

The Parisian Find

History of the Find

The artefacts and documents presented here were recovered from the basement of the so-called Goldscheider Building¹ at 7 Síp Street, built by Miklós and Ernő Román, during the 2016 renovation of the building. The company carrying out the work handed it over to the Gyula Forster National Centre for Cultural Heritage Management with the note “Chest of unknown origin 2016/LNY 18730424”, where it was inventoried. However, during the closure and reorganisation of the Foster Centre in December of the same year, it was lost, presumably during the salvage of other documents awaiting removal in January 2017, which was necessary due to a burst pipe.² The chest reappeared at vendor at the Ecseri flea market, from whom it was purchased by a member of the team conducting the present research³ on 24 April 2023. If the hypotheses and conclusions of the research below are correct, and the chest does indeed contain Ilka Révai’s photos and objects, it is a remarkable coincidence that the find was discovered on the exact date of the 150th anniversary of her birth.

List of Photograms with Descriptions

1. *Fête des lumières* (Festival of Lights, 1928)⁴
composite photogram, 12,5×24 cm
inventory number: RI-f/1-2023
inscription on the reverse: “7 Dec 1928”

Révai’s earliest surviving photogram attempt, based on the date on the reverse, was made on the first day of the Hanukkah holiday in 1928. This seems to be confirmed both by the note on the second page of the found pocket notebook (RI-t/5-2023), “...to record the trace of the light-holiday??”, and by three fragmentary entries in the hand-bound notebook from 15 December 1928⁵: “*Champs Délicieux*,”⁶ “*Variétés*,”⁷ and “68 Rue Lafayette”⁸ (RI-t/10-2023, p. 8). The first entry clearly refers to the title of Man Ray’s 1922 Paris publication, which contained his so-called *rayograms*. The second is the title of a French-language Belgian art magazine published monthly between 1928 and 1930, which published photographs and photograms by Man Ray and László Moholy-Nagy, among others, alongside the more progressive contemporary works of the time.⁹ The Paris address was that of the bookshop Librairie des Arts Décoratifs, where both publications were available. It is likely that it was from these sources that Révai first learned of the artistic usage of the photogram.

2. *Rêve* (Dream 1930)
composite photogram, 18×22,2 cm

¹ https://mierzsebetvarosunk.blog.hu/2016/03/07/sip_utca_7, Retrieved February 25, 2025

² <https://2015-2019.kormany.hu/hu/miniszterelnokseg/kulturalis-oroksegvedelemert-es-kiemelt-kulturalis-beruhazasokert-felelos-allamtitkar/hirek/mintegy-200-dokumentum-karosodott-visszafordithatatlanul-a-forster-kozpont-epuletenek-pincejeben>, Retrieved February 25, 2025

³ Researcher: Szabolcs KissPál, assistant: Boróka Prokób

⁴ According to the 1928 Israelite calendar, the Hanukkah holiday of the year 5689 was between 7-15 December

⁵ RI-t/10-2023, p. 8.

⁶ Lee Ann Daffner-Jane Pierce: Man Ray’s *Champs Délicieux* Turns 100, <https://www.moma.org/magazine/articles/688>. Retrieved February 25, 2025

⁷ <https://search.worldcat.org/fr/title/145336971>. Retrieved February 25, 2025

⁸ The title of *Librairie des Arts Décoratifs* in the late twenties, see: <https://www.abebooks.com/PARIS-1928-Roche-Antoine-Librairie-Arts/30753130172/bd#&gid=1&pid=3>

⁹ Exhibition *Variétés* (1928-1930) and photography from the Amsab-ISG collection, <https://www.ugent.be/vandenhove/en/exhibitions/exhibition-archive/exhibition-varietes-1928-1930-and-photography-from-the-amsab-isg-collection#Exhibition>. Retrieved February 25, 2025

inventory number: RI-f/2-2023

inscription on the reverse: "May 1930"

