Rondocubism versus National Style

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Abstract
There is a range of various terms used to refer to architectural production from the period after the First World War, among the most common being 'Rondocubism' and the 'National Style'. The terminological ambiguity clearly points to the problem with the very character of the style of expression that lies behind these diverse labels. In the 1920s, figures of the interwar avant-garde were already sharply critical of the post-war decorative style, the leading figures of which were the architects Pavel Janák and Josef Gočár. While this negative stigma was later overcome, following several thematic studies, it is still possible to look for other inspiring sources outside aesthetic categories that were directed at clarifying this theme. Extensive social projects had architects employed in all sorts of artistic activities, and therefore a possible answer to what the essence of the style was is offered by the wider political and cultural context. After the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic, the former protagonists of architectural Cubism and their colleagues from the Czechoslovak Workshop Association, Artěl and the School of Decorative Arts attained such social standing that they could effectively influence local artistic development. Through the individual conception applied to official commissions they created a visual identity of the new state system. As is apparent from their theoretical writings, they found their sources of information for ornamental decoration of buildings and craft artefacts by bonding with local tradition. This did not of course mean directly borrowing from folk-art prototypes. Advanced forms of national art were intended to help establish Czechoslovakia in the international scene and were also a conscious attempt through a more folkish form of expression to appeal to the wider strata of the population.

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> "In the place of the manor house that had burned down, the masons built the count a magnificent castle, in every possible style, with the predominant architecture being Jewish-Chaldean, hybridised by Janák and Gočár."[1]

Introduction

[1] The author of these expressive lines, the painter Josef Váchal, did not hesitate to place the two architects, Pavel Janák (1882-1956) and Josef Gočár (1880-1945), in extremely disreputable company in his novel *Krvavý roman* [*Bloodstained Romance*] (1924). And history shows clearly enough that he was not the only one to consider the way these architects manifested their artistic ideas at the time to be at the very least peculiar. It was this ambiguous, or rather disparaging, reception by theoreticians and historians of architecture of works of architecture and art handicraft produced in the period 1918-1925 that led to an unsatisfactory interpretation of this unique cultural

[1] Josef Váchal, *Krvavý román*, Praha 1990, 284 (1st edition 1924). – [Editor's note: All translations of quotes, titles, etc., in this article are by the translator.]

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phenomenon which established itself in the first years of the existence of the independent Czechoslovak state.

[2] The Czechoslovak Legions Bank, the crematorium in Pardubice, the Riunione Adriatica di Sicurta palace, and a number of other buildings and unjustly neglected architectural designs by the leading architects Josef Gočár, Pavel Janák, and later others as well, have been classified using a variety of terms, adorned by connotations with a range of nuances, most of them pejorative. Thus it is common to find coexisting in the specialist literature the terms *rondocubism*, *rounded style*, *rounded decorativism*, *rounded cubism*, *colourful originality*, *postwar eclecticism*, *national style*, *national decorativism*, *Czech decorativism*, *post-upheaval style*, and occasionally also *art deco* or *Legiobank style*. Most recently Rostislav Švácha added a further classification to the list, namely *third Cubist style*.[2] In spite of this, as late as 1940 the architect and theoretician of architecture Jan Evangelista Koula stated that "we have no terms to describe […] this postwar period".[3]

[3] This lack of any fixed terminology reflects fairly faithfully the ambiguous attitude of the art history community towards this form of artistic expression after 1918, which it was difficult to ignore. The frequent use of a double designation to describe the work produced at that time, for example *rondocubism*, *national style*, conceals the more serious issue of the actual nature of the style in question. What, then, is the meaning of these buildings and numerous objects of art handicraft, characterised by a striking wealth of colour and profusion of ornaments, probably derived from folklore sources?

[4] The negative views formulated by the protagonists of the interwar avant-garde on this phenomenon of nationally tinged decorative architecture endured for many decades. It was not until the end of the 1960s that it was rehabilitated as an original form of artistic expression by the art historian Marie Benešová, in a text whose prosaic title *Rondocubism* did not conceal any ambition to codify this style.[4] However, Benešová did not create a theoretical neologism with this title, as is often mistakenly asserted. She simply selected from the broad range of possibilities one of the original terms which had been used, for example, in the mid-1920s by the architect and critic Oldřich Starý in the extensive periodical article *Česká moderní architektura* [*Czech modern architecture*].[5] At the time, however, Starý had seen "*rondo-cubism*" as an inappropriate term for a clearly reactionary style, bogged down in historical and ethnographic traditions.

[5] The fact that the term rondocubism semantically creates the impression of an interconnection between the prewar and postwar work of these architects brings with it

[2] Rostislav Švácha, *Lomené, hranaté a obloukové tvary. Česká kubistická architektura 1911-1923*, Praha 2000.

[3] Jan Evangelista Koula, *Nová česká architektura a její vývoj ve XX. století*, Praha 1940, 39.

[4] Marie Benešová, "Rondokubismus," in: *Architektura ČSR* 28 (1969), 303-317.

[5] Oldřich Starý, "Česká moderní architektura," in: *Stavba* 4 (1925-1926), 193.

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the danger of oversimplifying issues relating to this style. Already in the period before the establishment of the Czechoslovak state their ideas had started to move away from cubism. This is most cogently described by Pavel Janák in a text written in 1940 in which he attempted to take stock of architectural developments since the beginning of the century. In it, he expressed clearly the fundamental change in conception of artistic approach when he said that

> the year 1918 was a watershed, a return to traditional folklore, and a connection with life in the broader sense. It was primarily a reaction against pre-1918 artism. Now architects sought forms that would accommodate the general popular understanding. Already here it contains the beginning of a major change from an individual artistic form to a broader general comprehensibility and utility, even at the price of a reduction in expressiveness.[6]

[6] The fact that this statement has not been simply made retrospectively is testified to by several articles written by Janák in 1918.[7] But the real impetus for seeking inspiration in displays of popular culture can originally be traced to the conclusions of the art historian Václav Vilém Štech, as Rostislav Švácha has indicated.[8]

[7] Štech identified the original nature of the Czech cultural tradition in a text intended for the catalogue accompanying an exhibition of Czech decorative art at the Werkbund exhibition in Cologne in 1914.[9] He declared the local genius loci to be the determining factor that constantly catalyses all stylistic forms of expression into their specifically distinctive Czech variations. Two years later he started to develop in more detail the ideas he had sketched out in this text.[10] He saw the character of Czech art as being closely linked with the land, the soil, and the climate, which directly influenced the form taken by local works of art. These influences permanently transform all works of art, not only in the field of visual art and architecture, but also music or literature, into the final ornamental form. Buildings are then inevitably characterised by earthiness, to the point of awkwardness, and they are picturesque rather than imposing.[11] Štech emphasises the tendency to "develop all schemes onto the surface, transform the construction and composition of the material into the rhythm of the surface areas, and to convert the structural elements into a system of lavish and living ornamentation".[12] He himself, however, rejected the direct adoption of models from ethnographic material.

