

MILENA BARTLOVÁ  
Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague

## CULTIVATING ITS OWN ROOTS: CZECH ART HISTORY IN THE 1980S IN SEARCH OF ITS OWN BEGINNINGS

In 1986 and 1987, a team of researchers at the Institute of Art History of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences published two volumes of *Chapters from Czech Art Historiography*.<sup>1</sup> The project had been conceived and led from the beginning of the seventies by one of the key personalities of Czech art history, Josef Krása. The mission of the publication was to be, in his words,

to orient the general reading public in art historical issues, to interest future students of art history, to serve as the first dictionary of its kind and, last but not least, to address the issues of periodization of the field, methodological traditions and the context of domestic and international art history.<sup>2</sup>

Self-constructing the field of art history's own identity is not among the declared goals, but in retrospect it is clear that it was a major function of both volumes. Krása was unable to see the final realization of the project because he died in 1985 at the age of only fifty-two, but the manuscripts of both volumes had already been handed over to the publishing house in 1981 and 1983.

The work is a typical product of the last phase of the regime of really existing socialism in Czechoslovakia during the period of so-called perestroika, when the Institute of the Academy of Sciences could produce, under the direction of three members of the Communist Party, a publication that ignored most of the official rhetoric and Marxism-Leninism. It had been in preparation at the Institute since the middle of the 1970s as the most

important contribution of the Institute's department of art history towards the output in the field of Marxist-Leninist theory, which was favored by the management. One of the co-editors of *Chapters*, Rudolf Chadraba, had planned for more than a decade to write a handbook for art history students. Another plan was to prepare a dictionary of art historical terminology. Some older-generation archivists were supported by contracts to summarize relevant excerpts from pre-modern literature.<sup>3</sup> All these plans morphed into the *Chapters* that were, however, published while they yet lacked some necessary editing. In a certain haste to complete the project, some of the Institute personnel were simply ordered to write the biography chapters, which did not refer to original archival research.

Neither the Introduction nor other official materials mentioned it, but the somewhat hurried completion of the two volumes was a reaction to an imminent threat to the existence of the scientific field of art history in our country, i.e. in the Czech part of the then Czechoslovakia (by the way, the existence of Slovak culture and art history is not even mentioned at all in either volume). The radical reduction in the number of students in university departments in both Prague and Brno since the late 1970s was one dimension of this threat.<sup>4</sup> More subtle but no less

<sup>1</sup> *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění I.–II*, ed. by R. CHADRABA et al., Praha 1986–1987.

<sup>2</sup> Quoted by R. CHADRABA in the preface to *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu I.*, p. 11 (as note 1).

<sup>3</sup> Oddělení dokumentace ÚDU AV ČR, fond Josef Krása, k. 3, i.č. 1 'Výkazy práce 1971–1982'; Masarykův ústav – Archiv Akademie věd, fond ČSAV – Ústav teorie a dějin umění 1970–1990 (neuspořádané), 'Zprávy o plnění ústavních úkolů 1976–1982'; 'Hodnocení neperiodických publikací nakladatelství Academia 1987–1988'.

<sup>4</sup> T. JOHANIDESOVÁ, J. BACHTÍK, 'Řízený útlum. Katedra dějin umění (a estetiky) na FF UK v období normalizace 1970–1989', in *Století ústavu pro dějiny umění na Filozofické fakultě Univerzity*

menacing was the official renaming in 1982 of the field of study from art history to ‘Marxist art theory’ and then even to ‘aesthetics with a focus on the visual arts’. This move was justified by a leading Communist figure with the pronouncement that ‘we do not need historians dealing with feudal culture, but experts who can help our artists to create properly in the direction of socialist realism.’<sup>5</sup> The identification of its own origins and pedigree thus was an urgent task in Czech art history around 1980: it was no longer enough to have a habitual identity, it had to be clearly described and interpreted. In this paper I will ask what identity model Czech art history had construed for itself at the end of the modernist era.

