

## National treasure or a redundant relic: the roles of the vernacular in Czech art

Marta Filipová

### Editing and peer review managed by:

Iain Boyd Whyte, Visual Arts Research Institute Edinburgh (VARIE)

### Reviewers:

Christopher Long, Tomáš Winter

### Abstract

The article examines the reception of folk art in the visual culture of Bohemia and Czechoslovakia and focuses on the shift in the meaning of folk art in the period of early twentieth-century modernism. It examines closely the main attitudes and approaches to folk art in examples drawn from painting, sculpture and architecture as well as art theory in the Czech-speaking regions from the end of the nineteenth century until the early 1930s. This politically important period that saw the transformation of the Habsburg monarchy into new independent states, including Czechoslovakia, was also marked by the establishment of modernism in Central Europe. Many Czech artists were turning to more cosmopolitan ideas, while simultaneously they retained some of the ideas and ideals from the nineteenth century national revival. These shifts were reflected in the various roles folk art was given, ranging from its association with a nostalgic return to pre-industrial society, to an ideological tool of national revival, and to a redundant relic of the past. Folk art, therefore, is understood as a complex phenomenon, which disrupts the reading of modernism in Central Europe as a straightforward embrace of cosmopolitan ideas in the visual arts and art theory and that challenges the historical opposition between folk art and high art. Simultaneously, its central role in the formation of Central European modernism is emphasized as crucial to our understanding of Central European art in this period.

### Contents

Introduction

"Discovering" folk art

Painting the folk

Finding a new language in folk architecture

Folk art and the modernists

Conclusion

*If our art should become an organic outpour of national originality, national peculiarity, I do not know of any other departure point for us other than trying to build on what our people has already created and continue in the interrupted development of their art.<sup>1</sup>*

*The new art, the revolutionary, proletarian, folk [art] cannot be associated with the exclusivity and self-sufficiency of the existing art. No snobbery. No academicism. Foreign to partiality for artistic esoterism, it will stand in the centre of the drama of realities [...] it will be a part of life like cinema or a magazine, it will not be a relic in a museum or a redundant ornament.<sup>2</sup>*

### Introduction

[1] In 1902, the year of his exhibition in Prague, Auguste Rodin was invited by Czech artists to visit Moravian Slovakia, a predominantly rural region in southeast Moravia.<sup>3</sup>

Accompanied by Alfons Mucha, the female artist and folk art enthusiast Zdenka

<sup>1</sup> Dušan Jurkovič, *Práce lidu našeho*, Vienna 1905, unpag.

<sup>2</sup> Karel Teige, "Umění dnes a zítra", in: *Avantgarda známá a neznámá. Od proletářská poezie k poetismu 1919-1924*, ed. Štěpán Vlašín, vol. 1, Prague 1971, 365-381, here 377.

Braunerová, and a number of other members of the Prague-based Mánes Association of Artists, Rodin went to an exhibition of Moravian and Slovak artists in the town Hodonín and the next day visited a house of the painter Joža Uprka in the village of Hroznová Lhota. (Fig. 1) During his stay, the spectacle of local folk culture and arts was presented to him in a series of staged encounters. The exotic element of the village was reinforced by the almost permanent presence of "comely" girls dancing and boys in costume singing, traditional folk musicians, and decorated horses.<sup>4</sup> (Fig. 2) In the villages on the way to Uprka's house, Rodin was welcomed by cheering crowds of peasants who offered him traditional bread, salt and wine.<sup>5</sup> According to the recollections of Uprka's daughter and of Braunerová, the sculptor admired the local culture, including costumes, embroidery, pottery and songs, and his visit – following another tradition – also involved wine tasting and dancing long into the night.<sup>6</sup>



1 Anonymous, August Rodin visiting Moravian Slovakia in 1902 (Rodin and Alfons Mucha, followed by the artists Miloš Jiránek, Josef Mařatka, and Joža Uprka), reproduction from 1954, photograph. The Fotoarchiv Fund, The Museum of Czech Literature, Prague (photograph provided by The Museum of Czech Literature)

<sup>3</sup> Cathleen M. Giustino, "Rodin in Prague: Modern Art, Cultural Diplomacy and National Display", in: *Slavic Review* 69, no. 3 (2010), 591-619; Dana Mikulejská, "Joža Uprka a Zdenka Braunerová – postřehy ze života", in: *Joža Uprka, Evropan Slováckého venkova. 1861-1940*, ed. Helena Musilová, Prague 2011, 157-163.

<sup>4</sup> A few photographs from the visit were published in *Zlatá Praha* XIX (1902), 396.

<sup>5</sup> "Rodin na Moravě", in: *Lidové noviny*, 3 June 1902, 2-3.

<sup>6</sup> Božena Nováková-Uprková, *Besedy s Jožou Uprkou*, Strážnice 1996, 160. Cf. also a manuscript of Zdenka Braunerová, quoted in Barbara Jebavá, *Estetická kritéria a východiska v literárním odkazu Zdenky Braunerové*, A Master Thesis at Masaryk University Brno, 2008, appendix 1.



2 Anonymous, *Dancers in Hroznová Lhota*, 1902, photograph. The Fotoarchiv Fund, The Museum of Czech Literature, Prague (photograph provided by The Museum of Czech Literature)

- [2] The excitement of the locals over the visit of a French artist (of whom many of them had probably never heard) accompanied by intellectuals from Prague is understandable. Village life in rural areas of Austro-Hungary at the turn of the century was very much dictated by the seasons and not by attention from the outside. The whole visit was therefore understood as a confirmation of the increasing international importance of regional cultural and art – and indeed, Jan Hudeček, a local geometer, in a speech of welcome addressed to Rodin, emphasized that after years of following the models of French art, French artists were now coming to see the work of their former students.<sup>7</sup> Such acknowledgement of folk art and of modern art inspired by folk art was, in the eyes of the Czechs, a significant step in the dialogue between the modern and the traditional in the Czech lands.
- [3] Apart from being an interesting (and somewhat amusing) anecdote in Rodin's life, the visit signified the complex and changing role folk art had in relation to modern art at the turn of the twentieth century. For a long time, the development of modernist art and design in Central Europe had been linked to the region's embrace of internationalist and cosmopolitan ideas in politics and the visual arts. Such interpretations commonly dismissed the contribution of folk art and culture to the development of modernism because of the associations between the vernacular and the forces of anti-modernism

---

<sup>7</sup> Nováková-Uprková, *Besedy s Uprkou*, 158-159.

that were identified by the Central European avant-gardes. The close affiliation of folk art with the recovery of national consciousness and reinvention of the historical roots of nations, nevertheless, played a significant part in the formulation of modernism in Central Europe.

- [4] The turn of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw lively discussions on the role of folk arts and design in modernist artistic practice, and many practitioners and theorists tried to use folk art as a source of renewal of modern art. The peasant art of the villages and the countryside in the Czech-speaking lands of Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia was discovered as a source of primitivist innocence and served as an exotic reference to a reality outside the urban milieu of the artist. The notions of "primitive art", and primitivism in art, and their relationship to the modern artistic idiom were explored by a number of contemporary artists in Central Europe.<sup>8</sup> As elsewhere, primitivism served to confirm the dominant position of urban modernity and in many cases was found close to the cities – in the folk art and material culture created by those who lived in nearby villages.
- [5] In the Czech context discussed in this article, folk art has been assigned many roles and has often been discussed in relation to Czech national identity. These roles and the understanding of the entire phenomenon have also been largely dependent on the linguistic definitions and associations of the basic terminology that links it to concepts of nation and people. The Czech term for folk art, *lidové umění*, indicates its root in "lid" – the people, but also reflects its attribute of being *lidové*, which can be translated to English as folk, vernacular and popular. Moreover, in Czech "lid" has often been linked with the concept of nation, *národ*, which contributed to the close associations between folk art and national art.<sup>9</sup> This link was challenged, however, at the beginning of the twentieth century, when many artists and art historians started turning their attention to urban folklore – the art of the people (*umění lidu*) or proletarian art, which they saw as a specific type of primitive art in towns and cities. Such popular art, the art of amateurs, was favoured by the avant-gardes because, in contrast to traditionally conceived folk art, they saw it as devoid of academicism, nationalism, or historicism. For all of these associations, folk art became a contested, yet unavoidable concept, linked to the construction, advancement or denial of Czech national identity.
- [6] This article focuses on the shift in the meaning of folk – people's art and examines closely the main attitudes and approaches to folk art in examples drawn from painting, sculpture

<sup>8</sup> On exotic primitivism in Czech art, see most recently, Tomáš Winter, *Palmy na Vltavě. Primitivismus, mimoevropské kultury a české výtvarné umění 1850-1950*, Plzeň 2013; Tomáš Winter, "The Group of Fine Artists and Primitivism in the Czech Lands", in: *Centropa* XI (2011), 19-33; and Tomáš Winter, "Cannibals in Bohemia", in: *Umění* 57, no. 3 (2009), 248-60.

<sup>9</sup> I commonly translate the Czech term "lidové umění" as "folk art", but its meaning is closer to the German term "Volkskunst". For a discussion on the subtleties of the meaning of *Volkskunst* and folk art, see Stefan Muthesius, "Alois Riegl, Volkskunst, Haussfleiss und Hausindustrie", in: *Framing Formalism. Riegl's Work*, ed. Richard Woodfield, Amsterdam 2001, 135-50.

and architecture as well as art theory in the Czech-speaking regions from the end of the nineteenth century until the early 1930s. This was an important time, when the Czech nation after 1918 was being politically transformed from several regions of the Habsburg monarchy and consolidated into the independent state of Czechoslovakia. Importantly, too, modernism was establishing itself in Central Europe at the time and artists were turning to more cosmopolitan ideas, while simultaneously retaining ideas and ideals from the nineteenth century national revival in a period of continuing nationalism.<sup>10</sup> This transformation was reflected in the various roles folk art was given at the time, ranging from its association with a nostalgic return to pre-industrial society, to an ideological tool of national revival and to a redundant relic of the past. Folk art, therefore, is presented here as a complex phenomenon, which disrupts the reading of modernism in Central Europe as a straightforward embrace of cosmopolitan ideas in the visual arts and art theory and challenges the historical opposition between folk art and high art. Simultaneously, its central role in the formation of Central European modernism is emphasized as crucial to our understanding of Central European art in this period.

