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Taťána Petrasová — Rostislav Švácha (edd.)  
**Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000**

Prague, Arbor Vitae 2017, 992 pp., ca. 800 colour and b/w ills,  
 bibliography, index of names

In the introduction to *Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000*, Rostislav Švácha remarks that ‘our book has been able to present the history of art in the Czech lands in one volume for the first time’. (p. 35) If only for this reason, the appearance of this large tome would be noteworthy. This work results from a long-term project of the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences. Many of its over thirty authors were well prepared for this undertaking, because the book seems to have begun soon after the institute had published the final volumes (also edited by Švácha) of a comprehensive sexpartite history in twelve volumes of Czech art that started appearing in 1984.<sup>1</sup>

*Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000* is far from a condensation of *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění*, however, and may even be considered a response to it. For despite their mammoth accomplishment and many other publications by Czech art historians, as well as several international exhibitions of the past decades, the history of art in the Czech Republic remains largely unfamiliar to most foreign scholars. Although the transformation of the region since 1989 has attracted ever increasing record numbers of foreign visitors (twenty-one million to the Czech Republic in 2018, of whom about a third visited Prague), no comparable breakthrough has occurred in art historical scholarship. The decision to publish in English as well as in Czech editions addressed this situation, wherein local scholars may now often write in English or German, but their work and the art with which it deals does not gain the attention it merits.

The broad chronological coverage of *Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000* also counters another unfortunate tendency in art history. Interests have shifted in recent years to the point that, for example, at least 60% of doctoral applicants to this reviewer’s university are interested exclusively in art or architecture after ca. 1850. Perhaps reflecting this shift, major American publishers and institutions like the Getty Research Institute and the Museum of Modern Art, New York have recently published important translations of texts on twentieth-century and contemporary art, criticism, and theory from the

region.<sup>2</sup> On the other end of the historical spectrum, art (and some scholars) of earlier periods in the area of the Czech Republic, particularly the era of Charles IV, have been noticed.<sup>3</sup> However younger American art historians who deal with art from the late fifteenth century onward still blithely ignore art in this region of Central Europe, including English-language scholarship from the 1970s that had already suggested frameworks for discussion.<sup>4</sup> The tripartite division of the text (800–1500, 1500–1800, 1800–2000) tries to achieve some balance.

The geographical definition proposed by *Art in the Czech Lands* also parallels Anglophone (and other) efforts to reconsider the historiography of (Central) Europe, of which some of its authors are aware.<sup>5</sup> The title intentionally evokes the historical notion of the ‘*České země*’ and accordingly the kingdom of Bohemia (to use the standard English translation), which lasted from the Middle Ages until 1918. While the decision to limit consideration of art to that found in the present Czech Republic leaves out major related monuments in Lusatia and Silesia, which for a time were Czech lands, emphasis on this concept does on the whole obviate issues of ethnic identification and of nationalism that have long bedeviled the region.

The editor’s introduction explains how the organization of the book took shape. Its ‘initial idea [was] to present short independent descriptions for each one of several hundred selected works of art’. (p. 33) The descriptions have subsequently been modified into catalogue-like discussions of individual works of art and architecture in small groups around certain themes or ideas. The groups are in turn clustered together in approximate chronological sequence. They are separated according to the broad period concepts within the chronological divisions of the text, with a general cultural historical introduction preceding each division.

The general form of presentation is comparable to, though probably was not inspired by, an exceedingly successful series of radio programs compiled into a book published initially in 2010 by Neil McGregor and its successors. McGregor, now the director of the Humboldt

Forum, Berlin, told the history of the world in a hundred objects held in collections of the British Museum.<sup>6</sup> Offspring of McGregor's book (that also utilize the British Museum's collections) more closely approximate the approach of *Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000*, in that they discuss several hundred objects, grouped in clusters. These histories of China and of the Islamic World in objects set their material into frameworks shaped according to traditional historical divisions, with general introductions, brief surveys to individual sections, and bridging accounts.<sup>7</sup>

Although it shares some features in common with these books, *Art in the Czech Lands* is significantly different. Similarities include such features as the publication in English, the introduction of unfamiliar material, the up-to-date texts by experts, the abundant illustrations (unfortunately, but understandably because of expense, not on the highest quality paper), the wealth of information, and the substantial bibliographies. These are all to the good. Yet weighing in at approximately four kilograms and measuring 22 by 28 centimeters, the size alone precludes its becoming a useful handbook, more than metaphorically. More important, the book lacks a single or unified authorial voice or even coherent set of criteria for selection like that in these comparanda. The question then arises how well it might serve the ends of being either an introduction or a reference work.

