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Navigating Czech Art History after the Second World War

A Review of: Milena Bartlová, *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945–1969*
(The History of Czech Art History 1945–1969), Prague: UMPRUM, 2021.
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A Review of: Milena Bartlová, *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945–1969* (The History of Czech Art History 1945–1969), Prague: UMPRUM, 2021. 552 pp. ISBN 978–80–88308–11–9.

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How does one write the history of art history? And who is it that writes art history in different political, social and historic contexts, and the art history of what? These are some of the main questions posed by Milena Bartlová in a highly self-reflective book, *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945–1969*. The reflection here does not only concern the scholarship in the field of art history in the given period, for it is also somewhat personal, as Bartlová explores the very environment she has come from, and which has formed her. She also revises some of her own previous findings and considerations on the state of the field. The book's focus is the discipline of art history in Czechoslovakia. Looking at a period which is framed by the end of the Second World War and the year 1969, when the hopes of the Prague Spring for a reform of the Communist regime were definitely halted, Bartlová delves into a time in the history of Czechoslovakia that can still hide various skeletons and cast shadows onto the present. Her attempt is therefore to write a sincere and open discussion of a period that saw the Communist takeover of power in 1948, the Stalinist repressions, the era of post-Stalinism in the late 1950s, and the political easing of the 1960s terminated by the 1968 occupation.

So far, literature that attempted a comprehensive look at the field in this period has been limited. Rudolf Chadraba's two-volume survey of Czech art history, published in 1987, does not provide much detailed analysis of the post-war period.¹ On the other hand, the considerably more exhaustive history of the art history department at Charles University by Biegel, Prahel and Bachtík (reviewed in the previous issue of *Art East Central*) offers very detailed insight into one aspect of academic art history, mostly leaving out the external circumstances.² Following the growing interest in the history of the field of the socialist realm, *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1945–1969* therefore brings much needed insight into the ways art history had to cope not only with a change of a political regime but also a new emphasis on comprehensible art encouraged from the Soviet Union.³

Bartlová explains her motivation to write this book in her introduction, which is a polemic directed at the anticipated future critic and sceptic. It reads like a targeted response to a discussion that has or will necessarily take place within the Czech (art) historical community. Looking back at a period that many lived through can still be a very sensitive issue. When the Czech historian Michal Pullmann and his colleague, Pavel Kolář, argued that during the so-

1) Rudolf Chadraba, ed., *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění*, 2 vols, Prague: Odeon, 1987.

2) Richard Biegel, Roman Prahel, and Jakub Bachtík, eds, *Sto let Ústavu pro dějiny umění na Filozofické fakultě Univerzity Karlovy*, Prague, Charles University, 2020.

3) Krista Kodres, Kristina Jöekalda and Michaela Marek, *A Socialist Realist History? Writing Art History in the Post-War Decades*, Cologne: Böhlau, 2019.

called normalization of the 1970s and 80s, ordinary Czechoslovak citizens were, through their behaviour, to an extent complicit in retaining the Communist regime, the criticism from many sides was immense.⁴ Pullmann was accused of condoning Communism and trivialising some of its non-democratic aspects. Yet, the authors asked several important, but uncomfortable, questions. How did the regime make its way into everyday life and the workplace, how did citizens negotiate it, and sometimes contribute to its perpetuation? This kind of questioning sees the people (factory workers, shop assistants, art historians) as those with agency, they were not a mindless body that can be manipulated at will by a handful of evil apparatchiks. Many made personal, admittedly hard, choices to work within the system and, inevitably, for the system.

Bartlová also puts people to the fore of her study. Art historians, mainly those working in academia, become actors within a specific academic network, which is an approach she uses here, informed mainly by Bruno Latour but also Benjamin Bratton, Michel Foucault, Rosi Braidotti, or Pierre Bourdieu. Individuals operate within the networks of institutions of education and work, negotiate power relations, are subjected to external events, and contribute to them. In Czechoslovakia their scholarship, seemingly apolitical, is thus inevitably framed by these systemic circumstances as well as by the forms of communication that are allowed within them. It was mainly access to information – whether to first- and second-hand artistic material or to publications and the dissemination of one's research – that put limits on the kind of research that could be conducted. The inability to travel abroad freely under Communism or communicate with peers thus led many to focus on predominantly local art works, a practice that has thrived until these days.

