

Některé diskuse otevřené recenzemi nových publikací vyvolávají polemické reakce a mohou přinést obecnější oborovou diskusi. Rozhodli jsme se proto zavést nepravidelnou rubriku, kde v odůvodněných případech a výhradně po souhlasu redakční rady poskytneme autorům recenzovaných publikací prostor k reakci na kritické výhrady recenzentů, a umožnit tak výměnu názorů o obecnějších oborových a metodologických otázkách. Autor původní recenze bude mít možnost na odpověď krátce reagovat, pokud to bude považovat za nutné. Věříme, že tento formát přispěje k inspirativní výměně názorů na aktuální témata našeho oboru.

The discussions opened up by the reviews of new publications sometimes spark debates and critical reactions and these can lead to more general discussions in the field of art history. We have therefore decided to introduce an occasional section in the journal that — in justifiable cases and only with the agreement of the Editorial Board — will provide the authors of reviewed publications a space in which to respond to a reviewer's criticisms, and will thereby enable an exchange of opinions on more general issues in the field and methodology of art history. The author of the original review will also have an opportunity to respond briefly if s/he considers it necessary. We believe that this new section will help promote inspiring exchanges of opinion on current issues in our field.



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The Method of Collective Art-Historical Syntheses

In the last-but-one issue of the journal *Umění/Art*, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann published a review of the book *Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000* (2017).¹ He assessed the work in very critical terms, which, in view of his reputation as an outstanding expert on Central European art, is something that we, as editors of the book, have to take seriously. However, our opinion on some of the issues raised in DaCosta Kaufmann's review differs from that of this respected American researcher. We would like to make the readers of *Umění/Art* aware of our point of view.

The most important questions evidently relate to the method used by the book *Art in the Czech Lands* in presenting some 800 works of art from a period covering 12 centuries. Together with our 31 co-authors, all of them colleagues from the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, we decided to organise the book in a different way than is usual with similar art-historical syntheses. We wanted to avoid what is described in the current art-historical discourse as a survey. An earlier publication by our Institute, the

11-volume *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění* (*A History of Czech Visual Art, 1988–2007*), which is mentioned by DaCosta Kaufmann at the beginning of his review, is an example of such a survey. The essential methodological approach of this kind of synthesis consists in dividing up the artistic production of a certain epoch into different fields. In older epochs these were usually architecture, sculpture, painting, and artistic craftwork. Onto the imaginary strings of each field art historians would then thread the selected beads of artefacts and describe how and why these works changed within the framework of the field. For various reasons, of which we will here mention two, we considered this concept of synthesis to be problematical, and tried to find an alternative approach.

Firstly, it seemed to us that a certain risk is involved simply in specialising in one field of art. We found that even those narratives that successfully placed the changes in works of art within a field in their historical context, and whose authors were well aware of the interrelations

between fields, still tended towards the outdated idea — which had long been superseded in the art-historical discourse — of immanent development with change coming from within, and we felt that this was due to their specialisation in a single field. The second reason why we chose to approach our synthesis in a different way lies in the narrative technique used in surveys, which obliges art historians to create links and connections between works of art, even where there are no facts available to support this. Consequently, the literary qualities of the author's text start to compete with the endeavour to present history as factually as possible. Among other sources, we found support for our lack of confidence in the survey genre in the ideas of Hayden White,² whom DaCosta Kaufmann criticises us for having misunderstood. For according to our critic, when we decided to suppress the survey element in our synthesis, we deprived it of the very thing which makes a synthesis a synthesis. In our view, however, a survey approach is not a necessary precondition for a synthesis.

If this were the case, then — in the words of Paul Veyne — all that readers would learn at the end of the book would be a *'storyline prepared in advance'*,³ as is the case, in our view, with traditionally structured surveys or prose writings. A synthesis, however, can also have the character of an experimental prose, which stimulates the readers' imagination and tests their attentiveness. Such a synthesis places next to one another sections of narrative that do not have to have any direct connection, but which nevertheless together create an overall picture by gradually adding further layers. The interpretation of art historians can also add one layer after another and thus be made up of chapters which do not have just a single beginning and a single end. Neil MacGregor, whose book *A History of the World in 100 Objects* is compared to our work by DaCosta Kaufmann, uses in his introduction the metaphor of *'puzzling out'*.⁴ In our discussions about the concept for our book, we had something similar in mind when we came to the conclusion that it was possible to build up an overall history of art in the Czech lands from smaller sections by gradually adding them in further layers.

