Crafts and tapestry

Craft, seen as timeless and related to the local (meaning Czech and to an extent Slovak) traditions, was one of the key elements of the national pavilion. It was also featured through the work of Kysela in many places, but especially in his eight large and ten smaller tapestries in the Hall of Honor on the first floor. The work begs for a closer inspection here for its content, technique, and especially for its place within the narrative of modern state on display in Paris. Kysela's endeavor was also noticed by many journalists, designers and art historians in Czechoslovakia who paid a lot of attention to the Czechoslovak national exhibit. One commentator who promoted what can be called local exceptionalism of the display noted that Kysela's "work breathes out [the sentiment of] our country and its spring, it is the artistic transcription of the Czech folk primitivism, it has its rhythm and simple, intimate beauty which does not fade in time."[42] Such rhetoric was embedded in the continued attempts to define specific national qualities of Czech art that would demonstrate its uniqueness on the one hand and importance for national identity on the other.[43] These efforts date back to the late 19th century when revivalists aimed at constructing the idea of the Czech nation in various political and cultural aspects, which included art and architecture. Several decades later, in a completely different political environment of the interwar period, the narratives of national exceptionalism, or uniqueness, were successfully continued and exhibited in the international context.

The tapestries depicting the traditional crafts in the Czechoslovak pavilion played this role very well, as their technique and mode of depiction were rooted in a certain folk naivete [fig. 33]. The traditionally anonymous skill was here adopted by educated designers, with Kysela responsible for the artistic content and the weaver Marie Teinitzerová for executing the tapestries in her studio in the south Bohemian town of Jindřichův Hradec. The smaller tapestries contained decorative motifs like draperies and fruit. The large tapestries covered a total area of 60m^{2,} and each depicted a different craft. A figure of a craftsman or craftsmen, be it a potter, cabinet maker, printer, glass maker, wall painter, bookbinder, weaver or metalsmith is central to each work. The protagonists are surrounded by their typical tools and machines, showing for instance a pot-

42 "Prof. František Kysela," *Výtvarné snahy* 6, no. 2 (1925): 48.

43 Filipová, *Modernity*; Jindřich Vybíral, "What Is 'Czech' in Art in Bohemia? Alfred Woltmann and Defensive Mechanisms of Czech Artistic Historiography," *Kunstchronik* 59, no. 1 (January 2006): 1–7.

Fig. 33. Josef Gočár, interior of the Czechoslovak pavilion in Paris with František Kysela's tapestries, 1925.

tery wheel, chisel, or a weaving machine. In many respects, the tapestries can be considered anachronistic.

The figures, objects and ornaments filled the entire surface of each depiction in a way the area of Renaissance and Baroque tapestries was constructed. In this, the approach to the surface was no different from that of many other works at the exhibition, for instance, the decorative panels by Jean Dupas in the Pavillon du Collectionneur or Domergue-Lagarde's "Pacification-Travail" in the French African Pavilion. They both used figurative narrative which, although abstracted to an extent, was still very didactic about the subject.[44] Kysela, too, combined figurative motives and objects with abstracted ornament that covered the entire area of the panels, framed by the shallow space of the room in which each craft was performed.

44 Llewellyn Smith, *Reports on the present position and tendencies of the industrial arts as indicated at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts, Paris, 1925, with an introductory survey* (London: Harrow-HMSO Press, 1927). Vilém Dvořák, "Gobeliny umělecko-průmyslové školy v Praze na mezinárodní výstavě dekorativního umění v Paříži 195," *Výtvarná práce* 4, nos. 2–3 (1925): 82.

Fig.34. František Kysela, Weaving, tapestry, 1924.

The depiction of the "Weaver" illustrates the designer's attitude to the space, subject matter and the combination of realistic and abstract motifs [fig. 34]. In the "Weaver," a central A shape of the weaving machine, surrounded by abstracted floral ornaments, dominates the composition. The shape re-appears on a few other themes, such as the Painter and the Potter. The heavy wooden weaving machine is making a drape with a geometrical pattern, while abstracted forms also appear as a decoration in the background next to floral motives. Unlike most of the other tapestries which are firmly embedded in hand-made craft-making, the "Weaver's" content can therefore be considered a transition between the traditional and the modern, where the hand-operated device creates a fabric with a modernist pattern.[45] The weaver is located on one side of the machine, which he controls, and looks to the back at the making process. A sheep stands in the bottom right corner on its rear legs curiously looking into the machine. It is also observing what has become of its wool in a detail that adds a uniquely whimsical element to the scene.

45 Ethan Robey, in *Inventing the Modern World: Decorative Arts at the World's Fairs, 1851–1939*, eds. Jason T. Busch and Catherine L. Futter (New York: Skira Rizzoli, 2012), 189.

