

A World of its Own? Art History in Prague.

A Review of: Richard Biegl, Roman Prahel and Jakub Bachtík, eds, *Století ústavu pro dějiny umění na Filozofické fakultě Univerzity Karlovy* [A Century of the Institute for Art History at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University]. Prague: Charles University, 2020. 942 pp. ISBN: 9788073089627.

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Keywords

Charles University; Karel Chytil; Alfred Woltmann; Antonín Matějček; nationalism; Vienna School of Art History; historiography;

<https://doi.org/10.5817/AEC2021-1-7>

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When the Czech film *Pupendo* (2003), set in the 1980s, depicted an art historian as a dishevelled, middle-aged man, it captured a common stereotypical view of the profession held by the majority of society in Communist Czechoslovakia. Although homeless, the fictional art historian Alois Fábera in the film always wears a suit, a tie and obligatory glasses, showing his middle-class (possibly bourgeois) background. He is portrayed as someone very knowledgeable and empathic, yet also one who is misunderstood by society and stands outside of the Communist system. The comic effect of the figure is emphasised by his unorthodox relationship to the world around and by the wheelie bag he drags around. In the Communist 1980s, art history had an aura of a subject that had no real relevance in the target-driven state and perhaps more than ever it had connotations with the allegedly bourgeois climate of interwar Czechoslovakia.

In the Czechoslovakia of the decade before the Velvet Revolution, in which the film takes place, art history as a university subject stagnated. At the Charles University in Prague, it suffered from limits on the student numbers and a lack of teaching staff. The Communist regime imposed a screening process for both students and staff and those with unacceptable political profiles were unwanted. The seemingly caricatured figure of the film art historian thus rings true in many respects and confirms a view that penetrated the general understanding of the discipline and its representatives as elitist, eccentric and detached from the needs of the real world. Such a view may not be held internationally but in the Czech Republic and many other post-Communist countries, art historians still often need to explain, defend and justify their choice of occupation because of this legacy.

Yet art history as a subject has a long history in Central Europe, which is intertwined with political and cultural events. Art historians have played a key role in for instance forming canons of national art, building up national collections of art, and informing debates about public monuments and architecture. Reflecting on the nature of art history as a subject and its historic and contemporary role in society is therefore an interesting and much needed task that the volume *Století ústavu pro dějiny umění* promises to achieve. The book examines the history of the Institute of Art History at the Charles University in Prague, which recently commemorated its centenary. The main focus of the extensive book may seem rather limited because the history of a single department at a single university may not be too attractive for wider audiences. Yet as the dustjacket states, this book sets out not only to inform about

one particular subject 'but simultaneously to contribute to the knowledge of modern Czech history and the role of universities and scholars in their development.' This, indeed, could be a useful approach which chooses a small element of history, a microhistory, on which it draws conclusions about the wider historic context, the macrohistory. Has the book achieved this goal? And could it appeal to readers outside of art history to create an informed view of art history not based on a caricature?

One hundred years of what?

Nearly 950 pages long, the book was edited by Richard Biegl, Roman Prahel and Jakub Bachtík and the individual contributions were written by a variety of academics at various levels of their careers who are active at the current department now or have been linked with it in the past. The entire volume is divided into two parts. The main, narrative, part deals with the history of the department and spreads over nearly seven hundred pages. It covers not only the hundred years of the institution but also the prehistory of art history education at the university. Each chapter covers a specific period and also includes biographies of the main scholarly protagonists. The second part comprises several lists: names of the lecturers, professors and occasional staff active here, topics of theses and dissertations submitted between 1918 and 2018, and an extensive bibliography.

First of all, what is the one hundred years in the title? Already here, the complicated history of the department is suggested because a specific, single foundation date cannot be pinpointed. The introduction mentions several years as the possible starting point, including 1919 when an important art history library was acquired for the art history chair, and 1922 when the ministry of education officially approved the institute. Yet the statutes of the art history department had already been accepted in 1911, when the university also received its first permanent Czech-language chair in art history, in the figure of Karel Chytil. The history could go back even further to 1850, when Josef Erazim Vocel (whose name sometimes was spelled Wocel) became the first professor of art history. With no concrete date to hold on to, the book starts with a chapter on the emancipation of art history as a discipline in the second half of the 19th century and carries on until the present day. Roman Prahel and Jaroslav Horáček trace the early days in the work of Vocel (1803–1871), whose texts on the history of mediaeval art and architecture in the Czech lands emphasised their Czech origin.

