

The Czech Vienna School and the art of the ‘small people’

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Artists as well as art historians in Central Europe paid special attention to folk art and culture for decades.¹ The topic became particularly significant for many creative individuals in the second half of the nineteenth century who believed that folk art was able to revive contemporary art because of its seemingly authentic, primitive quality and close relationship – if not equation – with national art. In Czech art history of this time too, the notion of national art played an important role. The belief in the existence of a collection of specific artistic traits that were uniquely Czech, or at least Slavic, was an integral part of the national revival and the nation’s self-determination. In the discipline of art history at the turn of the century, this translated into a publication of a number of articles and monographs on the theory of national art and on artists deemed as national, as well as into organisation of exhibitions on such topics.

Many practising artists and designers across the Czech lands used folk art as an inspirational source of subject-matters or ornament and considered the phenomenon a rich well of individual forms. From the host of artists, I can name for instance the painters and graphic artists Mikoláš Aleš (1852-1913) and Josef Mánes (1820-1871) who depicted the idealised peasant world, while the painter Joža Uprka (1861-1940) focused on colourful village festivities in his small and large scale studies from eastern Moravia. In design and architecture, Jan Kotěra (1871-1923), a student of Otto Wagner, found sources of organic decoration in nature and combined them with more austere modernist language.² One of the most prominent representatives of the folk movement in the Czech lands was Dušan Jurkovič (1868-1947), an architect who drew inspiration from the visual language of Moravian and Slovak vernacular culture. Like Kotěra, he reflected on his practice of in theory and examined the relation between folk art, architecture and possible future national art.

¹ This article is part of a project that has received funding from the European Research Council (ERC) under the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme (grant agreement No 786314).

² Jeremy Howard, *Art Nouveau. International and National Styles in Europe* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 95-8. Jindřich Vybíral, ‘Jan Kotěra ve sférách idejí a sociálních vztahů,’ *Devatenáct esejů o devatenáctém století* (Prague: Argo – VŠUP, 2002): pp. 261-79, Daniela Karasová, *Jan Kotěra 1871-1923: The Founder of Modern Architecture* (Prague: The Municipal House – Kant, 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, London: The University of Chicago Press, 2006), pp. 90-9.

If our art should become an organic outpouring of national creativity, national peculiarity, I do not know of any departure point for us other than trying to build on what our people has already created and continuing the interrupted development of their art.³

Jurkovič therefore identified the source of national art in the art of the rural peasants, which – through continuity – necessarily informed the future art and architecture.

Many art historians in the Czech lands of the second half of the nineteenth century also constructed histories of local art on the basis of the conviction that art was the expression of the nation. Yet what the nation consisted of differed and developed in their views, and sometimes the nation was found in folk art. The belief that the peasantry was the source and bearer of national cultural traditions was challenged around the turn of the century particularly by the incoming generation of Czech art historians who studied in Vienna or those that were intimately familiar with the Vienna School teaching.

This article focuses on some of these scholars who were based in Prague, particularly on Zdeněk Wirth (1878-1961) and Antonín Matějček (1889-1950), and on their criticism of the ideologically charged phenomenon of folk art. I argue here that their revision of the concept of national art and its link to folk art was informed by the Vienna School ideas. Yet they also developed them further, especially as regards the role and place of the creator of art in the social and economic structure of the increasingly industrialised world. Both Wirth and Matějček paid close attention to folk art, which they saw produced by the so-called small people of villages and rural areas. Their interest, which did not dwindle even in the interwar period indicates the continuous significance of the phenomenon of folk art in Czech art history. This article therefore explores some of the reasons for this lasting interest in order to shed light on the direction that art history in Prague took from the departure point in the Vienna School, and especially in Alois Riegl's views.

Folk art and class: Zdeněk Wirth

Riegl was convinced that folk art fell victim to modernity and industrialisation. In the Czech lands, industrialization and the very idea of progress (whether economic, cultural or social) gave rise to the modern nation which, as many contemporary art historians understood, was located in towns and cities. The move from premodern society with its archaic traditions and collective practices to modern, urban society which emphasised individualism was one of the consequences of industrialisation reflected on in art and art history. Many historians and art historians at the end of the nineteenth century saw the culture of people in the rural areas of Bohemia and Moravia as on constant decline while urban culture became fundamental for both Czech cosmopolitanism and nationalism. Czech art history was indeed written from the position of this allegedly superior urban modernity, it nevertheless retained

³ Dušan Jurkovič, *Práce lidu našeho*, Vienna: Anton Schroll & Co., 1905, unpag.

interest in the art of the so called 'small people,' the inhabitants of villages and the countryside which it incorporated in the narrative of the recovering nation.