And so instead of the survey we used a different basis for our book. This consisted of what we called *'families'* — MacGregor uses the term *'clusters'*⁵ in the same connection — groups of two, three, or four works selected from all fields of artistic production. They consist of works which for various reasons belong together. The concept of our *'families'* is based on the assumption that each work in them helps us to understand the other ones, and that together all the members of a family create an interpretational framework or context. We think it is a pity that these basic units of our synthesis remained on the periphery of DaCosta Kaufmann's interest, and that when our critic did mention them, he considered them simply as items in a catalogue. Our book, however, is not a catalogue. In the introduction to *Art in the Czech Lands* we emphasised that the catalogue form did not seem ap-

propriate to us, as it is too simple, and so we tried to find a different form for the concept of our book.

The themes of the *'families'* vary throughout the book. In one case the family members are linked by having been commissioned by the same patron, in a second by the initiative of the artists, elsewhere by the rise of new religious or political ideas, and in other cases they all present a new artistic trend or a new media. We set great store by families that did not specialise in a single artistic field. On the other hand, as editors we did not consider it necessary for all the families to contain members from different fields. Our aim was rather for the themes of the families to cover as far as possible all the important (or at least all the typical) features connected with artistic production in the Czech lands over twelve centuries, and thus to provide a representative overall picture, although not one that was presented in an uninterrupted narrative.

The book contains 260 such *'families'*. For the most part they are arranged in chronological order, and so the themes covered in them make their appearance in the book in the order in which they emerged over the course of history. In addition, we have tried to date all the works in these small units as precisely as possible. In short, it can be said that our book is essentially grounded on the historical sequence of artistic themes. When, therefore, DaCosta Kaufmann says that the *'disjointed format'* of our book *'runs the dangers of becoming ahistorical'* or even *'athematic'*,⁶ this is a statement that we can hardly agree with.

Nevertheless, it seems to us that it is precisely this *'disjointed format'* that our critic regards as the most problematical aspect of *Art in the Czech Lands*. He then adds to his statement about the disparate nature of our book the hypothesis that as editors we ourselves realised the *'drawbacks of a catalogue format'*⁷ and therefore commissioned introductions or overviews for the three main sections of the work. However, we did not do this after the event, in order to rescue our book at the last moment, as DaCosta Kaufmann's criticism implies. In fact, we planned to have these short introductory texts right from the beginning. We wanted the authors of these texts to concentrate on methodological questions of art-historical interpretation, particularly those that it was not possible to develop sufficiently in the *'family'* format,⁸ or those that would overburden the format and lead to frequent repetition. We were concerned here above all with themes that ran continuously throughout the period 800–2000, and which underwent changes in the course of the different historical epochs. They include, for example, the function of art, the status of art and artists, or the modes of perception and evaluation of works of art in earlier and more recent times. The introductory texts to the sections in our book concentrated on the themes of this type, and if in their examination of them the authors chose a form similar to short surveys, but at the same time fulfilled their task satisfactorily, we as editors did not stand in their way.

This brings us to the second set of DaCosta Kaufmann's objections to our book, which in this case

are directed against the work of its editors. According to his review we have not revealed to our readers which set of criteria we laid down for the selection of the artefacts included in the book, nor have we explained how individual authors were responsible for their contributions. In DaCosta Kaufmann's view, the fact that these questions were not clarified in advance led to many internal contradictions in our book. Both directly and indirectly he criticises us for not having carried out our role as editors sufficiently: we are informed by him that there is a lack of a 'single authorial voice'.⁹

We admit that our introduction to the book was too brief. We have paid dearly for this, because DaCosta Kaufmann devoted roughly half of his review just to this three-page text, while the book as a whole is almost a thousand pages long. We are therefore now obliged to provide readers with a glimpse behind the scenes so they can understand how the concept of the book and the process of writing it took shape. As we hope we have already explained, we wanted to move away from the traditional methods of art-historical surveys, and we can reveal that we had to expend considerable effort before all our colleagues came to share our ideas about the concept of the book. Many of them accepted it with gritted teeth, but nevertheless did their work well, at least in our view. In order for the numerous members of our team to understand in advance what we wanted of them, we ourselves wrote several 'families' as models.

