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Historicist Trends in Czech Art during the Second World War

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The reaction of the Czech nation to the Nazi occupation included a return to folk traditions and the commemoration of its own history. Debates surfaced as to whether artists could be designated as historicising by recalling historic styles and selected artists of the past. Some were inspired by Czech Gothic and Baroque paintings, the Renaissance, 17th-century Dutch Old Masters, or the works of artists such as El Greco or Daumier. Others imitated Albrecht Dürer's woodcuts, used aged paper or applied a patina to new paper, or painted according to the painting techniques of the Old Masters. Did this return to historic styles mean an attempt to establish the value of a conservative order, instead of the former praising of avant-garde experimentation? Or was it just a pastiche of past styles that anticipated the shallowness of postmodernism? Or should we see in it something more subversive than either of these? These questions have yet to be answered.

I would like to begin with an analysis of several works by three Czech painters. All of these works are evidently marked by antecedent artistic styles. Then I will discuss the critical reception of these works by the artists' contemporaries during the Second World War. Finally, I will try to show how we can interpret these works that were created in the 1940s from today's perspective.

Critics at the time gravitated towards artists who had renounced their previous modernist styles in favour of the more traditional styles of the past. The peak of this phenomenon came in the year 1941, with the exhibition of work by Alois Wachsman (1898–1942), and continued into 1942 after the exhibition of work by the painters Vladimír Sychra (1903–1963)



1. Alois Wachsman. *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. 1941

and Richard Wiesner (1900–1972).¹ What kind of paintings did the visitors to these exhibitions see?

The first picture is *Christ on the Mount of Olives*, and was exhibited at the group exhibition of members of the Fine Art Society (Spolek výtvarných umělců Mánes) in Prague in 1941 (Fig. 1). On the left, we can see the three Apostles falling asleep as they recline on one another. On the right, we find the small figure of Christ, praying on a hill with his

¹ *Konec avantgardy? Od mnichovské dohody ke komunistickému převratu* (The End of the Avant-Garde? From the Munich Agreement to the Communist Takeover), H. Rousová (ed.), Řevnice, 2011, p. 75.



2. Master of Wittingau (or the Master of the *Třeboň Altarpiece*). *Christ on the Mount of Olives*. Ca. 1380



3. Alois Wachsman. *The Return of the Prodigal Son*. 1941

arms outstretched. Alois Wachsman, the artist of this work, recently a Surrealist, was not only inspired by the work of Pieter Brueghel, but also by Czech Medieval panel painting. His *Christ on the Mount of Olives* is a reference to the *Třeboň Altarpiece* by the Master of Wittingau (or the Master of the *Třeboň Altarpiece*), dating from the 1380s, as is evident from its characteristic manner of representing cliffs and shrubs, its reddish background, and the technique of tempera on wood (Fig. 2). The *Třeboň Altarpiece* was regarded as a typical example of Czech art, because of its softness and the lyricism of the execution. The nationalist meaning of the panel might explain why Wachsman chose it as a source of inspiration for his own modern work. A second example of Wachsman's work from the war period is his composition *The Return of the Prodigal Son*, dating from 1941 (Fig. 3). On the left side of the picture we can see the Prodigal Son kneeling by the gate. His arms crossed across his chest represent his submission. On the right, we can see three female figures and the young man's father. The scene is serene, apart from the father's gesture to



4. Vladimír Sychra. *Portrait of the Actress Marie Burešová*. 1940

the kneeling son. Executed in tempera on wood, despite its small size, the work appears to be almost monumental. Its forms and execution recall traditional fresco painting.

Another painter I would like to mention is Vladimír Sychra. He painted the likeness of a well-known actress of the period, Marie Burešová, influenced by Renaissance portraits (Fig. 4). The woman is sitting on the corner of a sofa, her right arm is leaning lightly, and her gaze is fixed in the direction of the source of light, most likely a window. Her face is illuminated by a very gentle natural light, which creates the mood of the entire painting. The background is unclear, and shows mostly a wall of the space in which the woman sat for the portrait. The overall impression is enriched by the actress' conservatively buttoned dress, and her high forehead. The scene is quiet, calm, and without excitement. We can determine that Sychra took his inspiration from Italian Renaissance painting, such as the work of Giovanni Bellini. His brushwork is not as smooth and precise as Bellini's, but it has the capacity to give the picture the same vibrant light.