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[6] Pavel Janák, "Čtyřicet let nové architektury za námi – pohled zpět," in: *Architektura* 2 (1940), 129-132.

[7] Just to mention a few at random: Pavel Janák, "Opět na rozcestí k svérázu," in: *Národ* 1 (5) (1917) no. 32, 576-578; Pavel Janák, "Národní věc a čeští architekti," in: *Národ* 2 (1918), nos. 23 and 24, 295, 305-306; Pavel Janák, "Nedočkavá procházka," in: *Umění* 1 (1918), here 85; Pavel Janák, "Ve třetině cesty," in: *Volné směry* 14 (1918), 218-226.

[8] Švácha, *Lomené, hranaté a obloukové tvary*, 49.

[9] Václav Vilém Štech, *Čechische Bestrebungen um ein modernes Interieur*, Prag 1915, 2; Václav Vilém Štech, "České cesty k modernímu interiéru," in: V. V. Štech, *Včera*, Praha 1921, 195.

[10] Václav Vilém Štech, "O národním umění," in: Štech, *Včera*, 204-221.

[11] Václav Vilém Štech, "Smysl země," in: Štech, *Včera*, 232-245.

[12] Štech, "Smysl země," 239.

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[8] The latent need for a national art was intensified in the second half of the second decade of the twentieth century by the escalation of wartime events. At this time, the search for a source of inspiration in popular art gained strength once more.[13] Although Pavel Janák displayed a certain reserve towards Štech in their personal relationships, which is evident from their correspondence and diary entries from the time of the First World War, Štech's theoretical insights still left their mark on him. In 1917 he launched a polemic in the pages of a weekly with the suggestive name *Národ* [*Nation*] about the importance of originality for contemporary works of art. He rejected the banal adoption of stimuli and forms from popular art, and the veristic repetition of specific models from this sphere.[14] He was supported in these views in a lengthy analysis by the art historian Antonín Matějček, in which the latter concluded that popular art was simply a derivative of higher art, and so could not offer any potential for inspiration.[15] On the other hand, the architect Jan Koula, a representative of historicism, who in his later work drew heavily on ideas from local popular building styles, felt personally offended by these conclusions. In his view, a national culture could not develop without a profound knowledge of the distinctive features of the nation and a conscious orientation towards its sources.[16] But on the other side of the debate Janák proclaimed that it was his endeavour to achieve a sensitive understanding of the essence of local tradition as a universal, timeless principle. In his view, the call for folklore styles was more a populist feature. The architect should become "*a poet of the homeland*", who would raise public awareness about national ideals.[17] Štech followed a similar line of thought when he expressed in the periodical *Styl* the wish that "art will hopefully long remain cultural work, service, and will not become purely and simply personal expression".[18] The newly embraced endeavour to address the whole nation likewise exactly coincided with the views of another art historian, František Žákavec, who, in a lengthy essay in the journal *Volné směry* stated that "the Czech artistic programme absolutely requires that the artist surrenders himself to the nation in the broadest sense".[19]

[9] The task facing architects in this period was to find the optimum design for the typology of Czech buildings.[20] Janák's famous essay *Ve třetině cesty [A third of the way along the road]*, written in 1918, can be regarded as a genuine manifesto. In it, he defined "*national architecture*" in terms similar to Štech's conclusions by saying that "the material is identical with the soil – with the motherland, on which grows up the tribe –

[13] Štech, "O národním umění," 204.
[14] Pavel Janák, "Opět na rozcestí k svérázu," in: *Národ* 1 (5) (1917), no. 32, 576-578.
[15] Antonín Matějček, "O vyschlém prameni," in: *Národ* 1 (5) (1917), nos. 37 and 39, 660-662, 693-694.
[16] Jan Koula, "Ještě o svérázu," in: *Národ* 1 (5) (1917), no. 36, 643-644.
[17] Pavel Janák, "Národní věc a čeští architekti," in: *Národ* 2 (1918), nos. 23 and 24, 295, 305-306.
[18] Václav Vilém Štech, "Vzpomínka na jaro v Paříži 1919," in: *Styl* 1 (6) (1920-21), 4-8, here 8.
[19] František Žákavec, "Slovanský program výtvarnický," in: *Volné směry* 20 (1919-1920), 73-74.
[20] Janák, "Národní věc a čeští architekti," nos. 23 and 24, 295, 305-306.

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the national life and spirit, which arises out of this series of identities, returns to it, and creates out of its individual regions organised architectural wholes".[21]

[10] The aesthetic differences between cubism and the architectural forms after 1918 were succinctly captured by another art historian, Zdeněk Wirth, in the catalogue for an exhibition by Josef Gočár in 1930. While he saw the artistic principle in cubist architecture as being based on shaping from the core of the material outward onto the surface, in postwar forms, on the contrary, the visual effect of elements applied on the surface area was used, intensified by a very wide range of different colours.[22]

