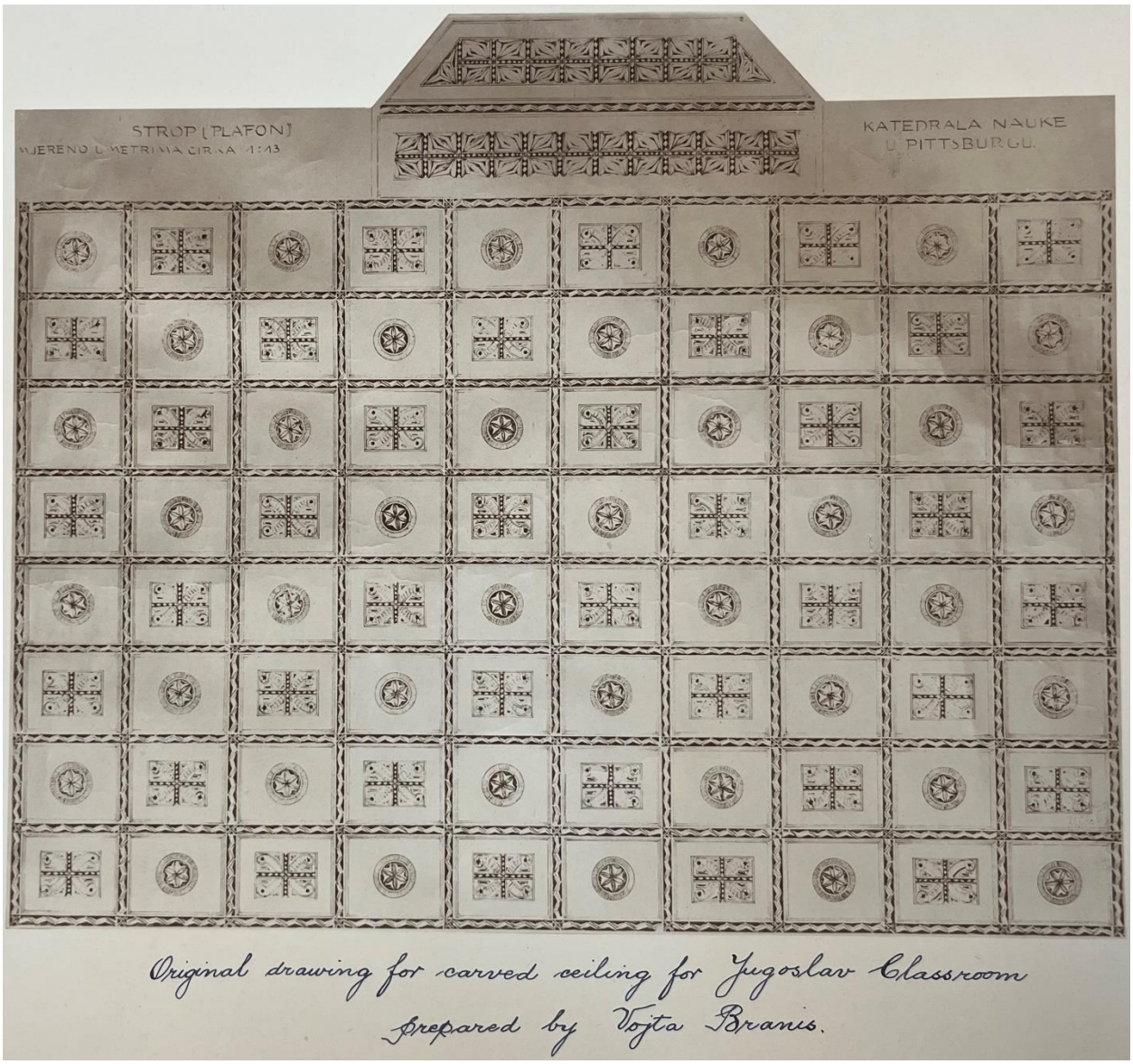

Figure 2. Original drawing for carved ceiling for Yugoslav Classroom prepared by Vojta Braniš. (Source: Box 3 Folder 7, Yugoslav Nationality Room Committee Records, 1925-1942, UA.40.25, University Archives, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.)

