

# BIOGRAPHY

János Vársárhelyi was born on 1 August 1945 in Marosvásárhely (Târgu Mureş), in one of the most important spiritual centres of Székely Land (Romania). The cultural values and the inspiring diversity of the town soon aroused his interest in art and as the student of Farkas Bolyai Lyceum he had the opportunity to develop in an intellectual environment that besides providing him with a proper education laid a great emphasis on nurturing Hungarian identity as well. His early experience stemming from his birthplace proved to be determinative in his professional career later on.

He graduated from the Polytechnical Institute in Brassó (Braşov) and obtained his woodwork engineering degree with an excellent grade specialising on finished wood products, then he started to work at “Augustus 23.” Woodwork Factory, Marosvásárhely, producing period furniture in 1969. The expertise of the artisans working in production and the technological and financial limitations allowing only a modest possibility for design and implementation made him focus on the necessity of harmonising artistic and engineering works already at that early stage.



From 1972 he not only designed furniture for foreign orders, but also created his own models and even though most of them did not enter serial production, he had the chance to get a deeper insight into various aspects of design-

er work via custom orders, such as the preparation of the implementation sketch of the audience wall cladding of the National Theatre of Marosvásárhely and the supervision of its implementation (1973). In 1975 and 1976 he worked as a part-time instructor at the Wood Industry Vocational School in Marosvásárhely. In 1976 he became senior design engineer of ILEFOR plant. Thanks to the flexible market strategy of the factory a part of his prototypes entered into mass production and was exported. 1979 was a turning point both in his private and professional life: after he got married and his first daughter was born, he moved to Hungary closing a process of resettlement full of struggle.

In 1980 he began to work at the Balaton Furniture Factory as a designer at the product development group. At that period the growing demand for contemporary, quality serial furniture gave a new impetus to the Hungarian furniture production. Despite the unfavourable conditions of the industrial sector and the necessary compromises arising as a result, Vársárhelyi managed to find the opportunity for a change and in the oncoming decade he worked hard to prove that the Hungarian industry is capable of producing unique and characteristic Hungarian pieces of furniture competitive even on an international level. Between 1980 and 1990 he designed 70 models, two-third of which were manufactured at the same year they were designed and proved to be marketable abroad, i.e. in the Scandinavian, English, German and American market. His furniture ranges were characterized by a playful consistence, where the diversity of design was combined with a moderate shaping of components, a unified construction and a clear composition taking functionality into consideration. The validity of his ideas was proven by a series of professional recognitions: he won the Design Quality Prize for *Rotonda* in 1983, for *Flóra/Kalota* in 1986, for *Ági* chair product family in 1990 and for *Delta* furniture set in 1992. In 1986 he won the BNV (Budapest International Fair) development prize with *Déva* boardroom set and was awarded the Badge for Excellent Work by the Minister of Industry at the same year. In 1992 he received the Ministerial Diploma of Merit for David chair family and the Wood Industry Scientific Association gave him the „Wood Industry Development” medal. In 1989 he took the arts and crafts design manager training of the College of Arts and Crafts as well.

From 1993 he continued as a freelance designer. The manufacturing part-

ners he acquired during the 1990s and the early 2000s, Asztalos Kft., Pápa, Fafém Bútor Zrt., Gyula and Danubia Bútoripari Zrt., Mohács brought him not only new orders, but also new technological and design possibilities. As a designer of Hajdúthonet Rt., Debrecen (now Sellaton Design Kft.) he designed numerous stackable chair and furniture sets using the classical Thonet technology and its design applied in new constructions (*Szimplex*, *Hajdú*, *Smoky*, *Pipacs*, *Tonetta*, *Multiplex*, *Echo*, *Lily*, *Origó*, *Apropó*, *Réka*). He was not short of honours during his years as a freelance, either:



he received Design Quality Prize for *Smoky Lux* lounge set in 1997 and for *Lily* furniture set in 2002; he won the Niveau Prize of the Veszprém Spring Exhibition with his works in 1996 and 1998 and his *Smoky* and *Rolád* furniture sets won the Grand Prix of BNV in 1998 and 1999. As a recognition of his merits, he was granted the Noémi Ferenczy Award. In 1997. Following various individual and collective exhibitions as well as after having been showcased at the Trade Show of Cologne, Milan and Copenhagen, he displayed his furniture within the framework of a large-scale travelling exhibition in 2000.

From 1990 he wrote publications as a specialist writer in the topics of environmental culture, dissemination of expertise, history of furniture and design for the magazines *Átrium*, *Magyar Asztalos*, *Otthon* and *Szép Lak*. Following his earlier works of interior design, such as the lobby of Hotel Annabella in Balatonfüred (1991), the hunting lodge of Verga Rt. at Kab-hegy (1993) and the retail stores of Herend Porcelain Manufactory in Pécs, Budapest and Debrecen (1993-1994), he received significant orders in the 2000s, as well: he was commissioned (among others) with the interior design and furniture of the Renault showrooms in Pápa and Tatabánya (2001-2002), Hotel Gizella in Veszprém (2001), the bar and restaurant of Pápa Várkertfürdő (Spa) (2003) and Grabarics Confectionary in Pápa (2003) as well as with the stalls of Béla Bartók Theatre in Győr (2003) and the bench rows of Kecske-templom (Goat Church) in Sopron (2012). He actively took part in the work of several domestic professional organisations as a member both on a local and on a national level: Association of Hungarian Fine and Applied Artists (from 1986), Veszprém Artists Guild (from 1989), National Association of Hungarian Journalists (from 1997). Between 1999 and 2010 he was the board member of the Department of Interior Design of the National Association of Hungarian Artists. He educated the new generations of furniture design as a lecturer at Moholy-Nagy University of Art and Design between 2005 and 2009 and at the Institute of Product Design and Production Technology at the University of West Hungary (now Sopron) between 2009 and 2012. In 2007 he was promoted to the rank of associate professor.

His experience as a designer was based on the comprehensive system approach of design, in which art, traditions, trends, market, production and management played an equally important role. According to his creed a chair is not only an artistic and engineering product, but also a “tool for sitting” idealistically encompassing the harmony of material, structure and form. In accordance with this his pieces of furniture are durable, yet lightweight; comfortable, yet functional; aesthetic, yet economic; characteris-



tic, yet suitable for serial production; find their origins in the Hungarian furniture tradition, yet follow the trends. As a recognition of his oeuvre, he was granted the Ányos Jedlik Award by the Hungarian Intellectual Property Office in 2020.