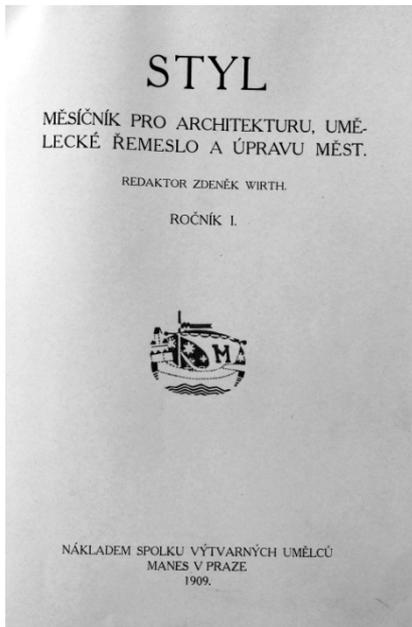


Figure 1 *Styl. Měsíčník pro architekturu, umělecké řemeslo a úpravu měst I, 1909*, Prague: Spolek výtvarných umělců Mánes. Author's collection.

In one of the first issues of the Czech journal *Styl*, the Czech art historian Zdeněk Wirth expressed his criticism of the use of folk art in contemporary artistic production and defined folk art as

impersonal, rather stereotypical art, [meant] for a specific social class, and mostly produced by artists from the same class; [it is] art of especially peasant class or small people of village-towns. Decisive is not the artistic expression of the individual but rather a certain boundary which separates the wealth of the upper classes and the rigour of the stylistic expression with which they surround themselves.⁴

Styl, the journal in which Wirth published his views of folk art, was founded in 1908 and its editorial board consisted of contemporary architects and designers, the publisher Jan Štenc, and Wirth himself who edited the first two volumes [fig. 1].⁵ The journal focused mainly on architecture but also included articles on applied arts and town planning. It defended the embrace of modernism through original texts and translations by authors such as Alois Riegl, Henry Muthesius (1861-1927) and the Czech architect and theorist Pavel Janák (1882-1956). It also paid a lot of (mostly critical) attention to folk art and its place in the formation of modern Czech art.

In the quoted article entitled 'Lidové a moderní umění' (Folk and modern art) Wirth set up an opposition between two social classes – the upper class, which, in his view dwelled in towns and cities, and the lower class of the rural peasantry. He approached the latter from the position of the former; he explored the village

⁴ Zdeněk Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění', *Styl* 1:2, 1909-10, 9.

⁵ Kristina Uhlíková, *Zdeněk Wirth, první dvě životní etapy (1878-1939)*, Praha: NPÚ, 2010, 20.

from the city. His concern with the art of these so-called small people, nevertheless, indicates that he deemed this phenomenon important and had devoted a number of publications to it.⁶

By the time the article was published, Wirth was an established art historian. Like many of his colleagues in Prague at the beginning of the twentieth century (most prominently Antonín Matějček and Vojtěch Birnbaum), Wirth also took up key positions in various art historical institutions in the Bohemian capital, including at the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment. Unlike his colleagues, though, he was not a direct student of any of the main figures in Vienna. Instead, he studied philology and history in Prague and also attended lectures of Czech art historians Bohumil Matějka (1867-1909), Otakar Hostinský (1847-1910) and Karel Chytil (1857-1934). Yet it is generally acknowledged that Vienna school art historians, especially Alois Riegl, had a significant impact on him.⁷ Wirth was undoubtedly familiar with lectures delivered in Vienna as well as with the texts written by the most significant art historians there, including Franz Wickhoff (1855-1909) and Max Dvořák (1874-1921). Wirth adopted a critical attitude towards the use of folk motifs in contemporary art and architecture, which was a widespread view in the early 1900s held also by Riegl. Yet I would argue, that for the Czech art historians, the artistic production of the so-called small people became more significant as a marker of difference.