This was followed by the stage of deciding on the themes for the families. The formulation of these themes lay in the competence of three authorial sub-teams for the periods 800–1500, 1500–1800, and 1800–2000. We as editors tried to ensure that the number of families was divided proportionally between these three main sections, that their thematic content did not become stereotypical, and above all that the themes covered the entire course of artistic production in the Czech lands in all its typical manifestations. During our discussions with the authors, some families were added, others discarded, and a considerable number had to be rewritten. We insisted, for example, that the texts of the families had to relate to works that could be reproduced, and that they did not take the form of a kind of mini-survey. Responsibility for the published form of these texts and for the choice of artefacts attached to them lay with the individual authors whose initials appear below the texts. We take this to be self-evident, and it is not clear to us what further explanation DaCosta Kaufmann needs here. In addition, we are sure that the editors of large syntheses, in which a large number of authors are involved, would have chosen the same or a very similar approach to their work.

Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, however, has discovered 'multiple contradictions'¹⁰ in our book, and finds opinions in it which he considers mistaken. Here we come to the third set of his objections, relating to the factual level of our book. As our critic is an outstanding expert on early modern art in the Central European region, it

clearly is not possible to argue against some of his adverse judgements, for example confusing copies made in 1657 of drawings by the Rudolfine artist Paulus van Vianen with the originals, or the imprecise identification of the models for the fountain in the château courtyard in Bučovice. We, too, also regret that the famous Imperial Hall of this château did not find a place among the illustrations in our book, although the Bučovice residence appears in two of our families. However, we find that other attempts by DaCosta Kaufmann to demonstrate contradictions and mistakes in *Art in the Czech Lands* (and thus to criticise its editors for insufficient care in monitoring the content of the book) are debatable, and in such cases we must stand up for our authorial team.

For example, we do not see any contradiction in the two different interpretations of the term 'the Prague school', used to describe the Rudolfine painters, because the first interpretation is talking about a present-day assessment of this circle of artists, while the second refers to how it was seen by its contemporaries. We did not consider it appropriate to add the country seat in Jičín to the sites in the book connected with Albrecht of Waldstein — DaCosta Kaufmann favours the modern transcription 'Wallenstein'¹¹ used by the poet Friedrich Schiller — because Waldstein's Prague Palace, to which a whole family is devoted in the book, provides a more representative range of the works commissioned by this aristocrat, in a combination of several artistic fields, than would be possible with the site in Jičín. Nor is it true that our book constructed an entire oeuvre by the sculptor Ernst Heidelberger, recorded as having worked for Waldstein in 1632. Finally, to take the case of the Rudolfine painter Bartholomeus Spranger, who is credited in the book with having painted *Cupid Carving His Bow*, a picture on copper in an American collection, this attribution was made by colleagues of ours who are acknowledged both in the Czech Republic and internationally as specialists on Rudolfine art, and there was no reason why we as editors should not have confidence in them.

Another highly debatable set of objections to our book by DaCosta Kaufmann arises out of the complicated history of the Czech state, whose borders and ethnic composition changed over the course of 12 centuries. From the 19th century onwards, Czech and German nationalism began to play a significant role in the culture of the Czech lands. For us this raised the question of to what extent our book should respect the present-day borders of the Czech state, and to what extent it should cover the output of artists and architects from other countries and other linguistic territories. It seems that few answers to these questions can satisfy everybody. Together with the members of our authorial team we eventually decided that we should focus on artefacts created on the territory of what is today the Czech Republic, regardless of the ethnic origin of the artists. However, if we consider this to be a binding criterion, would it be correct to overlook the oeuvre of two modern