[11] Directly linking Czech postwar output with artefacts in the Art Deco style, simply on the basis that they occurred at the same time and had certain formal similarities of form,[23] appears problematic when we recall the quite contrasting starting-points of the two styles. The broad concept of "Art Deco" first became established in the 1960s as a term for the artistic trends of the 1920s and 1930s which developed loosely out of the Art Nouveau decorativism of the turn of the century. It took the direction of freeing itself from florally undulating curves, seamlessly absorbing ideas from current artistic movements such as fauvism, cubism, futurism, and expressionism. Art Deco was further enriched by various sources of inspiration, drawing on stimuli from the art of the Orient, of Egypt, or Japan, still seen at the time as exotic. However, the overall designation for this form of style, which was not Art Deco but *Style Moderne*, was only coined retrospectively, after the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes* held in Paris in 1925, and thus its application to the Czech cultural scene after 1918 would appear to be slightly misleading. The national style attempted in the first instance to capture the character of the Czech spirit, and for this elementary reason it seems unlikely that artists deliberately took their inspiration from foreign archetypes. Almost programmatically, they drew on the local milieu for their creative ideas, from the rich sources of local tradition. Pavel Janák literally said that "French tapestries, porcelain from Copenhagen, or German models of furniture cannot today bring us anything new in terms of art or content, because they were based on quite different national cultural foundations and are of a different cultural level".[24]

[12] In spite of this proclamation about taking up the national heritage, artists did not create their work in a vacuum of time and space. They achieved their emphasis on the longstanding tradition which lay behind the genesis of modern Czech art by references to types that had proved themselves in history. As illustrations we can point to the unobtrusive incorporation of the motif of the triumphal arch into the structure of the façade of the Czechoslovak Legions Bank, echoes of the peripteral ground plan layout and

[21] Pavel Janák, "Ve třetině cesty," in: *Volné směry* 14 (1918), 218-226.
[22] Zdeněk Wirth, "Josef Gočár," Genf 1930, 9.
[23] Jana Horneková, ed., *České art deco 1918-1938*, Praha 1998.
[24] [Pavel Janák], "úvodník" [editorial], in: *Výtvarná práce* 2 (1923), unpaged.

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the decorative elements of the Florentine proto-Renaissance in the final form of the crematorium in Pardubice,[25] or the allusions, which have been drawn attention to many times, to the Italian Renaissance palaces of the Trecento in the material composition of the Riunione Adriatica di Sicurta palace.

[13] However, the main difference between Art Deco and Czech works of art handicraft and architecture produced at the same time is derived from qualities outside the aesthetic sphere. The considerably heterogeneous manifestations of Art Deco in Europe and later in the USA are all linked to the dominant imperative of luxury that was typical of fashionable social circles. And this factor stands in stark contrast to the Czech national style, which attempted to base itself on the regional heritage, and which above all aspired in theory to become an official style that was particularly accessible to broad strata of the population, not a luxurious veneer intended for the social elite. This is why we do not find within this category many objects intended for luxury use, but rather those meant for ordinary everyday use, prompted by the desire to improve the quality of equipment of the average household by raising awareness. Another important group is formed by the search for the artistic canon of the visual identity of Czechoslovakia.

[14] Rather than formal demarcations over against other styles, the crucial criterion for understanding "rondocubism" is therefore the frequently overlooked fact that works of architecture produced in the postwar period cannot be considered in isolation from other artistic work and especially art handicraft of the same period. The main protagonists of "rondocubism", the architects Josef Gočár and Pavel Janák, did not restrict themselves exclusively to the construction aspects of their works, but usually also played an active role in creating the overall appearance of the interiors, spending considerable time on the design of furniture and individual accessories or on cooperation with other colleagues in arranging public areas. Indeed, intensive cooperation between representatives of different artistic fields, with artists joining together to create a collective design for specific commissions, is one of the typical features of this period. Usually it was not a *Gesamtkunstwerk* by one artist that took shape, but a single style that was created through the cooperation of several artists, linked by a similar creative feel. Close collaboration between different disciplines was typical especially of members of the societies Union of Czechoslovak Work and Artěl or graduates of the School of Decorative Art. Janák himself revealed in his correspondence with Zdeněk Wirth during the war that the hotbed of "*our expression*" was gradually aroused in small-scale art, a typical example of which he considered to be the decorative work of František Kysela.[26] And a

[25] Vendula Hnídková, "Pavel Janák und der tschechische 'Nationalstil'. Aspekte einer architektonischen und nationalen Emanzipation," in: *Kritische Berichte* XXXV (2007), 75-85.

[26] Pavel Janák, letter to Zdeněk Wirth, 6. 6. 1917. Zdeněk Wirth Collection, Documentation Department of the Institute of Art History, Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, correspondence with Pavel Janák.

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few years later, as editor of *Výtvarná práce*, he was able to note the encouraging fact that

> the decorative arts have taken on a Czech character, and are increasingly taking root within themselves. They are gaining strength all the time from the awareness that they are based on the materials and spirit of their motherland, should serve domestic requirements, and that they have been predestined to have a quite distinctive character.[27]

[15] The culmination of this cooperation between different artistic disciplines, under the supervision of the Union of Czechoslovak Work, was the *Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes*, which we have already mentioned. It was held in Paris in 1925, and representatives of the Czechoslovak cultural scene brought major awards and diplomas home from it. But at the same time, for many of them it signified the definitive conclusion to the application of ornamental elements to works of decorative art and architecture. In the broader context of works of art produced in the postwar period, it is therefore 1925 which appears to be a more appropriate milestone for marking the end of the national style than the preceding years, when the various works constructed in this style were completed. As has already been said, the national style was not just a system of architectural form and structure, but also a formal code for the decorative arts, which reached its splendid conclusion at the artistic gathering in Paris. This in spite of the fact that its protagonists, particularly in the field of architecture, had already moved in the direction of more purist manifestations of form, as is evidenced most obviously by the exhibition pavilion of Gočár himself.

[16] The fact that Paris was the definitive swansong of the national style is corroborated by the representative project *Exhibition of contemporary culture*, which was held only three years later to celebrate the first ten years of the existence of Czechoslovakia. The entire complex of the Exhibition Centre in Pisárky near Brno, including the pavilions of the Academy of the Visual Arts by Gočár and of the School of Decorative Art by Janák, enveloped itself in progressive architectural forms, and thus resolutely threw off the decorative coverings of the previous period. Not only the buildings themselves, but also the exhibition fittings, the advertising graphics, and the exhibits were linked with the technological development of the industrial sector of the country that was being celebrated, and not with its rich folklore tradition. During the next two decades the visual identity of the progressive republic would be defined by functionalism. Nevertheless, a few marginal examples of the national style were still to be found at least till the end of the 1920s, as can be seen from several echoes in the form of a number of regional buildings.

