

# Editorial:

## Counter-Narratives of East Central Europe

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### Keywords

Central Europe; east-central Europe; Ion Mincu; globalization; imperialism; colonization; world systems; Virgil Bierbauer; gender; women artists

<https://doi.org/10.5817/AEC2022-2-1>

## Editorial: Counter-Narratives of East Central Europe

When this journal was launched, it was stated that it would be focused on the period from 1800 to the present. No sooner was that stated than the journal broke its own rule, by including a round-table discussion ‘Globalizing Early Modern Central and Eastern European Art,’ which addresses the issues related to the historiography of art in east central Europe *before* 1800. However, we felt that the calibre of the discussion, and the importance of the issues it raised, made its inclusion in *Art East Central* a logical decision. The discussion led by Robyn Radway, Tomasz Grusiecki and their colleagues explores themes and debates that are of relevance to scholars of central and eastern European art with interests in *any* period, including the place of the region in art historical scholarship. The emphasis on globalization in the discussion highlights an important shift in the historiography of central and eastern Europe. Where its parameters were so often defined in relation to neighbouring regions and states in Europe, such as Italy, Germany, France, Scandinavia and the Ottoman Empire, this self-limiting framework has increasingly come to be seen as untenable. Whether in relation to the last two centuries or to the early modern period, it is now clear that the states and peoples of central and eastern Europe were entwined in a wider global network of cultures.

The American sociologist and economic historian Immanuel Wallerstein (1930–2019) coined the notion of the ‘world system’ in the 1970s, and he dated its inception to the development of capitalism in the 16<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Since then, the idea of a world system has been intertwined with that of colonialism for, as Walter Mignolo has argued, the European colonial venture and the Renaissance and Enlightenment were simply different sides of the same coin.<sup>2</sup> Central and eastern Europe were entangled in this process, and not merely as ‘colonial subjects’ of the great imperial powers of Germany, Tsarist Russia and Austria-Hungary.<sup>3</sup> For a growing body of research has also examined the way that Poles, Hungarians, Czechs, Slovaks and Romanians, for example, acted as agents of empire and purveyors of imperial attitudes towards the colonised world for much of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.<sup>4</sup> The round table discussion led by Radway and Grusiecki extends this interest further back in time. It also undertakes an important task, namely, in centering its discussion on art. For while social histories and studies of visual culture in central and eastern Europe have become more

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1) Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-system I: Capitalist Agriculture and the Origins of the European World-economy in the Sixteenth Century*, New York and London: Academic Press, 1974.

2) Walter Mignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity: Global Futures, Decolonial Options*, Durham NC: Duke University Press, 2011.

3) A particularly suggestive project on Austria-Hungary explored the extent to which Habsburg rule over non-German speaking subjects assumed a colonial character. See Johannes Feichtinger, Ursula Prutsch and Moritz Csáky, eds, *Habsburg Postcolonial: Machtstrukturen und kollektives Gedächtnis*, Vienna: Studien Verlag, 2003.

4) See, for example, Walter Sauer, ed., *K. u. k. colonial: Habsburgermonarchie und europäische Herrschaft in Afrika*, Vienna: Boehlau, 2007; Robert Born, ed., *Orientalismen in Ostmitteleuropa: Diskurse, Akteure und Disziplinen vom 19. Jahrhundert bis zum Zweiten Weltkrieg*, Bielefeld: Transcript, 2014; Filip Herza, *Imaginace jinakosti: Pražské přehledky lidských kuriozit v 19. a 20. Století*, Prague: Scriptorium, 2021; Piotr Puchalski, *Poland in a Colonial World Order: Adjustments and Aspirations 1918–1939*, London: Routledge, 2022; Dagnosław Demski and Dominika Czarnecka, *Staged Otherness; Ethnic Shows in Central and Eastern Europe, 1850–1939*, Budapest: CEU Press, 2022.

prominent, art historians of the region have yet to engage in a consistent and deep way with globalization and its implications. Hopefully the discussion in the round table published will act as a catalyst for further work specifically in the history of art.

