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# Young tree setting up in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva

## Abstract

The author describes the custom of two villages in Hargita county in Hungary. As the two settlements are close to forests, they abound both in pines and birches, which enables the inhabitants, for instance, the chopping-down of fourteen pines for a wedding as bridal young trees. Apart from weddings, there are numerous other occasions to set up young trees. The author also attempts to interpret the tradition, describe the functions of young tree setting in the limelight of its magical, artistic and ethnic contexts from the 1950s to the present days.

**Keywords:** occasions, tradition, rite, archetypal image, rites of passages, magical-sacral function, national identity, artistic function

During my researches I was seeking information about a „young tree” as a symbol and an *archetype*, about the analysis of the customs and functions of its *setting up*, and the changes of these tradition. In this way, the main questions of my research are the following:

Which occasions are connected with the young tree setting up in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva?

How does planting young trees process?

What is the role of the young tree in connection with this custom?

What is the community’s opinion about the young tree setting up? What is their explanation of this tradition?

What is the meaning of the young tree in the different rites?

I would also like to mention the most important question that I would like to answer. How have the meanings of this tradition changed during last few decades and what are its new meanings nowadays? The reason why I regard this question significant and interesting is that this tradition is bound up with the positive evaluation of the past and with the honour of the Transylvanian Hungarian (Szek-

ler) antecedents. It is also important for them to experience that their inherited traditions are becoming indispensable. The tradition of the young tree setting up filled with emotions and gestures has lately become one of the expressives of the Transylvanian national identification.

## Research methods

During the field practice in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva interviewing was the principal researching method I used. I made semi-structured interviews mostly, which means that I asked the inhabitants questions that I had written down in advance. I tried to speak with all the occurrent social classes. I spoke with the parochial personnel and their family members, with the priest and other residents of the community who are not the members of the congregation, and I also asked rural dwellers, elderly people (60–90 years old), middle aged people (30–50) and the youth. This strategy seemed the best because this way we can see an overall opinion on this topic as different people have different views on it. Furthermore, I watched as much photographs as it was possible about the young tree setting up and it was also important to listen to the inhabitants speaking about their memories. In this way I could observe their reactions and anecdotes about this memorable custom.

## Occasions for setting up a young tree in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva

Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva are located in Hargita county. These are Hungarian villages inhabited by Transylvanians (Bárth 2010: 5). Therefore these two villages are located near the woods and the Alps, so it does not cause problems for the villagers to cut down 12–14 young pine trees for a wedding. Moreover, they cut down trees for Pentecost, wakes, confirmaries, ordainments, funerals of young children, peers' meetings and vintage feasts, too.

### 1. Setting up young trees for weddings

There are no weddings in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva during Lent, that is why they hold weddings in the carnival season, in the late spring, in summer, autumn and in early winter periods. One of the indispensable customs of the ceremony is the young tree setting up, which is done by the best man, the bridegroom and his friends or his neighbours. The bride and her female friends or neighbours can decorate the tree.

Weddings are held on Saturdays so the fiancé and his group go for the pine trees (at least 5, maximum 10 pieces) on Thursday. They still choose this day because Tuesdays and Fridays are believed misadventurous according to superstitions. Monday and Wednesday would not be good because the trees would wither by Saturday.

The boys and men leave on a farm-wagon on Thursday dawn, and they take with them to the Alps at least 4–6 litre of so called *pálinka* as well as bacon and sausages.

In the woods they search for an appropriate, 7–8 meters tall young tree and they decide together if it is good enough or not. They search for a tall and straight tree with thin and well-balanced branches. The tree symbolizes the bride's future behaviour, that is why they need a straight one. If the men get a perfect tree, they will be appreciated. Furthermore, the taller is the tree, the further it can be seen. These pine trees indicate the wedding ceremony and they show the citizens which families are the lucky ones. It is possible that the inhabitants criticize the ugly trees but of course they eulogize the beautiful ones. In this way trees can be represented as a communication instrument and a sign too: it indicates the communication between the couple and the community.