figures, Alfons Mucha and František Kupka, who have evinced the greatest reaction on the world stage of all Czech artists, if we know that their most important works were created in Paris? DaCosta Kaufmann suggests that it would indeed be correct, but to us the question does not seem so clear-cut. Our critic is also surprised that one of our families is devoted to works by artists from Slovakia and another to the output of ethnic Germans living in interwar Czechoslovakia. In both cases, however, the territorial criterion was met, and the text of both families clearly explains why the author felt justified in including the works of these artists in the book — as is also the case in the family which covers the works painted in Prague by the Austrian Oskar Kokoschka. Finally, we also find it difficult to understand our critic's question why we do not present Peter Parler, who was responsible for the design of the Gothic Cathedral of St Vitus, as a foreign architect working in the Czech lands, when we did this for Josef Plečnik, Adolf Loos, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe in the 20th century. Our answer to this is that inviting an architect to Prague from what is today Germany was quite natural for the medieval Emperor Charles IV, but for clients in the first half of the 20th century such a step was by no means so self-evident, because by then nationalism had intervened, and Czech architects, who had tried to occupy all the key positions after the establishment of the Czechoslovak state, regarded foreign competition with animosity. The texts of the families dealing with foreign architects have tried to make all this clear.

When in his review Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann has come to the end of the list of cases where in his view our book has made mistakes, he adds '*In the light of such problems, to cite other shortcomings might seem superfluous*',¹² as though our book was full of such shortcomings. This remark shows a considerable lack of correctness, and unfortunately it is not the only one in DaCosta Kaufmann's text. We have the same impression with our critic's explanation of what the terms canon and decanonisation mean, or his attempts at amusing remarks about authority and authoritarianism. In our view, such a prominent and experienced art historian does not need to include such passages, because he might realise that a lack of correctness gives rise to emotion, and where emotion takes over, it puts an end to rational discussion. Of course, we fully accept that many aspects of *Art in the Czech Lands* can be the subject of discussion, and indeed very critical discussion, and this applies in particular to the approach used in the book, and to its concept and genre.

In his critique, DaCosta Kaufmann characterises the genre of our book as a catalogue. At one point, however, he talks about the difficulty of classifying it in terms of genre: '*It is neither an encyclopedia, nor a dictionary, nor an inventory of objects or monuments ... Nor do its entries resemble a catalogue raisonné in any strict sense.*'¹³ Our critic refuses to accept the fact that our book is in fact an art-historical synthesis, and this is no doubt because *Art in the Czech Lands* does not have the characteristic features of a survey

and its '*families*' are not linked by a continuous narrative. In our view, therefore, the discussion should mainly focus on whether such a connecting narrative is a necessary condition for art-historical syntheses. We have tried to explain why we believe that this is not the case.

TRANSLATED BY PETER STEPHENS

NOTES

- 1 Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann — Princeton University [review:], Taťána Petrasová and Rostislav Švácha (eds), *Art in the Czech Lands 800–2000*, Prague 2017, *Umění / Art LXVII*, 2019, no. 3, pp. 239–242.
- 2 Cf. in particular Hayden White, *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism*, Baltimore 1992. — Czech translation by Ladislav Nagy: *Tropika diskursu: Kulturně kritické eseje*, Praha 2010.
- 3 Paul Veyne, *Comment on écrit l'histoire, suivi de Foucault révolutionnaire l'histoire*, Paris 1978. — Czech translation by Čestmír Pelikán in Paul Veyne, *Jak se píšou dějiny*, Červený Kostelec 2010, pp. 167–168.
- 4 Neil MacGregor, *A History of the World in 100 Objects*, London 2012, p. xviii
- 5 MacGregor (note 4), p. xiii.
- 6 DaCosta Kaufmann (note 1), p. 240.
- 7 Ibidem.
- 8 Here we consider valid the comment by Matthew Rampley that the capacity of the '*family*' '*mostly offers brief sketches rather than extensive analyses*'. — Cf. Matthew Rampley, *Art in the Czech Lands: Book Review*, <https://craace.com/2018/10/23/book-review-art-in-the-czech-lands-800-2000/>
- 9 DaCosta Kaufmann (note 1), p. 241
- 10 Ibidem.
- 11 Ibidem.
- 12 Ibidem, p. 242.
- 13 Ibidem, p. 240.