[<top>](#)

### "Discovering" folk art

[7] Throughout the nineteenth century, folk culture – including handicraft, decorative objects, music, or tales – had been a popular resource for many national revivalists in Bohemia and coincided with a more general interest in the topic around Europe.<sup>11</sup> The attention that was given to folk art in the visual arts also came out of a broader movement in other art forms. Following the example of the Grimm brothers, who saw folk traditions and language as a common identifier of "Germanness" in the fractured Germany of the first half of the nineteenth century, Czech writers and poets started collecting folk tales, poems and stories in the Czech-speaking regions in an effort to revive national consciousness. They based their own prose or poetry on folk resources,

---

<sup>10</sup> David Crowley, "The Uses of Peasant Design in Austria-Hungary in the Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Centuries", in: *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 2, no.2 (1995), 2-28; Crowley, "Finding Poland in the Margins. The Case of the Zakopane Style", in: *Journal of Design History* 14, no. 2 (2001), 105-16; Andrzej Szczerski, "Sources of Modernity: The Interpretations of Vernacular Crafts in Polish Design around 1900", in: *The Journal of Modern Craft* 1, no. 1 (2008), 55-76; Piotr Piotrowski, "Modernity and Nationalism: Avant-Garde Art and Polish Independence, 1912-1922", in: *Central European Avant-Gardes 1910-1930: Exchange and Transformation*, ed. Timothy O. Benson, Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass. 2002, 312-26; Krzysztof Stefański, "A Note on the 'Homely Style' in Polish Architecture c. 1900", in: *Centropa. A Journal of Central European Architecture and Related Arts* 2, no. 3 (2002), 197-201; Nicola Gordon Bowe, *Art and the National Dream. The Search for Vernacular Expression in Turn-of-the-Century Design*, Dublin 1993.

<sup>11</sup> Mitchell Schwarzer, "The Design Prototype as Artistic Boundary. The Debate on History and Industry in Central European Applied Arts Museums, 1860-1900", in: *Design Issues* 9, no. 1 (1992), 33. See also Roger D. Abrahams, "Phantoms of Romantic Nationalism in Folkloristics", in: *The Journal of American Folklore* 106, no. 419 (1993), 3-37. The German writer and social theorist Wilhelm Heinrich Riehl (1823-1897) examined the everyday life of the rural folk as an antithesis to an increasingly industrialized and modernized urban society and called for an establishment of a more profound discipline – *Volkskunde* – which would record and study folk customs, tales, ways of life, traditions.

which they considered "a pure folk art untainted by urban and upper-class 'Germanisation'", and therefore as a national art.<sup>12</sup> Perhaps the two most prominent representatives of this trend were Karel Jaromír Erben (1811-1870), the author of collections of narrative poems, ballads and fairy tales, such as *Kytice* (The Garland, 1853), and Božena Němcová (1820-1862), the author of the novel *Babička* (The Grandmother, 1855), which celebrated rural life. Němcová collected fairy tales from villages and remote parts of Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia and reworked them into a literary genre that has been popular with the Czechs ever since.

- [8] Following the success of literature based on folk culture, a similar tendency emerged in music, in which compositions drawing on motifs from folk music enjoyed considerable popularity. Well known examples included the symphonic poem *Má vlast* (My Country, 1878) by Bedřich Smetana (1824-1884) and Antonín Dvořák's (1841-1904) *Slovanské tance* (Slavonic Dances, 1878) or his romantic lyric opera *Rusalka* (1900). Folk motifs continued to inspire composers well into the twentieth century, including Leoš Janáček (1854-1928) and his opera *Jenůfa* (1904) or Bohuslav Martinů (1890-1959) who, for instance, in 1937 composed a ballet *Kytice* inspired by Erben's text. As the latter commented, "[...] I use Czech folk songs as themes, but more often I create thematic material coloured by the style and spirit of Czech folk idiom."<sup>13</sup> Motifs from folk songs and tales were thus selectively reworked for contemporary audiences and used as a source of inspiration.
- [9] The search for folk motifs in all art forms and their subsequent adaptation for modern audiences therefore became an important part of the national revival in Bohemia not only in the nineteenth, but also in the twentieth century. The Czech peasant commonly emerged in the writings, songs and images of patriotic artists as a symbol of Czech national identity and as the keeper of ancient traditions, and as such became the focus of nationalistic sentiment in the arts.
- [10] Alongside the national interests of the local authors and consumers in the vernacular forms of expression, folk culture became an object of fascination for visitors from abroad (hence Rodin's trip) and provided a wealth of material for foreign scholars, too, who either studied it as an interesting phenomenon in its own right, or used it as a source for the revival of arts and crafts in Europe. One of the first scholars to become interested in Central European vernacular art was the French-Swiss art critic William Ritter (1867-1955) who travelled throughout Central and Eastern Europe, including Romania, Hungary and Poland, and saw in these regions what he regarded as an authentic heritage that had been preserved unaffected by European modernism, of which he disapproved.<sup>14</sup>

---

<sup>12</sup> Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia. A Czech History*, Princeton, N.J. 2000, 74.

<sup>13</sup> Bohuslav Martinů quoted in Michael Beckerman, "In Search for Czechness in Music", in: *19<sup>th</sup> Century Music* 10, no. 1 (1986), 64.

[11] Ritter had also been concerned with art in Bohemia, Moravia and Slovakia, and at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century published a number of articles on the topic, in which he expressed his attachment to Slavic folk culture.<sup>15</sup> He had visited the Prague Ethnographic Exhibition in 1895, a showcase of Czech, Moravian and Slovak folk culture, and since he believed that an artist's work should be analysed in the context of its ethnic or cultural background, he travelled to Moravian Slovakia several times to study and collect artefacts.<sup>16</sup> The same part of Moravia that Rodin visited around the same time represented, in Ritter's view, another example of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's idea of the "natural, unspoilt, rural life", where authentic popular art flourished.<sup>17</sup> Ritter became particularly fascinated by the work of Joža Uprka, a "painter of colourful village festivities", whom he regarded as continuing this tradition, "a surviving witness of the ancient Slavonic world".<sup>18</sup> He saw his work as a form of "barbarism", understood in a positive sense as imbued with moral health, and counterposed the "authentic" artists of villages against those of the "tragic, black" city of Prague.<sup>19</sup> For Ritter, therefore, the folklore of the village was an exotic paradise, which had been lost in many urbanized places but retained in the work of a few artists.

[12] Another approach to Central European vernacular culture arose with the attention to arts and crafts that originated in Great Britain. Charles Holme (1848-1923), the English writer and magazine editor founded *The Studio: An Illustrated Magazine of Fine and Applied Arts* in 1892 to promote "good design". From 1894 onwards, the journal published issues written by specialists on topics such as crafts, etching, architecture, and photography.<sup>20</sup> A series of special volumes were also devoted to peasant art in Europe – *Peasant Art in Sweden, Lapland and Iceland* (1910) was followed by a volume on Austria and Hungary (1911), Russia (1912) and Italy (1913). "Peasant" in these volumes stood for the

<sup>14</sup> Xavier Galmiche, "L'arrière-pays d'une ville incertaine 'L'invention' de Prague et de la Tchécoslovaquie chez William Ritter (1867-1955)", in: *Images de la Bohême dans les lettres françaises: réciprocity culturelle des français, tchèques et slovaques*, ed. Hana Voisine-Jechová, Paris 2004, 45-56.

<sup>15</sup> See for example William Ritter, "Le peinture tchèque", in: *Art et les Artistes*, no. 16 (1913), 265-80; William Ritter, "La Nation tchéco-slovaque", in: *Foyer domestique*, no. 4, 25 January 1896; Ritter, "Notes tchécoslovaques", in: *Gazette de Lausanne*, 1921. Cf. K. Fabelová, "La recherche de la modernité travers les rapports entre William Ritter (1867-1955) et Miloš Jiránek (1875-1911)", in: *Inspirations françaises. Recueil d'intervention portant sur l'histoire de l'art*, Opera Facultatis philosophiae Universitatis Carolinae Pragensis, vol. I, Prague 2006, 101-114;

<sup>16</sup> Francesco Passanti, "The Vernacular, Modernism, and Le Corbusier", in: *The Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 56, no. 4 (1997), 445; Lenka Bydžovská, "'Heart in a trance': William Ritter and Czech modernism", in: *CIRCE: Centre Interdisciplinaire de Recherches Centre-Européennes*, [http://www.circe.paris-sorbonne.fr/index.php?option=com\\_content&view=article&id=261](http://www.circe.paris-sorbonne.fr/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=261) (last accessed 13 February 2013); Marta Filipová, "Peasants on Display. The Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition of 1895", in: *Journal of Design History* 24, no. 1 (2011), 15-36.

<sup>17</sup> Bydžovská, "Heart in a trance".

<sup>18</sup> Bydžovská, "Heart in a trance".

<sup>19</sup> Ritter, "Heures de Prague et de Vienne", in: *La Plume*, no. 166 (1896), 197-198.

<sup>20</sup> Julie F. Codell, "Holme, Charles", in: *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography*, Oxford 2004; online edition, <http://www.oxforddnb.com/view/article/33950> (last accessed 13 February 2013).

"primitive" inhabitant of rural areas who expressed "naive charm in the spontaneous designs and quaintness of thought shown in the work of unschooled daughters of the soil".<sup>21</sup>

[13] It is important to note, however, that the contributors to the volume on Austria and Hungary, including the Austrian ethnographer Michael Haberlandt and the Anglo-Austrian art historian Amelia Levetus, considered the Austrian peasant, following the official position of Austrian ethnography, as a generic type that represented *all* races subject to Austrian rule. Although there were regional differences between the three main groups comprising the population of Austria (German speakers, Slavs, and speakers of Romance languages), Levetus, for example, saw "no fine line of demarcation [that] can be drawn to indicate where the peasant art of one nation begins and another ends".<sup>22</sup> In fact, both Haberlandt and Levetus argued that despite its varied forms, which could be put down to geographical and cultural differences, folk art had an underlying universal quality that transcended national divisions.

[14] Such a view, of course, was not accepted in the individual regions of Austria and Hungary, where folk art was seen as a distinctive and original form of national expression. Haberlandt and Levetus acknowledged "racial" differences and variations in the method of executing folk art but insisted on using the term "Austrian peasant" to encompass all ethnic groups of Austria. Haberlandt, author of a chapter on Austrian peasant art in the volume, nevertheless recognized the "national character" of peasant artefacts and, in the case of embroidery in Bohemia and Moravia, related it to "national pride".<sup>23</sup> Yet both Levetus and Haberlandt approach peasant art as a form of primitivism. For instance the latter claimed that Moravian embroidery had a "naïve charm" but at the same time stood above that of the Carpathian region, which was "much more primitive".<sup>24</sup> Primitive expression in this sense equalled with crude execution and unrefined and simple ornament, detail or colour.

[15] In Bohemia, interest in local folk culture and its allegedly primitive character was evident in the work of artists as well as theoretical writings by art critics. Artistic examples date back to the early nineteenth century and were linked to the growing popularity of excursions to the countryside. The work of artists, most prominently the painters Josef Mánes (1820-1871) and Mikoláš Aleš (1853-1913), was usually embedded in sentimental and romantic ideas about the peasant art and culture of Bohemia, Moravia and, to a lesser extent, what is now Slovakia.

