

## CONFERENCES AND REPORTS

### International conference “What was Czechoslovakia? State, nation, culture”, Prague 21<sup>st</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> January 2016

In my opinion one of the most interesting Prague interdisciplinary conferences of this year was the International conference “What was Czechoslovakia? State, nation, culture” („Co bylo Československo? Stát, národ, kultura“), held in the beautiful modernist venue of the National Gallery, originally built between 1925 and 1928 for the Prague Trade Fairs. The conference lasted two days, Thursday, 21<sup>st</sup> January and Friday 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2016. Two respected institutions shared the burden of its organisation: National Gallery in Prague and the University of Arts and Crafts in Prague. The large exhibition of the National Gallery called “Building a State” („Budování státu“), valuably supplemented the conference. During the morning session of Thursday, the conference was opened by the organisers and by the speech of **Petr Pithart** from the Faculty of Law of the Charles University in Prague.

The **first panel** about Czechoslovakism (Čechoslovakismus) brought five valuable lectures of the Czech and foreign scholars. In the first lecture, **Marek Krejčí**, member of the Centre for Slavic Art Studies in Prague, contributed to the problem of the image of the unified Czechoslovak culture during the interwar period, especially in regard to the activities of leading art historian Zdeněk Wirth and in the official agenda of the interwar Ministry of Schools and Popular Education. The second lecture, given by **Milan Ducháček** of the Institute for History and Archives of the Charles University in Prague (Ústav dějin a archiv Univerzity Karlovy, Praha) was devoted to the problems with the idea of Czechoslovakism, especially to the case of Karel Chotek, the first professor of ethnography at the newly founded Comenius University in Bratislava. The third lecture of **Marta Filipová** from the University of Birmingham posed the questions of the role of folk art (lidové umění) in the interwar Czechoslovakia, especially in relation to the (possible) dichotomy between “folk art” and the notion “art of the people” („umění lidu“). Filipová researched the idea of the new, contemporary folk art, the urban and suburban art in the work of the leading artists (Karel and Josef Čapek, S. K. Neumann) and theorists (Karel Teige, V. V. Štech) of that time. The theme of colonial imagery and colonial discourse in relationship to Slovakia was opened by Ivan Jurica from Museum of Modern Art (Museum moderner Kunst, MUMOK) in Vienna. He spoke about the clash between universalism and colonial mentality in the relationship of the Czechs and Slovaks. The last and very interesting lecture of this panel by **Zdeno Kolesár** from University of the Fine Arts in Bratislava (Vysoká škola výtvarných umění) researched the fate of one of the new educational institutions established by our Republic, the School of Artisan Crafts (Škola umeleckých remesiel) in Bratislava, founded by Josef Vydra, who moved to Slovakia in 1919. Vydra, inspired by German Bauhaus School, tried to use the Slovak pre-industrial tradition of home craftsmanship. The forgotten institution had many leading artists among its teachers (Jaromír Funke, Karel Plicka, Zdeněk Rossmann etc.) and hosted also Karel Teige or Zdeněk Pešánek. Despite of its end in 1939, the influence of the School has remained important for Slovak artists of the successive decades.

The **second** Thursday panel was devoted to the problems of cultural constructions of the new state identity. In the first lecture, **Tomáš Klíčka** spoke about the special phenomenon, the art exhibitions of the legionaries (members of the Czechoslovak WW1 Legions, fighting against Austria-Hungary and Germany). **Mariana Dufková** from the University of Arts and Crafts in Prague spoke about the reconstruction and restoration works on the Saint Vitus Cathedral in the Prague Castle during the first decade of the Republic. She argued that this reconstruction was a rare crossing and communication of two different ideologies, the Czechoslovak state and national ideology on one hand and conservative Roman Catholic ideology on the other hand. The third lecture of **Miloš Zapletal** from the Ethnological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Brno was devoted to the problem

of the relationship of the well-known and worshipped composer Leoš Janáček to the official governmental doctrines. **Helena Maňasová Hradská** from Institute of Music Research of the Philosophical Faculty of Masaryk University in Brno spoke about the development of advertising towards modernist, dynamical and progressive patterns during the interwar period. She pointed out the key motives of the power and destruction as the elements of the progressive move forwards. Quite interesting was the lecture of **Alena Janatková** from Institute for Art Research and Historical Urbanism of the Technical University in Berlin on the German Werkbund and the Czechoslovak culture at the Jubilee Exhibition in Brno in 1928, devoted to the “residential culture” (bytová kultura). Following the Stuttgart exhibition in 1927, the Brno exhibition was organised by Union of the Czechoslovak Work (Svaz československého díla), but also with participation of the German “Werkbund der Deutschen in der Tschechoslowakei”). In the last lecture of this panel, **Kristýna Zajícová** from University of Arts and Crafts in Prague spoke about the sensitive question of the commercial promotion versus state promotion at the World Exhibition in Paris in 1937. She emphasized the contribution of nearly-forgotten Jan Brabec to the development of the ethics of advertising. Quite unusually, the same panel continued on Friday morning with two other papers. **Markéta Ježková** from the National Gallery in Prague analysed the role of two funds, the National Masaryk Fund (Národní fond Masarykův) and the Jubilee Fund (Jubilejní fond) in the development of the art collections of the Prague Castle, the representative collection build as a representation of the continuity of the art in the Czech Lands and of the ideals of V. V. Štech and T. G. Masaryk. In the second lecture, **Jitka Šosová** from the National Gallery in Prague delivered the picture of the same collection from another point of view. The building of the Prague Castle collections had also its social aspects as the source of financial help to the selected artists or to their families.