5. Richard Wiesner. *The Reunion*. 1941

The last of the three painters discussed is Richard Wiesner. If the previous two were largely inspired by Gothic and Renaissance art, Wiesner took his inspiration mostly from Baroque art. The author of the preface to his exhibition catalogue in the spring of 1942 explicitly acknowledges the Baroque features of Wiesner's art: the notable subjectivism, the monumental and dramatic compositions, even the chiaroscuro.² These characteristics can be observed in the painting *The Reunion*, executed by him in 1941 (Fig. 5). Wiesner's interest in Baroque art was undoubtedly aroused by the Prague Baroque Exhibition. It took place in 1938, and one of its principal goals was to legitimise Baroque among the wider public as one of the classic styles. On the other hand, the show was seen as a very good chance to demonstrate the wealth, power and originality of Czech Baroque art, and together with that the importance of the modern Czechoslovak Republic, and first of all the richness of its cultural heritage. This propagandist attitude, which obviously had a defensive character,

² J. Květ, *Výstava obrazů Richarda Wiesnera* (The Exhibition of Richard Wiesner's Paintings) (exhibition catalogue), Praha, 1942.

was a reaction to the incessant denigration of the Czech cultural identity by the Germans. Wiesner's picture *The Reunion* represents a woman and a young girl rapidly coming together, one from the right, another from the left. Wiesner captures the moment of the reunion by opposing the two figures. The dramatic scene is amplified by stormy clouds in the background and the slightly raised heads of the woman and the girl, as well as by the elongated fingers of the right hand of the woman.

Now I would like to deal with the critical reception of these works in the 1940s. The nature and meaning of wartime Historicist art was discussed seriously in 1942, after Wachsmán's, Sychra's and Wiesner's exhibitions at the Mánes Gallery in Prague. All of them presented works rich with quotes and references to artistic tradition, to the art of Classical epochs. First of all, it should be noted that all three artists previously accepted avant-garde ideas, and responded to them in their creative work. Knowing this, their sudden change elicited many questions. During the 1930s, these artists were fascinated by Cubism, Fauvism and Surrealism. The explanations for the reasons for such a sudden change in their artistic interests, and, as a consequence, the change of the individual style of painting, differed. The paintings by Wachsmán, Sychra and Wiesner were frequently called historicising, but from today's point of view this seems to be dubious. The term had pejorative connotations at that time. We can identify at least three different interpretations of the historicising tendency among the artists.

The first line of thought considered their actions to be legitimate. Proponents of this view largely originated from the ranks of historians and art critics, and, in some cases, artists who wrote critiques. One of them was Josef Liesler. He wrote an article about these so-called historical 'sources of the artists' inspiration' in 1944, in the magazine *Volné směry* (Free Trends). Liesler emphasised the necessity for a highly individualised visual interpretation of each artist and style of the past: 'Art which relied on a preceding artwork as a source of its own inspiration, does not automatically qualify as historicising. What is really important is the so-called power of interpretation.'³ Liesler was convinced that even

³ J. Liesler, O takzvaném inspiračním zdroji (On the So-Called Source of Inspiration), *Volné*

art which demonstrates the influence of recent artistic examples should be called historicising. He was referring to the imitation of various styles which were common in the last three decades (Cubism, Fauvism, Surrealism). Even in those cases, he considered the creativity of the artist and his ability to transform the style or the work to which he made reference to be most important. His colleagues, other art critics of the time, also warned against the simple imitation of form and iconography and cheap virtuosity. They were convinced that forms taken from the past needed a new content; otherwise they were destined to remain empty.