---

<sup>21</sup> Amelia Sarah Levetus, "Austria. Introduction", in: *Peasant Art in Austria and Hungary*, ed. Charles Holme, London and New York 1911, 2-3.

<sup>22</sup> Levetus, "Austria. Introduction", 1.

<sup>23</sup> Michael Haberlandt, "Austrian Peasant Art", in: *Peasant Art in Austria and Hungary*, 15 and 17.

<sup>24</sup> Haberlandt, "Austrian Peasant Art", 19.



3 Josef Mánes, *Sketch of October for the astronomical clock*, 1865, drawing (from František Kovárna, *Mánesův odkaz národu*, Prague 1939, plate 24)

- [16] Mánes's studies of folk costumes, his illustrations of Czech songs or his decorations of the astronomical clock on the Old Town Hall in Prague in many ways respond to the romantic mood of the Czech national revival, which identified the village with the nation's history and traditions. The clock of 1865, for instance, consists of twelve circular allegorical depictions of seasonal work and life in the countryside and the twelve signs of the zodiac, executed against a golden background. Similarly, the peasants ploughing the fields in the February medallion, or the depiction of them collecting grapes in the October medallion, represented a generic image of villagers at work in clothes that were regionally undistinguishable.<sup>25</sup> (Fig. 3) They were depicted in this way to fit the decorative purpose of the clock and such stylization and sentimentality was typical of many of Mánes's other works from mid-nineteenth century onwards. Representative of this approach are the drawing *Slovenská rodina* (A Slovak Family) or the cycle of illustrations *Česká píseň* (Czech songs) from 1855, in which he tried to provide an idealized image of life in the countryside. In *A Slovak Family* (Fig. 4), he depicted a couple seated outside a hut, surrounded by their three children. The family is placed against a landscape backdrop that completes the image of a rural idyll. Similarly, the ink drawings illustrating the *Czech Songs* also depict contented peasants in various domestic situations or working in the field, with the emphasis on the black outline and ornament serving as a decorative addition to the scores and lyrics of the songs.

<sup>25</sup> Richard Jeřábek et al., *Folklorismy v českém výtvarném umění XX. století = Folklorisms in 20th-century Czech art*, Prague 2004, 20.



4 Josef Mánes, *A Slovak Family*, no date (from František Kovárna, *Mánesův odkaz národu*, Prague 1939, plate 117)

- [17] Many Czech nationalist art historians of the nineteenth and twentieth century saw the subject matter of both Mánes and Aleš, as the key to their "greatness and Czechness" as painters.<sup>26</sup> They identified their ability to capture the true character of the "Czech soul" through depiction of the peasant and the local countryside.<sup>27</sup> According to Miroslav Tyrš (1832-84), one of the first Czech art historians, Mánes preferred to depict the inhabitants of the eastern parts of the Czech speaking lands (and this included Slovakia at the time), on account of the fact that they "retained greater purity" than those in the Western regions.<sup>28</sup> The allegedly smoother facial features of the Moravians and Slovaks as well as "greater tenderness and softness" of the former, he argued, were suitable for Mánes's idealization and lyrical epical style.<sup>29</sup>
- [18] Although Mánes continued to attract the praise of Czech art historians well into the twentieth century, his work started to be subject to reconsideration at the beginning of the century. Its sentimentality and bourgeois naivety were criticized by Ritter, for

<sup>26</sup> Karel Bartoloměj Mádl, "Mánes", *Umění včera a dnes*, Prague 1904, 4-5.

<sup>27</sup> Mádl, "Mánesu". Other texts on Mánes and Aleš include Antonín Matějček, *Dílo Josefa Mánesa 1-3*, Prague 1920-1927; František Žákavec, *L' oeuvre de Joseph Mánes. Tome II, Le Peuple tchécoslovaque*, Prague 1923; Miloš Jiránek, *Josef Mánes*, Prague 1909; Max Dvořák, "Von Mánes zu Švabinsky", in: *Die Graphischen Künste XXVII* (1904); Václav Vilém Štech and František Xaver Jiřík, *Mikoláš Aleš: jeho život a dílo*, Prague 1913 and Žákavec, *Knížka o Alšovi*, Prague 1912.

<sup>28</sup> Miroslav Tyrš, "K výstavě Mánesově v místnosti Lehmannově" (1880), reprinted in Renata Tyršová, ed., *Dra Miroslava Tyrše úvahy a pojednání o umění výtvarném I.*, Prague 1901, 44.

<sup>29</sup> Tyrš, "K výstavě Mánesově", 44.

instance, who in 1921 compared what he saw as the artist's search for ancient Slavdom in drawing and painting to the musical interpretation of the Scottish Ossian by Mendelssohn and Niels Gade.<sup>30</sup> He also pointed to the similarities between his work and that of German Romantics, a comparison not usually favoured by Czech nationalists. Already in 1904, Max Dvořák found similarities between German artists and Mánes, who in his view "interpreted national history and the present, was a poet of fairy tales and myths like [Moritz von] Schwind or [Alfred] Rethel, and illustrator of national songs like [Adrian Ludwig] Richter".<sup>31</sup> Dvořák's aim was, however, not to contest Mánes's "Czechness", but rather to demonstrate how his work fitted into a wider European context of the history of art.



5 Dušan Jurkovič, *Touristic houses at Pustevny*, 1897  
(photograph provided by Christopher Long)

[19] In contrast to Mánes, Aleš, the author of many decorative illustrations of national literature and historical murals, did not travel to villages to capture the romantic idyll and based his images of peasants on contemporary photographs, postcards or descriptions.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, his work, such as the ornamentation and wall decorations in the tourist resort of Pustevny in eastern Moravia (Fig. 5) or his designs of the "Homeland" series for lunettes in the National Theatre, 1877-81, depicting historically important places and myths of Bohemia, were seen as embodying Czech national identity. The wall paintings in the refuge of the Pustevny resort, designed in 1898 by the architect Dušan Jurkovič (1867-1947), who will be mentioned shortly, show figures from Slavic legend, such as the highway robber Jánošík (1688-1713) or the bandit Stavinoha, as well as idealized peasants who are all executed in an illustrative style, which puts emphasis on the decorative quality of the outline. (Fig. 6) The resort, set on a hilly range associated with

<sup>30</sup> William Ritter, "Notes tchecoslovaques", in: *Gazette de Lausanne*, 27 August, 1921, 1.

<sup>31</sup> Dvořák, "Von Mánes zu Švabinsky", in: *Die Graphischen Künste* 27, no. 5 (1904), 29-52; in Czech as "Od Mánesa ke Švabinskému", in: *Volné směry* IX (1910), 275-298, here 285.

<sup>32</sup> Jeřábek, *Folklorismy*, 17.

ancient Slavic legends, became a popular hiking destination at the end of the nineteenth century and both Jurkovič's architecture and Aleš's interior paintings were to provide the visitors with a suitable setting replete with folk and ancient Slavic references.



6 Mikoláš Aleš, *The interior mural*, 1897, mural, Libušín, Pustevny (photograph provided by the author)

[20] Many of Aleš's other works link him with places that were of historical importance for the Czechs. Apart from his work for the National Theatre in Prague (Fig. 7), he was also the author of sgraffiti on various houses in Prague and other Bohemian towns. His linear approach proved suitable for this purpose while thematically he remained faithful to the depictions of peasants and ancient Slavic myths. In places with a large German minority, such as the Western Bohemian town of Plzeň, they had a special ideological significance for the local Czech community.<sup>33</sup> The designs that Aleš executed for fifteen town houses in Plzeň between 1894 and 1898, for example, depicted historical events, allegories and genre subjects that emphasized Slavic connections. For instance, the sgraffito of a local market is full of peasants arriving at the municipal market in traditional costumes, while the allegorical and historical depictions feature real or mythical figures either in an idyllic landscape or on a golden background. All have an accentuated line and are often surrounded by floral, Secession-like ornament in sharp colours.

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Irena Helebrantová and Jitka Ullmannová, *Alšova sgrafita v Plzni*, Plzeň 1989; Václav František Eisenreich and Emanuel Svoboda, *Mikoláš Aleš. Plzeňská sgrafita*, Prague 1932.



7 Mikoláš Aleš, *St George and the Dragon*, undated sketch for murals in the National Theatre, Prague (from Antonín Matějček and Zdeněk Wirth, *Modern and Contemporary Czech Art*, London 1924, plate 53)

- [21] Contemporary art historians believed that it was Aleš's subject matter, together with the references to folk motives in ornament that captured the typical "Czechness" of the soul, character, and nature of the Czech people.<sup>34</sup> The art historian Karel Boromejský Mádl (1859-1932), who promoted the work of Czech artists inspired by folklore, noted that Aleš personified the Czech soul and character and also the strengths and faults of the people that distinguish it from other races and tribes.<sup>35</sup> References to the Czech soul and the specific character especially of the country folk were not uncommon among Czech art historians and visual artists. In many cases they were inspired by a short but influential text by Johann Gottfried Herder, published in *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* (Ideas upon Philosophy and the History of Mankind) about the traits of the Slavs, which continued to be fundamental in the national revival.<sup>36</sup> Herder saw the Slavs as people with a love for agriculture, domestic arts, commerce and music, who "were charitable, hospitable to excess, lovers of free country ways, yet submissive and

<sup>34</sup> Mádl, "Mánesu", 4-5

<sup>35</sup> Mádl, "Mánesu", 4-5.

<sup>36</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder, *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 4 vol., Riga and Leipzig 1784-1791.

obedient, averse to pillage and robbery".<sup>37</sup> It was therefore the domestic and agricultural orientation as well as the skills in craftsmanship that were often used to describe the authentic Czech society and culture, found predominantly in the countryside.