## NORMATIVE AMBITIONS

In the Introduction to *Chapters*, Chadřaba defined the normative criterion of what is already ‘the real one’, i.e. modern art history: it is ‘the search for and improvement of a developmental model’. The first chapter opens with the statement that ‘Art history, this *Herzenskind des Dilettantismus* (according to Max Dvořák), took shape as a special branch of history about a hundred years ago.’<sup>6</sup> Such a temporal demarcation is not repeated, and we can see clearly in this and other details that the project lacked a unifying program and even proper editing. The central founding father figure of Czech art history in this logic is, of course, Max Dvořák, and it is with a detailed discussion of him and the Vienna School that editor-in-chief Chadřaba opened the second volume. Nevertheless, it was still deemed necessary to include the first volume, with its subtitle *Predecessors and Founders*.

Both volumes are conceived as histories of ideas and of great men. In the first volume just one woman is mentioned: Renata, the wife of professor of art history Miroslav Tyrš. Although she was an important art critic, and the actual book on Tyrš states that ‘today we would not hesitate to label publications with the names of both husband and wife as co-authors’, she is credited here merely with the preservation of her husband’s estate.<sup>7</sup> The contents of the first volume can be divided into three parts: first, it discusses the precursors of modern art history in

the late Middle Ages, Humanism, the Baroque, the Enlightenment and Romanticism; second, it includes monographs of the first university professors of Czech-language art history, Vocel and Tyrš; and third, it contains a rather chaotic summary of the representatives of positivist cultural history and aesthetics from the 1870s to the 1890s.

The construction and consciousness of continuity in *Chapters* is almost never connected to institutions; in the first volume, any institutional basis of the art historical field is mentioned only in references. The reason for this was a complication that was never spoken about publicly in the 1980s, namely that scientific institutions of universities and museums were bilingual in the territory of the present-day Czech Republic until 1945. Charles University was divided into Czech and German institutions in 1882. The continuity from its foundation in 1862 was on the part of the German-speaking Institute of Art History, while the Czech-speaking one became permanent only in 1911. After all, even Max Dvořák did not work at a domestic, let alone a Czech-language university. Jindřich Vybíral discusses the topic of the precarious relationship between the Czech and German speakers in art history in his contribution to this volume, so I may return to the analysis of the first volume of *Chapters*.

The first chapter, which I have already cited, was written by Ivo Kořán, and on the very first page he normatively stated the national moment of Czech art history:

[...] the verbal commentary on art in the Baroque era was not just a bitter lament for the faded glory of Bohemia, but became an enchanted testimony to its undying beauty, power, and strength. An uncritical, often superstitious, not infrequently contradictory, but always cordial, kind and often even affectionate testimony. This approach to art in Bohemia is imprinted in the whole of Czech art history, basically down to our own days. The Czech art historian cannot – as his Western colleagues do – simply state the artistic quality of a work ‘in itself’, but is inwardly bound to the life of his people and necessarily views art through it, to better understand the life of his own country through art.<sup>8</sup>

This strong nationalistic concept was cited approvingly in a review of *Chapters* written by a representative of the young generation of Czech art historians, Vojtěch Lahoda, for the first issue of a new journal published by the official Union of Visual Artists.<sup>9</sup> In another brief review, which I wrote for the illegally published ‘samizdat’ *Lidové noviny* under a code name, I stressed the concealment of German speaking art historians.<sup>10</sup> The third, longest and most critical review was published by Jiří Kroupa from Brno, who pointed to the unsatisfactory way Moravia was

Karlovy, ed. by R. PRAHL et al., Praha 2020, pp. 485–573, esp. 526.

– The topic will be discussed in a wider context and in more depth in my *Dějiny českých dějin umění 1970–1990* (forthcoming in 2025); this contribution is a preliminary outcome of the research project ‘History of Czech Art History II. 1970–1990’ supported by the Czech Science Foundation in 2022–2024 (Nr. 22-14620S).

<sup>5</sup> My own recollection of Dušan Konečný speaking at the conference ‘Place of art history in the framework of social sciences’, in October 1979.

<sup>6</sup> I. KOŘÁN, ‘Obraz a slovo v našich dějinách’, in *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu I.*, pp. 15–34, quote p. 15 (as note 1).