Communicating art history

The author explores these very issues in ten thematic chapters that cover topics like institutions, communication, or research methods. We learn who the key actors and sites that formed art history were, what approaches and subjects they chose and why, and under what political circumstances and power relations this was taking place. As the author argues, such an account cannot be written as a linear history and with this approach she deliberately creates a stack of layered infrastructures of art history. As a result, the chapters could be read independently as self-standing texts, although they sometimes repeat some basic information several times.

Throughout the book, the reader is introduced to the practices at various art historical institutions with Prague in the centre, the ways art historians were allowed to communicate because of the different political ruptures, the politicisation of academic knowledge and the potential resistance to the prescribed themes and forms of behaviour. In this context, Bartlová explores the ability of some art historians to reconcile the formalism that had survived from the times before WWII with the demands of the official Communist ideology after 1948 that favoured comprehensible socialist realism through applied methodologies and rhetoric.

4) Michal Pullmann, Pavel Kolář, *Co byla normalizace?* Prague: Lidové noviny, 2017; Michal Pullmann, *Konec experimentu. Přestavba a pád komunismu v Československu*, Prague: Scriptorium, 2011.

Bartlová points out that some art historians adopted Aesopian language to formally conform to the discourse modelled by Soviet art history, while including hidden messages for specialised colleagues.

There were several ways of doing this, but a common practice for this ingenious exercise was to include an introduction firmly outlining allegiance to Marxism-Leninism. The remainder of the text, however, would then try to avoid any political conformity. There was, however, a more astute way using very carefully chosen wording that is best exemplified by lectures and texts by Vincenc Kramář (1877–1960). In the interwar period, this graduate of the Vienna School was a Prague-based art historian and collector of Cubism, which he tried to defend even after the Second World War. Kramář joined the Communist party in 1945 and a year later published a pamphlet on the relationship between the party and fine art.⁵ While the official stance of the Communist regime was against formalism and any non-figurative representation, Kramář boldly defended Cubism and argued, for instance, that ‘we cannot see mere formalism in every work of art that does not represent a social topic or a life of a person.’⁶ Even Cubism was, in his view, capable of expressing political and social messages and could be revolutionary. And where Communist propaganda required art to be comprehensible and non-elitist, he claimed that ‘paintings [were] not comprehensible or incomprehensible in themselves. [...] With a standard level of intelligence, one can understand anything,’ especially through education, while the true meaning and message of art can be grasped only by those who have a sense of the life of lines, shapes, colours and light. Although Kramář was no longer one of the main actors that formulated art history as a discipline after the war, his rhetorical eloquence exemplifies the possible ways of responding to the official impositions on art and art history.

People in art history

The focus on individuals and their workings within the system allows Bartlová to read art historians as not solely driven by a concern with national identity, which had often been the case with studies of earlier periods. Saying that, these issues inevitably do appear now and then, and the two final chapters deal with the questions of the nation and identity, both internal and external. Yet in the context of the book as a whole, these themes appear marginal. There are historical reasons for that. The most significant ‘others’ for Czech art historians before the Second World War, German scholars based in Bohemia and Moravia, mostly disappeared from Czechoslovakia with the end of the conflict. They get some attention throughout the book but are not considered the key protagonists. Their post-war interactions with their Czech colleagues reveal how the discipline moved on to more cooperative exchanges despite the political divides after the Second World War. For instance, Karl Maria Swoboda (1889–1977), once a student of Max Dvořák and a professor at the German University in Prague and curator at several art institutions in Prague, played an important role in the interwar period. Swoboda was arrested following the liberation of Czechoslovakia in 1945, but two Czech art historians

5) Vincenc Kramář, *Kulturně politický program KSČ a výtvarné umění*, Prague: Svoboda, 1946.