[<top>](#)

### Painting the folk

- [22] The peasant, understood in this romanticized and nationalized way, continued to be a popular subject in the work of a number of other artists well into the twentieth century. Whereas Aleš and Mánes were primarily based and schooled in Prague and ventured to the regions to look for inspiration (at least in the case of Mánes), the beginning of the twentieth century saw an increase in the number of artists based in the rural areas, in closer proximity to the allegedly unspoiled culture of the peasants. This rise of interest in the local folk culture may partly be ascribed to the impact of the preparatory activities of the Czechoslavic Ethnographic Exhibition of 1895, which took place in Prague, but also to the revival of arts and crafts and traditional skills in fine art.
- [23] The revival prompted artists to settle in regional centres or to visit them regularly in order to explore and depict rural culture, and many of them provide a good example of how folk art was promoted and understood at a regional level, but with national, even international, ambitions. In 1907, one group of artists, comprising Joža Uprka (1861-1940), his brother, the sculptor Franta Uprka (1868-1929), the painters František Ondrúšek (1861-1932), Bohumír Jaroněk (1866-1933) and Zdenka Braunerová (who accompanied Rodin on his ventures into the Moravian countryside), the ethnographer Josef Klvaňa as well as the dramatists Vilém and Alois Mrštík (1863-1912, 1861-1925) founded the Association of Moravian Visual Artists in the provincial town of Hodonín in southern Moravia, which Rodin had visited five years earlier. Hodonín was consciously selected as a more Moravian and Slavonic (and therefore more national) alternative to the administrative centre of Moravia, Brno (Brünn), which had a strongly Germanized culture and close ties to Vienna.<sup>38</sup> In their proclamation of 1907, the members argued that they wanted "to live from our art, to work with our themes, to avoid all harmful alien influences – retain, preserve and nourish the principle of nationality in art".<sup>39</sup> Vilém Mrštík was an especially ardent defender of the idea of the untainted nature and beauty of Moravian peasant art in his dramas, novels, newspaper articles and art criticism.<sup>40</sup> His

<sup>37</sup> Johann Gottfried von Herder, "Germans and Slavs", in: *Pan-Slavism: Its History and Ideology*, ed. Hans Kohn, Notre Dame, Ind. 1953, 104. Originally as J. G. von Herder, "Deutsche Völker" and "Slawische Völker", in: *Ideen zur Philosophie der Geschichte der Menschheit* IV, Riga and Leipzig 1791.

<sup>38</sup> Ladislava Horňáková et al., *100 SVUM*, Hodonín 2007, 10. Hodonín, however, still had a significant German population, cf. Elizabeth Clegg, *Art, Design, and Architecture, 1890-1920*, New Haven 2006, 111.

<sup>39</sup> Horňáková et al., *100 SVUM*, 10.

<sup>40</sup> Mrštík published articles in literary and cultural magazines and newspapers *Národní listy*, *Rozhledy*, *Zlatá Praha*, *Česká revue* or *Lumír*; several short texts with his impressions and views of

most famous drama, *Maryša*, 1894, was set in a village, involved detailed descriptions of folk costumes, included folk songs, and made use of local dialects. Mrštík believed Moravian peasant culture capable of reviving the art of the entire Czech nation, and he argued that artists should try to "employ various means to increase the artistic quality and cultivate nationality in art, and art in nationality".<sup>41</sup>



8 Joža Uprka, *The Pilgrimage to St Anthony*, 1894, oil on canvas, Moravian Gallery in Brno (image provided by the Moravian Gallery in Brno)

[24] Despite their claims about the need to combat alien influences, the artists associated with the Moravian Group were aware of international contexts. Joža Uprka, whose studio and house were on the itinerary of Rodin's 1902 visit, is perhaps the most prominent example of this effort to combine regionalism and nationalism with international modernism. Born in the village of Kněždub in south east Moravia, he studied at the art academies in Prague and Munich and exhibited his work in solo exhibitions in Vienna (1897) and Prague (1904), at the Venice Biennale (1907), and at the Parisian Salon in 1894, where he was awarded an honourable mention (*mention honorable*) for his painting *Pouť u svatého Antonínka* (The Pilgrimage to St. Anthony) of the previous year. The work depicts a field full of young women and girls in festive dresses resting on their way to a pilgrim church. (Fig. 8) The painting is executed in vivid contrasting colours of green, red and white, and its treatment of light and patchy quality of the colours reveal Uprka's debt to Impressionism, which he encountered in Paris. Another painting under the influence of Impressionism, *Jízda králů* (Ride of the Kings) from 1897 (Fig. 9), is often seen as the peak in his career. It depicts an annual custom, the origins of which remain obscure and with many interpretations as to its meaning. In this event held in villages in eastern Moravia, and most famously in Vlčnov, a boy from the village is selected to ride a decorated horse at the head of a procession of other young men, the Moravian village life was published in *Kniha cest*, 1905.

<sup>41</sup> Quoted in Leopold Weigner, *Lidové umění československé*, Prague 1917, 64.

women and children. It is a prestigious event, giving pride to the whole village and providing the occasion for the participants to dress up in traditional clothes.<sup>42</sup> Uprka's interpretation of the custom focuses on a group of young men in regional festive costumes on decorated horses and tries to capture the ceremonial character of this event in a traditional composition using bright colours, dominated by reds, whites and blacks.



9 Joža Uprka, *Ride of the Kings*, 1897, oil on canvas, Moravian Gallery in Brno (image provided by the Moravian Gallery in Brno)

[25] In his sympathy with the peasants, Uprka differed from many other Czech artists who were based in towns and cities and treated the countryside as a faraway, but intriguing, region. The occasional ventures of painters from Prague, including Miloš Jiránek (1875-1911), Braunerová and František Kupka (1871-1957) seemed to be more the observations of an outsider in comparison with the studies of Uprka, his younger brother Franta, an academically trained sculptor, or other Moravian and Slovak artists from and around Hodonín who saw themselves as preserving and not just documenting or depicting folk life and traditions in their art. Born and settled in a village, Joža Uprka combined an academic approach to his subject with an in-situ experience of rural life and a descriptive attention to detail. Moreover, this descriptiveness, prominent mainly in his late work, brought his paintings of various female headwear and scarfs or peasant fur coats into the service of ethnography.<sup>43</sup>

[26] The reception of Joža Uprka's work in his time was, nevertheless, mixed. His paintings, with their emphasis on atmosphere, the use of vivid colours especially their strong tonal contrast between reds and whites, and linear treatment of the subject, were well received abroad as a form of exoticism and orientalism. According to Elizabeth Clegg, they were "painted in the knowledge that they would be 'consumed' [...] by a refined

<sup>42</sup> The custom is still popular and in 2011 it was added to the UNESCO heritage list.

<sup>43</sup> On women's fur coats, see Uprka's illustrations in František Kretz, *Ženské kožuchy*, Brno 1927 and *Maehrisch-slovakische Hauben: gesammelt und mit einer ethnographischen Studie begleitet von Franz Kretz*, Vienna 1902; on head scarf, Joža Uprka, *Vázání šátků*, Kroměříž 1921.

Viennese public whose pleasure in them was superficial in the extreme".<sup>44</sup> Indeed, in contrast to, for example, Courbet's and Millet's works, most of Uprka's paintings provided little social commentary, because the Czech painter depicted an idealized village life devoid of the social or economic hardship. Uprka's figures were often clad in occasional, fancy costumes and were depicted during festive events, such as weddings, processions and church services. As such they were more participants in staged pageants than examples of laborious everyday life in the countryside. Uprka, nevertheless, did occasionally depict peasants at work in the field in paintings and sketches, in which he tried to convey a similar message to French realism, with which he was familiar from his trip to Paris. Although once called "our Czech Millet", he conveyed apolitical pictorial and descriptive observations rather than critical observation.<sup>45</sup> Observers soon noticed that where Millet seemed pessimistic, serious and philosophical, Uprka was optimistic, upbeat, and spontaneous.<sup>46</sup>

[27] Despite, or perhaps because of the lack of a critical approach to the village reality, Uprka, who has often been marketed as a folk painter, became a successful artist aware of contemporary artistic trends who turned them into his own, localized, visual language.<sup>47</sup> His search for the rural idyll was a part of a more general tendency to find inspiration in local, allegedly authentic culture in terms of his techniques, material and colour, and this can be traced in the work of a number of other artists or artists' colonies across Europe. Yet, whereas Uprka was born and lived most of his life in the village, artists in colonies at Worpswede in Germany, Collioure in France or Skagen in Denmark, as well as individuals such as Gauguin in Brittany, Kandinsky in Old Russia or the aforementioned Millet in Barbizon sought to escape the city, attracted by local folklore and landscape.<sup>48</sup>

[28] In their case, but also in that of Uprka, the revival of folk traditions, including their visual forms, was an instance of deliberate myth-making, and folk culture was seen as the carrier of residual knowledge of the past that was also, crucially, necessary for the present and future life of the nation.<sup>49</sup> Many revivalists saw traditions as having the potential to mobilize social change or enhance national awareness.<sup>50</sup> In the national revival movements in Central Europe of the nineteenth century, national traditions

---

<sup>44</sup> Clegg, *Art, Design, and Architecture*, 102.

<sup>45</sup> Alois Kalvoda, "Náš český Millet", in: *České slovo*, 29 October 1911.

<sup>46</sup> Štěpán Jež, *Joža Uprka. K pátému výročí umělcovy smrti*, Prague 1944, 261.

<sup>47</sup> Most recently, an exhibition in the National Gallery of Prague and its catalogue *Joža Uprka (1861-1940): European of the Slovácko Region*, 23 September 2011-29 January 2012, presented Uprka as an original painter of folk subjects and a neglected modernist. Cf. the exhibition review by Milena Bartlová, "In margine (nejen o Jožovi Uprkovi)", in: *artalk.cz*, [http://www.artalk.cz/2011/12/06/in\\_margine-nejen-o-jozovi-uprkovi](http://www.artalk.cz/2011/12/06/in_margine-nejen-o-jozovi-uprkovi) (last accessed 13 February 2013).

<sup>48</sup> Michael Jacobs, *The Good and Simple Life: Artist Colonies in Europe and America*, Oxford 1985, Nina Lubben, *Rural Artists' Colonies in Europe 1870-1910*, New Brunswick, N.J. 2001.

<sup>49</sup> Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds., *The Invention of Tradition*, Cambridge 1983.

<sup>50</sup> Cf. the Scottish Ossian or the Czech manuscripts of Zelená Hora and Kutná Hora which were forged to create a sense of historical continuity of the respective nations.

became capable of creating a sense of unity and historic connectedness of a certain group of people by reminding them of their common, ancient past, in this case embedded in the peasantry.

[<top>](#)

### **Finding a new language in folk architecture**

- [29] The work of these Czech painters was often based on their highly romanticized views of village life. A more rigorous, but equally idealized, approach to folk art can be seen in the work of many architects. Architecture, too, was often understood as capable of strengthening the sense of collective (national) identity, and folk culture provided a rich source of inspiration. The Zakopane style is an often-cited example of how architects used vernacular motifs to revive contemporary craft and design, enrich their own practice and recreate a national art.<sup>51</sup> In the remote Podhale region in the Tatra mountains of southern Poland, Stanisław Witkiewicz (1851-1915) "discovered" in the 1880s what he called the "genuine style" of the highlanders, which he believed was unspoiled by European influences and historicism. His goal was to promote the architecture and applied arts of the remote town as "a recipe for Polish national art", and to produce designs in this style both in Zakopane and outside.<sup>52</sup>
- [30] Witkiewicz's idealized view of the local visual and material culture was shared in many other parts of Austria Hungary. In the Czech lands, folk architecture and ornament were crucial from around the end of the nineteenth century, for example, in the work of Jan Kotěra (1871-1923) or Dušan Jurkovič, who both developed a distinctive language informed by folk architecture.
- [31] Kotěra, a student of Otto Wagner, and influenced by the theories of John Ruskin, found the sources of organic decoration in nature and combined them with a more austere modernist language.<sup>53</sup> While most of his public commissions, such as the pavilion for the artistic group Mánes in Prague from 1902, which hosted the Rodin exhibition, were accomplished with a Secessionist approach to the architectonic detail and decoration, his private villas in Prague and elsewhere from the beginning of the twentieth century drew more explicitly on vernacular models not only of villages but also of small, provincial towns.