On pages 16–18 of the hand-bound notebook (RI-t/10-2023), one can find a two-page description of Ilka Révai's dream from 1930, the essence of which is that a nude photograph of her daughter Éva (*Female Nude*, 1920s) is brought to life as a choreography of abstract pictorial elements. The detailed description reveals that on the night of the dream, Révai was visiting an exhibition in Paris¹⁰ with her daughter Éva and Ergy Landau.¹¹ There she met László Moholy-Nagy, saw his photograms exhibited there and the first version of the mechanism later known as the *Light-Space Modulator*, originally called the *Light Prop for an Electric Stage*, which was essentially a prop for a live abstract photogram-movie. Moholy-Nagy could have also given her inspiring examples of how to combine photographic printing with the photogram technique, for example in Dora Maar's mixed-media photographic images,¹² which were well known in Paris at the time.¹³ Inspired by the dream, Révai began experimenting with photograms using her own earlier negatives, jewellery-making supplies left over from her former shop in Merano, analysing and reflecting on her own earlier photographs.

3. *L'homme* (The Man, 1932)

composite photogram, 18×24 cm

inventory number: RI-f/3-2023

diary entry: "True art is therefore the ultimate reality. True art, therefore, has no romantic aims (K) (?)." (quote from *Book of New Artists*, see: RI-t/12-2023, p. 24), "...light architecture? [...] l'homme..., what is the difference between man and man Kasi? To advertise, to trumpet, to make people love it, over and over again!..." (RI-t/10-2023, p. 26)

During her experiments, Révai recalls the social network of friends that surrounded her during her Budapest years, her past conversations with Lajos Kassák and the artists of the periodical *Ma* (Today), and the differences on the concept of *man* that art can grasp. She begins to study Kassák's writings (cf. RI/12-2023) and paintings more closely, while creating photograms using a negative of one of her own Kassák portraits.

4. *Fougères* (*Mutterka*) (Ferns [Mutti], 1932)

composite photogram, 18×24 cm

inventory number: RI-f/4-2023

diary entry: "...the machine is merely an executor of the human idea that is at the forefront, and only this idea can set the standard of the work! ¹⁴[...] would the direct image be better suited to capture this idea without the machine? ...but where will the human documentary value be, how can it be preserved after all...? JMC [illegible]?" (RI-t/10-2023, pp. 33–34)

Although no direct evidence has been found, the abbreviation "JMC" is most likely a reference to Julia Margaret Cameron (1815–1879), whose works Révai may have known from a 1926 volume on

¹⁰ 20e salon artistes décorateurs. Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, du 14 mai au 13 juillet 1930. <https://moholy-nagy.org/chronology/> Retrieved February 25, 2025

¹¹ They were already in contact at this time, around 1929–30, when Erzsi Landau photographed Éva Révai's jewelry. See Júlia Cserba's study in this volume.

¹² "...created a series of photograms combining photographic techniques with abstract marks, merging all the techniques that she perfected during a lifetime of art-making." <https://news.artnet.com/art-world/dora-maar-picasso-tate-modern-1710780>. Retrieved February 25, 2025

Dora Maar: Photogram of woman in profile, ca. 1935, <https://artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/37489>. Retrieved February 25, 2025

¹³ Pablo Picasso: Portrait of Dora Maar (with lace), 1936–1937

<https://www.mutualart.com/Artwork/Portrait-of-Dora-Maar--with-lace-/6A0BE50926122C88>. Retrieved February 25, 2025

¹⁴ ¹⁴ Révai quoting herself: Photography - Vörös lobogó, I. 19–20, 18 June 1919

her, edited by the early Victorian photographer's niece, Virginia Woolf. This publication did not include, however, her extraordinary 1860s photograph, which we can consider the very first image in photographic history to be both a photographic print and a photogram. The composite photograph, created using a glass negative by O. G. Rejlander, shows a female portrait framed by the shadows of fern leaves. However, as this picture surfaced only in 1941, being acquired by the Victoria and Albert Museum, Révai may have learned of its existence earlier, presumably from her first master, Rudolph Durhkoop, who was a member of the Royal Society of Photographers, as Cameron herself had been earlier. The present photogram was made using a negative of Révai's portrait of Kassák's mother and her own experiments with celluloid jewellery flowers.