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[27] [Pavel Janák], "úvodník" [editorial], in: *Výtvarná práce* 2 (1923), unpaged.

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Shaping the representation of the state

[17] The increased emphasis on the importance of representing the state at this period was an initiative of the artists, art historians, and art theoreticians themselves, who occupied important posts not only in artistic associations and at vocational schools and institutes of higher education, but also in public administration. The feverish tempo of development after the establishment of the Czechoslovak state united a number of individuals, professional associations and representatives of public administration in an idealistic endeavour to build up a modern identity for the young republic on a progressive artistic platform, which had its roots in the prewar attempts to capture a different expression of cubism from what was happening in neighbouring Germany or in the lands of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy. The ambitions of a number of artists and state officials thus came together in a joint endeavour to stress the unique character of Czechoslovak art in past epochs and present times as evidence of its high standard, comparable with that of the advanced parts of the world, and thus as confirmation of justification for its existence and by extension for the existence of the state itself. Its *raison d'être* was however seen not only in its rich cultural tradition, but above all in its artistically apposite present. The challenge was aptly described by the future director of the Museum of the Decorative Arts, Karel Herain, when he compared the young state to an individual, who, in his contacts with other countries, must impress people with his "dignified and refined behaviour, and intelligent manner, presupposing a sophisticated outward appearance",[28] because as an unknown newcomer on the international scene stricter parameters of evaluation were applied to him than to established personalities in the cultural sphere.

[18] As the longstanding movement for the emancipation of the Czech nation culminated in 1918 with the establishment of a new state containing ethnic, historical and religious elements that varied considerably, it was necessary to unify it internally and then present it externally as a homogenous whole. When the two art historians Zdeněk Wirth and Václav Vilém Štech (whom Karel Teige described as "one of the most fervent propagators" of the national style)[29] were appointed to leading functions at the Ministry of Education and National Culture, the office of the Ministry became the focal point for endeavours to build up the cultural expression of Czechoslovakia. The state institution tried to set an example through the interior designs for its own administrative and representative premises, and so in 1919 Josef Gočár successfully designed and installed in the Ministry building in the Lesser Town district of Prague furnishings for the meeting room, the elliptic library, and the office of the State Secretary, and also a table with an easy chair for the Minister himself.[30] Contemporary photographs show that massive

[28] Karel Herain, "Státní representace v umění," in: *Drobné umění* 2 (1921), 118.
[29] Karel Teige, *Moderní architektura v Československu*, Praha 1930, 103.
[30] Marie Benešová, *Josef Gočár*, Praha 1958, 48.

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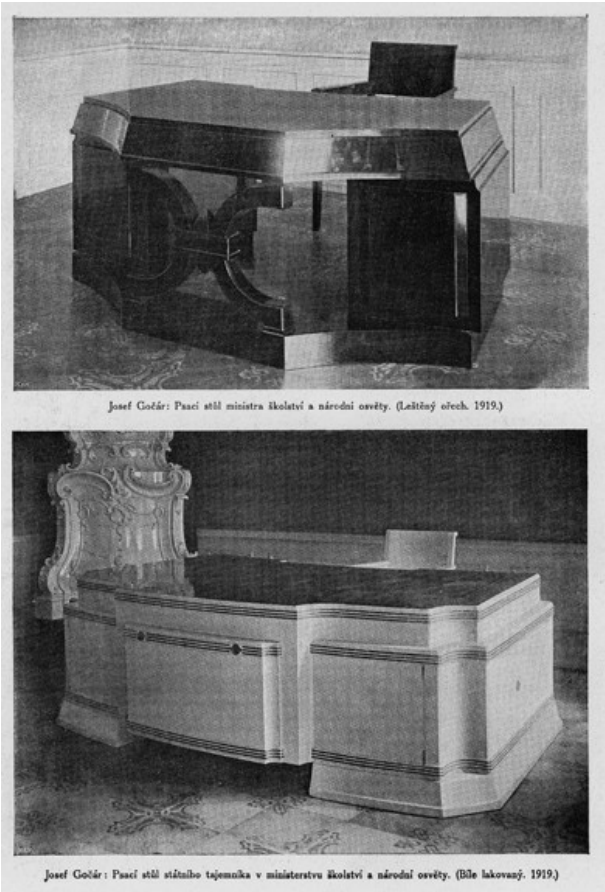
desks, almost neo-baroque in form, fitted in surprisingly easily with the original historical interiors.



1 Josef Gočár, Furniture for Ministry of Education and National Culture, 1919 (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

[19] However, a greater impact than the furniture and fittings in the bowels of the Ministry was made by a law that was approved in 1920 on the initiative of Stanislav Kostka Neumann, which stipulated that all works of art produced for the purpose of state representation or created using state funds must be subject to the approval of the Ministry of Education and National Culture.[31] This was not just a question of ministerial supervision of public finances but rather of stimulating activity when announcing and organising competitions for public works, which indeed resulted in the Ministry's initiative attracting the criticism "that it favours the most modern trends and makes them official".[32] On the basis of this targeted strategy a number of initiatives were soon launched to renew the artistic sphere by means of competitions for public works, the commissions for which regularly included representatives of the Union of Czechoslovak Work, the School of Decorative Art, and Artěl. To a certain extent they thus exercised

[31] "Zákon o umělecké úpravě předmětů státem vydávaných neb podporovaných," in: *Umění* 1 (1918-21), here 442, 445.

[32] Herain, "Státní representace v umění," 119.

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supervision over the production of contemporary works of art and defined their official canon.