One may judge *Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000* according to the assumptions that governed its conceptualization. In explaining why the book originated as a form of catalogues, Švacha says that: '*One reason for thinking along these lines was certainly fear of various pitfalls that texts often get caught in when their authors approach them as narrative or a survey. As Hayden White pointed out in the 1960s, narrative historians tend to bridge over the blank spaces in their picture of history with various literary figures and tropes, and their works thus tend to be subject to the demands of artistic quality rather than of scholarly accuracy. Furthermore, in recent decades surveys---in other words narratives about the course of art production in a large area and over a lengthy period of time---have come in for justified criticism because of their tendency toward authoritarianism and the construction of rigid canons and hierarchies.*' (p. 34)

Even on their own terms, these assumptions raise several issues. In the first place White's critique, as far as this reviewer understands its main thrust, was directed against what he and other structuralist and post-structuralist critics of the later twentieth century decried as the 'positivist' construction of the humanities. Historiography based on facts and dates supposedly ignored the way that history was actually written, using tropes and metaphors. The use of narratives, with all their literary aspects, did not support the truth claims of positivist accounts. In proposing a catalogue, the initial idea for *Art in the Czech Lands* followed White in being suspicious of syntheses, but seemed to draw an inference which he would not have endorsed. That is, it reduces

what might have been composed into a survey to their possible basic components (including the facts of art history, works of art and architecture, put in date order).

*Art in the Czech Lands* is also unlike other sorts of reference works that it may at first seem to resemble. It is neither an encyclopedia, nor a dictionary, nor an inventory of objects or monuments, although all these have been published in Czech, too. Nor do its entries resemble a catalogue raisonné in any strict sense. Only a few (four at most) references are provided to support the observations made in any one grouping: while the citations are largely up-to-date, the amount of information they provide does not in many cases reflect the full body of literature, and neither the entries nor the references add up to a comprehensive picture. While the bibliographies are extensive, the presence of two separate ones suggests the existence of an internal contradiction. The editors themselves evidently felt it necessary to supply a supplementary bibliography (as a 'Select Bibliography') that consists of broader surveys and important monographs. This reveals a tacit recognition that the entries, even presented as groupings, remain partial, in more than one sense of the word. In addition, the limitation of the Select Bibliography (unlike the larger compilation) mainly to Czech titles and its failure to indicate which works include summaries in other languages severely limits its usefulness.

While the fragment has become a favored mode in modernist and post-modernist discourse, a work that presents material in this essentially disjointed format runs the dangers of becoming ahistorical or athenatic. It remains questionable how well without further commentary the choice of such a form could in any case serve the purposes of providing an historical introduction. Guides to architecture of Prague (in the series *Ten Centuries of Architecture*) and more general compendia (in the series on historical periods of Prague) do exist, but these books contained overviews, and spoke in a uniform voice. They were also written for laypeople, but both the heft and the level of writing and detail of this book indicate that it was not really intended for a similar audience (although it may be sold as such in the Czech Republic), and it has not solved the problem of disparate comments.

Many of the individual authors seem to have recognized some of the problems involved, because they encapsulate their discussion of artifacts in historical mini-introductions, with good results especially in the first section of the book. The editors themselves also recognized the drawbacks of a catalogue format, even in modified form as groupings of artifacts, because they commissioned introductions to each of the sections. Contradicting previously stated assumptions, Švacha says: '*If some sections of the introductions to the three sections resemble the traditional form of the art historical survey, this is because a survey, in spite of all its debatable aspects, is still able to help readers to enter relatively unknown territory and to find their bearing there, at least on a cursory level.*' (p. 35)

Other problems pertain to the question of canons. Švácha decries 'rigid construction of canons', but any book like this, really any book on art and architecture, necessarily includes certain artifacts and excludes others. This involves a process of selection, a set of determinations that in effect establishes or else amends an already existing canon. This is also doubtless the case with the *Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000*, which because of its size, substance, institutional source and the reputations of its authors, may be regarded as establishing its own canon. The issue is not therefore one of the rigidity of canons, which may change or evolve in any case. By having so many voices participating in the decision-making the canons of this book could hardly be rigid. Rather the issues concern how representative or reliable the choice of works is, and how they have been selected.