Most art history written and taught in the second half of the 19th century was under the direct influence of national tensions between Czechs and Germans at the university as well as outside of it. The authors recall the now notorious lecture of the German art historian Alfred Woltmann, Vocel's successor, about the prominence of German art in Prague which led to student protests. At the time when the Czechness of Czech art was an important element in the national revival, claims about the possible German origin of artworks outraged the Czechs. Nationalism was one of the key foundation stones on which art history was built in the nineteenth century, yet this feature is slightly underplayed in the book.

The book nevertheless acknowledges that the early institutional history in Prague was marked by the Czech – German relationship. The university itself was split into separate Czech

and German parts in 1882 and the two art histories co-existed alongside each other without much real interaction. Even though the German department ceased to exist at the end of the Second World War, the book devotes a chapter to it, in which Jiří Koukal outlines its fate. Just as the authors in the other chapters, he focuses mostly on individuals who taught here, overviewing their main research interests and teaching. Koukal nevertheless explains how *German* art history contributed to history in general, using Karl Maria Swoboda's response to fascism and expansion of Germany as an example. Swoboda considered the contested border region of Sudetenland as a sovereign cultural province in eastern Germany and his volume *Zum deutschen Anteil an der Kunst der Sudetenländer* (one of seven published between 1938–43) tried to present a range of examples to prove that argument.

Extensive yet exclusive

In general, extreme historic situations, including both world wars, the fall of the Habsburg Monarchy or the period of the Nazi Protectorate, are treated in a sketchy way, compared to the extensive and detailed attention given to other periods. Instead, emphasis is placed on the path of the department through history seen via the scholars active at the department. The period between 1894 and 1939 is covered in two chapters by Tomáš Murár who does consider the artistic and cultural environment in Prague as well as the intellectual stimuli that the Vienna School of Art history represented for many Czech art historians. However, his focus remains limited to the discipline without much attention to historical and political events outside of the art (history) world. For example, when one illustrative photograph shows a professor at the department, Antonín Matějček, with then-President Masaryk, the question arises what kind of relationship they had? What was the role of art historians in the political structure of Czechoslovakia? Who had access to decision making in the political matters concerning art?

In this regard, the photographs included in the book represent a great resource that could complement the extensive textual information. They depict the individual professors in both standard and non-standard situations of work and leisure which suggest how and where they spent their time and how they interacted with students. Unfortunately, the photographs only play an auxiliary role in the book and are not reflected on in the text.

Most of the chapters also do not deal with the topic of studentship very well. It is only in the treatment of more recent history that we learn who was allowed to study under Communism and what the national and gender composition of the students was. To get a better sense about the discipline and its role in society, it would be good to know who studied art history in the periods before 1948 and why; where the students came from in terms of geography and social class; how many women studied the subject and what their occupation was, if any, upon completion of their studies.

The questions of social as well as political context in which the department of art history operated is given more attention in the period during WWII and after. When the Czech university closed down during the war, many Czech art historians left Prague or kept their second jobs at various cultural institutions in the capital. The wartime fate of the Czech art history is examined by Tereza Johanidisová who points out that despite the closure of the

university, a lot of other activities, including publishing and exhibiting, remained unaffected when considered politically safe. Matějček left Prague but kept writing, while Jan Květ, who specialised in mediaeval art, taught art history at secondary schools. There were also a few who retained their careers, such as the historian of Christian art and archaeology, Josef Cibulka, who replaced Vincenc Kramář to become director of the Czech-Moravian Land Gallery, the wartime incarnation of the future National Gallery. For his services he received an award from the Protectorate, which together with the high-ranking position, became problematic in post-war Czechoslovakia.