[20] This is one of the reasons why the first examples of the new style were pavilions at exhibitions. At the beginning of its existence, Czechoslovakia was successfully represented by such pavilions at international expositions in Lyon (1920, Gočár) and Rio de Janeiro (1922, Janák). Like other buildings in the national style they had in common a strict symmetry in the façade; abstract decoration in the form of groups of half-cylinders, arcs, rectangles, and sections of other geometrical shapes; and numerous floral ornaments, in keeping with the very bright colouring. On the domestic scene these elements were also to the fore in competitions for the buildings of the new Czech theatres in Prague and Olomouc that were announced in the early 1920s.[33]

[21] Works of graphic design also presented a distinctive platform for the national style. The new republic naturally needed to have its own banknotes, postage stamps, printed forms, posters, and duty stamps. On them, too, was to be seen very vivid colouring, this time with an additional emphasis on the colours of the national flag in combination with emblematic elements such as linden tree sprays, figures from the state coat of arms or major characters from Czech history.

2 Jaroslav Benda, design for a banknote (5 crowns), 1921, 120x60 mm (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

[33] Jiří Hilmera, "Mezníky, které zůstaly na papíře. Ke třem soutěžím na stavbu nových divadel v Ostravě, Olomouci a Praze v letech 1920-1922," in: *Umění* 39 (1991), 437-450.

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3 František Kysela, design for a banknote (50 crowns), 1922, 162x81 mm (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

[22] František Kysela, a professor at the School of Decorative Art, a member of Artěl, a collaborator at the beginning of Prague Artistic Studios, and a member of the Union of Czechoslovak Work, designed the ten-crown banknote, the state coat of arms, the president's standard, the poster for a music festival in Paris and London,[34] and a poster publicising the Czechoslovak Republic.[35] In 1925 a new safety curtain designed by him was installed in the National Theatre.

[23] Pavel Janák even argued in favour of creating typical Czech lettering emphasising the diacritical signs, because in his view it was not possible simply to adopt foreign fonts, which were not capable of capturing the characteristic features of the Czech alphabet.[36] Jaroslav Benda, a founder member of Artěl, perhaps came close to realising this aspiration with his rounded concept of lettering, based on uncials. Because of its decorative character he used it for the textual part of important state documents, such as letters of authentication issued by the President of the Republic to the Czechoslovak envoys at a peace conference for representatives of friendly governments.[37] He also

[34] "Soutěže," in: *Umění* 1 (1918-21), 283-284.

[35] Pavel Janák, "Revoluce v plakátě," in: *Umění* 1 (1918-21), 254-256.

[36] NTM AAS, Fond 85-Janák, publikační činnost 1921, text of an unpublished lecture by Pavel Janák entitled "The Work of J. Benda, V.H. Brunner, and F. Kysela", delivered on 13 February 1921 in the Museum of Decorative Arts.

[37] A., "Užitá grafika," in: *Umění* 1 (1918-21), 266-267.

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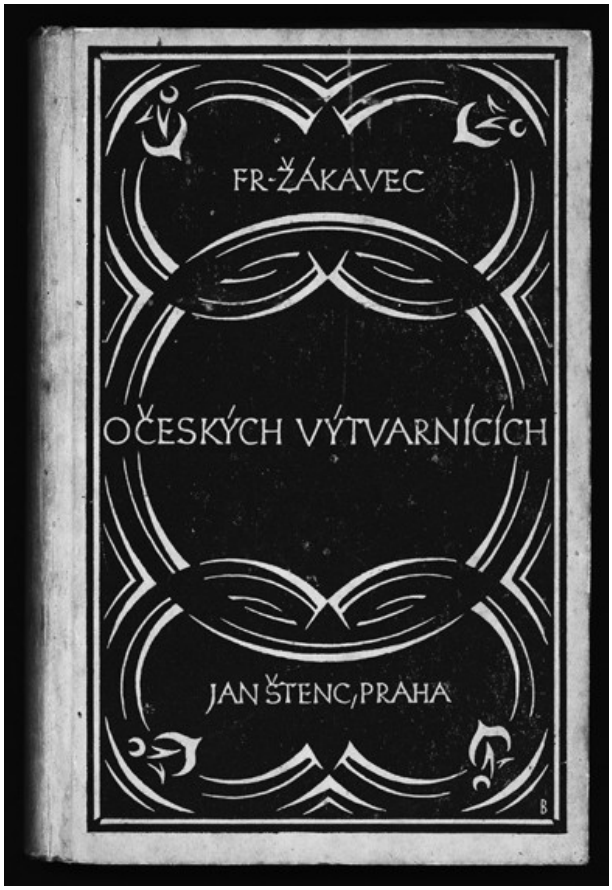
made use of rounded numerals and letters on the five- and twenty-crown banknotes, displaying "grand and at the same time very simple ornamental ideas".[38]

[24] Both Benda and Viktor Hugo Brunner, likewise a member of Artěl, also designed postage stamps after 1918, but their major contribution is to be seen in the graphic design of books and magazines. On numerous title pages they made copious use of extremely ornamental, but nevertheless structured shapes, frequently emphasised by contrasting colouring in a similar way to the architecture of the national style. Kysela, Benda, and Brunner, all of them professors at the School of Decorative Art, likewise guided their students in carrying out similar tasks, which radiated "tremendous youthful vitality and a lively interest in current national affairs".[39]



4 Jaroslav Benda, title page of the book František Žákavec, *O českých výtvarnících*, Praha 1920 (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

[38] NTM AAS, Fond 85-Janák, publikační činnost 1921 (see note 36 above).

[39] František Žákavec, "Dnes zahájená výstava Umělecko-průmyslové školy," in: *Národní listy* 61 (1921), no. 171, 5.

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5 Jaroslav Benda, title page of the journal *Styl*, 1922-23 (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

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The role of monuments

[25] A further acute requirement of the time arose immediately after the destructive wave of iconoclasm, spontaneously sparked off by the euphoria following the establishment of the Czechoslovak state. Society now sought new idols with which it could worthily identify itself. And so the monument to Jan Žižka on Vítkov hill neared completion,[40] and competitions were announced for monuments to Jan Ámos Komenský (Comenius) in Litomyšl (Štursa – Janák) and in Amsterdam (Štursa – Janák), monuments to Božena Němcová (Gutfreund – Janák) and Karel Havlíček Borovský in Havlíčkův Brod (Gočár – Kafka), to Přemysl the Ploughman (Štursa – Janák) and to Svatopluk Čech in the Královské Vinohrady district of Prague, again by the same pair of artists.[41] Above all, the endeavour to portray the wartime activities of the members of the Czechoslovak Legions as the basis for the newly created Czechoslovak army met with a strong response.