The second group of art critics consisted mostly of artists who preferred realism to other styles. In their view, one could not hide from the reality of the past. According to them, there came a time to make the real world the basis of art. One of those who commented ironically on the artist's sudden shift from the avant-garde to traditionalism was the painter Bedřich Mudroch (1898–1962). In an article called *Once More about Historicism*, he said that Wachsman, Sychra and Wiesner indulged in popular 'historical fashion', and he questioned even the sincerity of their previous artistic practice. At this point, we must point out that Pablo Picasso encountered similar criticism when he turned to Neoclassicism. In conclusion, Mudroch wrote that 'an interesting find is that nothing has been alleged against the imitation of various Picasso, Braque [...] and others – but what was denounced was the imitation of reality, although in essence there is no difference between these two methods. Imitation is imitation.'⁴ Nevertheless, Mudroch and others in this group of critics opposed the soulless imitation of reality. They desired subjectivism, and were looking for individualism in expression: 'True and genuine work will only stand as a result of the artists' own subjective vision of reality.'⁵

The third group of critics consisted of those who denounced Historicism and historicising as Mudroch did, but based their attitude on different reasons. The supporters of avant-garde art belonged to this group. Accord-

směry, 1942–1944, vol. 38, no. 1, pp. 247–251.

⁴ B. Mudroch, *A ještě o historismu* (Once more about Historicism), *Umění dneška*, 1942, vol. 1, Autumn, p. 175.

⁵ B. Mudroch, *op cit.*, p. 175.

ing to them, to work in a historicising way meant just repeating the styles of the past, without any effort at creativity or innovative ambition. The painter and art critic Karel Šourek (1909–1950), in the review of Vladimír Sychra's exhibition mentioned above, criticised Sychra's paintings for their 'artificial perfection'. This was, according to him, evidence of Sychra's spiritual anxiety, because this 'perfection' was the perfection of a 'dead past'.⁶

The lack of courage to experiment and to explore new means of expression of the 'historicists' was a criticism levelled at them by the painter and art critic Otakar Mrkvička (1898–1957). Evaluating the situation of Czech art at the time, he wrote: 'Apart from a few exceptions, you see what artists who until recently were modernists are doing to save themselves: they are borrowing from Renaissance portraits, or the Master of the Třeboň Altarpiece, and adding a new arrangement. The refined taste of these past works is preferred to anything modern.'⁷ References to the inspiration of Renaissance portraits and the Třeboň Altarpiece are obvious allusions to the works of Sychra and Wachsmann. Mrkvička goes so far as to label the works by these artists as a particular form of academic modernism: 'It's quite an eclectic modernism, assumed, external and cautious. Newly made-up Academism. Timid mannerism, which prevents any further advance.'⁸

There are many cases in the history of art of the first half of the 20th century when artists changed radically their artistic expression (among very well known examples, the cases of the Italian modernists Giorgio de Chirico and Gino Severini, or the Czech artist Otto Gutfreund, could be mentioned). One such decisive stylistic transformation is detectable in the work of Pablo Picasso after 1915. Picasso, the initiator of Cubism and a devotee of artistic experimentation, began to work following the example of the Italian Renaissance and even French Classicism, which from the mid-19th century was associated with academic and salon art. He praised art which was rejected by modernism and by himself during his Cubist phase. Picasso's new style evoked a sense of disappointment and betrayal

⁶ kšik [K. Šourek], Svět viděný očima starých mistrů (The World Seen through the Eyes of the Old Masters), *Národní politika*, 14 February 1942, vol. 60, no. 44, p. 5.

⁷ O. Mrkvička, Povinnost experimentu (The Commitment to Make an Experiment), *Život*, 1942, vol. 18, no. 2, p. 113.

⁸ O. Mrkvička, O současném umění (On Contemporary Art), *Kvart*, 1945, vol. 4, no. 1, p. 27.

among avant-garde artists, collectors, and dealers who supported modern art. However, Picasso had not rejected Cubism by starting to work as a Neoclassicist. He maintained the Cubist style, even following the genius of French Classicism Jean Dominique Ingres.