---

<sup>51</sup> David Crowley, *National Style and Nation State. Design in Poland from the Vernacular Revival to the Industrial Age*, Manchester 1992; Crowley, "The Uses of Peasant Design"; Clegg, *Art, Design, and Architecture*; Bowe, ed., *Art and the National Dream*; Ákos Moravánszky, *Competing Visions: Aesthetic Invention and Social Imagination in Central European architecture, 1867-1918*, Cambridge, Mass. 1998.

<sup>52</sup> Bowe, ed., *Art and National Dream*, 103.

<sup>53</sup> Jeremy Howard, *Art Nouveau. International and National Styles in Europe*, Manchester 1996, 95-98; Jindřich Vybíral, "Jan Kotěra ve sférách idejí a sociálních vztahů", in: *Devatenáctém století*, Prague 2002, 261-79; Daniela Karasová, *Jan Kotěra 1871-1923: The Founder of Modern Architecture*, Prague 2001. The rationalist architecture of Kotěra is discussed in Anthony Alofsin, *When Buildings Speak. Architecture as Language in the Habsburg Empire and Its Aftermath, 1867-1933*, Chicago and London 2006, 90-9.

Informed by the writings of his German counterpart, Hermann Muthesius (1861-1927), especially *Das englische Haus* (The English House, 1903), Kotěra adapted the country cottage to modern, urban purposes.<sup>54</sup> In villas such as Tmal in Prague or Mácha in Bechyně (both 1902-1903), he combined the aesthetic principles of the Arts and Crafts movement with motifs from vernacular architecture (both local and English), which he saw as "a refreshing spring" of new architecture not just for him but also for his students.<sup>55</sup> (Fig. 10) The result was a new type of house consisting of half-timbered gables, overhanging roofs, large chimneys, sloping corners of the exterior walls and restrained Art Nouveau ornamentation, which, as he held, came second to the function of the building.<sup>56</sup>



10 Jan Kotěra, *Villa Tmal in Prague*, 1902-1903, photograph, [www.slavnevilky.cz](http://www.slavnevilky.cz) (image provided by FOIBOS)

[32] The work of the Slovak architect Jurkovič, who studied in Vienna with Camillo Sitte, found inspiration in both the structural and decorative features of folk art.<sup>57</sup> Making his first appearance as the designer of a number of buildings and exhibits at the Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition, Jurkovič's subsequent practice and theory drew on his research into the visual language of Moravian and Slovak folk culture. (Although what is now Slovakia was part of Hungary, it was often considered a part of the Czech lands). He authored a number of articles on vernacular architecture and made a collection of

---

<sup>54</sup> Jindřich Vybíral, "The Reception of the Arts and Crafts Movement in Bohemia around 1900", in: *Centropa* 4, no. 3 (2004), 218-230, here 225. Cf. also Andrzej Szczerski, "The Arts and Crafts Movement, Internationalism and Vernacular Revival in Central Europe c. 1900", in: Grace Brockington, ed., *Internationalism and the Arts in Britain and Europe at the Fin de Siecle*, Oxford 2009.

<sup>55</sup> Václav Tille, "Lidové umění", in: *Styl*, no. 1 (1908-1909), 91.

<sup>56</sup> Ákos Moravánszky, *Competing Visions*, 204.

<sup>57</sup> A comprehensive study of Jurkovič's work can be found in Christopher Long, "The Works of Our People. Dušan Jurkovič and the Slovak Folk Arts Revival", in: *Studies in the Decorative Arts* 12, no. 1, (2004-2005), 2 -29. Also most recently in Slovak, Dana Bořutová, *Architekt Dušan Samo Jurkovič*, Bratislava 2009.

photographs from his field trips in which he criticized slavish architectural imitations of historical, "classical" styles, and the lack of independence of contemporary architects in searching for inspiration.<sup>58</sup> Instead of using foreign forms which are incomprehensible to local audiences, he called for a return to local folk architecture because it "corresponds with the spirit of the people for whom we are building"; it grows out of the local climate, environment, circumstances and needs.<sup>59</sup>

- [33] Jurkovič used the "typology of vernacular wooden structures" which in many cases tried to relate the function of the buildings (spa pavilions, tourist hotels, etc.) to the allegedly unspoilt quality of rural life and remoteness from urban civilization that he found during his research trips to northern Slovakia.<sup>60</sup> His buildings, however, and those of Witkiewicz too, were primarily constructed for urban dwellers. It was the cottages for the Czechoslavic Ethnographic Exhibition, the touristic mountain resort of Pustevny, or the spa buildings and hotels in the town of Luhačovice, as well as villas for the wealthy and reconstructions of castles dominated his work before 1918. (Fig. 11)



11 Dušan Jurkovič, *View of Luhačovice*, postcard (image provided by the author)

- [34] The spa town of Luhačovice in eastern Moravia is a pertinent example of his use of vernacular forms, which was successfully incorporated into commissions for the middle and upper classes. Approached by František Veselý, a doctor from Brno, and financed by a local aristocrat, Otto Serényi, who owned most of the property Jurkovič carried out several reconstructions, designed new spa buildings in the valley and built a number of villas for the local middle classes in the Prague Quarter, just outside of Luhačovice, between 1902 and 1915. Among the most notable interventions were his reconstructions of the hotel Janův dům (Jan's House, which is known today as Jurkovič's House), the

<sup>58</sup> Jurkovič, *Práce lidu našeho*; Dušan Jurkovič, "Slovak Popular Art", in: *Racial Problems in Hungary*, ed. Robert William Seton-Watson, London 1908.

<sup>59</sup> Dušan Jurkovič, "Umění stavitelské jindy a dnes", in: *Věstník samosprávný a národohospodářský* 6 (1906), 56.

<sup>60</sup> Moravánszky, *Competing Visions*, 250.

cultural centre, Slovenská búda (The Slovak Hut), a restaurant, a bandstand and a number of family houses. (Fig. 12)



12 Dušan Jurkovič, *Jan's House*, 1902, Luhačovice (photograph provided by Christopher Long)

[35] The philosophy behind the architectural language of these buildings complied with the contemporary popularity of rural retreats but also with the attempt to create a meeting point for Moravian and Czech patriots.<sup>61</sup> Jurkovič's half-timbered structures with colourful ornamental decoration in wood and fresco, most notably on the Janův dům, were intended to satisfy both. They appealed to the predominantly urban visitors to the spa with their vernacular look combined with modern comfort, and created a feeling of complete "harmony with nature" while remaining original and creative.<sup>62</sup> Jurkovič's adaptation of the local folk architecture with its "impressions of Slavic buildings" to the "aesthetic needs and needs for hygiene" of the present, including his use of large windows and skylights (*Jan's House*, 1902), stone (*Villa Vlastimila*, 1903) and diagonally sloping corners (*Inhalation pavilion*, 1903) was again influenced by the contemporary trends in architecture.

[36] Indeed, Jurkovič's attempt to capture a local, *Czechoslovak* spirit in architecture was not isolated from the awareness of the rise of vernacular inspirations elsewhere in Europe and in the USA. The English detached house caught his attention with its layout, situation and modernity and it was mainly the architects Baillie Scott, Edgar Wood and Charles

<sup>61</sup> Dana Bořutová, *Dušan Jurkovič. Architect and His House*, Brno 2010.

<sup>62</sup> Jan Kotěra, "Luhačovice", in: *Volné směry* 8 (1904), 59.

Rennie Mackintosh who influenced his practical work.<sup>63</sup> Jurkovič was also familiar with the theories of Ruskin and Morris and was a regular reader of *The Studio*.

[37] And it is these models, especially the popularity of the English house, found also in the work of many other Czech and Central European architects, such as Muthesius or Leopold Bauer (1872-1938) that complicate the question of the national roots and sources of vernacular tradition that Jurkovič sought with his houses. Although Jurkovič was against an uninformed application of foreign forms, and claimed that he was not interested in mechanical imitation of vernacular models, the fact that he found inspiration in Mackintosh and Muthesius suggests that he was looking for a new architectural language that would combine the traditional (authentic) vernacular of Moravia and Slovakia, with the latest architectural design, which was more cosmopolitan and suited to modern living.<sup>64</sup> Architecture, designed on the combination of these principles, was in Jurkovič's view based on values that stood outside transient fashion.<sup>65</sup>

[38] As a result, like the *Heimatstil* in decorative architecture popular in Germany in the second half of the nineteenth century, the work of architects such as Jurkovič (or Witkiewicz in Poland) was directed at a deliberate creation of a new style informed by the vernacular architectural language – especially ornament, colour, techniques and material – constructed to suit the needs of the early twentieth century. Folk art was regarded as the expression of the national tradition of a particular country, but at the same time it also provided a fashionable and exotic reference to a reality outside modern urban civilization in which the traces of modernity were nevertheless visible.

[39] Many Central European artists and theorists saw the potential of peasant art and culture for the future, which they believed could be modernized and could thus contribute to constructing a favourable image of the modern nation.<sup>66</sup> In this respect, folk art was closely associated with the Arts and Crafts movement, which is typified by Jurkovič's work. Indeed, using folk art motives and skills to revive contemporary art and design was a commonplace in many European countries. In Central Europe, this tendency was closely linked to the design reform movement, which involved the establishment of museums of applied arts and reform in art and design education.<sup>67</sup> However, the revival

---

<sup>63</sup> Jurkovič's introduction to František Žákavec, *Dílo Dušana Jurkoviče – kus dějin československé architektury*, Prague 1929, xiv. For the parallels between Jurkovič and Mackintosh, see a short text Danuše Kšicová, "Secese and Art Nouveau: Dušan Jurkovič and C. R. Mackintosh", in: *Scotland and the Slavs. Selected Papers from the Glasgow-90 East-West Forum*, ed. Peter Henry, Jim MacDonald and Halina Moss, Glasgow 1990, 123-130.

<sup>64</sup> Kšicová, "Secese and Art Nouveau".