[26] Artistic circles also took the initiative in becoming involved in working on the cult legacy of the legionnaires after the Ministry of Education and National Culture announced

[40] Marcel Pencák, "Soutěž na pomník Jana Žižky na Vítkově v roce 1913," in: *Umění* 54 (2006), 69-84.

[41] A., "Soutěž na pomník Svatopluka Čecha pro Jungmannovy sady na Král. Vinohradech" [Competition for the monument of Svatopluk Čech to be placed in Jungmann's park in Královské Vinohrady], in: *Umění* 1 (1918-1921), 282.

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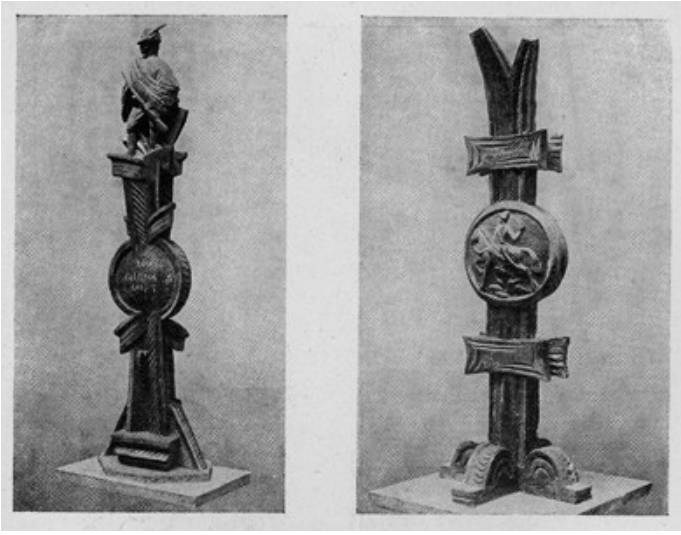
a *Competition for monuments to the victims of the war and to mark our liberation*. The specifications for the work did not reflect the historical contradictions and called for universal types, either for a freestanding or a wall-mounted monument, with the condition that it facilitated a simple design that was not financially demanding and "could be executed in a durable material distinctive for the region".[42] After the deadline for entries, the commission[43] found itself overwhelmed by as many as 241 designs, unparalleled for those days. One of the three second prizes that were awarded was won by the joint design by Karel Dvořák and Pavel Janák, *Painted Wood*.[44]



6 Karel Dvořák, Pavel Janák, competition design for the monument "Painted Wood", 1920 (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

[27] Whereas Janák's designs for monuments when the military conflict was still going on took the form of shallow alcove chapels with uncompromisingly cubist dynamic forms, in the competition he made use of a completely different, much simpler form for the monument. With both projects we are immediately struck by the evident popular nature

[42] Antonín Matějček, "K soutěži návrhů na památníky na paměť obětí války a našeho osvobození," in: *Styl* 1 (6) (1920-21), 67.

[43] Minutes of the meeting of the commission for the competition for monuments to the victims of the war and to mark our liberation, announced by the Ministry of Education and National Culture, in: *Styl* 1 (6) (1920-21), 71. Members of the commission: Prof. J. Benda, architect B. Hübschmann, Prof. C. Klouček, Prof. Dr. A. Matějček, architect O. Novotný, Capt. Špála (representative of the Monument of the Resistance Movement association) and Dr. V. V. Štech.

[44] The first prize was won by the lyrical wall-mounted relief by Karel Pokorný depicting a female figure looking down at a military helmet at her feet. The second prize was shared between three designs: "Painted Wood" by Karel Dvořák and Pavel Janák; "To the Heroes and Martyrs" by the sculptor Jaroslav Brychta; and "Slovak Madonna" by the sculptor Rudolf Březa and the architect Josef Štěpánek. Both the last two designs display a sensitive approach, not only to fulfilling the competition specifications in terms of affordability and relatively non-demanding implementation, but above all in their conceptual understanding of the issue, with a simple, almost authentic stele on the grave of a fallen soldier, aptly capturing the everyday reality of war, in contrast to the traditional monumental war memorials erected after the end of the conflict. The design by Janák and Dvořák, in its aesthetic form and in the material selected, comes close to popular works of art, without any aspiration to higher artistic values other than the quality of the craftwork itself.

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of the work and the almost contrived naivety of the craftsmanship. The main focus here is the vertical structure of a column constructed as it were out of several wooden battens, to which are attached further decorative elements. Giving the impression of wartime authenticity rather than artistic representation, it is most reminiscent of a battlefield grave, without any kind of church insignia.[45] The sensitive, almost unpretentious approach contrasts with the traditional heroic and monumental conception of war memorials. Not just the form and the material chosen, but also the title *Painted Wood* itself displays a direct association with popular art forms.

[28] Prague, too, could not avoid the issues relating to war memorials, in connection with the legendary battle by Zborov and the tomb of the Unknown Soldier that was incorporated into the gothic chapel with a bay window in the Old Town Hall. This was once again designed by Pavel Janák, this time in collaboration with the Monument of the Resistance Movement association. In a hitherto unpublished text, evidently dating from June 1924, he develops his conception of the ideal location of Štursa's statue *Wounded* as an appropriate symbol for the Unknown Soldier.[46] In his sculpture *Wounded*, created in 1917, Štursa attempted to give a material form to emotion and to depict the figure of a soldier hit by a bullet on the battlefield.[47] A real experience was here transformed into the emotionally charged level of a male nude, slightly larger than life-size, just at the moment when the dying man stiffens before falling.

[29] Janák felt that the most appropriate location for the tomb of the Unknown Soldier in terms of significance would be the area outside the Old Town Hall where the Bohemian nobles were executed in 1621. He viewed the connection with that tragic event in the spirit of contemporary declarations as a symbolic time loop, in which the three-hundred-year subjugation of the Czech nation reaches its conclusion. It would therefore be ideal if "all the victims who had fallen for their motherland"[48] might be honoured in a single monument in this historically hallowed place.

