

*Romuald Kaczmarek*

INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY  
UNIVERSITY OF WROCLAW, POLAND  
ORCID: 0000-0003-0230-9696

## Review

### *Inventing Medieval Czechoslovakia 1918–1968. Between Slavs, Germans, and Totalitarian Regimes,*

eds. Ivan Foletti, Adrien Palladino, Rome, 2019, 200 pp.

The book contains six case studies (including the Introduction), analysing the specific social and historical conditions for the functioning of the humanities, in this case medieval art history, within the timeframe 1918 – ca. 1968, sometimes, however, reaching as far back as the early 20<sup>th</sup> century and looking out to the end of this same century.

1. The introduction outlines the intellectual framework for the interest shown by art historians in the history of their own discipline, which arouse after the First World War and has intensified in recent decades. The editors of this volume present the discussed phenomenon in the European perspective, mentioning a number of regional and general studies, including selected Polish publications. When discussing the Czech perspective, in addition to the study by Jiří Kroupa, a number of problem papers by Milena Bartlová are found worthy of attention. Finally, the authors point out the importance of this research, especially in the aspect of confronting attitudes resulting from the researchers different national backgrounds, which seems significant in the current era of forced or voluntary migration, of ordinary citizens, as well as within the orbit of science.

2. Ondřej Jakubec has extensively characterised the emergence of Slavic myth and, in particular, the “Bohemian Renaissance”. Taking as a basis the concept of the Czech nation, its features, detailed by František Palacký, were transferred to the 16<sup>th</sup> century architecture. The heyday of such a nationalistic approach came in the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but it persisted for nearly a century, even echoing in publications of the 1960s–1970s. In an astonishing way, the nationalistic concept of the “Czech Renaissance” worked, changing its colours (the association with club colours is not far from the point) from Slavophile nationalism, to a determined defence against cosmopolitan modernism, ending at anti-fascism and Marxism.

Permanent in the characterisation of the thus conceived “Czech Renaissance” were categories formulated apriori at the very beginning, such as: “picturesqueness,” “cheerfulness,” “tunefulness,” “softness,” etc., which, by the way, were also applied to the characteristics of Czech painting of the period, as well as the national character of the Czechs in general. Typical elements of Bohemian architecture in this sense included the use of gables, lunette cornices, and sgraffito decorations, especially with motifs of sunflowers and apple and pear branches, being considered native. The theoretical concepts of historiographers, also developed by architects, were reflected in the forms of Neo-Renaissance architecture in the region. As a parallel in the history of Polish art Jakubec cited Jan Białostocki’s concept assuming the distinctiveness of Polish art of the second half of the 16<sup>th</sup> and early 17<sup>th</sup> centuries as an effect of a specific interpretation of Mannerism. At the same time, he reminded about the criticism of this approach by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, who generally rejected the search for “indigenous” stylistic forms as growing out of nationalisms of all kinds. It should be added here that in such a brief presentation, Białostocki’s concept has been definitely oversimplified. Moreover, in Polish historiography as well as in architectural reflection and practice, the national interpretation of the Renaissance and its incorporation into local, indigenous tradition took place much earlier than in the mentioned Białostocki’s study. Meanwhile, back to range of Polish art history research after Second World War – not every reflection devoted to searching for specific features, predilections for certain motives or artistic solutions in some geographically and politically separated territory deserves *a priori* a charge of continuing a nationalistic approach. Mieczysław Zlat, who noticed a certain predilection for formally limited attics in the 16<sup>th</sup>-century Lower Silesian architecture, cannot be accused of forcing a national approach. After all, Silesia is a specific region within post-war Poland, and the study of art in the “Recovered Territories” after 1945 by Polish art historians necessitated a decidedly balanced approach that focused on local geographic and cultural conditions, arising at the intersection of different cultures and authorities, rather than national ones.

3. The issue of the functioning in Prague during the German occupation of the *Institutum Kondakovianum* – a Russian academic institution created in 1931 by emigrants continuing the legacy of the protoplast of Russian art history Nikodim Kondakov (d. 1925) – was taken up by Ivan Foletti. It is a survival story with some sensational threads – internal dissensions, denunciations to the occupation authorities, support of Prince Karel Schwarzenberg, making their living thanks to the reams of paper preserved from the good times, and finally the post-war fading away of the institution after its incorporation into the structure of the Czech National Academy (1952). The international recognition of Byzantine and Eastern studies by Kondakov and his students, and their position as a “white émigré” allowed the institution to survive Prague’s most perilous wartime period, but the consequence of the latter was its erasure in the era of the Third Republic.