The year 1929 marked a shift in the country’s (by then the Kingdom of Yugoslavia) approach to the question of Yugoslav identity, and this directly influenced how identity would be visually articulated in the room. The King sought to create a unified nation with a cohesive culture that would unite the South Slavs within Yugoslavia. However, the question of what constituted Yugoslav identity—specifically, which cultural and artistic manifestations represented Yugoslavia—remained unresolved: “the members of the Yugoslav Committee felt that they were not qualified to pass judgment on it as to what extent the carving was representative of Yugoslavia” (UA 40.25, B1 F4). Daniel Stepanovich, Esq., Secretary, asked M. I. Pupin for his opinion in a letter dated April 17, 1931, regarding a hand-carved wooden panel that had arrived from abroad (its exact origin was not specified). In his response, Pupin

expressed his position unequivocally: “I am not an expert in wood carving, and I do not know the characteristics of Yugoslav wood carving. If Mrs. Mitchell wishes to consult authorities on this subject, she can find them in the Art Department of the Carnegie Institute of Technology or in the Museum of Fine Arts in Pittsburgh” (M. I. Pupin, April 21, 1931, ibid.).

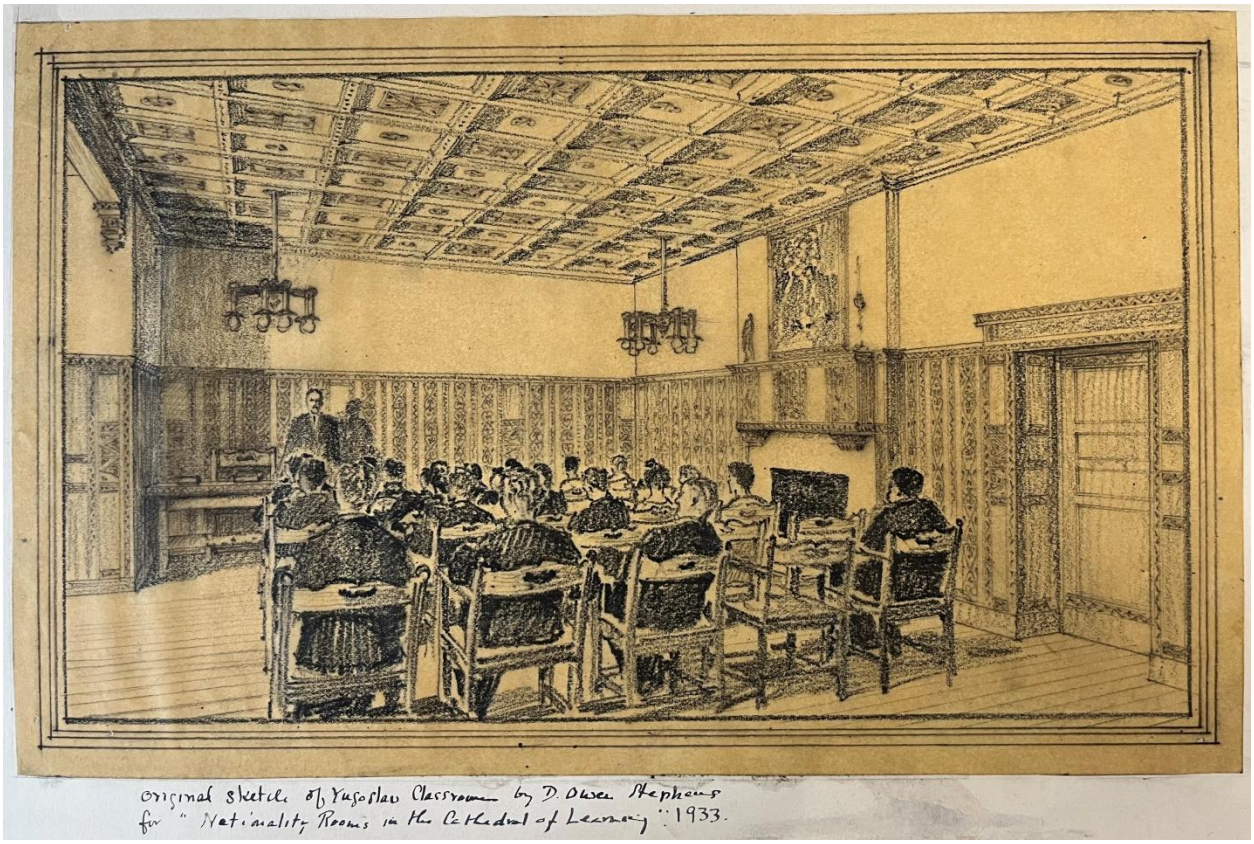

Figure 3. Original sketch of Yugoslav Classroom by D. Owen Stephens for “Nationality Rooms in the Cathedral of Learning”, 1933. (Source: Box 3 Folder 6, Yugoslav Nationality Room Committee Records, 1925-1942, UA.40.25, University Archives, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.)

