



Petit Palais
Musée des Beaux-Arts
de la Ville de Paris

Károly Ferenczy

Hungarian Modernity

April 14 - September 6, 2026



Károly Ferenczy, *On the Hilltop*, Oil on canvas, 110 x 141.5 cm. Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest – Hungarian National Gallery © Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest – Hungarian National Gallery, 2026.

PRESS RELEASE

March 2026

CURATORS:

Annick Lemoine, Head Curator,
Director of the Petit Palais.

SPECIALIST CURATORS:

Ferenc Gosztonyi, Head Curator,
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest –
Central European Research Institute
for Art History (KEMKI)

Réka Krasznai, Head Curator, Head
of Painting, Museum of Fine Arts,
Budapest – Hungarian National
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Edit Plesznivy, Head Curator, Head
of 19th and 20th Hungarian Painting,
Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest –
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Baptiste Roelly, Heritage
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As famous in his native Hungary as he is little known in France, Károly Ferenczy (1862-1917) is a major figure of Modernity in Central Europe. His truly unique work makes him one of the great painters of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. For this retrospective in France, the Petit Palais aims to showcase his profound originality. Neither a Naturalist, a Symbolist, an Impressionist, a Nabi, nor a Fauvist, but a little of all these at once, he epitomizes late-century cosmopolitanism through the breath of his cultural knowledge. A founding member of an artists' colony working in the heart of the Hungarian countryside, Ferenczy made plein-air painting one of his best-known practices. He sought in nature the expression of a syncretic spirituality. Under his brush, the sun frequently became the leading protagonist in landscapes bearing his own distinctive hallmark.

Featuring almost one hundred and forty pieces, this exhibition reveals the multiple facets of his approach: landscapes, portraits, family scenes, biblical subjects, nudes, and caricatures, while highlighting his fundamental role in the emergence of a Hungarian Modernist art school. This exhibition was designed in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest and the Hungarian National Gallery.



Structured chronologically, the exhibition is punctuated with thematic sections exploring Ferenczy's stylistic evolution, from his early works marked by his travels through France and Italy up until his last period.

The exhibition opens with a self-portrait of Károly Ferenczy flanked by two works depicting the artist directing his model's pose. This introduction immediately establishes the two main poles of his work that would permeate his entire career: pleinair painting and studio work. The first rooms present his early works, produced following his formative travels, particularly in Italy, as well as his beginnings in Szentendre, Hungary. These paintings bear witness to the visual culture Ferenczy acquired through his contact with the great European masters and the lasting impact of his studies in Paris at the Académie Julian.

The exhibition continues with a thematic section presenting the portraits of his loved ones—his wife, father, and children—revealing an intimate and attentive gaze. This personal dimension resonates with a key period in his artistic development: his time in Munich. There, Ferenczy's work evolved towards a more Symbolist language, closely linked to nature, where the forest became the central motif. Several major paintings, such as *Birdsong* (1893) and *Orpheus* (1894), demonstrate this transformation, pointing at a new narrative and spiritual depth.

Ferenczy's move in 1896 to the Nagybánya artists' colony was another seminal moment in his career. There, he reached a full and lasting artistic maturity. Several iconic works from this period attest to his originality: religious subjects transposed into contemporary landscapes, the coexistence of multiple time frames, and the inscription of a pervasive spirituality at the heart of daily life. Biblical themes, which recur throughout his career, find a unique expression here, through the fusion of sacred iconography, observations of nature, and references to the modern world.

The exhibition also shines a light on the close dialogue between painting and literature amongst the Nagybánya artists, particularly through Ferenczy's illustrations for the poetry of József Kiss. The connection underscores the artist's profoundly intellectual nature, his love of reading, and his thorough knowledge of European literature. This openness to the world may be seen in the attention to scenes from daily life and the figures he observed in Nagybánya and its surroundings: peasants, woodcutters, Romani, horsemen, and various trades people. Presented alongside works by other contemporary Hungarian artists, these paintings illustrate his unique vision and pivotal role in the emergence of a Hungarian Modernity.

After 1900, Ferenczy's painting was marked by a highly luminous period. Landscapes, swimming scenes, rivers, and cottages convey a new serenity and an accomplished mastery of colour and composition. At the same time, Ferenczy continued his work as a portraitist, broadening his focus to depict members of the intellectual and artistic circles he frequented, while also developing a freer, more satirical approach in caricatures that reveal a more intimate and humorous facet of his work.

From 1906, the final years of his career were marked by a renewed exploration of the representation of the body. Female nudes, rendered in a classical studio style, are juxtaposed with male figures shown in dynamic contexts like the circus or athletics, where movement is central. This reflection was

also explored in Ferenczy's ambitious project for *La Pietà*, to which he devoted himself extensively between 1913 and 1916. This work, situated at the crossroads of religious and history painting, was the ultimate and unusual masterpiece of a painter who would die before the end of the First World War.

The exhibition concludes with a series of late, intensely chromatic landscapes. In these works, nature is made vibrant and almost meditative, testifying to Ferenczy's consummate pictorial mastery. The exhibition ends with *The Red Wall IV* (1910), an emblematic painting both for the strength of its colour and the contemplative atmosphere it evokes, leaving the visitor with a lasting souvenir of the art of this major Central European painter of Modernism.

This exhibition has been organized in collaboration with the Museum of Fine Arts, Budapest and the Hungarian National Gallery.

PRACTICAL INFORMATION

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75008 Paris
Tel : +33 (0)1 53 43 40 00
petitpalais.paris.en

Tuesday - Sunday, 10am - 6pm
Late-night opening Friday and
Saturday until 8pm

Prices

Full rate: 17 €
Reduced rate : 15 €

Booking a time slot for your visit is
recommended on :
petitpalais.paris.en

Accessible to visitors with
disabilities.



Károly Ferenczy, *Birdsong*, 1893. Oil on canvas, 105 x 77.5 cm.
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Károly Ferenczy, *The Red Wall IV*, 1910.
Oil on canvas, 31 x 31 cm © Private collection