When they arrive to the village, they go to the bridegroom's house first where they are offered *cabbage leaves*, *black sausages* and *fried potato* to eat by the hosts. Before or after the eating the mates peel the pines' trunk and they do it until the trunks become white. They carve the trunks to get them sharp and then they stick the trees into the ground. They paint the white trunk red helically.

The girls and the women decorate the branches with crepe-paper strips but they cannot help the men peeling and painting the trunk. It is the bride's relatives, neighbours and friends who help to decorate. On Thursday the *womenfolk* go to the bridegroom's house and wait for the men to bring the young trees and then the men do the peeling and painting. After that, the girls start to decorate them. After this procedure, on Thursday evening or the next day the groom's group take the trees to the bride's house, then to the church and to the *culture house* and they stick them into the ground in front of the gates. The costumes are different in some families because it is possible that the boys make all the peeling, painting and decorating and the girls just see them the next day in front of their houses.

Until the mid-twentieth century mostly white and red crepe paper stripes were used, but nowadays other colours are used, too, for example orange and pink. Using only white stripes was also common until the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, what represented the virginity, the purity and the chesty of the bride (Tánczos 2007: 351). Those girls who were known as less pure members of the community were not allowed to have only white paper, they had to put red stripes on the tree, too. Red is the colour of life and love so it has a symbolic power. They never hang yellow and blue crepe-stripes because they regard these colours as Romanian ones. That is why sometimes Hungarian hosts were punished by the Romanian authorities especially during the communist era. Since 1994–1995 Hungarians can use red-white-green colours for the decorations. This expresses the Transylvanian identity and the distancing from the Romanians.

Girls also make white and red roses or rose bunches from crepe-paper and they place it on the top of the young tree. The flower symbolizes the loving couple, love, youth and fertility, too (Tánczos 2007: 360–361). In some places it is still a tradition to attach a little jug or a bottle of *pálinka* to the tree. They call this the *nyuszuujókorsó* bottle in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva and it is a test of bravery for the groom, the best man or other boys to climb the tree and cut the bottle down while the tree is constantly moving. Before the test, the boys make a bet if the volunteer will be brave enough to do that. Another custom is to hit the bottle with little stones or screws.

Let's analyse the numbers. On Thursday 14 young trees get fully decorated: 4 for the bride (2 pieces in front of her gate, 2 in front of the entrance door), 4 for the groom in the same way, 4 pieces in front of the culture house and 2 pieces in front of the church entrance.

The trees have to be left there for at least a week because, according to this superstition, this way the marriage will be long-lasting.

According to Lajos Balázs, this custom is a remnant of ancient cultic traditions (Balázs 1994: 245). It is a symbol of growth, fertility, strength, health, luck and mercy, by László Székely unknown year: 80).

## 2. Funerals

Referring to funerals, in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva young trees are set up only in case of young person's death. Young people are entitled to it only if they were not married, in this way the rite expresses the mourning and by performing this ritual mourners try to „compensate” them; if the community had gone to their wedding ceremony and their funeral, too. Local members did not mention it but Vilmos Tánczos referred to this meaning (Tánczos 2007: 230–231). In addition to this they refer to a spouse wearing folkloric costume taking young tree branches to the funeral. Lajos Balázs says that the spouse of the deceased young person shows up in externals: through symbols, emblems and ritual appliances, and also through the initiate rites of the spouse. In pursuance of this, a young tree is thought to be a ritualistic implement and a symbol recalling the wedding (Balázs 2006).

In case of a young person's death it is common that their neighbours and friends decide when and where to go to find a suitable pine tree. The height of the tree depends on the age of the deceased person: if they are younger, a shorter tree is cut, but if they are elder (20–25 years old), a taller one is cut.

For the decoration they use only white crepe-paper stripes and they tie a bunch of red or white paper roses to the top of the tree. It is important to make the top of the tree broken and stooped so as the young person's life has ended. This gesture symbolizes death and passing.

Before the day of the burial the deceased's friends put two trees next to every roadside shrine. Later, they locate two trees next to the entrance to the church.

During the mourning procession four young men or women hold four small pine branches in their hands, and they go up to the grave standing by the four tips of the coffin. Most of the interviewees said that if a boy dies, boys will hold the branches and if it is a girl, girls hold the branches. But some said that it is the other way round.