By December 20, 1933, “The Committee for the Yugoslav Room, together with the University of Pittsburgh, has approved the final drawings for the Yugoslav Room as submitted by Professor Braniš of Zagreb and as reviewed by Mr. A. A. Klimcheck [university architect of the University of Pittsburgh]” (UA 40.25, B1 F6). In the following months, the University opened tenders for the fabrication and installation of the woodwork, which was to be made from Slavonian oak. According to the documents, the opening of the Yugoslav Room was scheduled for July or August 1935 (UA 40.25, B1, F8). Among the archived images, likely from 1935, one stands out, titled: *“Jan Luhowiak, Ukrainian wood carver from Mt. Washington, worked on panel for Yugoslav Room”* (UA 40.25, B1, F6). However, in a 1929 letter from the Zagreb-based Committee of *Prosvjetni Savez* (Educational Assembly) to the Croatian Committee for the Cathedral of Learning, the committee emphasized that the fact that all the carving work should be done in Zagreb should be taken into consideration (June 6, 1929, UA 40.25, B1, F2).

Tensions between diaspora communities and homeland institutions delayed the room’s completion, as pressure from the Pittsburgh-based Croatian *Zajedničar* association emerged by

1934, as indicated in a letter from Ruth Crawford Mitchell (Interior Plans, Cathedral of Learning) to Vojta Braniš, dated August 7, 1934 (UA 40.25, B3, F5). Due to the peak of political and financial tensions in 1934 (Seton-Watson) and again before the 1938 elections (Ramet117), the completion and dedication of the room were delayed until March 31, 1939 (UA 40.25, B1, F12).

The final completed room in 1939 showcased symbolic elements drawn from multiple South Slavic traditions, while scholarly works continued to refine understandings of Yugoslav folk culture. A 1942 description of the room by Crawford Mitchell (“Yugoslav Classroom”) highlights that the panels were made of Slavonian oak, with wall panels embroidered with a Slavonic heart design, combined with a geometric border of Byzantine influence. The carved ceiling features folk motifs of Croatian, Slovenian, and Serbian origins. The professor’s chair and two guest chairs were carved at the Industrial Art School in Zagreb, where Braniš served as a professor. The room was further adorned with paintings (portraits) and art pieces, including a bronze bust by Vojta Braniš titled *Post-War Motherhood*, *The Lace Madonna* by Slovenian women, and books representing Yugoslav literature and art.

Figure 4. Wall panels embroidered with a Slavonic heart design combined with a geometric border and portraits of Baron Georg Von Vega and II. Petar Petrović-Njegoš. (Source: The Author, 2023)

Figure 5. The Lace Madonna in the Yugoslav room. (Source: The Author, 2023)

Among the books showcased in the classroom in 2023 (the year of the research conducted) was also the *Serbo-Croatian Folk Songs: Texts and Transcriptions of Seventy-Five Folk Songs from the Milman Parry Collection and a Morphology of Serbo-Croatian Folk Melodies* by Béla Bartók and Walbert B. Lord. With a scholarship from Columbia University, Bartók conducted research at Harvard on the Milman Parry Serbo-Croatian collection (Griffiths). As noted in a scholarly review: "The monograph is one of the most important contributions to the musicological analysis of Yugoslav folk songs, in spite of the brevity (92 pp.) of Bartók's text." (J. B. and C. R. 69).

The Hungarian Classroom of the Cathedral of Learning

The Hungarian government's interest in the Nationality Rooms was spurred by regional cultural diplomacy and concerns over national representation. Hungarian consul general Lajos Alexy informed the Foreign Ministry about the increasing prominence of Slavic cultural activities and Slavic studies at the University of Pittsburgh. He emphasized the significance of the Nationality Rooms project in European cultural engagement, noting the financial contributions from Czechoslovakia and Yugoslavia, which in turn sparked Hungary's interest in participating (Nagy 445). The idea of creating a room to represent the Hungarian nation and strengthen the connection between the Hungarian community and the university had already emerged in 1929.[2]

Hungarian interwar architecture was shaped by the ideological tensions between nationalism and modernism. Interwar Hungary (1919–1939) was a period of cultural transformation marked by political instability and economic challenges resulting from the Treaty of Trianon (1920), as well as artistic innovation in avant-garde and modernist movements. Architecture and visual arts reflected the tensions between nationalism and modernism. The neo-Baroque dominated 1920s architecture, reflecting postwar conservatism, official cultural policies, and societal resistance to past innovations. The conservative elite embraced its grandeur as a symbol of national identity (Ritoók and Hollósi 70).