<sup>65</sup> Dušan Jurkovič, *Pustevny na Radhošti. Turistické ubytovny Pohorské jednoty Radhošť ve Frenštátě, vystavěné a zařízené po způsobu lidových staveb na Moravském Valašsku a Uherském Slovensku*, Brno 1900.

<sup>66</sup> Katalin Keserü, "Vernacularism and its Special Characteristics in Hungarian Art", in: *Art and the National Dream*, 129.

<sup>67</sup> Cf. for example Crowley, "The Uses of Peasant Design"; Clegg, *Art, Design, and Architecture*; Schwarzer, "The Design Prototype as Artistic Boundary"; Matthew Rampley, "Design Reform in the

of peasant design often took place at official Habsburg institutions with official Habsburg policies and as such had many critics. The teaching based on copying of Tyrolian-Viennese models at the School of Wood Industry in Zakopane, for example, was criticised by Witkiewicz, who saw it as a "threat to instinctive peasant skill and to the innate Polishness of peasant culture".<sup>68</sup> Witkiewicz understood the curriculum of the School as a Germanic exploitation of local, peasant skills, which were hindered by the use of foreign ornament. The national identity preserved by the peasantry (and not only in Galicia) was thus seen as endangered by state support for design education and museums, together with its commercialization.

- [40] Criticism of contemporary attitudes to and the commercial exploitation of peasant art had already been expressed elsewhere in Austria Hungary by the art historian Alois Riegl (1858-1905), who had claimed that commodification of folk art contributed to its extinction and was especially critical of the *Volkskunst* movement of the late nineteenth century.<sup>69</sup> In his view, folk art, although still preserved in some remote parts of Austria Hungary, such as Bukovina, was inevitably doomed to extinction and as such, it can be studied, classified and appreciated but not reproduced.<sup>70</sup> And while Witkiewicz believed that the authentic peasant culture could be preserved if it were not challenged by imported influences, Riegl, who was in fact critical of such efforts, saw the phenomenon as a historical artefact.

[<top>](#)

### Folk art and the modernists

- [41] Riegl in fact repudiated the incorporation of folk motives into contemporary art as a decorative element. His criticism was based on a belief in folk art's regressive character, a view held by many other contemporary artists and critics. In 1895, a number of young artists based mainly in Prague composed the manifesto of *Česká moderna* (Czech Modernism), and published it the following year.<sup>71</sup> The manifesto declared, amongst other things, the need for individualism and originality in artists' work, which would put end, for example, to "the imitation of national songs, rhyming folkloristic trinkets, [...] and

---

Habsburg Empire. Technology, Aesthetics and Ideology", in: *Journal of Design History* 23, no. 3 (2010), 247-264; Paul Stirton and Julien Kinchin, "The Hungarian Folk Arts Debate in the British Press", in: *Britain and Hungary: contacts in architecture and design during the nineteenth and twentieth century. Essays and studies*, ed. Gyula Emyey, Budapest 1999; Rebecca Houze, "At the Forefront of a Newly Emerging Profession? Ethnography, Education and the Exhibition of Women's Needlework in Austria-Hungary in the Late Nineteenth Century", in: *Journal of Design History. Professionalizing Interior Design 1870-1970* 21, no. 1 (2008), 19-40.

<sup>68</sup> Stanislaw Witkiewicz, "Na przełęcz", in: *Wybor pism estetycznych Stanisława Witkiewicza*, ed. Józef Tarnowski, Cracow 2009, 259. English translation available in Crowley, "The Uses", 24.

<sup>69</sup> Muthesius, "Alois Riegl", 143.

<sup>70</sup> Michael Gubser, "Time and History in Alois Riegl's Theory of Perception", in: *Journal of the History of Ideas* 66, no. 3 (2005), 462.

<sup>71</sup> "Manifest české moderny", in: *Čítanka českého myšlení o literatuře*, ed. František Buriánek, Prague 1976, 128-132. Originally published in *Rozhledy*, no. 1 (1896).

realistic flat objectivity".<sup>72</sup> The authors of the manifesto were the representatives of a younger generation, including the art critic František Xaver Šalda (1867-1937), the poet Otokar Březina (1868-1929), and the playwright Vilém Mrštík, a diverse group that jointly called for the end of historicism and what they regarded as small-minded Czech nationalism.

[42] On the one hand, the declaration represented a move away from the interests of artists such as Mánes, for instance, in copying folk ornament, and the adoption of a more original (and individualistic) interpretation of folk art. On the other, the concept of the nation was not dismissed completely by the signatories, who claimed that "parties perish, but the nation prevails".<sup>73</sup> Consequently, despite the explicit embrace of international modernism and the criticism of nationalism, the latter was still inherent in the work of some of the artists associated with the manifesto. Mrštík, for instance, joined the Moravian Artists Association discussed earlier, and became a champion of the creative application of folk motives, albeit a critical one.

[43] The ambivalent attitude of Mrštík towards folk art is in many respects indicative of the contemporary understanding of this phenomenon and its inclusion into modern art, which was far from straightforward. In 1908, a lively discussion broke out in Brno in relation to the construction of a Czech National Theatre in the town. Mrštík saw it as a duty to call Jurkovič to design the new building, which was to provide a Czech alternative to the German Theatre and replace a temporary building that had been torn down in 1882.<sup>74</sup> In response, the local architect Karel Hugo Kepka (1869-1924), a long-standing critic of Jurkovič, not only criticized the formal features and eclectic style of the latter's work, but he also compared the folk elements of his architecture to the naivety and vulgarity of the peasantry, which, in his view, were not fit for a cultural institution such as a theatre. Not unlike Riegl's claims, Kepka related Jurkovič's approach to a "dishonest fashion" which, for him, was foreign to the Czechs because of its commercial appeal.<sup>75</sup> And, like many others, he claimed that "folk architecture should be understood as an inferior art".<sup>76</sup> In the end, due to the various delays and controversies stemming from the design competitions, the construction of the new theatre did not start until 1958.

[44] Kepka's position typified a growing tendency amongst Czech artists and critics to regard folk art and craft as of lesser quality because, on the one hand, they came from the rural working classes that were uneducated and lacked aesthetic refinement and, on the other, they underlay the eclectic imitation of local and foreign styles and motifs. Kepka, nevertheless, was the defender of a historicist architectonic language with classic

---

<sup>72</sup> "Manifest české moderny", 129.

<sup>73</sup> "Manifest české moderny", 129.

<sup>74</sup> Vilém Mrštík, "Národní divadlo moravské", in: *Lidové noviny*, 24 December 1908, 8.

<sup>75</sup> Karel Hugo Kepka, "Národní divadlo", in: *Lidové noviny* 17, no. 1, 24 January 1909, 9.

<sup>76</sup> Karel Hugo Kepka, "Národní divadlo".

proportions, and his departure point was different from that of the more progressive, contemporary artists, architects and theorists closely associated with the emerging Czech modernism. Much of the criticism of the imitation of folk art originated in the modernist approach to art and architecture, with its negative attitudes towards decoration.

- [45] The 1913 Czech equivalent of the Futurist Manifesto, entitled *Otevřená okna* (Open Windows), also publicly condemned folk art.<sup>77</sup> Its author, the poet and art critic S. K. Neumann (1875-1947), assumed a radical attitude against the nationalistic promotion of folk culture surviving from the nineteenth century, and emphasized in its place a future-oriented modernism. Although he acknowledged the key influences of regional (or folk) art on contemporary artistic production, Neumann insisted, like the authors of the Manifesto of Czech Modernism, that artists should not imitate works of folk art on a superficial level and demanded that they should also be knowledgeable of current developments in European art. With an interest in urban culture and technological progress, Neumann distanced himself from the enthusiasm for the remnants of tradition and folklore. He called for an end to many aspects of traditional Czech culture, including the work of Czech authors such as the neo-romantic writer and poet Julius Zeyer, conservative journals such as *Česká kultura* (The Czech Culture), "the kitschy superficiality of academism and impressionism, [...], folklore, embroidery from Moravian Slovakia, Alfons Mucha, [...] The Museum of Arts and Crafts, [...], Dr Kramář and Baroque [...]", and he called for an end to historicism, professors, politics, women's handicrafts.<sup>78</sup> The individual items Neumann revoked were indeed related to things of the past: traditional arts, such as crafts and embroidery, the ornamental style of Mucha's posters and a number of historical styles, particularly Baroque, which the avant-gardes associated with pathos and imposing monumentality. The art historian Vincenc Kramář (1877-1960), who at the time already acted as a champion of Cubism, was put on the list for his brief promotion of Baroque sculpture.
- [46] At the same time, Neumann cried out "Long live [...] fauvism, expressionism, cubism, [...] artistic advertisement, [...] modernity, flowing life and civil art", machines, cinema, new materials, and such artists and architects, as Josef and Karel Čapek, Josef Gočár, Bohumil Kubišta, or Otto Gutfreund.<sup>79</sup> These phenomena Neumann related to everyday modern life while the artists were members of the incoming generation who were well informed of the latest developments on the international art scene, especially cubism and futurism.
- [47] Such a turn was apparent in the wider circle of Czech modernist artists and art critics who saw historical, traditional and regional aspects of Czech culture as anachronistic.<sup>80</sup> The relationship between folk art and modern art was, however, more complex than one

---

<sup>77</sup> Stanislav Kostka Neumann, "Otevřená okna", in: *Lidové noviny*, 9 August 1913, 1-2; reprinted in *Osmá a Skupina výtvarných umělců 1907-1917*, ed. Jiří Padrta, Prague 1992, 138-40.

<sup>78</sup> Neumann, "Otevřená okna", 139-40.

<sup>79</sup> Neumann, "Otevřená okna", 140.

of simple antagonism. Some of the artists Neumann celebrated for their progressive work such as, for example the Čapek brothers. Both Josef and Karel Čapek, for instance, became members of the short-lived Skupina výtvarných umělců (The Group of Fine Artists), formed in Prague in 1911 and dissolved by 1914. The Group openly embraced international influences, including German Expressionism and Picasso's work. This reflected in the works of its members, in the group exhibitions they organized as well as in articles of their journal, *Umělecký měsíčník* (Art Monthly) celebrating what the members called "new art".<sup>81</sup> Moreover, the third exhibition of the Group, which took place in 1913, juxtaposed the work of the members, including Gutfreund, Emil Filla (1882-1953), and Vincenc Beneš (1883-1979), but not Josef Čapek who left the Group by then, alongside Picasso, Braque, Derain, as well as "old, folk and exotic art".<sup>82</sup> Such presentation indicated how the Group members understood contemporary art and the influences that abstraction and naturalism, found in historical, non-European and folk art, had on it.