Getting to the grave, the four young people stand next to the four angles of the grave and then they stick the branches to the ground. They have to leave the branches there at least for 6 weeks, then they pick them up and burn them away.

### 3. Jacob's branch setting up, May Day, St. Philip and St. Jacob Apostles' Day

Nowadays in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva only the elder generations remember setting up the young tree on May Day because by the 1960's this custom had disappeared. The seniors of the villages told me about this tradition of planting two little young pine by boys. They planted the trees in front of their loved ones' gates the day before May Day. These trees were decorated with crepe stripes, too, and the boys had to guard their trees because rival boys could steal them and replace them with their trees. The setting up should be loud so that the beloved girl and her family could hear it.

The young tree setting up on May Day is still common in some Transylvanian villages. Take for instance Segesvár where Saxons express their respect for their principals (their pastor, mayor etc.). The Students from Brassow put birch trees in front of their collage in order to express their respect, too (Pozsony 1997).

### 4. Confirmation

For the ritual of confirmation birch trees are set up instead of pine trees. The members of the consistory, the sexton or/and young boys go for the trees the day before the confirmation. They put them in pairs in front of the church gate, and in front of all the entrances of the church. In addition to this, a range of birch branches are set by the road between the rectory and the church.

I would like to mention here the ceremony of *ordination* because birches are set up in the same way as during confirmation.

### 5. Feast of Corpus Christi (Body of Christ)

The altars of Corpus Christi contain little tables covered with white tablecloths and a carpet, with two candlesticks and a big icon put on the tables. Five young birch trees are set up next to every altar. Sometimes the branches are twisted so the altar looks like a cave. Rosary Companies are used to make the altars.

A beautiful tradition still exists in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva: after the ceremony of Corpus Christi elder people pick a little branch off the young tree and they tell as many *paternosters* and *holy marys* as many leaves they have counted on the branch. Then they put away the branch and in case of bad weather they burn it away leaf by leaf.

## 6. Wakes

For the Day of Saint George young pine trees, which are not decorated, are set up. They are stucked in pairs in front of the gate and entrance of the church, and by the road between the rectory and the church's garden. Mainly the members of the consistory, the sexton and young boys go for the trees. They look for similar pairs to express balance. This harmony is important in all parochial and even on profane holidays. After the feasts people collect the trees and burn them away.

## 7. School-leaving ceremony

Students, their families and their teachers celebrate the graduation from elementary school, which lasts 8 years. The teachers wish the children happiness and success in the future and they give them pieces of advice through poems and aphorisms. The parents congratulate their children with bunches of flowers at the end of the ceremony. Young pine trees are inevitable elements of the ceremony. One young, tall and rich pine tree is set up in front of the school entrance, and it is decorated with colorful crepe-paper stripes. Moreover, the frames of the school gates are decorated with colorful pine branches, in this way they look like archways. It is common to take photographs of the classes with their teachers.

## 8. Peers' meeting

In Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva there is a tradition to celebrate the 30<sup>th</sup>, 40<sup>th</sup> and 50<sup>th</sup> birthdays. The person whose birthdays is celebrated organizes a meeting for their birthdays themselves. They locate young pine trees in front of the church gate and its entrances, and also in front of the door of the culture house. The celebration starts in the courtyard of the school of Csíkbánfalva on Sunday where the peers meet at 9 am. They greet their ex-teachers and ex-head teacher there, than they attend the St. George Church's high mass at 10 am, where the priest also greet the jubilarians. After the liturgy, the family members present flowers to the celebrated ones, then they walk together to the culture house of Csíkbánfalva. The march is like a procession: two girls go ahead carrying a flower wreath which is put on the stage of the culture house later. They have lunch in the culture house, after that a party starts that lasts till dawn.

This feast contains sacramental and profane features, too, because of the mass in the church and the march on the street and young trees are located in both places.