Picasso's Neoclassicism, like the Historicism of the Czech artists mentioned above, raised many questions among contemporaries. How could a painter work in a style which he had previously sought to debunk and overthrow? How could he work in two contradictory artistic styles at the same time? And how do we interpret his claim that nothing had changed in his working method? The American art historian Hal Foster attempted to answer these questions in *Art Since 1900*.⁹ The book offers four interpretive formulas to discuss various topics from modern art history. The introduction presents the following methodological approaches: psychoanalysis, the social history of art, formalism and structuralism, and deconstruction and post-structuralism.

In the article called 1919. Antimodern Reaction, Foster identifies three current explanations for Picasso's change. The first two look for reasons outside Picasso's paintings, either in political, social or biographical causes. As political and social reasons, phenomena such as French nationalism are seen, which somehow caused the aversion to Cubism (it remains unclear why French nationalists considered Cubism a foreign element). As biographical reasons, some researchers consider Picasso's isolation from friends, the death of his companion Eva Gouel, his dissatisfaction with the superficiality of Cubism in the work of his followers, his enthusiasm for Sergei Diaghilev's Ballets Russes and his marriage to the Russian dancer Olga Khokhlova, who introduced him to Parisian high society that was so taken with the avant-garde. Foster adds that both approaches are based on a concept of causal interpretation. The third explanation asserts that Picasso's turn towards Neoclassicism derived from Cubism, through the principle of collage. From this perspective, nothing changes. Picasso's artistic form was a kind of stylish collage with a miniscule shift in the outer fabric.

⁹ H. Foster, R. Krauss, Y.-A. Bois, B.H.D. Buchloh, *Umění pro roce 1900 (Art Since 1900)*, Praha, 2007, p. 163.

The fundamental differences between these interpretations leave us with a question of historical method. Foster believes that a contextual approach considers cultural expression a consequence of external causes, whereas internalism considers that the artist is the principal source of artistic tradition. Although both models can appear incoherent, each expects to find proof of their correctness by using documentary evidence. Both theories ignore the difference between modernism and pastiche, or, to put it another way, exposing the difference between authenticity and cheating. According to Foster, Cubism and Neoclassical pastiche can never be identical. Modernism namely emphasises authenticity, while pastiche is an obvious imitation of the style of other artists. Foster proposes formulating the problem differently. He asks how it happened that, starting in 1915, Picasso thought pastiche and modernism could be the same. Foster is convinced that Picasso was confronted with the consequences of Cubism, the pure abstraction and mechanisation of art in the form of readymades, and found a solution by introducing Neoclassical styling into his work.¹⁰ He added the trait of a readymade to his mildly mechanical image of ‘renovated’ or modernised Classicism. Picasso’s Neoclassicism basically rested on characteristics and attitudes which he scorned. Foster relies on the psychoanalytical model to explain this discrepancy, so-called ego defence mechanisms.

Foster borrowed the term ‘reaction-formation’ from Sigmund Freud’s terminology. Freud used the term to describe the defensive process in which a suppressed subject was expressed unconsciously through its opposite. For example, when one feels an urge for aggressive negotiation, its opposite becomes overtly conciliatory behaviour. Classic psychoanalysis says the original negative impulse does not change, because ‘it survives in its original infantile substance’ under a new guise.¹¹ In connection with this notion of reaction-formation, Freud pointed out that its accompanying phenomenon is so-called secondary gain. It consists of the fact that the individual can continue to meet the needs of his hidden urges, and also earn respect for the socially acceptable form which he has chosen for them.

¹⁰ Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, *Umění pro roce 1900*, p. 163.

¹¹ C. Rycroft, *Kritický slovník psychoanalýzy* (A Critical Dictionary of Psychoanalysis), Praha, 1993, p. 114.