[2] See the Hungarian Nationality Room Committee Collection, 1926-1964, UA.40.11, University Archives, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System further on UA 40:11 Box 1 FF3 General Correspondence, 1929. Further references to this archival material are in the main text.

Figure 6. The neo-Baroque building of the Déri Museum in Debrecen, completed in 1930. Architects: Dénes Györgyi and Aladár Münnich, 1923–1929. (Source: Fortepan/Somlai Tibor.)

International engagement with architectural trends was a defining feature of 1930, when Budapest hosted the Twelfth International Congress of Architects. This congress included an architectural exhibition and was attended by representatives from twenty-five nations, centering on debates between traditional and modern architecture. The event’s materials were published that same year (n.a.). The Hungarian exhibition at the National Salon showcased the complexity of the country’s architectural identity through multiple stylistic factions. In an article published on January 15, 1930, Béla Rerrich described the Hungarian exhibition held at the National Salon. Among the groups mentioned were the artists incorporating folk artistic elements, represented by Dénes Györgyi (Rerrich 11). In his evaluation of the International Congress of Architects, the architect and critic Vilmos Magyar identified four distinct groups. The exhibition of the historicist (“eclectic”) group included the Déri Museum in Debrecen, designed by Dénes Györgyi and Aladár Münnich (Magyar, “XII. Nemzetközi építész-kongresszusról” 13). Györgyi’s exhibition pavilion in Barcelona was featured in the modernist group, while the national and vernacular architecture exhibition included school buildings (1911–1917) designed by Gyula Sváb and Dénes Györgyi within the Transylvanian vernacular movement (Magyar, “A XII. Nemzetközi építészkongresszus tervkiállításának mérlege” 380–381).

Dénes Györgyi's career unfolded at the intersection of early twentieth-century Hungarian architecture's search for identity; his work was rooted in the folk idiom that carried forward the legacy of Lechner while showcasing an openness to Western European architectural modernism. His oeuvre was shaped by his role as an educator, his international orientation, and his close connections with Hungarian institutions, and is characterized by a continual renewal of architectural thought. Györgyi played a significant role in representing Hungarian architecture on the international stage. He contributed to the Hungarian Pavilion at the 1911 Turin World's Fair and later designed the Hungarian pavilions for the World's Fairs in Barcelona (1929), Brussels (1935), and Paris (1937) (Kubinszky).

In 1930, professors Dénes Györgyi and Károly Bodon from the National School of Applied Arts (Industrial Art School) participated in a restricted competition to design the interior of the Hungarian Classroom in the Cathedral of Learning. According to Crawford Mitchell, "The committee chosen to select the winning design [of the Hungarian Classroom of the Cathedral of Learning] was composed of well-known figures in the artistic circles of Budapest" (Crawford Mitchell, "Hungarian Classroom" 5). The committee was chaired by K. Róbert Kertész, undersecretary of state for education and architect, and included prominent figures such as Elek Petrovics, art historian and director-in-chief of the Hungarian Art Museum; Lajos Ágotay, director of the Industrial Art School; Ferenc Helbing, painter and rector of the Industrial Art College; Miklós Menyhért, industrial artist; Dénes Jánossy, ministerial secretary; and Dr. István Varga, director of the Institute of Economic Research (UA 40:11 B1, F17: *Architectural Correspondence*).

On February 28, 1930, after carefully reviewing the proposals submitted by Dénes Györgyi and Károly Bodon, the Budapest-based committee concluded that it would not make a final decision but would instead recommend that both plans be submitted to the relevant American authorities for final selection (ibid.). On July 30, 1930, the Chancellor of the University of Pittsburgh wrote to Dr. Lajos Alexy, Hungarian consul at the Royal Hungarian Consulate in Cleveland, stating that, based on the joint decision of the Pittsburgh Committee for the Hungarian Hall and the University Committee on Interior Plans for the Cathedral of Learning, "Professor Györgyi's Plan No. 2" had been selected (ibid.). As Zsolt Nagy states, "Györgyi was also considered an ideal choice because he represented a compromise between contemporary Hungary's two cultural trends, blending the geometrically simplistic architectural designs characteristic of the *urbánus* or modern style with ornamentation of the *népies* or folk manner." (446)

The Pittsburgh-based Hungarian Committee strongly endorsed Györgyi's design for its national character and authenticity. In 1930, the "Majority Report of the Hungarian Hall Committee on the Plan of the Room" (UA 40:11 B1, F17) included a statement from Rev. Andor Laffler, who concluded: "We [the Hungarian Committee in Pittsburgh] know that the plan presented by Mr. Györgyi is truly Hungarian in spirit, in construction, and in ornamentation, and, on the other hand, declare that Mr. Bodon's plan is anything but Hungarian." The report outlined eight points explaining why Bodon's design did not reflect the Hungarian spirit, while seven points evaluated the Hungarian characteristics and merits of Györgyi's proposal.