5. *L'architecture des lumières* (Light Architecture, 1935)

composite photogram, 17,8×24 cm

inventory number: RI-f/5-2023

diary entry: "*IR... movement must be balanced, because that is how we get the form! The new form is architecture, ...the architecture of light, the house of the psyche?*" (RI-t/10-2023, pp. 43–44)

This photogram's clean composition, influenced by Kassák's artworks, can be interpreted as a turning point in Révai's series, from which an autonomous, geometric abstract imagery could have emerged. There is not enough data to determine why Révai's work could not develop in this direction.

6. *L'espace de l'angles dansants* (Space of Dancing Angles, 1936)

composite photogram, 15,7×26 cm

inventory number: RI-f/6-2023

inscription on the reverse: "*...angles dansant autour d'Éva? '36*"

diary entry: "*...29, rue d'Astorg, DK!¹⁵*" (RI-t/10-2023, pp. 48–49)

Révai's interest in contemporary body culture and movement art can be seen in several of her earlier photographs, so in addition to portraiture, she was interested in the photographic representation of the body and movement. She may have been influenced by the popular movement art workshops¹⁶ as well as by dance photographers of the time¹⁷. She was certainly inspired, for example, by Kandinsky's studies of movement, whose simple, geometric lines can also be seen in Révai's photograms¹⁸. The simultaneous use of negatives and photograms could also be found in other contemporary photographs of dance, for example in the work of Jane Reece, an American artist of the same age as Révai and a major figure of the turn-of-the-century Pictorialism movement. In 1922, she took photos of a choreographer¹⁹ and later created radial, splinter-like shapes using the photogram technique to further detail the photographic print. Reece lived in Paris from 1922 to 1923, and one of her composite photograms entitled *Spaces*, was included in the 1922 Salon d'Automne exhibition in Paris, which Révai most likely saw during her visit to Paris. This is inferred partly from the title of

¹⁵ RI-T/12-2023, p. 48–49. On this Paris address was located between 1920–41 the Galerie Simon run by D.H. Kahnweiler the popular exhibitions of which were probably visited by Révai. Here she could have come across the copies of *Das Kunstblatt*, a periodical having Kahnweiler as a regular author. <https://www.metmuseum.org/research-centers/leonard-a-lauder-research-center/research-resources/modern-art-index-project/galerie-simon>. Retrieved 25 February 2025

¹⁶ The movement studio of Alice Madzsar (1877–1935) operated between 1912–1937 in Budapest. https://hu.wikipedia.org/wiki/J%C3%A1szi_Alice. Retrieved 25 February 2025

¹⁷ Révai must have known the dance photos of László Willinger, who was running a photo studio in Paris from 1929 <https://lapetitemelancolie.net/category/danse/nina-payne/> Retrieved 25 February 2025

¹⁸ <https://en.matteomascolo.com/post/kandinsky-and-the-dance-of-the-future>, Published in 1926: Wassily Kandinsky, "Tanzkurven: Zu den Tänzen der Palucca," *Das Kunstblatt*, Potsdam, vol. 10, no. 3 (1926), pp. 117–21. https://ghdi.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4335. Retrieved 25 February 2025

¹⁹ Jane Reece: *Triangle Composition* (Harry Losee), 1922. <https://www.clevelandart.org/art/1996.358>. Retrieved 25 February 2025

Révai's photogram, and partly from the appearance of the catalogue cover of this exhibition in her archives (cf. RI-t/14-2023).

7. *Adam* (Adam, 1936)

composite photogram, 18×24 cm

inventory number: RI-f/7-2023

diary entry "...the instrument is the servant of the idea, but it does not determine it! ...you are either an engineer or an artist..."²⁰ (RI-t/10-2023, pp. 48–49)

This photogram presents Ilka Révai's dilemmas, her search for a path, and a reflection on the debate on Dada and Constructivism that took place in Hungary a decade earlier. The title most probably refers to Sándor Bortnyik's widely debated 1924 painting *The New Adam*, which was interpreted by critics as an illustration of intellectual concepts, but even as a bluff. The fact that the composition of this photogram refers to the structure of an earlier Bortnyik painting, the 1922 *Abstract Composition* made in Weimar, suggests that Révai was concerned more with Bortnyik's Constructivism. This is supported by an earlier diary entry from 1935, a quote from a review by Iván Hevesy published ten years earlier: "[Bortnyik] combines the possibilities of symbolic object representation with the powerful clarity and power of abstract forms to suggest a new sense of the world..." (RI-t/10-2023, p. 46). The background of the composition is a blurred exposure of her own portrait of Bortnyik from the early 1920s.