Since *Art in the Czech Lands* lacks any further articulation of governing assumptions, it has effectively left the task of a response to the individual authors. But lack of coherent collaboration and consistency has engendered multiple contradictions among and within the separate sections. These seem to be less present in the first part of the book, which, if reframing rubrics, more or less appears to offer a traditional canon of images, or at least one in which this reviewer finds little lacking. At the other end of the book, the formation of a canon of more recent works is understandably open to continuing discussion — simply because artists who made works even fifty years ago may still be alive and creating, and new works are constantly being produced. Yet some of the treatment and the selection of earlier twentieth-century art contradicts the basic premises of *Art in the Czech Lands*. If works are to be considered according to their location in the Czech lands, and not according to the ethnic or national origins of artists, why is material grouped under such rubrics as 'Foreign Architects in Czechoslovakia' (as if the same might not be said about many earlier figures from Parler on), 'German Czechoslovak Artists' (again why is language being a criterion if Czechoslovaks could also be German-speakers) 'Political Exiles in Prague,' and perhaps most problematic of all 'Slovak Artists of Czechoslovakia' (whatever that might mean—and one might also wonder about Czech artists and architects in Slovakia). Conversely, if the determining factor is the location where a work was made or kept, not the place of birth of the artist, why are artists included who spent significant parts or most of their careers in France, where they left many important works, such as Kupka and Mucha? The second part of the book in fact takes a different approach to this question and does not include artists and architects, even of some significance, who were born in Bohemia but made important contributions elsewhere in the world. Among them are eighteenth-century Bohemian-born painters who worked at the imperial court in China or in California, a contemporaneous architect from Plzeň who designed buildings in Buenos Aires and the Argentinian pampa, and a nineteenth-century

painter from the same city who portrayed the Maori in New Zealand.

In general, the problems seem more evident in the second section of the book. Issues of choice may always be debated, and we all have our favorites. One may still wonder why such important sites and monuments as Wallenstein's Jičín, the imperial room and adjacent chambers in Bučovice, or Maulbertsch's frescoes in Moravia are not specifically mentioned. But what more than arbitrary decisions, or the fact that a scholar has previously published a work, accounts for the selection that is present? One must assume that it is the authority of the individual author. But what if the authors do not agree? In eschewing a single authorial voice, and any single framework or agreed upon point of departure, the text in effect suggests there are many authorities and no one counts for more than any other.

The problems that ensue are obvious. Without a uniform set of standards, how are internal differences of opinion to be adjudicated? For example, should one accept the description of one authority who says that three Rudolfine figure painters 'formed the nucleus of an informal group of artists who are today unsatisfactorily and rather metaphorically referred to as the "Prague school"'. (p. 426) If so, how does one respond to two other authorities who read the same text and state without comment German princes 'entrusted important tasks to the Rudolfine artists and circulated the renown of the "Prague School"'? (p. 351)

On whom or what may one rely? References to the elusive seventeenth-century sculptor Ernst Heidelberger provide another sort of example. Sporadic documents mention Heidelberger as a sculptor in Prague, in imperial service and as working for Wallenstein. Yet only one document connects him with a definite work for Wallenstein, a payment in 1632 for sculptures executed for the altar of the palace in Jičín. On this basis there has been constructed a whole oeuvre, not only for his supposed work for Wallenstein, that spans a quarter of a century, including sculptures that are widely diverse in appearance not just because of possible differences related to stylistic development over time. This book simply repeats traditional attributions; clearly more needs to be done on sculpture of the second and third quarters of the seventeenth century. But to accept the authority of previous literature seems as problematic as taking on face value the unconfirmed assertions of a supposedly authorial authority. This seems truly authoritarian.