The closure of universities during the Second World War also highlights another significant issue that is not dealt with very well here. Art history teaching could continue at a limited number of institutions, including the School of Art and Design in Prague, which did not have a university status. Some art historians from the university, including Jaromír Pečírka and František Kovárna who both focused on modern art, found refuge here and carried on their teaching and research. This topic opens up not only the question of survival under extreme historic conditions but also one of the relationships between the department and other institutions where art history was practised. As a whole the book does not engage much with any other locations, making the department at the Charles University seem both unique and isolated. Most of the time, the impression is that Prague was the only place for art history in Czechoslovakia. This is confirmed in the brief discussion of the foundation of the Academy of Sciences with its Institute of Art History in 1953, which Johanidisová describes as a loss of the supreme position and ‘monopoly’ of the department in art historical research. While the department may have had a supreme position, without knowing how the discipline was practised not only at the School of Art and Design, but also at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague (let alone outside of Prague, for instance in Brno and Bratislava and increasingly in other cities) we can only take the author’s word for it. Indeed, the department at the Charles University is the central subject of the volume and is treated as such, but in order to recognize its position within the broader field of art history nationally, let alone internationally, it would be necessary to place it within a network of other institutions.

Recent histories

One of the contributions of the volume is its attempt to examine the more recent history of the department. Where the only other book to examine the development of Czech art history in depth, Rudolf Chadraba’s *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění* [Chapters of Czech art history], devoted only twenty pages to the situation after World War Two, in *Století ústavu* it occupies more than half of the volume.¹ The ups and downs the department experienced in the new political system after 1948 demonstrate the vulnerability of any field of human activity to regime change. During the embrace of Marxist-Leninist ideology in the 1940s and 1950s, for instance, art history was entrusted with the vital role of explaining and justifying socialist realism. At the same time, the loss of autonomy of universities due to the post-1948 reforms meant that decision-making about the department’s content and orientation became politicised with

1) Rudolf Chadraba, ed., *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění*, Prague, Odeon, 1986–87, 2 volumes.

suitability checks and clearances performed on staff and students. In extreme cases, lecturers were expelled for social, political or religious inadequacy and often replaced by those who could navigate the political demands. Those, such as Miroslav Míčko or Jaromír Neumann specialising in modern and Baroque art respectively, could re-establish relations with abroad and travel. The brief thaw of the 1960s that allowed such loosening of conditions on a larger scale came to a halt in 1968, with the new repressions of the normalisation period leading to the stagnation of the 1980s mentioned at the beginning.

Finally, in the difficult task of covering the recent history of the department, Richard Biegel tries to summarise the last three decades in the ultimate chapter. He describes them as the return to Europe which took place after the revolution of 1989. The department had to reinvent and rebuild itself into what is described as a multi-thematic and multi-generational organism with its own tradition in the historic continuity.²

Conclusion

Writing a history of a specific department is a challenging endeavour, which could have its benefits as long as such history places the object of investigation in a broader context. The history that is presented here remains mostly that of individuals, often men, their publications and teaching. Sometimes the authors of this volume go into such detail that explaining any external events or relations is forgotten. With students often missing from the accounts, we thus get a limited picture of art history as well as of art historians. Even though the picture is not that of the free-lance caricature art historian of *Pupendo*, the account still does not fully explain the relevance of art history within a broader system of social, economic, and political networks.

Paying attention to what was happening outside of the department at Charles university would require a different approach that summarises rather than dwells on the details of each period and individuals, their teaching and publications. One might imagine such a history written not as an exhaustive description, with biographies of everyone active in the department, but rather as a series of essays reflecting on the institution in relation to its political involvement, social structure, nationalism, gender composition and networks. The task of writing such a history would, obviously, be big and need a lot of effort, yet it could more effectively contribute to better understanding of the discipline by the more general public. Ultimately, although impressive in the level of research that went into it, the volume does little to contribute to knowledge of modern Czech history and the role of universities and scholars in the historical development it set for itself.

2) Richard Biegel, Roman Prahel and Jakub Bachtík, eds, *Století ústavu pro dějiny umění na Filozofické fakultě Univerzity Karlovy*, Prague: Charles University, 2020, 610–611.



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