8. *Sans titre* (Untitled, 1940)

composite photogram, 21×29 cm

inventory number: RI-f/8-2023

inscription on the reverse: "MP!!!"

This composition bears a striking resemblance to Margaret de Patta's (1903–1964) photogram *Untitled* of 1939²¹. The American artist, known primarily for her modernist jewelry, began creating photograms in the spring of 1939, influenced by her encounter with László Moholy-Nagy²². Due to the lack of evidence it is not possible to establish from whom Révai may have learned about Patta's work and whether she had seen reproductions of Patta's photograms. Moreover, the inscription on the back of the photograph is ambiguous, as it could refer either to the initials of Margaret de Patta's name, or to the head of the collaborationist Vichy government that was formed at the time (Maréchal Pétain). The emergence of the new government left Révai in a vulnerable and threatened position in France. This is the only surviving autonomous photogram in the series, for which Révai did not use a negative.

9. *Cauchemar* (Nightmare, 1941)

composite photogram, 17,7×24 cm

inventory number: RI-f/9-2023

inscription on the reverse: "~~Tempête~~" (*Tempest*, crossed out), next to it: "Vrai cauchemar! [A real nightmare!], 15 June 1941."

diary entry: "...I was again dreaming of my dear Éva, of a picture in which her delicate figure had been transformed into an 'explosion-figure'. It was distressing, and to free myself I spent the following night trying to picture it..." (RI-t/10-2023, pp. 53–54)

²⁰ „One should either be an engineer or an artist?” Antal Némethy: Budapest exhibitions Periszkop, 1925/1., 34; and Artúr Elek: Sándor Bortnyik and the representational geometry. In: Magyar Iparművészet, Quoted by Pál Merse Szeredi: The new Adam (according to Sándor Bortnyik), conference paper 2016 https://epa.oszk.hu/03500/03580/00007/pdf/EPA03580_helikon_2017_1_126-135.pdf

²¹ <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/your-collection/margaret-de-patta-shaping-light-and-space>. Retrieved 25 February 2025

²² San Francisco, 4th annual convention of the Pacific Arts Association in the spring of 1939, <https://www.gallery.ca/magazine/your-collection/margaret-de-patta-shaping-light-and-space>. Retrieved 25 February 2025

Both the note and the entry are probably a reference to a metaphor by the Hungarian poet Attila József, whom Ilka and Éva Révai knew intimately, written shortly after the three met (“explosion-figure”, from József’s poem *Förgeteg* [Tempest], 1928). However, the background to the depressing dream may have been Ilka Révai’s growing anxiety about the German occupation of Paris, the drastic deterioration of wartime conditions and the promulgation of the second Jewish law by the Vichy government²³. The dates and the inscriptions suggest that photograms nos. 9, 10, 11 and 12 were all made during one single night. Révai used a negative of her *Female Nude*, taken of Éva during the early 1920s, for all four images.

10. *Tourbillon* (Swirl, 1941)
composite photogram, 18×24 cm, series of 4
inventory number: RI-f/10/4-2023

11. *Désintégration* (Falling apart, 1941)
composite photogram, 17,9×24 cm
inventory number: RI-f/11-2023

12. *Dénégation* (Denial, 1941)
composite photogram, 17,1×22,7 cm
inventory number: RI-f/12-2023
inscription on the reverse: “*Bonne chance mon cher Henri! Je pense que je dois abandonner..., Paris, décembre 1941*”

The note on the back of the most recent photogram (no. 12) probably refers to the French painter Henri Goetz (1909–1989), with whom Révai may have come into contact through their common acquaintance Zsigmond Kolozsváry, as the three of them had previously lived in the same Parisian street (rue Bardinet, see: RI-t/13/1-10-2023). In addition, Goetz and Kolozsváry were for a while immediate neighbours in the same house. The inscription “*Good luck Henri!*” relates to Goetz’s underground activities: he ran a secret printing press, produced leaflets and forged documents for the French Resistance, which Kolozsváry tried to join, but was eventually prevented from doing so by his own arrest for forging his own papers.