[48] The cubist architect Gočár (1880-1945) or the sculptor Otto Gutfreund (1889-1927), mentioned by Neumann in the manifesto, also did not shy away from using motifs of folk architecture and art in their work at some stage of their careers. After the First World War, in the new state of Czechoslovakia, Gočár and a number of other architects, most prominently Pavel Janák (1882-1956), tried to develop a style that would reflect its newly acquired political independence and statehood. They wanted to combine the legacy of Cubist architecture with what were held to be Slavic traditions. The result was a short-lived phenomenon, sometimes called Rondocubism, National Style or Decorativism, which was typified by external ornamentation of the buildings' facades.<sup>83</sup> The colourful decoration inspired by folk architecture was applied to official buildings, most often banks, administrative buildings or churches. One of the most notable examples is Gočár's design for the Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions in Prague from 1922, which featured

<sup>80</sup> Cf. for example Antony Giddens, Ulrich Beck and Scott Lash, *Reflexive Modernization. Politics, Tradition and Aesthetics in the Modern Social Order*, Cambridge 1994; Jürgen Habermas, *Toward a Rational Society*, Boston 1971; Max Weber, *The Theory of Social and Economic Organization*, New York 1947.

<sup>81</sup> For example, Vincenc Beneš, "Nové umění", in: *Umělecký měsíčník* II (1912-1913), 176-186; Rudolf Procházka, "O podstatné proměně duchové podstaty naší doby", in: *Umělecký měsíčník* II (1912-13), 80-83, 131-135, 212-216, 244-247. Cf. Naomi Hume, "Context and Controversy around Prague's *Umělecký měsíčník* (Art Monthly), 1911-14", in: *Centropa. A Journal of Central European Architecture and Related Arts* 10 (2010), 204-220.

<sup>82</sup> "III. Výstava Skupiny V. U. v Obecním Domě", in: *Umělecký měsíčník* II (1912-13), 198; Hume, "Avant-Garde Anachronisms", 536.

<sup>83</sup> Vladimír Šlapeta, *Competing Ideas in Czechoslovakian Architecture in East European Modernism. Architecture in Czechoslovakia, Hungary & Poland between the Wars*, London 1996, 37; Marie Benešová, "Úsilí o moderní výraz. Architektura kubismu", in: *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění IV, 1880-1938*, ed. Marie Nešlehová et al., Prague 1998, 253. Most recently on the topic Vendula Hnídková, "Rondokubismus versus národní styl", in: *Umění* 57, no. 1 (2009), 74-84 (also published in English as "Rondocubism versus National Style", *RIHA Journal* 0011 (8 November 2010), <http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2010/hnidkova-rondocubism-versus-national-style>, URN: urn:nbn:de:101:1-201011123096).

contrasting yellow and brown colours. (Fig. 13) The façade is decorated with curves, circles and figurative reliefs, while the columns and their capitals at the ground floor level are doubled and placed on top of each other, which gives the building an almost postmodern feel. The decorative references to Slavic architectural features are highlighted by the importance of colour, which penetrates into the highly ornate interior.



13 Jan Gočár, *The Czechoslovak Legions*, 1922, Prague (photograph provided by Bildindex der Kunstgeschichte und Architektur)



14 Pavel Janák, *Crematorium*, 1921-1923, Pardubice (photograph provided by Roman Horník)

[49] Janák's crematorium in Pardubice of 1921-23 also lays emphasis on pictorial effect, in this case the national colours of red, white and blue, which are set next to each other in striking contrasts. (Fig. 14) The building, with a monumental staircase leading to a porch on the first floor level, an entrance behind a peristasis of massive columns, a tympanon under a gabled roof and rich geometrical decoration of the façade, was designed to be reminiscent of an Old-Slavic pagan temple, but one can find references to Ancient Greek,

Renaissance, Baroque and, indeed, local folk architecture.<sup>84</sup> As Janák stated in his theoretical texts, he – and the other architects – were looking for forms "that would appeal to the understanding of the common folk".<sup>85</sup> Janák, in fact, was a long-standing defender of applying "authentic", i. e. vernacular forms, which he associated with unpretentious and genuine expressions of ancient folk art and "Czechness".<sup>86</sup> While he rejected the passive adoption of forms from folk architecture and a repetition of vernacular details, he called for a more spiritual association of architecture with the land (both physical and mental), in which it is rooted.<sup>87</sup>

[50] These opinions were shared by some contemporary Czech art historians, most notably Václav Vilém Štech (1885-1974), who worked as a director of the Municipal Museum in Prague and, after 1918, at the Ministry of Education, and who published several studies and commentaries on folk art and its links to national art in the twenties and thirties.<sup>88</sup> Štech was one of the first in Czech art history to relate folk art to class – he saw folk art as the complex expression of a specific social and economic stratum because it appropriated the forms of high art. He understood the appropriation of the "high" into vernacular art as a form of simplification (which he called "*rustikalizace*", rustication), a creative transfer, reformulation, and reassessment of extraneous models that could be taken either from abroad or from a different class.<sup>89</sup> Folk art, in his view, reused the ideas and motifs of works of art that were originally meant for a different class and in doing so, it was trying to come to terms with the art of a different social class in a creative and original way.<sup>90</sup> And it was this reliance on paradigms from elsewhere that, in Štech's opinion, distinguished folk art from the art of the "true primitives who deal with impulses and stimuli [from nature] directly", without a link to the traditions of craftsmanship or aesthetic requirements.<sup>91</sup>

[51] Moreover, in Štech's view, it was the process of adopting high (non-domestic) art forms into local folk art that made them Czech, which involved giving "objective phenomena [...] a melodic touch" and turning them into "lyrical ornament".<sup>92</sup> For that reason, he acknowledged the existence of a Czech national art and he saw the ornamentising forms of folk art and design as a specific expression of the Czech national spirit.<sup>93</sup> And it was precisely because he also believed that folk art was a collective and anonymous

<sup>84</sup> Cf. Alena Janatková, *Barockrezeption zwischen Historismus und Moderne. Die Architekturdiskussion in Prag 1890-1914*, Zurich and Berlin 2000; Alofsin, *When Buildings Speak*.

<sup>85</sup> Pavel Janák, "Čtyřicet let nové architektury za námi – pohled zpět", in: *Architektura II* (1940), 129-132, quoted in Hnídková, "Rondokubismus versus národní styl", 74.

<sup>86</sup> Janák, "Opět na rozcestí k svérázu", in: *Národ*, no. 32 (1917), 577.

<sup>87</sup> Janák, "Ve třetině cesty", in: *Volné směry XIV* (1918), 218-226.

<sup>88</sup> Václav Vilém Štech, *Pod povrchem tvarů*, Prague 1941.

<sup>89</sup> Štech, "Umění města", in: *Pod povrchem tvarů*, 54.

<sup>90</sup> Štech, "Podstata lidového umění", in: *Pod povrchem tvarů*, Prague 1941, 47.

<sup>91</sup> Štech, "Umění města", 54.

<sup>92</sup> Štech, "Podstata lidového umění", 61.

enterprise that he understood it as national.<sup>94</sup> Štech therefore recognized the independent creativity of folk art, which could be inspirational for artists like Le Douanier Rousseau or Aleš, yet he accentuated the indispensable relation of folk art to the people and the nation, whose roots were in the countryside.

[52] Indeed, it was the emphasis on the position of folk art in relation to "high art" by both Štech and Janák that created a taxonomy of the arts based on the class association of its creators. The "low", vernacular forms were seen as the product of the peasants in the countryside, while "high", or fine art was associated with the urban middle and upper classes. At the same time, both Štech and Janák saw this "higher" art as often academicised and therefore devoid of genuine creative expression, unless it was linked to local tradition in one way or another. Such opinions became prominent in Czech art and theory in the 1910s and 1920s, when the "freshness" of so-called primitive art but also the practices of everyday life became important sources for many modernist painters, most prominently, Václav Špála (1885-1945) and Josef Čapek (1887-1945).<sup>95</sup> The latter, the elder brother of the writer Karel (1890-1938), was interested in the question of what could be called "popular" art. As a painter, illustrator and writer he also addressed the question of popular – amateur – art forms in a collection of essays published as *Nejskromnější umění* (The Humblest Art) in 1920.<sup>96</sup> His focus, however, was not on folk art understood as art of the peasants, but rather on what he called art "without ambitions", exemplified by amateur shop signs, pottery, toys, or photography, and their relation to high art. Čapek saw the art of everyday life as the expression of popular culture produced by unambitious amateurs, which was nevertheless self-sustaining and inspiring for professional artists. He did not talk, therefore, "about folk art as it is habitually understood: national or peasant art".<sup>97</sup> Instead, his idea of contemporary popular, or amateur, art was "the work of artisans and dilettantes from amongst the people; urban art, or rather – suburban art" – and the creators of the art he analysed were the inhabitants of towns and cities rather than villages and the countryside.<sup>98</sup>

[53] Alongside his attention to urban and "suburban" primitive art, Čapek also addressed the art of the countryside – he emphasized that the roots of folk art, in the sense of peasant art, lay in the "tradition of the high art styles and in its own spirit".<sup>99</sup> By contrast, urban "amateur art" was, he argued, accidental, disconnected from the specific culture and

---

<sup>93</sup> Jindřich Vybíral, "National Style as a Construction of Art History", in: *The Plurality of Europe. Identities and Spaces*, ed. Winfried Eberhard and Christian Lübke, Leipzig 2010, 471.

<sup>94</sup> Štech, "Umění města", 59.

<sup>95</sup> Derek Sayer, "Surrealities", in: *Central European Avant-Gardes 1910-1930: Exchange and Transformation*, ed. Timothy O. Benson, Los Angeles and Cambridge, Mass. 2002, 94.

<sup>96</sup> Josef Čapek, *Nejskromnější umění*, Prague 1997, first published as Josef Čapek, *Nejskromnější umění*, Prague 1920. All subsequent references are to the edition of 1997.

<sup>97</sup> Josef Čapek, "Co potkáváme", in: *Nejskromnější umění*, 83.

<sup>98</sup> Čapek, "Co potkáváme", 83.

<sup>99</sup> Josef Čapek, "A závěr", in: *Nejskromnější umění*, 91.

although at times inspired by higher art, it retained a certain level of purity, originality, and its own common sense.<sup>100</sup> His own practice reflected these theories. Around 1920, he inclined to naïve artistic expression and wanted to "achieve even simpler and less stylized levels than Naivism was in the stage of the humblest art".<sup>101</sup> In the 1930s he became interested in rural themes and peasants. The bright colours and decorative lines of his paintings with subjects from the Slovak countryside continued to evoke the idea of a simple, unspoiled life, this time that found in villages.