Figure 7. Hungarian Room by Bodon Károly (February 15, 1930. Budapest). Source: Box 3, Hungarian Nationality Room Committee Collection, 1926-1964, UA.40.11, University Archives, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System

Bodon’s design was rejected due to its incorporation of stylistic elements not aligned with Hungarian heritage. According to the report, Bodon’s design lacks Hungarian characteristics due to several stylistic and cultural elements that align more closely with foreign influences. The overall atmosphere of the room fails to reflect Hungarian aesthetics; instead, its elaborate and restless nature is more characteristic of Rococo interiors. The ceiling design does not resemble traditional Hungarian styles but rather evokes the appearance of a ballroom. The paneling exhibits distinctly French influences, while the tiled stove is of German origin, a feature typically found in households shaped by German cultural influence in Hungary. Additionally, the furniture lacks a coherent stylistic identity, further distancing the design from traditional Hungarian principles.

Figure 8. Hungarian Room. Györgyi Dénes (February 25, 1930. Budapest). Source: Box 3, Hungarian Nationality Room Committee Collection, 1926-1964, UA.40.11, University Archives, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System

In contrast, Györgyi’s proposal was praised for its integration of traditional Hungarian artistic motifs. According to the report (UA 40:11 B1, F17), Györgyi’s design embodies Hungarian aesthetics through its incorporation of traditional cultural elements. The ceiling reflects the vibrancy of Hungarian folk culture, evoking the colorful nature of folk songs and costumes. The furniture, characterized by its solid construction, substantial weight, and intricate ornamentation, aligns with Hungarian design traditions. Additionally, the decorative elements draw inspiration from historic Transylvanian courtyard gates, reinforcing a connection to

traditional Hungarian craftsmanship. The unpaneled, heavy walls are a distinctive feature of Hungarian interior design. Furthermore, the lamps incorporate stylistic elements of the tulip, one of the most emblematic flowers in Hungarian folk art, further emphasizing the national character of the design. Point seven of the report highlights Györgyi's personal background, professional achievements, and family heritage—specifically referencing his father, Kálmán Györgyi—as evidence of his deep understanding of Hungarian interior design and his use of its motifs in his work.

Despite its initial acceptance, Györgyi's design underwent extensive revision, reflecting tensions between artistic autonomy and institutional constraints. Although Dénes Györgyi's design (*Plan No. 2*) was accepted in 1930, the architect revised it multiple times until 1938. By 1933, he had created three versions, [3] the first of which—*Revision of Hungarian Prize Plan No. 2*—was completed as early as July 1930 (UA 40:11 B1, F17). Györgyi wrote: "I ask, therefore, with great emphasis, that the American Committee leave my plans unaltered, for through these American influences, the originality would be lost. Above all, I ask for the privilege of artistic freedom of expression" (ibid.). He pointed out that he had already received detailed instructions regarding the room's furnishings, which "endangered the Hungarian characteristic of the room" (ibid.). The architect recommended that the construction be carried out in Budapest, as much of the work required his personal presence and artistic supervision.

On June 11, 1932, the architect submitted yet another version of the plan (UA 40:11 B1, F 19). Although the second design had been accepted in 1930, additional revisions—labeled *A* and *B*—were subsequently created. The *Plan Inventory* includes an original perspective drawing of the room's interior, executed in colored chalk. However, no such colored drawings have been found among the known archival documents, despite references to them in correspondence and the inventory records. In a letter, Györgyi noted that another revision would be necessary, as the room's dimensions had changed, rendering the original plans unusable without modifications. The newly selected *Type B* classroom plan was designated as *Plan No. 608*, with a revision date of May 1, 1931. The architect wrote*:* "When I received this blueprint, I examined it in detail, but to my greatest regret, I found significant discrepancies and contradictions in this plan provided by the University's Construction Supervision Office, which made it impossible for me to complete the blueprint for the Hungarian classroom" (ibid—my translation).