List of Objects with Description

Vitrine 1

1. Chest (1930s)
wood, iron, 39×28×15 cm
inventory number: RI-t/1-2023

The chest was originally used as an ordinary soldier’s chest, but bears traces of subsequent alterations. One corner has slat inserts to hold shelved glass plates and the interior is covered with a light absorbing black paint. The reconstruction revealed that the purpose of the conversion was to create a complex photogram-making apparatus with glass plates on three levels to accommodate the various shadow-forming elements. It is not clear from the Paris postal receipt on the lid of the box when the consignment was dispatched, but in Budapest it was not postmarked until 1948. It arrived at 7 Síp Street, with an illegible signature on the receipt. All the items in the present find were recovered from this box.

²³ The second Jewish Law was passed on June 2 1941, and published in the official French monitor on June 14.
https://fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Loi_du_2_juin_1941_remplaçant_la_loi_du_3_octobre_1940_portant_statut_des_Juifs

2. Kodak Eastman darkroom timer (1940s)
metal, glass, 10,5×8×3 cm
inventory number: RI-t/2-2023

The darkroom timer is an indispensable accessory for photographers, especially in the multiple exposure procedure used by Révai. Several fragmentary notes record the precise exposure times she used during her experiments (cf. RI-t/10-2023). This series of timers were distributed in France by the Doehler company of Brooklyn, which had close links with Kodak, as the French inscription on the timer testifies.

3. Voigtländer Perkeo (3×4) camera (1932–34)
11 × 7 × 3 cm inventory number: RI-t/3-2023

The German company Voigtländer, founded in 1756, produced optical instruments, including cameras, which became popular mainly because of their lenses. The shares of the long-time market leader were bought by Carl Zeiss in 1956. According to the number on the lens, it was produced between 1932 and 1934 and was one of Révai's main tools of the trade, as the brand's lenses – designed by Hungarian-born József Petzvál – were known to be excellent for portrait photography.

4. Hanukkiah (around 1900)
cast bronze, 22×23 cm
inventory number: RI-t/4-2023

The Hanukkiah (an 8+1 branch candlestick used on Hanukkah) may have been a family heirloom, but as it is incomplete and broken, it was no longer used for ritual purposes. Analysis of the object has revealed that, as it can be rotated around its base, Révai most likely used it to create light and shadow circles with the aid of a light pencil (RI-t/8-2023) attached to the candlestick. Traces of these circles can be seen in several of her photograms.

5. Pocket notebook/diary (1928)
paper, 6,5×10,7 cm
inventory number: RI-t/5-2023

The small notebook with the inscription “Károly Wirth, Representative of the E. Merck Chemical Factory in Hungary” was probably given to Révai as a promotional gift, as she often needed medication and the German company was the oldest pharmaceutical company in the world, with a significant market in Hungary. Several pages of the 111-page notebook are missing, with only a single entry (“...to record the trace of the light-holiday??”) and an Hebrew mark (“*chag Purim sameach!* 5689”, Happy light-holiday! 5689) on page 14 (see also RI-f/1-2023).

6. Glass plate negative box (circa 1900)
Ghent, Ed Beernaert's Dry Plate Company
cardboard, 14×19×3 cm, restored
inventory number: RI-t/6-2023

This box from the Swiss colloidal dry plate company may have been acquired by Révai in Budapest, as the company split and changed its name at the turn of the century due to insolvency. The box was originally used to store her own negatives in Nice and Paris. Two notebooks (RI-t/5-2023, RI-t/10-2023) and ten postcards (RI-t/13/1-10-2023) were found inside this box.

7. Rhaco filter set (1930s)
metal, glass, in a laminated, fabric-lined cardboard box, 11×5,8×35 cm

inventory number: RI-t/7-2023

The filter set, made by the Richard Henning & Co. (Germany), is used to enrich the grey tones in the process of black and white photography or photogram making.

8. Light pen (1920s)
wood, copper, 15,6×1,4 cm, restored
inventory number: RI-t/8-2023

Turn-of-the-century pencil or pen (?) of an unidentified brand, converted with two thin inserted wires, presumably to operate a small battery-powered torch-burner. The device was thus made usable as a light pen. It was found attached to the candlestick, suggesting that Révai may have used it to create light circle exposures in her experiments.