6) Kramář, *Kulturně politický program*, 18.

Antonín Matějček (1889–1950) and Zdeněk Wirth (1878–1961), pleaded for his release. Afterwards, Swoboda left for Vienna but from there he remained in touch with his former peers in Czechoslovakia. He helped, for example, the younger Czech art historian Jaromír Neumann (1924–2001) to uncover Dvořák's archival documents in Vienna in 1959.

Such pieces of information, when put together from the different chapters, reveal that Czech art historians were not as completely isolated from external relations and contacts as they are often assumed to have been under the strict Communist regime. Nevertheless, these are more exceptions than the rule; they show more the power of personal or professional friendship than a general desire to undermine the political system. After all, Neumann, who had been a student of Matějček, became one of the crucial and most crafty agents in Czech post-war art history and an ardent Communist. Together with Jaroslav Pešina (1912–1992) and Jiří Kotalík (1920–1996), he held some of the most important and influential positions that defined the subject: these three were the heads of the art history department in Prague (Pešina), the newly established Institute of Art History of the Academy of Sciences (Neumann), and of the Art Academy and the National Gallery (Kotalík).

Who were the individuals, agents and actors that formed the history of Czech art history in the period between 1945 and 1969? Bartlová fittingly calls them (not without a pinch of sarcasm) *the big men* of art history for their influence, charisma and, after all, gender. They were a small group of art historians in the most powerful positions, based in Prague. And even though Bartlová makes a concerted effort to provide a holistic picture of art history that included a number of female art historians, including Růžena Vacková (1901–82), Anežka Merhautová (1919–2015) and Hana Volavková (1904–85), it is clear that the whole period was indeed dominated by (the big) men. This is something to be acknowledged as having shaped art history as a discipline for decades and in some forms it continues until today. After all, Bartlová remains the only female professor of art history in the Czech Republic.

Locations for art history

From the examination of how art history was practised in the given period, it also becomes clear that the geographical centre of the art historical activities was Prague. While Bartlová discusses some locations outside of the capital, especially the art history department in Brno, it was the capital, Prague, with Charles University, the art historical institute of the Academy of Sciences, the National Gallery and other national institutions, that was key. With a focus on *Czech* art history, Slovakia is not covered here to any great extent, although it features as part of the political context.

The Czech focus also invites comparison with the previously mentioned anniversary book on the Department of Art History at Charles University. Bartlová's book covers the some of the same timespan. Where the compendium dwells on detailed description of the academic work, teaching and life of the different members of the department, supplementing the historic narrative with people's biographies, Bartlová's interest and contribution lie more in the broader circumstances, which locate the individuals concerned in specific networks. This, however, is at the expense of providing a sense of the interests of individual scholars, whose

names appear throughout the book as if they were familiar to all. As the book was published only in Czech, one can assume it is meant only for Czech readers. They may recognise prominent personalities like Matějček, Kotalík or Neumann, but there are still plenty whose work they may not be aware of. This was most probably the author's intention, to avoid delving into too much detail, but many readers would need to find out from other sources what the art historians in questions were actually interested in or what they published. *Dějiny českých dějin umění* nevertheless provides a fascinating study of a relatively short period but one, which many people, including art historians, had to learn to navigate. It considers art history as one of the humanities disciplines, with a primary interest in human beings as historical actors. Throughout the book, Bartlová argues that it is the human factor that was the essential contributor and active shaper of the field of art history, which was formed, on the one hand, by the discipline's traditions and conventions established before 1945 and, on the other hand, by the political circumstances and demands of the Communist regime. The latter contributed to the relative isolation Czech art historians found themselves in from the mid-1940s onwards, where any substantial exchanges between art historical thinking in Czechoslovakia and abroad at the time were limited, albeit not impossible. As another important rupture in 1968 caused new upheavals in the field, the second part of Bartlová's study, which has already been announced, and which covers subsequent decades that are all too close to the present, will certainly renew debate about *who* writes art history, on *whom*, and *how*.



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