Despite these challenges, Györgyi prepared two alternative designs, each based on different room dimensions (as the exact measurements were still unknown). In both versions, the primary interior architectural feature was a coffered ceiling, described as a "shallow, richly ornamented and colorfully painted coffered ceiling" ("kis mélységű kazettázott dúsan ornamentált és színezett mennyezet") and an "architectonic coffered ceiling" ("architektónikus kazettázott mennyezet") (ibid—my translation).

Hungarian cultural leaders viewed the project as both a national and diasporic symbol of identity. Dr. Samuel Gömöry, president of the Hungarian Room Committee at the University of Pittsburgh, emphasized the broader significance of the project in a 1932 letter to Howard Sutherland: "This Hungarian Memorial Room is to serve a double purpose. It will establish a proper standing of the Hungarian in America, along with the other nationalities, and also will

[3] Letter by Dénes Györgyi (Budapest, August 30, 1933) UA 40:11 Box1 FF7 General Correspondence, 1933

serve as a worthy and permanent manifestation of the culture of a thousand years of their country of birth" (UA 40:11 B1, F6). Correspondence from 1932 provides insight into Györgyi Dénes's collaboration with the Ministry of Religion and Public Education in developing the plans (UA 40:11 B1, F19). However, the letters also reveal that frequent revisions and modifications within the ministry negatively impacted the efficiency of the design process. As a result, Györgyi informed Gömöry that moving forward, he would act in his own name and consult the Ministry only on matters of major importance. In 1932, the Hungarian classroom project fell under the jurisdiction of Dr. Kálmán Szily, Secretary of State, and the Ministry's Department of Arts, overseen by Deputy Secretary of State K. Róbert Kertész.

Györgyi's technical design documents offer rare insight into his artistic sources and the historical symbolism embedded in the Hungarian Room. Györgyi rarely referenced the sources of his design motifs in his correspondence regarding the room's decoration. However, on May 24, 1933, he submitted *The Technical Description of the Interior Plans of the Hungarian Room at the University of Pittsburgh*, a document intended to serve as the final version of the design, incorporating the requested modifications. In this description, he noted that he had designed a cabinet to run the full length of the wall and at the height of the table, drawing inspiration from the "Peasant Chest with Tulips" (UA 40:11 B1, F20). According to the document, industrial artist Lajos Muhits was responsible for crafting the wall tapestry, and Györgyi listed several objects he intended to have manufactured in Hungary. The 1933 design includes the following note: "On the top of the long chest, a relic container representing the bust of King St. Ladislaus is placed opposite the 'vitrine.' This relic container is one of the oldest examples of industrial art, being nearly 900 years old" (ibid.). This detail is referenced in the *Comments on the Final Design for the Hungarian Committee* from discussions between Professor Györgyi and Dr. Gömöry on July 11, 1933 (ibid.). The final plan, submitted in May 1933, was deemed "entirely acceptable to the Hungarian Committee and to the University of Pittsburgh" (ibid.). However, it was suggested that the number of university coats of arms be reduced to eight, representing the following institutions: Budapest, Szeged, Debrecen, Pécs, Architectural University, Miskolc, Kecskemét and Eger.

Practical constraints imposed by the university prompted revisions to Györgyi's original artistic vision. On June 29, 1934 (UA 40:11 B1, F21),A. A. Klimcheck, the university's architect, requested modifications to the room's furnishings. He reminded Györgyi that the Cathedral of Learning's Heritage Rooms function as classrooms, and therefore, the furniture should be designed accordingly. He explicitly asked the architect to abandon the idea of creating a quiet reception-room atmosphere—a concept that appears frequently in the project descriptions. The following year, another revision of the plan was completed (February and March 5, 1935, UA 40:11 B1, F22).