Foster sees two reasons for using reaction-formation to interpret Picasso's Neoclassical pastiche:

First it explains the dialectical connection – the coherence in contradiction – between Cubism and its Neoclassical other. The second is that it creates a structure that helps explain the appearance of many additional anti-Modernist attitudes over the centuries [...] It demonstrates the degree to which anti-Modernisms were themselves conditioned on the very features of Modernist work that they wanted to reject and to suppress.¹²

As I pointed out at the beginning, an analogous phenomenon, which Foster demonstrated on Picasso's work, was operating on the creations of some Czech artists during the Second World War. Is it possible that the essence of the Historicist tendency in the Czech style can be explained as defence mechanisms as defined by psychoanalysis, and as used by Hal Foster? First we will need to distance ourselves from Foster's fixation on the classic psychoanalysis of Sigmund Freud. Foster uses terms such as 'libido load of impulses', 'sublimed Mask' and 'anal character', without reference to their legitimacy in terms of contemporary psychological research. He demonstrates his grasp of psychoanalytical theory, but also a lack of interest in the critical evaluation of the theory. Although Karl R. Popper, the famous theoretician of science, mentioned the pseudo-scientific nature of psychoanalysis, recent neurophysiological and psychological findings confirm the truthfulness of some of Freud's assumptions: happening unconsciously in the brain, the significance of early trauma and trauma in adulthood in the development of pathologies, or the significance of early experience with the care-giver for resistance to mental stress in later life, and so on.¹³ Psychological defence mechanisms are now understood (except classic psychoanalysis) as obvious behaviour, thinking or feeling, which eliminates anxiety and an unconscious sense of threat. Their purpose is to maintain the mental stability of the system. They activate when the system's balance is endangered, by conflicting impulses, suggestions and information. These mechanisms need not merely serve as neurotic

¹² Foster, Krauss, Bois, Buchloh, *Umění pro roce 1900*, p. 164.

¹³ C. Höschl, Co zbylo z Freuda (What was Left for Freud), *Dějiny a současnost*, 2006, no. 4, pp. 37-40.

‘defence’, but also for constructive self-management. From this point of view, we can speak about defence mechanisms as a management process, the organisation of the self. All are based on the ability to deny or distort reality, and take place consciously and unconsciously. They can occur not only internally, but also interpersonally (such as psychosocial-defence) or collectively (Case scapegoat).¹⁴ The existence of reaction-formation appears to be confirmed by experimental studies of psychosomatic reactions to a conscious confrontation of attitude.¹⁵

If we look at the Historicist art by Wachsmann, Sychra and Liesler from the psychoanalytic point of view of so-called ‘defence mechanisms’, it can be seen not only as reaction-formation, similar to that of Picasso, but also as a sign of so-called regression. Regression as a defence mechanism is found in many different varieties, in both personal and social psychology. In general terms, we are talking of a return to an earlier stage of development, to more basic functioning, to models of behaviour and strategies with an earlier track record. It is more understandable if we consider the difficult situation of modern Czech artists during the Nazi occupation, faced with a serious wave of anti-modernism, which hit Czech culture at the end of the 1930s, and even increased as the war progressed. Czech avant-garde art was scornfully attacked by the conservative right and staunch Stalinists, who had complained about modern art’s exaggerated subjectivism and incomprehensibility, and therefore condemned it as socially undesirable. This double-sided pressure and consequent crisis within the avant-garde movement made a big impression on the youngest generation of artists, which entered the art scene at the beginning of the 1940s. During the German occupation, Nazi censorship was ubiquitous. Czech artists had to deal with a range of conflicting impulses, initiatives and information.¹⁶ Sharp criticism of the avant-garde and the above-

¹⁴ P. Hartl, H. Hartlová, *Psychologický slovník* (A Dictionary of Psychology), Praha, 2000, p. 307; L. Müller, A. Müller, *Slovník analytické psychologie* (A Dictionary of Analytical Psychology), Praha, 2006, pp. 201-202, 241.

¹⁵ P. Fonagy, M. Target, *Psychoanalytické teorie* (Psychoanalytical Theories: The Perspective from Developmental Psychopathology), Praha, 2005, p. 61.