The focus on globalization puts into question what has often been a dominant frame of inquiry into the art of central and eastern Europe: the nation state. Cosmin Minea undertakes a parallel questioning of this frame in his article on Ion Mincu. Often seen as the originator of the modern Romanian style of architecture, and consequently turned into a mythical figure for many Romanians, Mincu was, it turns out, not as nationally-minded an architect as many have assumed. He was interested in the architectural heritage of Romania, but he was not a nationalist ideologue (in contrast to his contemporaries, such as the Hungarian architect Ödön Lechner). The historic architecture to be found in Romania provided Mincu with a resource of ideas and solutions, and for this reason he explored its potential for his own creative practice. However, Minea demonstrates, it was only subsequent generations of architects and writers who re-interpreted this as inspired by the idea of the Romanian nation as an imagined community. Minea's article brings to attention the extent to which an architect's identity and reputation is shaped by their subsequent reception and can often be used to serve ideological agendas with which the architect themselves may have had limited sympathy. In addition, the discussion reminds us of the importance of 'national indifference,' a term first used by scholars of Bohemia under the Habsburg Empire, but applicable elsewhere, including, in this case, Romania.<sup>5</sup>

This issue of *Art East Central* contains two collections of translations of historic primary source material, a practice that the journal will continue in future issues. The first is a group of four essays by the Hungarian architectural critic Virgil Bierbauer (1893–1956). Bierbauer falls into that category of individual whose activities are known about and recognised as significant, but with the details being vague. He was a prominent voice of modernist architectural criticism in the 1920s and 1930s in Hungary, and as editor of the journal *Tér és Forma* (Space and Form) he played a crucial role as an advocate of the international modern movement. Yet what he actually argued for is almost entirely unknown. The reason for this is fairly straightforward: the fact that he wrote almost exclusively in Hungarian. As with so many other languages of central and eastern Europe, the number of international scholars of modernist culture who are conversant in Hungarian is vanishingly small. Moreover, even in Hungary, very few have engaged seriously with his work. He has tended to be eclipsed by the writings of the designers and artists around Lajos Kassák, who undoubtedly benefitted from having spent a period in exile outside of Hungary. Familiarity with critical debate and thought on the part of Hungarian authors beyond the narrow confines of Kassák and his group is thus highly limited. Publication of this group of texts by Bierbauer is thus the first step in what will be a larger project of bringing the ideas of writers to a wider readership.

The second collection of translated texts is of an entirely different character, for they have been included here primarily for their documentary function. They consist of reviews and commentaries on exhibitions of art and design by women in interwar Austria. The activities of women designers and artists in Austria have only recently become a topic of extended

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5) Tara Zahra, 'Imagined Noncommunities: National Indifference as a Category of Analysis,' *Slavic Review* 69.1, 2010, 93–119.

inquiry, and this group of texts is a contribution to that larger project. Yet, as the introduction by Christian Drobe points out, it highlights the multi-faceted nature of that project. For there has been understandable focus on women as figures of dissent, challenging inherited norms and stereotypes and championing the idea of the ‘new woman.’ Two recent exhibitions in Vienna on women artists and on women designers in the Wiener Werkstätte have adopted this approach.<sup>6</sup> In Brno, too, the Moravian Gallery staged an exhibition on the idea of the ‘civilized woman,’ in reference to an earlier exhibition of 1929 that celebrated women’s emancipation.<sup>7</sup>

In part, the collected texts further this theme, for they highlight the critical fortunes of women artists; they reveal efforts by women critics to articulate a specific aesthetic agenda that was at variance with the values of those of the male-dominated Viennese art world. Yet they also show that far from being contested, or indeed assuming a contestatory position, the work of women artists was often lauded and respected by their male peers. Women could also pursue successful careers as designers, which involved more than just being holders of a consolation prize after having been excluded from the masculine domain of architecture. Women designers were able to formulate their own social and aesthetic approaches, which often overlapped with debates between architects. As Drobe points out, even if Adolf Loos dismissed decoration as ‘feminine,’ discussion over its role played a serious part in thinking about how architectural and architectural space might engage meaningfully with their users. Finally, even if the ‘new woman’ has been at the centre of attention, the texts here demonstrate that discussion of gender and identity in the arts was far broader, and that the figure of femininity took on forms that, sometimes, contradicted ideals of female emancipation. We may dismiss some of them as retrograde – the Elida Prize offers a good example of this – but it is important nevertheless to examine them critically, above all, because they provide an insight into the landscape that women artists and designers had to negotiate. In this respect, all the texts contained in this issue of *Art East Central* offer different kinds of counter-narratives. They suggest, too, that rigorous inquiry should be alert to the unexpected challenges the complex terrain of art and its history can present.

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6) Sabine Fellner and Stella Rollig, eds, *City of Women: Female Artists in Vienna from 1900 to 1938*, Vienna: Belvedere, 2019; Christoph Thun-Hohenstein, Anne-Karin Rossberg and Elisabeth Schmuttermeier, eds, *Women Artists of the Wiener Werkstätte*, Basel: Birkhäuser, 2021.

7) Martina Pachmannová, ed., *Civilizovaná žena: Ideál i paradox prvorepublikové vizuální kultury*, Prague: UMPRUM, 2021.



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