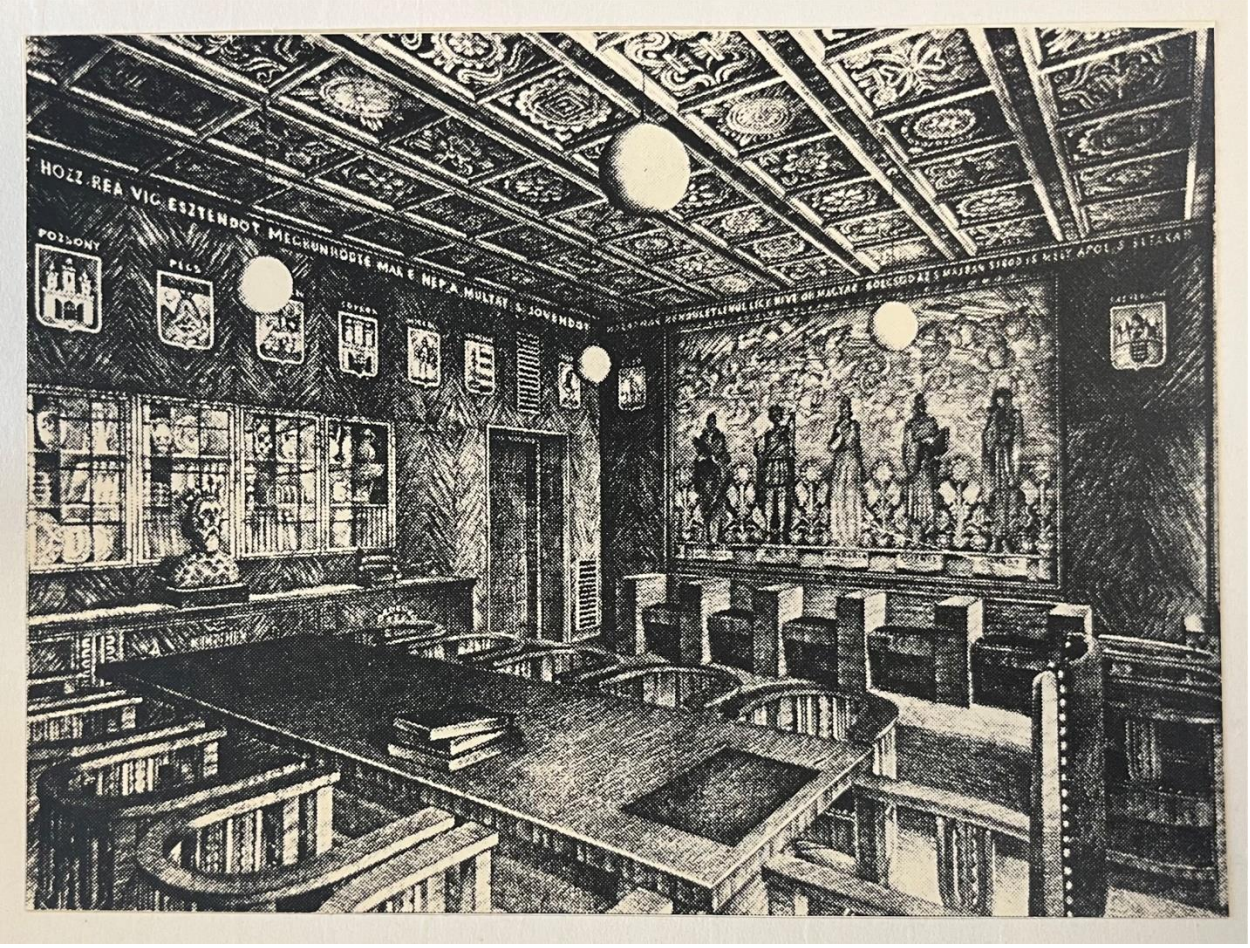

Figure 9. Hungarian Room by Györgyi Dénes (May 24, 1933. Budapest). (Source: Box 3, Hungarian Nationality Room Committee Collection, 1926-1964, UA.40.11, University Archives, Archives & Special Collections, University of Pittsburgh Library System.)

The handcrafted components of the Hungarian Room underscore the transnational collaboration and the emphasis on cultural authenticity. According to a list dated May 31, 1934 (UA 40:11 B1, F8), and subsequent correspondence, the first objects imported from Hungary for the Hungarian Room included seventy hand-painted ceiling panels, a wall tapestry created by Sándor Muhits, painted coats of arms, wood carvings, and other handcrafted items. However, the list does not specify the individual artists responsible for these works. Antal Dióssy had planned to paint a group portrait, and a photograph of this proposed work was sent to Pittsburgh. At the center of the composition was Saint Stephen, with Saint Emeric and Saint Ladislaus in the foreground, and Saint Elizabeth and Saint Margaret behind them. Surrounding these canonized figures of the Hungarian Árpád dynasty were five groups representing religion, science, history, literature, and the arts. However, there is no known record confirming the completion of this painting. Dióssy was also responsible for painting the decorative panels of the coffered ceiling.

Figure 10. Ceiling of the Hungarian Room, painted by Antal Diósy. (Source: American Hungarian Educators Association, 2019 conference, ahea.net/photo-album.)