4. Jan Klípa provided an analysis of the research on medieval art in Silesia. It is a region of great interest to Czech art historians because for centuries it functioned within the structure of the Bohemian Crown. He first presented the change in ap-

proach to the problem of the origins and networks of Silesian art that occurred in the research of German scholars between the 1920s and 1930s., beginning with the monumental 1926 exhibition of Silesian Gothic art catalogue published by Heinz Braune and Erich Wiese. These two authors, according to Klípa, showed a surprising lack of nationalistic approach to the question of the origin of medieval Silesian art, and in reference to painting, the application of an admittedly vague category of “Silesian-Czech” epoch, art, master. However, they derived it from formal and stylistic analyses rather than *a priori* assumptions of nationalistic policy. The change came about a decade later, exemplified in a text by Dagobert Frey, who searched for the constants and peculiarities of local art not so much as the result of mutual transregional contacts, but in the implementation of specific Germanic attributes in the areas of German “Ostraum”. In the search for justification for the originality and peculiar self-sufficiency of Silesian art growing out of the roots of Germanic “Ost-siedlung”, not even the category of “Silesian-Czech” art persisted. Even Ernst Troche’s article on Silesian painting included in the same volume of “Die Hohe Strasse” [sic!], although not characterised by such a nationalistic approach, tried to replace Czech artistic connections by pointing to Silesian-German relations. The following post- Second World War period of Polish publications on Silesian art is characterised by Klípa as almost copying the German approach of the 1930s, but with changed poles. It was not the German-Silesian artistic relations, but the Polish-Silesian connections that became the postulated and pursued research issue. Here Klípa points to the political and social demand associated with the propagandistic idea of the Recovered Territories. However, the concept of Silesian-Czech ties has come back into favour, as it facilitated removing the contemptuous label of German art from at least some of the Silesian artworks.

At this point it is important to note the fundamental difference between the situation of pre-war German art history and post-war Polish art history. While some of the German scholars can be attributed to the conscious pursuit of a nationalist party-political line, the issue of Silesian art historiography was indeed more complicated. Just as the everyday reality of post-war Silesia in the People’s Republic of Poland differed from that in the Czechoslovak Republic (from 1960 Socialist Republic). This is not the place to consider the above-mentioned situation broadly. Just to mention a few: huge destruction of all kinds of infrastructure as a result of warfare, including large numbers of monuments, artworks and collections, almost complete replacement of the existing population and alienation of the Polish immigrant community, the so-called repatriates. The objectivism of science is not supported by its incorporation into the political and social functions implemented by a given authority. In the case of Polish art historians writing about Silesia after the war, it was not this criterion that played a role, but a combination of wartime experiences, animosities and traumas, patriotic responsibility for the new cultural region perceived through the prism of the so-called Piast heritage, and educational needs – to familiarise the Polish society with Silesian history and art.

Klípa did not cover the whole subject of “medieval art in Silesia as a battlefield of national historiography”, for he was mainly interested in the aspect of panel paint-

ing. He acknowledged the work of two scholars, who, beyond any doubts, were active already in the 2<sup>nd</sup> half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, namely Anna Ziomecka and Alicja Karłowska-Kamzowa. Above all, he appreciated their openness to Silesian-Czech ties in the Luxembourg era, although he credited the last scholar with differentiating the approach depending on whether the text was addressed to a Polish reader or a more international and specialised one. It seems to be an overinterpretation – Karłowska-Kamzowa devoted the last chapter of her book simply to the issue of the connections between Silesian painting and the painting of Lesser Poland and Greater Poland. This important problem simply seemed less suitable as a topic for foreign publications and speeches. Anyway, the dominant view in her publication is that Silesian painting was more important for the above-mentioned regions. As she puts it in the Conclusion (p. 90), one of the problems is: “Did Silesia assimilate the achievements of this monarchy [Bohemia] and pass them further east to Cracow and north to Greater Poland?”. Either way, a more nuanced view of the matter of Silesian-Czech artistic relations in painting is noticeable starting with the work of these scholars. On the Czech side, in addition to Klípa himself, the previously cited Milena Bartlová did so. At the end of his paper, Klípa presented the case of the painting of St. Anne from Strzegom in order to illustrate the complexity of this problem in the epoch of International Style. Outlining the views of Polish researchers he omitted, let us note, the last publication,<sup>1</sup> but generally accepted the course of their findings. He was probably right to relativize the significance of the uncertain information about the painting’s origin from the Carmelites in Strzegom, which allowed him to propose a later date of the painting’s creation than previously assumed.