The **third panel**, “Buildings of the Republic”, was devoted mostly to the architecture and urbanism in its wide social and symbolical contexts. The historian of architecture from Institute of Art History of Czech Academy of Sciences, **Vendula Hnídková**, opened the panel with her paper called “Czechs among Czechs: Optimal extent of the existence minimum and architecture of the internation camps in Prague in 1938”, reflecting the participation of the architects (e.g. Pavel Janák) and students of architecture on planning of internation camps during the short period of the conservative, authoritarian regime of the 2<sup>nd</sup> Czechoslovak Republic (October 1938 – March 1939). In my view, this excellent lecture was one of the best of this conference. The interesting paper of **Ladislav Zikmund-Lender** from the University of Arts and Crafts in Prague researched the influences of the patriotic members of Free Masons on the shaping of the national identity between 1918 and 1938. Following the ideas of male bonding and brotherhood between all Free Masons of the Republic with no regard to their language or religion, Zikmund-Lender argued that Free Masons (similarly as other groups, like Sokols or Czechoslovak (Hussite) Church) aspired to create and disseminate specific cultural and spiritual awareness as an important vehicle for the strengthening of the new state. The valuable lecture of sociologist and historian **Zdeněk Nešpor** from the Faculty of Humanities of the Charles University in Prague on “national crematories” researched the crematory movement and its struggle against the prohibition of cremation during the Habsburg Monarchy (preserved by the influence of the Roman Catholic Church). The Cremation movement has contributed to the hygienical funerals as well as to the process of secularisation in Czechoslovakia. Newly build crematories were perceived as icons of modern attitude towards death, symbols of progress and of the emancipation from religious superstitions, but became also the field of competition between Czech and German cremation associations.

The last paper by **Jan Kober** from the Institute of State and Law of the Czech Academy of Sciences addressed the complicated historical process of search for the venue and design of the new parliament building, especially during the 1920s. Despite of the initial enthusiasim and extraordinary financial sources for the construction of representative state buildings, provided for the period between 1920 and 1940 by the special act, the attempts to build the new Czechoslovak parliament were – because of complex causes – not successful. However, the unrealised building designs by Josef Štěpánek, Jaromír Krejcar or Kamil Roškot became the valuable part of the architectural heritage of the interwar Czechoslovakia.

The **fourth panel**, called (however not very exactly) **Socialist Czechoslovakia** included six lectures, devoted to the Czechoslovakia after 1948. Quite interesting was the first lecture delivered by **Kristina Uhlíková** from Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences analysing the various plans and phases of usage of the nationalised castles and chateaus in the Czechoslovakia and the development of the (doubtful) conception of its opening to the wide public as the museums of historical furniture and living culture. The second lecture, given by **Petr Hlaváček** from the Collegium Europaeum, was devoted to the observation of Czech and German post-war relations and to the possible colonial stereotypes, especially in the Czech novels of 1940s and 1950s (Václav Řezáč etc.) as well as to the development of the population and language use in the borderland districts of the Czechoslovakia. Very interesting lecture of **Marcela Chmelařová** of the Philosophical faculty of the Masaryk University in Brno opened the problem of the legally unclear position of private art collecting in the Czechoslovakia of 1950s and 1960s. An apparent tension between art as a “consumer good” (e.g. furnishing of the home) and art as object of the art trade, speculation, clandestine value transfers and especially of the prohibited accumulation of property became the object of court decisions. In fact, this complicated legal and social problem has never been clearly solved in that period. Another very interesting theme was delivered by **Petra Nováková** of the Palacký University in Olomouc. She researched the participation of the Czech and Slovak artists at the Triennale di Milano and its importance for the Czechoslovak government. Similar exhibitions were regarded as “soft power” for the advancement of the Czechoslovak interests in the intricate situation of the Cold war. The lecture of **Blanka Nyklová** and **Petr Gibas** from the Sociological Institute of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague was devoted to the rather neglected problem of the use of pictures of industry and modern architecture for the representation of the town or region. Especially interesting was their analysis of the gender-based attribution of certain town spaces and of the constructions of emotionality at the photographs. In her closing lecture, **Mária Topolčanská** from Prague spoke about the postponed intellectual reflection of the architectural heritage of the period between 1972 and 1989.

In my opinion, the last panel, devoted to the Socialist Czechoslovakia, has generally little lower quality and intensity than the panels devoted to the older decades. The reason is probably the paralysing lack of time distance necessary for neutral research (“sine ira et studio”) and lack of environment free of (mis)use of historical interpretations of the past for political goals of the present time. Another reason might be lack of prior research of many themes and problems. Therefore, the number of the papers covering the mentioned period in this panel has been rather low in comparison to other panels (especially to the second panel). It is also understandable that for the conference devoted to such a long period (1918–1992) it is not possible to handle the whole period with the same intensity. I am generally regretting the rather limited number of the themes with relation to the law, legal history and legal symbolism. Is it an illustration of the fact, that the traditional and highly unfortunate divide between legal science and other social sciences persists? However, few exceptions as well as the symbolically important opening speech of the legal scholar might be interpreted as signs of change. I am glad to say that the organisation of the conference was exquisite and also its location in the representative public building of the interwar period was highly fortunate and inspiring.

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