What all the tapestries share is that the workers and craftsmen (and they all are men) are captured in their everyday activity; they create their products by hand in a seemingly pre-industrial world which are only occasionally disrupted by references to present-day reality. This could be found in the symbol of the Czechoslovak lion with a Slovak cross on its chest in the Glass-maker tapestry, the abstract patterns of the fabric in the "Weaver" or in the furniture in the "national style" that supported the plates in the Potter. Yet the Potter especially, with his bare feet, sand sieve and a wooden bucket firmly pointed to humble, traditional origin of the handicraft. This choice may play into the nostalgia for the pre-industrial techniques in the sense of the Arts and Crafts movement's plea against mechanical industrialization and loss of individual craftsmanship. Or it could also be viewed as an attempt to document the prehistory of contemporary production. In this embrace of the humble and the everyday, Kysela's designs may also be seen in relation to civilism and the daily experience of the worker in history, although devoid of any critical commentary.

This juxtaposition of the traditional handicrafts and the new designs introduced with the modern world can also be read as a trajectory, or one may say evolution, that leads from the craft-making by hand to the modern production enabled by the machine. Such story also well indicated the trajectory of the nation from being dispersed in the Habsburg monarchy to its emancipation in an independent state. Visual depictions of this narrative appeared in many other Czechoslovak pavilions but more explicitly in the national pavilion at the world's fair in New York in 1939. The large painted window dedicated to Hymn to Work, which I will discuss later, focused on the evolution of shoemaking and its ultimate modern pinnacle in the Baťa company.

Kysela's work that featured so prominently in the 1925 pavilion (and in other international exhibitions) aptly complemented the lively debates and considerations on the role of craft, industrial arts, and art in contemporary society that many theorists and practitioners in Czechoslovakia engaged in. The tapestries as well as the entire Czechoslovak representation in 1925 only furthered the ideological split between the vocal associates of the avant-garde like Karel Teige, Josef Čapek, the critic and writer Bohumil Markalous (aka Jaromír John) on the one hand and the representatives of the School of Decorative Arts, Kysela included, on the other. Both groups published a series of texts on their understanding of crafts, applied arts and art industries in 1924 and 1925, during the preparations of the Paris exhibition and the event itself. The radical, avant-garde authors expressed themselves in various articles in journals like *Stavba* (Building), *Bytová kultura* (The Culture of Housing), *Výtvarná práce* (The Artistic Work), and *Drobné umění* (Petit Arts),

where they criticized the representatives of the School. They often called them derogatively "umprumáci" (those from the UMPRUM which is short for the Czech translation of the School, Umělecká průmyslovka). Name-calling aside, at the heart of the discussions was the attempt to explain how the visual arts fit in the direction of the modern state and to reflect on their relevance to modern society.

What is modern art and design

One of the most vocal critics of the decorative arts in Czechoslovakia was Karel Teige, previously mentioned, who saw its modern incarnation in the production of the UMPRUM graduates and teachers. He argued that the "artistic industry" represented by the UMPRUM was stuck in the feudal times of primitive manufacture without machinery. Modern times, on the other hand, gave birth to what he called the "industrial arts," which were much more closely linked to modern democracy and liberalism.[46] Teige located the place of origin of the industrial arts in the United States, where the machine was the pioneer of the democratic ideal.

Teige firmly put the democratic industrial arts in contrast with what he understood as the undemocratic, feudal, and pre-industrial artistic industry. Teige challenged what he saw as a misconception that arts and crafts could elevate people's lives and artistic sensibilities.[47] That "artistic handwork, conducted by artistic imagination, can improve our life today, create a unified style, socialize art," was a myth for him because such production was too exclusive and aristocratic.[48] In the discussion about the dynamics between the machine and hand-created works, Teige's views resonated with other leftist artists and theorists in Central Europe, for instance with Moholy-Nagy's praise of the machine as a democratic instrument of political, societal and economic change.[49] The economic aspects of industrial production had also been addressed by Adolf Loos, whose ideas were well known in Czechoslovakia. Loos argued that unnecessary decoration

46 Karel Teige, "Konstruktivismus a likvidace umění," *Disk* II (1925): 4–8, reprinted in *Avantgarda známá a neznámá*, ed. Vladimír Vlašín (Prague: Svoboda, 1972), 123.
47 Teige, "Konstruktivismus," 123.
48 Teige, "Konstruktivismus,"151
49 László Moholy-Nagy, "Constructivism and the Proletariat," 1922, in *Modernism: An Anthology of Sources and Documents* eds. Vassiliki Kolocotroni, Jane Goldman and Olga Taxidou (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 299–300.