<sup>7</sup> K. STIBRAL, *Sokol mezi obrazy. Teorie umění, estetika a umělecká kritika Miroslava Tyrše*, Praha 2022, p. 165; R. CHADŘABA, ‘Miroslav Tyrš’, in *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu I.*, pp. 160–170 (as note 1).

<sup>8</sup> I. KOŘÁN, ‘Obraz a slovo’ (as note 6).

<sup>9</sup> V. LAHODA, ‘Záslužné dílo naší uměnovědy’, *Ateliér*, 1988, Nr. 1, p. 5.

<sup>10</sup> M. BERGMANNOVÁ [cover for M. BARTLOVÁ], ‘Dějepis příkladně opatrný’, *Lidové noviny\** 1, 1988, č. 5, p. 18.

dealt with in the *Chapters*.<sup>11</sup> The three reviews prove that nationalism was already at the time of publication the most delicate topic.

## PREDECESSORS AND FOUNDERS

Somewhat unexpectedly, Kořán began his interpretation with a discussion of Hussite iconoclasm at the turn of the 15<sup>th</sup> c. and continued with a treatment of Humanist texts. Most of the first chapter is, however, taken up with Baroque Catholic historiographers of the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries, who are presented as the primary source of Czech art history. For Kořán, such an emotional nationalist approach is part of the above pronounced patriotism, and the criterion of Czechness is neither ethnicity nor language, but 'love of the nation' conceived as a component of Roman Catholic religious faith. The revival of the idea of Austrian provincial patriotism was effectively promoted in the 1980s in the historical fields of Czech humanities as one of the efforts to find a substitute for historical materialism. Kořán himself, however, made no attempt to differentiate his emotional concept from the ethnic and linguistic nationalism that prevailed in the Czech lands for most of the 20<sup>th</sup> c.

What is much more surprising on a contemporary reading is that the opening chapter of this self-identifying work of Czech art history rejects both the rationality of scientific methodology and the demand for international relevance in art historical scholarship. The questions of national identity, international relevance, and explicitly also that of the place of scientific rationality in art history research are likewise addressed in the second chapter of the first volume, with different results. Its author, the medievalist Vlasta Dvořáková, was among the scholars who were aware of Western Marxism and semiotics in the 1970s and 1980s and she sought to integrate some of these approaches into the domestic art historical context. The tenor of her account of the Enlightenment and Romanticism is a recognition of the opposition between the journalistic and scholarly modes of writing about art. She first asks how texts devoted to art monuments operated in the process of the transition to modern scientific rationality, and then critically explores the question of the national, Slavic specificity of artistic expression, or esthetics.<sup>12</sup>

## PROBLEMS WITH PROFESSORS

The biographical chapter on Miroslav Tyrš, the first professor of art history at the Czech-speaking Charles University, was written by the main editor Chadřaba and

<sup>11</sup> J. KROUPA, 'Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění [rewiev]', *Studia minora facultatis philosophicae Universitatis Brunensis (SPFFBU)*, 32–33, 1988–1989, pp. 109–112.

<sup>12</sup> V. DVOŘÁKOVÁ, 'Osvícenci a romantikové', in *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu I.*, pp. 35–74 (as in note 1).

thus formed a sort of counterbalance to his chapter on Dvořák.<sup>13</sup> However, Tyrš could not be given an important place in the beginnings of Czech art history because, contrary to the developmental norm, he held a normative idea of the absolute value of the arts of antiquity. In the 1870s, he consistently emphasized the Neo-Renaissance over Romanticism and Realism, and he also promoted idealized Classical values as a co-founder of Sokol, the national gymnastic and quasi-military popular movement. Tyrš died only one year into his professorship in 1884 during a mountaineering expedition in the Alps.