5. The text by Adrien Palladin and Sabina Rosenbergová is devoted to two national perspectives in the creation of the biography of Anton Pilgram, an artist active at the turn of the Medieval and Early Modern eras. It appears that diminishing the significance or even denying his early activity in Brno as a period of “immaturity” went hand in hand with emphasising the mature phase, already classified as Renaissance, of the “genius”’s work achieved in Vienna. Czech scholars, in turn, pointing to Pilgram’s Moravian ancestry and acknowledging the German roots of his work, focused on his Brno works, if they included him at all in the spectrum of Czech art.

6. Jan Galeta, the author of the last study in this volume, provides the fascinating story of binational and bilingual Brno, seen through the prism of historical literature written in the century 1850–1950 and devoted to the art of the former capital of Moravia. Its authors were citizens of Brno, belonging to one or the other nationality group described as “German Moravians” (66% of the city’s citizens in 1910) and “Czech Moravians”. Depending on their nationality, they set the perspective, in which they portrayed the city’s history and the executors of monuments

1 M. Kapustka, “Część I. Gotyk. Wstęp do Katalogu”, in: *Op Nederlandse manier. Inspiracje niderlandzkie w sztuce śląskiej XV–XVIII w. Katalog wystawy* [exh cat. Muzeum Miedzi w Legnicy maj – lipiec 2001], eds. M. Kapustka, A. Kozieł, P. Oszczanowski, Legnica, 2001, p. 7 and the catalogue entry no. I.1. in this publication (pp. 10–11). This publication is also not cited in the excellent book J. Klípa, *Ymago de praga...* published in 2012.

to its past. The disputes went back as far as the Pre- and Early-Medieval periods. In the modern history of the city, this has been accompanied by fluctuations in the political predominance of one or the other option, marked by periods: before the First World War, after it, when Czechoslovakia was established, then after the establishment of the occupation protectorate 1939-1945, and after the end of the Second World War, whose radical repercussion was the expulsion of "German Moravians." A comparison of the historical literature and that devoted to the history of art shows that greater objectivity on both sides of the dispute characterised the art historians. It is significant that the latter from both national groups joined together in protest (unsuccessfully) against the planned 1904–1908 demolition of the "Royal Chapel" founded by King Wenceslas II.

The book under review provides a very interesting insight into the issues of art history's dependence on social and political conditions, in particular in the aspect of nationality. Undoubtedly new is the focus on the framing of the problem of medieval studies (with an excursus to the Renaissance) in the service of the young Czechoslovak republic. What is surprising, however, is the complete absence of Slovaks and Hungarians, who, along with the German minority, constituted another quantitatively and politically significant national group and who wrote about medieval art from the area of Czechoslovakia. Geographically and politically speaking, the Slovak (and Upper Hungarian) part of Czechoslovakia did not exist in the study in question, which was also not explained. One wonders, then, if this is not a kind of exclusion in a book that, among other things, discusses this problem in historiography?

Finally, the aesthetic aspect of the publication should not be overlooked. It consists of Amber Volume bulky paper in the inside of the book and winged cover pasteboard, as well as sophisticated Kitsch and Kitsch Text font. The decoration of the cover dominated by lettering (pp. 1 and 4), and a triad of black, red, and white-cream background colours was variegated by a small pattern created by multiplying the cross section of a Gothic vault rib. On a somewhat different note, the concept of the rib cross-section is used on the pre-title page, creating a quasi-architectural plan by superimposing and multiplying overlapping cross-sections of four different rib profiles. Black and white reproductions are contrasted with touches of red on the interleaf pages, main and intertitle titles and initials, captions of illustrations in the margins, and pagination. Petr M. Vronský has designed a book-object that is a pleasure to hold in your hand.