First international exhibitions

The search for an appropriate modern expression in Czechoslovakia was closely bound with the search for the arts that could be representative of the state and nation on the international forums, including world's fairs. Before 1918, art of the future Czechoslovakia made occasional appearance at world's fairs as part of the Austrian and Hungarian pavilions either in the form of individual works or as part of larger exhibits of for example glass. One of the most represented artists was Alfons Mucha (1860–1939), who contributed his works not only to the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900, but also to for example the Louisiana Purchase Exposition in St. Louis in 1904 where he created a poster for the French Ministry of Commerce.[10]

Immediately after the creation of independent Czechoslovakia, the visual arts—ranging from folk art and applied arts to fine art—were given the role of representing the new state and its identity. Presentation of fine art could signify cultural maturity and modernity of the new state, displays of folk art its traditions and historicity, while applied and decorative arts showcased the latest designs and production methods combined with a potential commercial opportunity of sale to new markets. On top of that, Czechoslovak presence through art exhibited in specific countries, especially France and the USA, sealed the political and military alliances formed during the First World War.

And it was in France where one of the first occasions for presenting art under the label of "Czechoslovak art" occurred. In 1920, the Louvre hosted an exhibition of Czechoslovak folk art, initiated by General Maurice Pellé (1863-1924) who in 1919 became the leader of the French Military Mission in Czechoslovakia and the chief of staff of the Czechoslovak army during the conflict with Hungary over Slovakia in the same year.[11] Pellé had close ties with the military representatives of Czechoslovakia but also with Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and many Czech artists whom he met in Paris and during his stationing in Bohemia and Moravia during the war. These included the painters and graphic artists František Kupka, Alfons Mucha, and Max Švabinský, the sculptor Bohumil Kafka,

10 Milan Hlavačka, Jana Orlíková, and Petr Šembera, *Alfons Mucha—Paříž 1900. Pavilon Bosny a Hercegoviny na světové výstavě / Alfons Mucha—Paris 1900. The Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the World Exhibition* (Prague: Obecní dům, 2002).

11 The so-called Hungarian-Czechoslovak war was a conflict between April and July 1919 which took place during the disputes over the territories of present-day Slovakia led between 1918 and 1919. The crisis was resolved on a diplomatic level by the Treaty of Trianon in 1920. See for example, David Perman, *The Shaping of the Czechoslovak State: Diplomatic History of the boundaries of Czechoslovakia 1914–1920* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1962).

and the female artist Zdenka Braunerová (1858–1934).[12] She not only introduced Pellé to his future wife, her niece Jára, but also to local folk art.[13] As a great admirer of vernacular art that she aimed to revive and preserve, Braunerová helped Pellé organize the Paris exhibition.

The relationship between Braunerová and Pellé is illustrative of the strong personal, cultural and political ties between France and the Czechs and Slovaks. Another such example can be found in the first Minister of War of Czechoslovakia, Milan Rastislav Štefánik, who was of Slovak origin and a French citizen. Before the war, he became an acclaimed astronomer and general of the French army, while during the war, he became a Czechoslovak legionnaire and one of the key members of the resistance government in Paris. The Czech(oslovak)-French relations were also strengthened on an institutional level by the establishment of the French Institute in Prague in 1920 and the Institute of Slavic studies in Paris in 1923, both linked to the French historian of the Slavs Ernest Denis (1849–1921).[14]

The Louvre exhibition therefore fitted into the ongoing cultural exchange and its status can be seen in the fact that the exhibition in Paris was opened by the French president Paul Deschanel. The exhibition, nevertheless, presented a very specific image of the new state, one embedded in folk traditions and art and one that looked at the narratives linking nation's art with folk heritage promoted before the war.[15] The five rooms in the Pavilion Marsau in Rue Rivoli were filled with items loaned from various museums in Czechoslovakia: costumes from Bohemia, Moravia, Slovakia, embroidery, ceramics, household items, furniture, clothes, a painted archway found above the front door (the so-called *žudro*) from the so-called Moravian Slovakia (a region in southeast Moravia), but also contemporary fine art paintings depicting scenic village life by Jože Uprka and the sculpture by his brother František.[16] The mixture of authentic folk art and folk-inspired fine art aimed to create an expression of national sentiments

12 Isabelle Sandiford-Pellé, *Generál Pellé, obrázkový deník* (Prague: Ministerstvo obrany ČR – Prezentační a informační centrum MO, 2010), 155.

13 Sandiford-Pellé, *Generál Pellé*, 155.

14 For example, Tomáš Chrobák and Doubravka Olšáková, *Ernest Denis* (Prague: Eva – Milan Nevole, 2003).

15 The exhibition was organized by Raymond Kœchlin, a French art historian, Lubor Niederle of the Ethnographic Museum in Prague with the help of the ethnographer Karel Chotek, the art historian Renata Tyršová, Madlena Wanklová of the Brno regional museum, and Vlasta Havelková of the Ethnographic Museum. Jaroslav Nauman, "Dojmy z Paříže poválečné," *Volná myšlenka*, May 30, 1920, 5 and Pierre de Quirielle, "Une exposition d'art populaire tchécoslovaque," *Journal des débats politiques et littéraires*, April 28, 1920, 1, https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k4893140.

16 Quirielle, "Une exposition," 1.

where "the unity of the presented folk art [served as] an affirmation of the unity of the race and the nation."[17]

To this extent, the French journalist and writer Pierre de Quirielle also identified Slovak folk art as a permanent cultural phenomenon that was the "traditional and original, vivid expression of the soul and aspirations" of a country which used it as a weapon against its oppressors, the Magyars.[18] And Slovaks were the people of John Ruskin; their expressions were the manifestation of their "sense of natural and spontaneous" art.[19] De Quirielle's reference to Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts movement stemmed out of the belief that Slovak folk art had a permanent, pre-industrial quality that preserved traditional forms and techniques despite the adverse influences of the outside world.

Czech commentators on the exhibition also stressed a degree of "charming" primitivism contained in the displayed works. The writer Jaroslav Nauman, for instance, reported in the liberal journal *Volná myšlenka* (A Free Thought) that "many visitors were captured by the simple, almost naïve, and still enchanting, beauty of the products of our mothers, standing in such sharp contrast with the refined [art] all around" in the Louvre.[20] Yet the emphasis on the timeless quality of the folk art on display and its pre-industrial roots were key for creating a sense of artistic tradition for foreign viewers. Linking Slovak and Czechoslovak folk art to the ideas of Ruskin and the Arts and Crafts movement made the arts relevant and comprehensible to international viewers. Such art could not be seen as an obsolete, outlived phenomenon, it had to be appreciated for its individual craftsmanship and skill in the face of machine produced art and design.

Searching for a representative style

The dichotomy between traditional visual expressions found in folk art, on the one hand, and machine-made design on the other was an ongoing topic of debate between both organizers of Czechoslovak interwar exhibitions and their critics. The polemic, as well as the search for appropriate representative modern artistic expression, were initiated already at the first substantial participation of Czechoslovakia at a truly international exhibition. It was The Centennial International Exhibition in Rio de Janeiro in 1922 where the

17 Quirielle, "Une exposition," 1.
18 Quirielle, "Une exposition," 1.
19 Quirielle, "Une exposition," 1.
20 Nauman, "Dojmy," 5.