Karel Chytil, who in 1911 resumed work at the chair of art history at Charles University, could not stand as a founding figure, either. Since the 1920s he had been personally attacked and his work disparaged because of a personal animosity that was mainly motivated by his anti-Viennese political stance after the founding of the Czechoslovak Republic, and the younger graduates of the Vienna School who formed the Prague art historical establishment of the newly created state.<sup>14</sup> Although he was roughly a contemporary of Dvořák, Chytil is included in the first volume of *Chapters*, giving the impression that he belongs to the distant past. Rostislav Šváchka wrote an important essay on so-called cultural history as one of the possibilities of art historical thinking, with the intention of rehabilitating both this research direction and Chytil personally. Unfortunately, however, the chapter made the whole situation rather unclear when Šváchka, another from the four co-editors, followed rather too literally E. H. Gombrich in his identification of the cultural-historical direction with the Hegelian model of development.<sup>15</sup> Šváchka shied away from calling it more accurately positivism, whose aim was to overcome the one-sidedness of formalism. *Chapters* includes Chytil's biography by Krása, in which he described the best of Chytil's texts as high-quality domestic precursors of iconology and discussed at least briefly the role of positivism.<sup>16</sup>

## POSTMODERN PLURALITY?

Let us now summarize the results of current reading of the first volume of *Chapters*. The main characteristic of the construction of the roots presented here is its postmodern plurality – not surprising from the point of view of its publication date, although perhaps unexpected in retrospect. Coherently with the period ideological situation, though, the plurality lacks openness. Some of the texts contain authoritatively formulated statements that contradict other parts of the book. It is thus a hybrid plurality.

<sup>13</sup> R. CHADŘABA, 'Miroslav Tyrš' (as in note 7).

<sup>14</sup> K. CHYTEL, 'O příštích úkolech dějin a historiků umění ve státě československém', *Naše doba* 26, 1918, pp. 753–756.

<sup>15</sup> R. ŠVÁCHA, 'Historikové kultury', in *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu I.*, pp. 141–159 (as in note 1).

<sup>16</sup> J. KRÁSA, 'Karel Chytil', in *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu I.*, pp. 172–178 (as in note 1).

Moreover, it remains unnamed; it emerges from the whole of both volumes and is compromised by their unfortunate disarray. As we have seen, objective scientism and international relevance of the art historians discussed not only do not contradict radical nationalism but may easily integrate with it. True openness and pluralism would be, of course, also difficult to reconcile with the authoritative positioning of Max Dvořák and the Vienna School. A nice example of the postmodern orientation is when the theorist, architectural historian, and co-editor of the volumes Švácha compares the so-called law of convergence promoted by Tyrš with Robert Venturi's contemporary texts, noting that they are 'essentially the same'.<sup>17</sup> Tyrš conceived this 'law' as an adaptation of all the components of an artwork to the main idea, arriving at a stylistically uniform Gesamtkunstwerk as the highest artistic achievement. Also unnamed remains the conflict that appears in *Chapters* between the incipient, unreflected interpretive tool of constructivism and the desire to suppress noetic relativity and restore normativity.

Another moment we get from our reading is recognition that German-speaking art history was still the 'significant Other' for Czech art history in the 1980s, one hundred years after division of the Prague university and four decades after the forced displacement of the Czechoslovak German minority. We can see this clearly in the way the Germans are represented in the book: from the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, German-language authors are singled out and collectively marginalized. If they are mentioned, it is only in overview; they are not given biographical medallions. The fact that the Prague University was one of the first ten universities to establish a regular professorship of art history in 1862 is therefore completely lost.<sup>18</sup> The sole and very unsystematic exception is Anton Springer, to whom Anděla Horová, the fourth co-editor of *Chapters*, devoted a rather long individual contribution. A native of Prague, Springer lectured on art history at the Academy of Arts and at the still undivided Prague university in 1848. He had to leave for Germany for political reasons after the defeat of the revolution. Johann Erazim Wocel, who took over the post, was, on the other hand, a political conservative and it was this reason, not the national dimension of the confrontation, that was decisive at the time. It is noteworthy that the significant criterion used to differentiate between 'us', i.e. the Czechs, and 'the others', i.e. the Germans, in the conception of *Chapters*, is place of birth according to the boundaries of today's modern states, not the self-identification

of the scholars concerned. Thus, alongside Dvořák, Josef Daniel Böhm, the 'forerunner' of the Vienna School, and the personalities of its first generation, Rudolf Eitelberger and Moritz Thausing, are included in Czech art history.<sup>19</sup> Due to the identification of Czech art history with Czech-language art history and the consequent exclusion of German-language art historians from its framework it was – and remains – difficult to address the question of an international relevance for Czech art history.