¹⁶ M. Pech, ‘Zvrhlé umění’ v protektorátu (‘Degenerate Art’ in the Protectorate of Bohemia and

mentioned occupation conditions caused some artists to redefine their course. Regression to historically sound genres became a way of dealing with the burden of correcting their attitudes and opinions. It was a means of escaping into different artistic spaces, which offered new, socially acceptable, opportunities for self-realisation.¹⁷

Were the works by the three painters mentioned above an inherent return to conservative forms after a period of avant-garde experimentation? Could we define their art as a pastiche style that anticipated the superficiality of Postmodernism? Or was this something else? We should recognise that even if Czech wartime 'historicising' art seems extremely traditional, it was not in the true sense a return to conservative or academic art. The special form of this artistic 'regression' is understandable from a socio-psychological perspective. To most young artists in the first half of the 1940s, the avant-garde seemed like an exhausted paradigm. In addition, Czechoslovakia experienced a deep crisis. In 1938, it was forced to cede its borderlands to Hitler's Germany, with the agreement of France and the United Kingdom, and then the Nazis occupied the rest of the western part of the country. Czech society naturally grew preoccupied with preserving its national identity. Historicism, which appeared in this situation, can be understood as a return to old and resisting values. In the eyes of artists, styles of the past had become one of the few certainties in life. Historicist paintings, or if somebody wants to call them 'styles of historical pastiche', that emerged in the 1940s are not equivalent in my opinion to Postmodern 'historicisms'. The Historicism of the mid-20th century was seeking certitude, and the Postmodern strategy of appropriation was completely unknown to it.

Moravia), *Konec avantgardy? Od mnichovské dohody ke komunistickému převratu*, H. Rousová (ed.), Praha 2011, pp. 99-112.

¹⁷ O. Mikšík, *Psychika osobnosti v období závažných životních a společenských změn* (The Human Mind during Serious Life and Social Changes), Praha, 2009, p. 41.

M i l a n P e c h

Istorizmo tendencija Antrojo pasaulinio karo metų čekų dailėje

Santrauka

Straipsnyje analizuojama istorizmo tendencija, išryškėjusi čekų dailininkų modernistų kūryboje Antrojo pasaulinio karo metais. Straipsnio teiginiai remiasi įvairiapusiais 1939–1945 m. vizualinių ir rašytinių šaltinių tyrimais. Nagrinėjant šį istoriškai reikšmingą reiškinį, prieinama prie išvados, kad istorizmas tapo kūrybos strategija, išreiškusia siurrealizmui ir kitoms klasikinio modernizmo kryptims artimų dailininkų reakciją į karą ir okupaciją.

Istorizmo tendencijos sampratai pagrįsti pasitelktos karo metų čekų tapybos pavyzdžių analogijos su viduramžių ir baroko daile, senųjų meistrų technologijos taikymas arba jos imitavimas, Biblijos ir mitologijos motyvai ikonografijoje, suteikiant jiems aktualų egzistencinį turinį. Trumpai komentuojama amžininkų reakcija į istorizmo tapybą ir mėginimai ją vertinti bei paaiškinti.

Dalis istorizmo kritikų priskyrė šią tendenciją atstovaujančių autorių dailei kūrybiškumo stoką, paviršutinišką praeities meno imitaciją ir eklektiškumą. Realizmo šalininkai kaltino istorizmo išpažinėjus nesugebėjimu vaizduoti tikrovę ir bailumu pažvelgti tiesiai į realybę. Modernistai atmetė istorizmą kaip naujojo meno idealų išdavystę. Istorizmo šalininkai ragino publiką akreipti dėmesį, kad tradicija turi būti palaikoma ir puoselėjama, ją nuolat atnaujinant, ką ir daro istorizmą išpažįstantys menininkai, kad praeities dailė buvo ir yra teisėtas įkvėpimo šaltinis naujoms kūrybos formoms, kurios toli gražu nėra imitacija, nes pasižymi pakankamu originalumu bei aktualumu.

Atskirai analizuojamos modernaus istorizmo galimos sociopsichologinės priežastys. Prieinama prie išvados, kad XX a. vidurio istorizmo santykis su praeitimi nėra tapatus postmodernistinei apropriacijos strategijai. Konstatuojama, kad istorizmo tendencija buvo viena svarbiausių Antrojo pasaulinio karo metų čekų dailės krypčių.