9. Hyppo Rexo darkroom tongs (1920s)
wood, 20×2×2 cm
inventory number: RI-t/9/2-2023

These two tongs were produced especially for use in the photography darkrooms by the Burke & James Inc. (Chicago) in 1890. Found in the chest, one of them were attached to the candlestick (RI-t/8-2023) to hold the light pen (RI-t/4-2023).

10. Hand-bound notebook (1920–40s)
cardboard, paper, 10×14,2×1 cm
inventory number: RI-t/10-2023

A hand-bound notebook with Ilka Révai's signature on the cover. The sixty-page notebook contains numerous entries. In addition to fragments of thoughts and a longer, coherent description, there are also a significant number of notes consisting of codes and sequences of numbers that may record the exposure times used to produce the photograms. Some of the entries are dated in non-chronological order, from 25 May 1928 to 15 June 1941.

Vitrine 2

11. Kodak Pathé folder, 2 pieces (1930s)
cardboard, 23×32 cm
inventory number: RI-t/11/1, 2-2023

The Kodak Eastman Company launched its film developing and photo enlarging service in 1888, which contributed greatly to the rapid expansion of photography, alongside the advantages of portable, compact cameras. Photographers received their enlarged images in these envelopes and folders. Kodak Pathé is a French subsidiary of the American company Kodak, which was founded in 1927 with the acquisition of a majority stake in Charles Pathé's company. In the chest, one of these folders contained twelve photograms (including a series of four pieces) and the other contained twelve photogram fragments of varying sizes and test strips.

12. Lajos Kassák and László Moholy-Nagy (eds.): *Book of New Artists* (1922)
Vienna, Julius Fischer Verlag
book, 23,5×31 cm
inventory number: RI-t/12-2023

The 50th copy of this volume, published in 500 numbered copies, was given as a gift to Ilka Révai by Kassák, presumably for her 50th birthday, according to the inscription: "*With friendship to my photographer! Kassi [sic!] 24 April 1923.*" On several pages of the publication there are underlined passages and short notes on the margins. First page of the introduction: "*Because there are unbridgeable differences between us in body and spirit.*" – underlined, with the note: "...what do you mean, Kasi? 16.XII.1928." On the same page: "*True art, therefore, has no romantic aims.*" – underlined, with the note: "?". On the fourth page: "*And we do not want to compose something new from the old. And we don't want to compose at all.*" – underlined, with the note: "*but we do want to [illegible] 20.V.1932.*"

13. Postcards

10 unsent postcards, each 9×14 cm

inventory number: RI-t/13/1-10-2023

Four of the ten postcards recovered from the box RI-t/6-2023 depict the main square and old town of Nice, as well as some of the hotels visited by Révai probably during her portrait shootings (Hôtel Interlaken et Provence, Hôtel Beau Rivage). Three other postcards show views of Paris. One postcard shows the Saint Denis quarter (Porte Saint Denis), known as La ville rouge (The Red City), which was the centre of the French Socialist movement at the turn of the century and was famous for its Communist mayors in the 1930s. Two other postcards present the exterior and interior of the Grande Synagogue La Victoire in Paris. Three other postcards depict parisian street views (rue de la Glacière, rue Bardinet) and buildings (Hôtel des Terrasses) of Ilka and Eva Révai's identified Parisian addresses (cf. RI-f/12-2023).

14. Cover of the exhibition catalogue of the Salon d'Automne (1922)

publication cover, paper, 19,5×10,2 cm

inventory number: RI-t/14-2023

note on verso in pencil: "*J. Reece! 267-68, 2000.*"

Only the torn-out cover of the 415-page catalogue of the 15th Paris Salon d'Automne, held from 1 November to 17 December 1922, has been recovered. A note on the cover refers to the page and lot number of Jane Reece's composite photogram entitled *Spaces*, which was shown at this exhibition²⁴ (cf. RI-f/6-2023).

²⁴ Catalogue des ouvrages de peinture, sculpture, dessins...

exposés au Grand Palais des Champs-Élysées, Paris, 1922

p. 267-68 oldal, item nr. 2000. https://data.bnf.fr/12255079/salon_d_automne/ Retrieved 25 February 2025