[30] After Janák had designed a triumphal arch on Wenceslas Square in 1918, Josef Gočár gave a talk in March 1919 at a meeting of the Society of Architects about his intention to build a Pantheon for the legionnaires in Prague.[49] He had an opportunity to

[45] "Inscription on reproduction illegible," in: *Styl* 1 (6) (1920-21), illustration XLIX.

[46] NTM AAS, Fond 85-Janák, publikační činnost, 1924 - Raněný, úprava Staroměstského náměstí [Wounded, adaptation design for the Old Town's Square].

[47] The first sketches date from 1914; Štursa started sculpting towards the end of the war in 1917, and the work was completed in 1920-21. The cast bears the date 1923. Kamil Novotný, *Jan Štursa*, Praha 1940, unpaged; Jiří Mašín and Tibor Honty (photographs), *Jan Štursa. 1880-1925. Geneze díla*, Praha 1981, 40, 46.

[48] NTM AAS, Fond 85-Janák, publikační činnost, 1924- Raněný, úprava Staroměstského náměstí [1924 - Wounded, adaptation design for the Old Town's Square].

[49] NTM AAS, Fond 85-Janák, Protokoly schůzí spolku "Českých architektů v Praze" [Minutes of the meetings of the Union of Czech Architects].

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say something more specific about this plan when he won the competition to construct the Czechoslovak Legions Bank in Prague.

7 Shares of the Czechoslovak Legions Bank, 1921 (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

[31] The design for the competition included the spatial scheme that was subsequently used, but it differed from the version that was finally constructed in several decorative features. The symmetrical five-axis façade is in its basic contours similar to the eventual form, but the main change occurred on the level of the first two storeys. The original design observed more consistently the pattern of continuous horizontal and vertical lines, which in the final version were erased in the lower part of the façade to such an extent that the original connection with the window axes of the upper storeys disappears in order to emphasise the central feature of the main entrance. The onlooker's gaze is further directed towards the central section by the movements of the soldiers' profiles on Štursa's reliefs, situated in the areas between the windows on the mezzanine.

[32] The concept for the façade in the design that was submitted for the competition included continuous vertical lines such that the six half-columns led directly to six reliefs with features from specific battles at which members of the Czechoslovak Legions played a part in achieving victory over the Central Powers. The sober plan was completed by sculpted heads of legionnaires in military caps situated at regular intervals in circular fields. But the alternative design that Gočár eventually used is remarkable. There are now only four reliefs, but designed on a more universal, timeless level as allegories of

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warriors from the past with swords. The design was completed by the figure of a shield-bearer, which was to be situated on a column in the area in front of the bank, in line with the main entrance.

[33] The resulting four reliefs do not form a chronological sequence, either starting from the left or from the right, but their final positioning is once again connected with the idea of a central point, which symbolises the place where the two institutions originated, which later merged to form the Czechoslovak Legions Bank.[50] The composition therefore builds up towards two principal motifs from Russian territory, beneath which people enter the bank: the Trans-Siberian Railway and the Battle of Zborov on 2 July 1917.[51] The insistent dramatic character of the compositions and the expressions on the faces on Štursa's sandstone capitals contrasts with the tranquillity radiating from Gutfreund's frieze on the architrave, the rhythms of which are carefully harmonised with the overall architectural layout.[52] Although the individual figural scenes on the theme of the return of the legionnaires are strictly separated on the frieze by vertical divisions, they create the impression of unhurried movement, which is again intensified in the central section through the figure of the archetypal woman-mother.

[34] Through this sculptural decoration, the architecture of the Bank assumed the role of a striking and effective communicative *architecture parlante* element, because the ornamental reliefs were undoubtedly intended not only for the eyes of passers-by, but also for the employees and shareholders of the Bank, the majority of whom were quite intentionally former legionnaires. The latter also recalled their exploits during the War in the privacy of their offices: one contemporary photograph shows a meeting room whose decoration consisted of stabbing weapons ornamentally displayed on the wall. And it was precisely at that time that Pavel Janák explicitly formulated his appeal for architecture, sculpture and painting to be joined together in a single whole, in which the individual artistic components would merge freely without any demarcations.[53]

[35] Another issue that is closely connected with the final appearance of the Czechoslovak Legions Bank is that of the colourfulness of the architecture, something which is burdened with a number of clichés in connection with the national style, as was shown recently by a text by Martin Strakoš, in which he described postwar art as "red, blue, and white".[54] This automatic link between the national style and the colours of the Czechoslovak tricolour once again evokes the connection with art handicraft, where the three colours of Czechoslovak statehood were a very frequent feature. This was in

[50] They were the Central Commission and the Military Savings Bank.

[51] www.pamatnik.valka.cz [last accessed Oct. 8, 2010].

[52] Mašín, *Jan Štursa*, 1981, 48.

[53] Pavel Janák, "Nedočkavá procházka," in: *Umění* 1 (1918), 85.

[54] Martin Strakoš, "Reprezentace architekturou v českých zemích 20. století," in: *ERA 21* VII (2007), no. 4, 71.

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contrast to architecture, where a two-colour scheme (pejoratively described by Vojtěch Birnbaum as a "grating" in the case of the Juliš House[55]) was usually used for the enclosing shell, contrasting with the meticulous miniature painting of the interior decorations, often carried out in Janák's and Gočár's buildings by František Kysela. The interpretation of the colouring is one of the basic guidelines for credibly deciphering the character of the national style in architecture.

[36] V.V. Štech developed a theory about the nature of the distinctive Czech character, which finds its suitable expression in the organic incorporation of ornament into material. According to him, the local genius loci determined the transformation of "space and composition into ornament, of sculpture into richness of colour".[56] Pavel Janák adopted from Štech's texts the causality of the influence of "home soil", where the milieu ineluctably shaped local artistic output into a distinctive lyrical form, which, however, could only be understood by the local population.[57] He also expanded the thesis of national determination to take in the issue of colouring, which became an active component in shaping the expression of buildings. On the basis of his profound knowledge of historical styles he completely rehabilitated the role of colour in architecture, because "it corresponds to our temperament and it is in agreement with the distinctive character of Prague".[58]

[55] Vojtěch Birnbaum, "K diskusi o barevnou architekturu," in: *Styl* 2 (7) (1921-1922), 6.