The conception of art history formulated in *Chapters* failed to achieve its goal in the last years of the really existing socialism in Czechoslovakia, but it became an effective foundation for the decades after its fall – if only because the publication became a compulsory university textbook. We can check this up by comparison with the recently published monumental work *Centenary of the Institute of Art History at the Faculty of Arts, Charles University*. Here, the German speaking art history is included, and the methodological plurality of Czech art history is emphasized and praised. The claim of methodological pluralism, however, remains unanalyzed and undefined, in contrast to the programmatic and normative inclusion, once again, of the tradition of the Vienna School of art history. I understand it to denote the relationship between a more theoretical conception of art history and its descriptive, perhaps positivist concept. *Chapters* clearly legitimizes patriotic and inventory writing as a full-fledged form of art history because it brings a crucial contribution to the construction and maintenance of national identity. The value of such a descriptive but nationalist concept of art history is confirmed by the identification of Wocel – and not Woltmann, Tyrš or Springer – as the central legitimizing figure of the field before Dvořák. We can even read in the current volume that the mistake of Miroslav Tyrš was 'theorizing too much'.<sup>20</sup>

Kořán spoke about *love* in his introductory chapter, and so did Švácha in his final paragraphs of the two volumes: 'The loving look at art is not the main task of art historians. It is, rather, to bring it about that readers of their writing would look at art with same, or even better love'.<sup>21</sup> Perhaps a fitting summary would be St Augustine's dictum 'Love and do whatever you will.' The precarious balancing on the edge of rationalism, the willingness to readily admit the emotionally simplified *Einfühlung* as its substitute, as well as the recognized status of inventory and descriptive writing, are a legacy that too large a portion of Czech art history continues to cherish.

<sup>17</sup> R. ŠVÁCHA, 'Historikové kultury', p. 149 (as in note 15).

<sup>18</sup> A proper elaboration of the Institute of Art History at the German Prague University is given only in J. KOUKAL, 'Katedra "těch druhých"? Dějiny umění na Německé univerzitě v Praze 1882–1945', in *Století ústavu pro dějiny umění*, pp. 234–299 (as in note 4). In my opinion, the inclusion of the German institute in the history of the Czech one is, to say the least, insensitive towards the identity of Bohemian Germans.

<sup>19</sup> R. CHADRABA, 'Max Dvořák a vídeňská škola dějin umění', in *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu II.*, pp. 9–56 (as in note 1).

<sup>20</sup> R. PRAHL, J. HORÁČEK, 'Od umělecko-historické praxe k univerzitní výuce. Emancipace dějepisu umění od poloviny 19. století do roku 1894', in *Století ústavu pro dějiny umění*, pp. 20–71, quote p. 58 (as in note 4).

<sup>21</sup> R. ŠVÁCHA, 'Dějepis umění v současnosti', in *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu II.*, pp. 349–370, quote p. 370 (as in note 1).



## SUMMARY

Milena Bartlová  
CULTIVATING ITS OWN ROOTS:  
CZECH ART HISTORY IN THE 1980S  
IN SEARCH OF ITS OWN BEGINNINGS

The contribution examines the significance of the two-volume publication *Chapters from the History of Czech Art History* (1986–1987). It was published by the Institute of Theory and History of Art of the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences as its official task, but also to support the existence of the field of art history, which was threatened in the 1970s and 1980s for ideological reasons in what was then the Czech Socialist Republic. Although the book identifies Max Dvořák as the founder of Czech art history and defines its mode normatively as a history of historical development, the first volume, subtitled *Predecessors and Founders*, describes the history of the field from the 15<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> c. The main characteristics of the publication can be summarized as a description of the constitutive features of Czech art history, with which it is still identified in its mainstream: Czech art history is made up of the ideas of great males who were born in Bohemia and Moravia and overwhelmingly wrote in Czech; the norm is the developmental model and the unquestioned patriarch is Max Dvořák; the descriptive mode of art historical work is legitimate and proper because it shapes the national history of art; plurality involves inconsistency of ideas and art history can well do without paying attention to its own philosophical foundations.