[54] It was, nevertheless, urban "primitivism" to which Čapek devoted the most attention, although he also took an interest in the art of the "primitives" of Africa and Polynesia, which he discussed in a number of articles and his book *Umění přírodních národů* (The Art of Native Peoples) published in 1938.<sup>102</sup> He saw it as a creative art that did not only copy and imitate reality, but created a new reality in itself.<sup>103</sup> But whether it was African primitive objects, city folklore or low art, Čapek was fascinated by any art that came, in his view, from untrained individuals whose artistic honesty and naivety could be used as inspiration for contemporary art. In his view, their apparent simplicity, with its elementary and inward quality, its spirituality and its plainness had the virtue of depth in contrast to what he saw as the superficiality of much contemporary art and culture.<sup>104</sup>

[55] These ideas originated out of a broader interest in primitivism and naïve art in Bohemia, inspired mainly by similar French tendencies. As early as 1905, the literary historian Arne Novák (1880-1939) turned attention to the work of anonymous medieval "primitivists" which was typical, he argued, of the "purity and richness of [the artist's] individuality".<sup>105</sup> Commenting on exhibitions of early medieval art of the primitifs flamands in Bruges, Sienese painting in Siena, medieval sculpture in Dusseldorf and French primitives in Paris, he appealed to contemporary artist to reconnect with their elementary roots and honesty in a similar way.<sup>106</sup> Equally, Filla discussed the parallels between the "primitive art" of Giotto or Masaccio and French cubism in 1911.<sup>107</sup> He compared what he called their neo-primitivism to the simplicity of forms, motives and movements of "the early primitivism" of Giotto and his followers, who followed the tradition of Byzantine art.<sup>108</sup> According to Filla, the neo-primitivists, however, aimed to revive their art without the burden of traditions, especially those of impressionism and neo-impressionism.<sup>109</sup> This type of primitivism sought abstraction and dematerialization of form and as such

---

<sup>100</sup> Čapek, "A závěr", 91-2.

<sup>101</sup> Pavla Pečinková, *Josef Čapek*, Prague 2009, 60.

<sup>102</sup> Josef Čapek, *Umění přírodních národů*, Prague 1938.

<sup>103</sup> Josef Čapek, "Sochařství černochů" (1918), in: *Moderní výtvarný výraz 3*, Prague 1958, 17.

<sup>104</sup> Alena Pomajzlová, *Josef Čapek. Nejskromnější umění*, Prague 2003, 49.

<sup>105</sup> Arne Novák, "Řeč primitivů", in: *Volné směry IX* (1905), 52.

<sup>106</sup> Novák, "Řeč primitivů", 60.

<sup>107</sup> Emil Filla, "O ctnosti novoprimitivismu" (1911), in: *Volné směry 15* (1911), 60-68.

<sup>108</sup> Filla, "O ctnosti novoprimitivismu", 64.

represented yet another kind of modern artistic renewal based on what was understood as primitive art.

- [56] These interests were also expressed in a number of articles in *Art Monthly*, which discussed mediaeval and Baroque European art, El Greco or Egyptian craft and which influenced the members of the Group of Fine Artists. El Greco, in particular, was praised by for example Filla or Josef Borovička.<sup>110</sup> Filla, most probably drawing on similar ideas expressed by Julius Meier-Graefe and Max Dvořák, related El Greco's "indigenous ideas", linearism and symbolic and psychological expression to the contemporary efforts of the Czech artists in an effort to show one of the possible sources for the renewal of art.<sup>111</sup>
- [57] Apart from the early mediaeval art and the art of the non-European peoples, many Czech artists became fascinated by the work of the French painter Henri Rousseau, whose work was well-known in Bohemia and which Čapek also mentioned in *The Humblest Art*.<sup>112</sup> Rousseau's *Self-Portrait* was purchased for the Modern Gallery in Prague in 1923 and his correspondence published in the journal *Volné směry* in the following year. This certainly contributed to the popularity of the "conscious primitivism" of Čapek and other artists.<sup>113</sup> The issue of *Volné směry* can almost be taken as a manifesto of primitivism because it also included Guillaume Apollinaire's text on Rousseau entitled "Celník" [Le Douanier], reproductions of the painter's work, and a photograph of the façade of the Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions designed by Gočár, with a frieze depicting the legions marching through Siberia by the sculptor Otto Gutfreund, who also turned to more decorative forms after the War derived from folk motifs and traditional materials or colours.<sup>114</sup>
- [58] While elements of vernacular folk art were used by many artists and designers as the basis for a renewal of modern art, Rousseau's work and the "humblest art" celebrated by Čapek were often seen as the basis of a new, proletarian, art. Karel Teige (1900-1951), one of the leading artists and theorists of the avant-garde, was also an advocate of such *people's art* in the sense of unspoilt, urban production, the "freshness" of which could act, he believed, as a potential impulse for the new modern art of an ideal classless society. In this context, the art of the people comprised the practices of the urban working class and not those of the peasantry and thus gave a very different meaning to

---

<sup>109</sup> Cf. Winter, "The Group of Fine Artists and Primitivism in the Czech Lands", and Winter, "Cannibals in Bohemia".

<sup>110</sup> Josef Borovička, "El Greco", in: *Umělecký měsíčník* 1 (1911), 67-73; Emil Filla, "El Greco", in: *Umělecký měsíčník* 1 (1911), 5-7, 74-78.

<sup>111</sup> Naomi Hume, "Avant-Garde Anachronisms: Prague's Group of Fine Artists and Viennese Art Theory", in: *Slavic Review* 71 (2012), 539; Max Dvořák, "Über Greco und den Manierismus", in: Karl M. Swoboda and Johannes Wilde, eds., *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte: Studien zur Abendländischen Kunstentwicklung*, Munich 1924. Cf. also Vojtěch Lahoda, *Emil Filla*, Prague 2007.

<sup>112</sup> Josef Čapek, "Celník Rousseau a neděle", in: *Nejskromnější umění*, 13-32.

<sup>113</sup> Vojtěch Lahoda, "Civilismus, primitivismus a sociální tendence v malířství 20. a 30. let", in: *Dějiny českého výtvarného umění IV, 1880-1938*, 315.

<sup>114</sup> Penelope Curtis, "Oto Gutfreund and the Czech National Decorative Style", in: *The Journal of Decorative and Propaganda Arts* 4, no. 1 (1987), 30-45.

the idea of folk art. Indeed, Teige did not have much time for the idealized and sentimental folk art of the villages, which he understood to be a historical relic, now placed in the "coffin of a museum", which itself was a concern of the past.<sup>115</sup> Similarly, he despised the folk art inspiration in, for instance, the "loud, painterly play-acting" of Uprka or the "inexhaustible and inartistic slush" of Mucha.<sup>116</sup>

- [59] For Teige, museums were detached from the real world of industrial reality and the true authors of urban and suburban art. He emphasized the economic and social influences on art production and stressed the social links between the art of the nineteenth century and the rise of the bourgeoisie, and its consequent isolation of art from the rest of society.<sup>117</sup> This had led in his opinion to the commercialization of art and to its dependency on the demands of the market and market value. At the same time, "capitalist industrialism gradually brought about the mass extinction of folk art production", which stood in opposition to official art.<sup>118</sup> This official art was associated with the ruling ideology, tradition, academicism, and the public sphere and was exemplified by the works of history painters such as Václav Brožík, Alfons Mucha and Vojtěch Hynais.<sup>119</sup> Bourgeois art was also accompanied by "folk kitsch" (*lidový kýč*) or "kitsch for the people" (*kýč pro lid*), which represented the greatest decline in the quality of artistic production.<sup>120</sup> Teige understood these art forms to be the result of surplus production that was meant to "deliberately keep the people in a state of ignorance".<sup>121</sup>
- [60] The view that kitsch was created for the masses brings to mind Clement Greenberg's discussion of the topic. In his view kitsch, a product of Western industrialism was not restricted to cities but "has flowed out over the countryside, wiping out folk culture".<sup>122</sup> For Greenberg the peasant who settled in the cities as proletariat required a new kind of culture for their consumption, which gave rise to kitsch. In contrast to Greenberg, however, Teige had much more faith in the working classes, whom he saw capable of *producing* and not only consuming proletarian art. Together with Čapek, he associated the art of the people with a rather romanticized working class, capable of creating a new independent art that would be of international nature.<sup>123</sup> Both thus redefined the concept of folk art.

---

<sup>115</sup> Karel Teige, "Nové umění a lidová tvorba", in: *Červen* IV (1921), 151.

<sup>116</sup> Teige, "Nové umění a lidová tvorba", 150.

<sup>117</sup> Karel Teige, *Jarmark umění*, Prague 1964, 13.

<sup>118</sup> Teige, *Jarmark umění*, 44.

<sup>119</sup> Teige, *Jarmark umění*, 48-9.

<sup>120</sup> Teige, *Jarmark umění*, 50.

<sup>121</sup> Teige, *Jarmark umění*, 51.

<sup>122</sup> Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in: *Art in Theory 1900-2000. An Anthology of Changing Ideas*, ed. Charles Harrison and Paul Wood, London 2003, 544. Originally published as Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch", in: *Partisan Review* 6 (1939), 34-49.

<sup>123</sup> Teige in a way preceded Walter Benjamin's "Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction". Cf. Karel Srp, "Poetry in the Midst of the World: The Avant-Garde as Projectile", in: *Central European Avant-Gardes*, 117.

[<top>](#)

## Conclusion

[61] Although Teige and other propagators of proletarian art turned their attention to the urban working classes, they still held an idealized view of them as much as their predecessors idealized the peasants. Teige also turned away from the bourgeois associations of high art informed by folk motives to an anonymous and preferably classless *art of the people* in a classless society.<sup>124</sup> This future-oriented proletarian art was therefore to replace peasant art, which Teige associated with history, kitsch and the bourgeoisie. This new association with the urban working classes that the idea of folk art acquired during the first decades of the twentieth century confirmed the growing dependence of its definition on social class. Although folk art and culture was always seen as linked with the working class, the move away from its association with ethnicity and authentic traditional culture is what marks the end of an era of the limited nationalistic view of the phenomenon.

[62] Yet this shift in the meaning of the term "people" and its role in society and the arts, was not the only or indeed dominant opinion in the Czech context of the early 1930s. Interest in folk art as representative of the traditional skills and crafts continued, and it was still seen by many as a resource that could be imitated or reinvented for the purposes of the present, or as an exotic phenomenon that could be proudly shown to famous French sculptors. Nonetheless, whether understood as a tool of nationalism, a sentimental escape to the preindustrial past, a source of artistic renewal or the ideal expression of a classless society, folk and popular art became a key subject for modern artists and the abstract and anonymous "people" an active player in the construction of Czech modernism.

[<top>](#)

---

<sup>124</sup> Teige, "Nové umění a lidová tvorba", 154.