## The interpretation of the young tree setting up. The young tree as an archetypical sign

One of the basic attributions of the folklore phenomena is the visual expressivity and the visual language. These images, in other words *archetypes*, are hidden in subconscious layers which are perceived to be symbolical by the people. They are thought to have magical-spiritual (sacral) power and to transmit messages of the spiritual world. Furthermore, these images not only represent and symbolize the transcendent reality but they also incorporate with them (Tánczos 2007: 7–10). Icons show saints that are equal to the manifestation of the reality. Eliade calls this statement *hierophania*. For instance the case of sacred stones and sacred wood in some cultures: stones and wood are respected because they are not just physical subjects but they are the cosmic sanctity of the nature and they are the incarnation of reality and eternity (Eliade 2009: 7–8).

A well-known theory is connected with the tree: the tree of life (or world-tree) which means that the nativity of the universe is related to a tree. This symbolism is very archaic, some people claim that this theory contains some elements of the Hungarian ancient religion, too. Naturally, this characteristics exist also in tales, habits, poetry and art of other culture (Lükő 1942: 118–125).

I believe that the young trees of Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva are also an archetypical image, which appears with the confines of the mentioned feasts. My interviewees do not realize consciously this connection but it is reflected in their everyday life and in some sentences they said to me. It seems that in the background of these archetypical images there is something like “cosmic sanctity” (Eliade 2009: 7–8). I am going to support my statement hereinafter.

In Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva the young tree (pine and birch) symbolizes *life* and *vitality*, and during weddings and courtship its significance broadens with *love* and *fertility* too. Apart from this, a young tree gives encouragement and hope: my interviewees said with one voice that the green colour of the young tree symbolizes *hope*.

In funerals of young deceased boys and girls, people break a branch off the tree which means the “break of life”. In bridals, in turn, young trees refer to the future marriage of the couple. In addition to this, it is not accidental that they use the strongest and biggest pine trees in weddings because they express strength, health and fertility (Székely unknown year: 80). Through them the couple will be lucky, happy, blessed and *evergreen*. This is a Transylvanian best men’s wedding rhyme collected by László Székely: “I wish their lives be like a young tree, love and peace move to their house like a green leaf. I wish them strength to love each other in case of misfortune and badluck” (1943: 80). It is obvious that living life to the

fullest is important but here there is also a fear of the future, and the happy future can be protected by young trees.

Young trees can be seen as antropomorphe entities. For instance, if a wedding young tree is lop-sided it means that the bride will be false. Another example is a broken young tree symbolizing the dead body (Tánczos 2007: 391). We can see that sometimes human attributions, states and fates are projected to the tree.

During peers' meetings people celebrate their age and their anniversaries: this includes the concepts of *life* and *time*. These unexplainable concepts materialize and are incorporated in a young tree.

The young tree setting up on May Day expresses love as the boys set up the tree in front of their beloved girls' houses.

Setting up young trees in spiritual and parochial ceremonies expresses *life* and *strength*. They are also connected with Jesus Christ and other saints. These trees are set up by the streets and in front of the gates and entrances of the church and the rectory. In this way the young trees' function is divided into spiritual and profane. According to Mircea Eliade: "it is the church where people can get in touch with God, so there has to be a door upwards where God can come to the Earth and people can symbolically rise to the sky" (2009: 19–20). So young trees are the borders. It is important to set up young trees by the roads because places where the priest walk can give mercy as a mediator between God and people. He can get strength and be blessed with the help of young trees and in this way he can be more succesful in getting in touch with God. Young trees sanctifies this aim.

In profane ceremonies young trees have other roles. They distinguish two different dimensions of state. In this way we can regard them as *rites of passage*. Take for instance a girl who is the bride but not yet married, so the set up of the tree draws the border between the two states of the girl's life: secession from her family and the integration into a new one

Lastly, I would like to speak about the magical and spiritual functions of young trees. Apart from the archetypical images, there are several magical-spiritual functions. These do not express obvious words and sentences because these are inner pictures of imagination that are connected with the recognition of the higher truth of God. That is why it is difficult to talk about these pictures verbally.