As regards Wirth's art historical interests, they were quite broad and ranged from Baroque architecture, modern art to folk art.⁸ One of the reasons for Wirth's criticism of folk art was what he saw as its misuse in contemporary artistic production. Folk art was for Wirth embedded in a specific class – the rural peasantry - that produced it, and this social stratum was also supposed to consume it. This lower class had traits that distinguished it from the urban middle classes and the arts were an important denominator. There were economic and aesthetic divides that separated folk art from high art, which Wirth firmly placed within the urban and middle-class artistic environment. Until the nineteenth century, Wirth argued, the lower class of the countryside, the peasants, lived in isolation and under the influence of patriarchal family life with slow pace of life. These people were, in his view, also self-sufficient in terms of economy and manufacture. Wirth saw life in the village until the beginning of the nineteenth century under '..... the influence of

⁶ Zdeněk Wirth, *Zdeněk Wirth, Umění československého lidu* (Prague: Vesmír, 1928); Wirth, 'Lidové umění', in *Česká Vlastivěda. VIII. Umění*, eds. Jan Branberg and Zdeněk Wirth, Prague: Sfinx, Bohumil Janda, 1935, 200-205.

⁷ For example Kristina Uhlíková, 'Zdeněk Wirth, český historik umění a organizátor památkové péče', in *Zdeněk Wirth. Pohledem dnešní doby*, eds. Jiří Roháček a Kristina Uhlíková, Prague: Artefactum, 2010, 9; Jan Bakoš, 'From Universalism to Nationalism. Transformation of Vienna School Ideas in Central Europe', in *Die Kunsthistoriographien in Ostmitteleuropa und der nationale Diskurs*, eds. Robert Born, Alena Janatková and Adam Labuda, Berlin: Mann Verlag, 2004, 79-101.

⁸ For instance Zdeněk Wirth, 'Barokní gotika v Čechách v 18. a 1. polovici 19.století', Prague: v.n., 1908; Zdeněk Wirth, 'Česká moderní architektura', *Styl* II, 7, 1921-22, 1-2; Zdeněk Wirth, *Josef Gočár*, Genf: Meister der Baukunst, 1930; Zdeněk Wirth, *Malý dům a zahrada*, Hradec Králové: Městské průmyslové museum, 1910.

patriarchal family life and slow pace of life, [and] ... always calmer than an exciting life of the middle classes.'⁹ Consequently, for Wirth, the artistic practices of the peasantry were determined by a rustic naivety and informed by the 'instincts of the primitive soul.'¹⁰

Wirth's comment about primitive instincts requires a short explanation. In the Czech context, since the nineteenth century artists and scholars from fields like ethnography, anthropology and art history referred to and explored the notions of 'primitive art' and primitivism in art in the relationship (and opposition) to the modern artistic idiom.¹¹ For many scholars, the primitive served to confirm the dominant position of urban modernity and in most cases was successfully found in the nearby 'primitives' – the peasants, the small people. This notion was advocated through various publications as well as exhibitions which gave folk culture a nation-forming role, which was nevertheless distant in geography, class as well as artistic quality.¹² Reassessment of the roots of the so-called Czech national art, which were increasingly seen outside of the rural areas, took place around the turn of the century. The art of the villages and the countryside was often portrayed as conservative, unproductive, closely related to nature and natural instincts.

For Wirth, there was a key factor that affected rural life and artistic practices in the countryside and that was industrialisation. Folk culture had declined with the rise of modern industry, better communications and changing living conditions, and its remnants could only be 'seen in museums or Slovak villages,' he argued.¹³ In a similar way, Riegl had talked about the extinction of folk art and its survival only in the peripheries of the Habsburg Monarchy. Wirth also saw folk art as a historical document which should have stayed as such rather than being exploited in the form of ornaments and folk motifs by the contemporary design industry.¹⁴ He called these attempts rather emphatically a 'reactionary evil.'¹⁵

Like Riegl, Wirth was one of the early art historians to see the decline of folk

⁹ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění,' 10.

¹⁰ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění,' 10.

¹¹ Most recently, Tomáš Winter and Pavla Machalíková, eds., *Jdi na venkov! Výtvarné umění a lidová kultura v Českých zemích 1800-1960*, Prague: Arbor vitae and Artefactum, 2019; Marta Filipová, 'The People', in *Modernity, History and Politics in Czech Art*, New York: Routledge, 2020.