[56] Václav Vilém Štech, "O národní umění," in: Štech, *Včera,* 207.

[57] Pavel Janák, "Cesta Uměleckoprůmyslové školy," in: *Výtvarná práce* 2 (1923), 181; Pavel Janák, "Ve třetině cesty," in: *Volné směry* 14 (1918), 224.

[58] Pavel Janák, "Barvu průčelím," in: *Styl* 2 (7) (1921-1922), 5.

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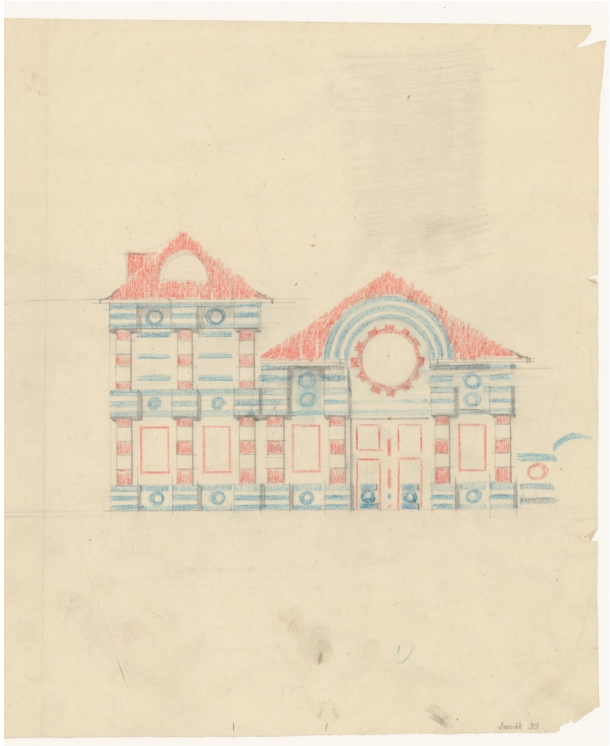
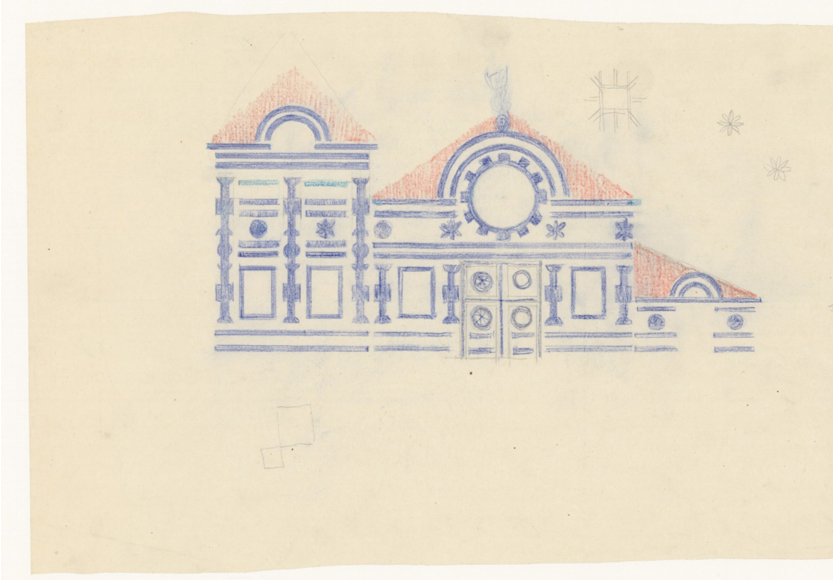


8 Pavel Janák, plan for the hydroelectric power station in Háj near Mohelnice, 1921 (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)



9 Pavel Janák, plan for the hydroelectric power station in Háj near Mohelnice, 1921 (reproduction from: Umění/Art, Journal of the Institute for Art History of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic)

[37] The contextually determined vivid colouring is therefore not an extravagant exhibition on the part of the artist, nor an explicit manifestation of state symbols, but is a consequence of the inner deliberation of the architect. An argument against any superficial interpretation of the symbolic meaning of the colours applied in particular on facades is provided by the several different alternative versions that were drawn up for the design of numerous buildings. A graphic example is the plan for the hydroelectric

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power station in Háj near Mohelnice: although Janák did submit a design in red, blue and white colours, he also at the same stage sketched other plans with a range of colours as equally valid alternatives.

[38] Similarly as with architecture, Janák also thought highly of the thoughtfully chosen shades of colour in the posters of František Kysela, because they were "natural to the point of being rustic".[59] He underlined Kysela's conscious attempt to achieve a non-artificial, more popular expression, which he described as "a struggle between the tendency towards an abstract decorative style and the drive towards reality".[60] In the unpublished text of a lecture entitled *Práce J. Bendy, V. H. Brunnera a F. Kysely v tiskovém umění* [*The work of J. Benda, V.H. Brunner, and F. Kysela in printed art*] from the year 1921, Janák shifts Kysela's style into a personally emotive position when he states that he "desired to continue to create […] from books with a nationally ethical content, through the most fervent and devoted work, books inspired by the national spirit, as it were books of love for the national cause".[61]

[39] The artists and art historians we have mentioned were not involved in any preconceived attempt to create a uniformly presented style in the service of forming a new Czechoslovak identity. But the optimistic mood in society and political circumstances in the early years of the existence of the Czechoslovak state provided them with an appropriate setting in which to express a distinctive artistic viewpoint. Through their hegemony in the leading positions in the cultural sphere, their close personal relationships, and similar means of expression, they were able to shape together the postwar visual style of the young republic. It therefore seems to me to be more apposite to talk of the cultural phenomenon that we have been discussing as the national style rather than as rondocubism.

Translated by Peter Stephens

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[59] Pavel Janák, "Nové plakáty F. Kysely," in: *Výtvarná práce* 2 (1923), 44.

[60] Janák, "Nové plakáty F. Kysely," 47.

[61] NTM AAS, Fond 85-Janák, publikační činnost 1921, text of an unpublished lecture by Pavel Janák entitled "The Work of J. Benda, V.H. Brunner, and F. Kysela", delivered on 13 February 1921 in the Museum of Decorative Arts.

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