People in Hungary and in Transylvania believe that young trees have portective, preventive and fertiliser functions. That is the reason why they played an important role in natural medicine and in other magical treatments. Nowadays this role is disappearing burning of birch leaves against bad weather is the only remnant of this tradition. Furthermore, it is common to take home a branch of birch from the *wake of Csíksomlyó*, so the family members who are staying at home can be part of the ceremony. They count the leaves of the branch and they tell as many *paternosters* and *hail marys* as the number of the leaves (the prayers are thought to be more powerful this way). According to László Székely, both the pine and birch trees are *life-giving and exorcist* elements (Székely, unknown year).

We have a lot of information which prove that people think that young trees have a magical-spiritual role. It is common not just in Csík, but also in Csólyospálos.



It is said that they set up young trees to keep the thunder and lightning off their house. Near Nyárád Transylvanian boys set up young pine trees in front of their beloved girls' houses at Easter time (Bálint 1998). Melinda Lakatos-Bakó wrote down that picking a branch of pine from the Corpus Christi tree has a protective and preventive function. What is more, little branches were put under young children's pillows to protect them from diseases and people used to hit their cows with the branches to protect them from Creutzfeldt-Jakob Disease (Lakatos-Bakó 1983:155). Young tree setting up also can be protective against plant diseases, that is why farmers stick young trees to the field during Whitsun (Szendrey, Szendrey 1931: 180–188).

According to the above ideas, we can establish that young trees can be regarded as archetypical pictures as it seems that in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva this tradition still exists in rites, and it represents deeper spiritual value for the dwellers. Although it is true that their magical characters are disappearing nowadays, we can induce that they were far more important decades ago.

## Young tree as an implementation of “rites of passage”, and their magical-spiritual functions

In Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva young trees are set up in situations when changes occur. I mean status-changing as marriage, death, confirmation, benediction and leaving school. I do not mention here peers' meetings and wakes because there are no status changes in that cases, although their age changes and the believers dispose their transgressions.

During a rite of passage the individual moves from one state to another, so the life they had before the changes ceases to exist and they are going to have new obligations and social expectations. The passage can be divided into three parts, according to the theory of Arnold van Gennep: *separation*, *alienation* and *initiation* (Balázs 2006: 35). When somebody moves to a new state, for a while, they get into liminality: *levitates between two worlds*. In this way a mental and material dividing line comes into being (Gennep 2007: 53). Gennep says that if a person has to walk under something or under branches – like a passage between the two states – this rite is obviously a *direct rite of passage* (2007: 54). In the two villages, where I did my researches, this passage is also noticeable because the individual always passes across two young trees.

Take a wedding as a first example: the couple's social status changes because the girl (bride) becomes a wife, the boy (groom) becomes a husband. We can see young trees during all of the stages of a wedding ceremony. First of all, when the boys go for the trees to the woods, they drink a lot. It is regarded as a stage of *separation*. Setting up and decorating the young trees is also related to the process. The day of the wedding and the reception is the *alienation*, especially when the best man “calls the bride”. In addition to this, the young trees in front of the couple's

house expresses the changing of the social status, the alienation from their former life. During the honeymoon the young trees still stand in front of the gates, this is the *initiation*.

In a burial of a young person we cannot realize the separation because it is more about the dead person's lost wedding. In this way it is manifested in externals: symbols, emblems, ritualistic appliances (Balázs 2006: 231). The young tree set up has three functions: it symbolizes the broken life and the lost wedding, and it is an inevitable ritualistic device for the ceremony. In my opinion the trees function as a gate between our world and the other world, they introduce the dead to the otherworldly life. In addition to this, the broken branches symbolize the christian uptake to Heaven (Kunt 2005).

The confirmation is a young parochial rite based on customs (Bárth 2007: 200–201). Classically, we can treat it as a rite of passage because during this process the child becomes an adult and a full member of the catholic congregation. But it happens that people confirm children older than 14–15 and it can cause debates (Bárth 2007: 200–201). Even so, young trees are indispensable elements of the rite.

The ceremony of benediction is also a rite of passage because the lay person becomes clerical, that is why there are young birch trees by the roads.

To sum up, young trees are significant ritualistic symbols of the rites of passage: they divide different worlds and they express change and sanctity.