The treatment of artists who have been better studied, exemplified by those who served at the court of Rudolf II in Prague, suggest why more is needed than the citation of a previous text (especially if it is by the authority him- or herself). Spranger was the longest-serving artist at Rudolf II's court and also had a broad impact, as this book suggests. Yet he is represented by only one painting. This is a not one of his larger or more familiar works, but a small picture on copper—now located in a private collection in the United States, which,

as it happens, this reviewer knows well. No convincing grounds have ever been offered for the attribution, which while resembling Spranger seems to have a different coloring, facture and figure type than the works with which it might be compared. This discrepancy may be a matter of opinion, as also may be the choice of a work by Joseph Heintz also illustrated in the book that exists in multiple versions, even though this one may be correct. But if the attributions are debatable or complicated, why (especially without further discussion) are they chosen to be paradigmatic? Less of a matter of debate are four landscape sketches on a sheet attributed to the goldsmith and draftsman Paulus van Vianen, which may have been chosen because they are views in and near Prague. While published as by the artist in the only monograph on his drawings, they are there also related to another drawing with the date 1657. Far from illegible, the whole line can be construed as *'...mahlergesehl geschehn inn Anno 1657'*.<sup>8</sup> The inscription and format with four framed views strongly suggest that the sheet groups together a set of copies of folios from a sketchbook. They may attest to interest in Van Vianen's work fifty years after the execution of the originals, but cannot be used to illustrate his work—certainly not in a book where they stand as the single examples shown of his work. Contrary to the assertion of the editors, the cases of the Spranger and the Van Vianen demonstrate that the determination of scholarly accuracy is not separate from considerations of quality.

In the light of such problems, to cite other shortcomings might seem superfluous. The translation is largely serviceable. Some bloopers (such as base being used instead of the word ground pertaining to painting; of print instead of drawing) might have been avoided (pp. 43 and 429). Some words, such as *Peripteros*, are just left in the Greek transliteration. Less satisfying is the recourse to traditional, and imprecise stylistic terminology (Mannerism, Early Baroque, High Baroque). Not only does this usage seem tired, but it avoids real contextualization by eschewing specific comparisons. When such parallels are adduced, they are often imprecise. Miloš Štehlík correctly recognized the relation of Pietro Materna's documented fountain in Bučovice to Giambologna and to his follower Pietro Tacca (to whom this reviewer thinks it is more closely related), not simply to what is here described as *'Tuscan Mannerism'* (pp. 443—Niccolò Tribolo and Bartolommeo Ammanati might be recalled

here). However, despite the fountains' ultimately common sources, it may hardly be described as parallel to Bernini's Triton Fountain.

More consideration of the validity or appropriateness of such specific comparisons to contemporaneous works by artists elsewhere would have clarified individual arguments, and better served the aim of the book. It seems a shame that concentration on art in the Czech Lands did not encourage more thorough treatment of how it relates to developments, exchanges and mutual influences with developments elsewhere. In focusing so intensely on the local, the opportunity to see how the local connects with the global is often lost from view. While some authors do make such connections, refusal to strive for a synthesis often hampers the enterprise. This book contains many useful observations and arguments, but apparent unwillingness to try to reach from the local to something more universal, starting from a Czech context, does not portend well for its fate.

#### NOTES

- 1 *Dějiny českého výtvarého umění*, Praha 1984–2007, 12 volumes.
- 2 See for example Laura Hoptman and Tomáš Pospiszyl (eds), *Primary Documents. A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s*, New York, 2002. — Ana Janevski, Roxana Marcoci and Ksenia Nouril (eds), *Primary Documents. Art and Theory of Post-1989 Central and Eastern Europe. A Critical Anthology*, New York 2018.
- 3 In addition to exhibitions devoted to Charles IV and contemporary Czech art, the appointment of Alexandra Suda, a scholar of Czech medieval art, as the director of the National Gallery of Canada is noteworthy.
- 4 Shira Brisman (review), Stephanie Porras, 'Art of the Northern Renaissance: Courts, Commerce and Devotion', *Renaissance Quarterly* LXXII, No. 2, 2019, p. 597: 'We now have a more nuanced and varied contribution to the English-language pedagogical approach, which had never felt comfortable with the territorial organization of Wolfgang Braunfels's *Die Kunst im Heiligen Römischen Reich Deutscher Nation*, but which had also long contorted itself in an attempt to combine Panofsky's great interests'.
- 5 See for example the works cited in the notes on p. 343.
- 6 Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, London 2010.
- 7 Jessica Harrison-Hall, *China. A History in Objects*, London, 2017. — Ladan Akbarnia et. al., *The Islamic World. A History in Objects*, London 2018.
- 8 See Teréz Gerszi, *Paulus van Vianen Handzeichnungen*, Hanau 1982, pp. 208–210, ill. 65 and 70.