Györgyi also designed thirteen university coats of arms as part of the room’s decoration. Among these were the coats of arms of three universities that were located within Hungary at the time but had predecessors in territories that were no longer part of the country: Pécs (University of Pozsony), Szeged (University of Kolozsvár), and Budapest (Academy of Nagyszombat). According to a letter dated December 20, 1937 (UA 40:11 B1, F24), the transatlantic shipment did not include the Hungarian National coat of arms, but all thirteen university coats of arms were completed and sent from Budapest to Pittsburgh in December 1937. The shipment was accompanied by the certificate of the Hungarian artist Antal Dióssy. The furnishings for the Hungarian Room did not arrive in the United States until February 1938 (UA 40:11 B1, F12), aligning with Györgyi’s request that some of the room’s furnishings be produced in Hungary.

The inclusion of university coats of arms in the Hungarian Room reflected both historical lineage and contemporary geopolitical sensitivities. On February 18, 1938, Ruth Crawford Mitchell wrote to Pierrepont Moffat, Chief of the Division of European Affairs in Washington, emphasizing that the university coats of arms had arrived despite their previous request to exclude them. She noted that “from a decorative point of view, our university architect felt that there were too many coats of arms in the room” (ibid.). Given the Cathedral of Learning Heritage Rooms’ policy “…to eliminate from the designs any details of political significance…” (ibid.),

the inclusion of three university coats of arms—Nagyszombat, Kolozsvár, and Pozsony—was called into question. She sought the opinion of the Department of State regarding their placement. In his response on March 26, 1938, Moffat provided historical context for the three universities but stated that “…this is a matter which the Department of State is not in a position to determine” (ibid.).

Despite attempts at censorship, Györgyi’s original vision for the room remained largely intact in the final execution. It remains unclear why all the coats of arms from the original 1933 design were completed despite the recommendations to omit some of them. The Hungarian Room was officially opened on September 29, 1939 in the Commons Room (*Hungarian Room*). The contemporary photograph published in a 1942 brochure does not show the coats of arms, nor was the relic container of Saint Ladislaus, which symbolized centuries-old Hungarian craftsmanship, displayed. Antal Diósy painted the seventy ceiling panels featuring Hungarian floral motifs, but the central painting intended for a prominent location was never completed. Diósy later designed the ceiling of the Hungarian Pavilion at the 1939 New York World’s Fair.

The room features a richly decorated coffered ceiling and an intricately hand-carved wooden door, which contrast with the plain, wood-paneled walls and floors. Although the door was produced in the United States, it was based on a plaster model created in Hungary by Dénes Györgyi. The tulip motif reappears on the students’ chairs and in the corridor, where a cabinet rests on a “tulip chest.”

Figure 10. Carved classroom chairs. (Source: American Hungarian Educators Association, 2019 conference, ahea.net/photo-album)

Among the archival documents of the Hungarian Room is a color painting depicting the curtain design. According to the 1942 publication, the curtains were made in Budapest. "The motifs [butterflies, hummingbirds, carnations] were copied from those on a regal gown made for Queen Maria Theresa in the eighteenth century" (Crawford Mitchell, "Hungarian Classroom" 10).

Conclusions

As Lucia Curta argues, the University of Pittsburgh's Nationality Rooms program functioned as a "showcase" in which immigrant communities engaged in symbolic acts of nation-building from afar, using architecture to imagine and perform collective identities. The Hungarian and Yugoslav Rooms exemplify how such interwar projects became contested sites for negotiating national identity, historical memory, and international visibility. These spaces, developed during the interwar period, do not merely commemorate immigrant heritage—they articulate competing visions of nationhood and historical memory at a time of political and cultural transformations.

The design of the Hungarian Room, through the work of Dénes Györgyi, integrates motifs that reflect an idealized national ethos, informed by Hungary's cultural self-positioning after the Treaty of Trianon. Györgyi's insistence on artistic autonomy produced a space that exemplifies the vernacular inspiration. The room is a projection of post-imperial Hungarian identity within an international educational setting. By contrast, the Yugoslav Room illustrates the challenges of translating a multiethnic and politically fragmented state into a unified architectural narrative. The shifting leadership among architects, frequent revisions to the design reflect the contested nature of Yugoslav identity during the interwar years. While the room aimed to encapsulate a unified Yugoslav cultural identity, the reliance on generalized Slavic folk motifs underscores the limitations of state-directed identity construction.

Both rooms serve as case studies in the role of architecture as a vehicle for national expression and international diplomacy. As sites of transatlantic cultural exchange, they embody the complexities of representing national identity, shaped by both homeland imperatives and the expectations of the host institution.

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