## Young trees and the Transylvanian (Szekler) identity

When I asked my interviewees about the young tree setting up, all of them said that it was a *tradition, this is our custom, we learned it from our ancestors*. They think that it is a heritage that they got from their parents, so setting up young trees is natural for them, it is an integral part of their lives. This gesture expresses their respect to their ancestors and the spiritual and mental value they inherited. It plays an important role in case of the Szekler identity.

According to my interviewees, young pine trees *symbolize Hungarians*, especially due to their green colour. The eldest interviewee told me that the green tree, its white trunk painted with a red spiral line symbolize the *Hungarian identity*. That is why young trees are mostly decorated with white and red crepe-paper stripes (instead of blue and yellow which are Romanian colours, he said). This gesture truthfully expresses their (people from Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva) national identity: they are Hungarians and Szeklers (Transylvanian Hungarians) at the same time. In addition to this, they distinguish themselves from other nationalities, they realize the different patterns of culture and they turn away from them. It is noticeable in an archive picture from 1943 that two young pine trees were set up next to the monument on a national holiday. It is a significant incident because they were not used to setting up young trees on national holidays. But in 1943 people from Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva felt that it is necessary to set up young

trees for the *little Hungarian world*. It was obviously a Szekler-Hungarian symbol apart from other national emblems like national costumes and patriotic speeches.

In this way young trees are regarded as national emblems because especially pine trees symbolize Hungarians and Szeklers. The main reason for this is that the two villages are located near to the Alps and pine-groves which play a leading role in the habitant's life. They live and work there. So the region and their job play a part as a symbol of Hungarians since an ethnical group regards something as a symbol of its environment (Kapitány, Kapitány 1999: 88–91). In this way young trees could become part of the national identity, and its expressive device for different rites.

## Artistic function of a young tree

Finally, I would like to talk shortly about the aesthetic function of a young tree, which is important because the interviewees one and all talked about and emphasized its decorative function. They said that *a young tree is a decoration, we decorate with young trees, young trees raise the spirit of the celebration*. So they make their environment more aesthetic and beautiful with young trees. It also shows that nowadays people from Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva think that young trees make the rites more colorful and outstanding. Most of the younger generations (30–50 years old) do not associate young trees with spiritual meanings, only their artistic style is important for them.

According to Vilmos Tánzos, talking about the artistic functions of folkloric pictures and signs is one of the most difficult tasks (Tánzos 2007: 7–8). It is difficult because art and aesthetics are part of the so called cultural system which is based on symbolic structures (Geertz 1994: 289). It is true, but several interviewees of mine do not know anything about young trees but their artistic functions, so for them just the aesthetic experience can be defined.

## Synthesis of the researchal results

To sum up, I would like to clarify my hypotheses and their answers.

1. How can be a young tree defined? It is an archetypical image because it visualizes abstract concepts in every rite which cannot be squarely defined verbally but can be reflected in the form of the young tree. These concepts are for example *life, renewal, strength, saint and time*.

There is another point to the issue. A young tree has magical-spiritual features nowadays too as an archetypical image. Take for instance the burning of the birch leaves for protection. It is the only protective and preventive custom I have ever known and it is still an existing tradition. In my opinion, there were much more protective customs like this decades ago. According to László Székely's notes, I am

right because he observed a lot of customs related to magical trees, bushes and other plants in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

2. What is the meaning of the young tree in the different rites and what characteristics do they have in common? A young tree is mostly an important device of the *rites of passage*, since it functions as a gate between different dimensions and it helps to elaborate the temporary stages.

The tradition of the young tree setting up has been changing all the time since the 1900's. Its content has changed the most. In the first half of the 20th century young trees had a magical-spiritual meaning, while nowadays young trees mostly express people's attachment to their Hungarian identity, their heritage and they see young trees as an artistic decoration.

So nowadays the young tree setting up represents national identity, and an artistic-aesthetical demand. Moreover, abstract conceptions are connected with young trees. Thus, my final conclusion is that in Csíkszentgyörgy and Csíkbánfalva the roles of the young tree setting up are interwoven with each other and cannot be divided sharply. All of the three statements of Ernst Gombrich are valid in case of young tree setting up. It *symbolizes* an abstract concepts and ideas, it has a *magical-spiritual function*, and it can be realized as an artistic expression (Gombrich 1997: 31–34).

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