¹² Exhibitions such as the 1891 industrial Jubilee exhibition and the 1895 Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition in Prague contained important displays of folk culture. Cf. Marta Filipová, 'Peasants on Display. The Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition of 1895', *Journal of Design History* 24:1, 2011; Claire E. Nolte, 'Celebrating Slavic Prague: Festivals and the Urban Environment, 1891-1912', *Bohemia* 52 (2012): 49 (37-54); Alena Janatková, *Modernisierung und Metropole: Architektur und Repräsentation auf den Landesausstellungen in Prag 1891 und Brünn 1928* (Stuttgart: F. Steiner, 2008).

¹³ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění,' 15.

¹⁴ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění,' 15-16. Cf. also Diana Reynolds-Cordileone, *Alois Riegl in Vienna 1875-1905, An Institutional Biography*, Farnham: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2014; Rebecca Houze, *Textiles, Fashion, and Design Reform in Austria-Hungary Before the First World War: Principles of Dress*, Aldershot: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2015.

¹⁵ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění', 9.

art as a consequence of modernisation. As Diana Cordilione has argued, for Riegl 'the age of folk art was over, for it was inextricably bound up in its primitive economic and social origins in the household production.'¹⁶ Yet Riegl seems to have been more realistic than Wirth when it came to the modernisation of villages and accepted that *some* advantages of modern society, like the introduction of some machinery or new materials, could not be denied to peasants. It was, after all, not possible to stop the 'tidal flood of modernity' and the small people had to adapt to the new age.¹⁷

Apart from the social and economic isolation, there was another reason why folk art developed and existed separately from what Wirth called the 'excellent trajectory of high, official art.'¹⁸ This was the so-called 'racial purity' of the people in the villages that Wirth identified in these troublesome words. He described the peasant class as purer than the upper classes, which were, he argued mixed with foreign blood.¹⁹ While, in this context, the expression 'pure race' applies to a specific ethnic group, the choice of the phrase indeed suggests that Wirth was interested in what made ethnic groups 'pure.' In his view, until the nineteenth century, such purity retained a residuum of the original autochthonous culture, isolated from external influences, and therefore seemed to be closely linked to ethnicity.

In this respect, another Vienna-based scholar, Josef Strzygowski (1862-1941), comes to mind who also believed in the purity of some anonymous folk art. Ideas and publications of this (for many of his contemporaries) controversial scholar were well known among the Czech art historians who opposed Strzygowski's thesis about the origins of early Christian art who, contrary to Franz Wickhoff, located the roots in the east. Equally controversial were his views that Baroque architecture in Central Europe originated from early wooden vernacular churches of the Western Slavs and not from Byzantine, Italian or German sources, disrupting the belief in the western origin of architecture in the Czech speaking lands.²⁰

Georg Vasold has pointed out that Strzygowski searched 'for an original state, the authentic' and perceived any cultural and physical hybridization as a threat.²¹ Yet there was one important difference between Wirth and Strzygowski. For Wirth, so-called racial or ethnic purity was not a guarantee of artistic purity, or of the quality of artistic production. Instead, that lay in the city and it was the urban middle and upper classes, which Wirth described as more ethnically mixed, that produced high art. This view was not uncommon in Czech scholarship at the time. Anthropologists and ethnographers from around the turn of the century onwards

¹⁶ Cordilione, *Alois Riegl in Vienna*, 130.

¹⁷ Cordilione, *Alois Riegl in Vienna*, 136.

¹⁸ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění', 9.

¹⁹ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění', 9.

²⁰ Marta Filipová, 'Between East and West: The Vienna School and the idea of Czechoslovak art', *Journal of Art Historiography* 8, 2013, 8-MF/1; Rampley, *The Vienna School*, 106-115; Petra Hečková, 'Disquiet in the Camp: The Question of Roman Art and the Orient oder Rom Issue in Czech Art History', in *Orient oder Rom? History and Reception of a Historiographical Myth (1901-1970)*, eds. Ivan Foletti and Francesco Lovino, Roma: Viella, 2018, s. 131-146.

²¹ Georg Vasold, 'Riegl, Strzygowski and the Development of Art', *Journal of Art Historiography*, 5, 2011, 111.

started applying Georg Mendel's genetics to explain the trajectory of the development of the Czech nation, they examined for instance the hereditary traits or population composition and trends.²² The Prague-based anthropologist Jindřich Matiegka (1862-1941), for instance, who took an active part in the 1895 Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition held in Prague, held that the 'Czech nation originated from various racial and national elements' including Slavic, Gallic and Germanic influences. Their 'mixing and crossing' strengthened the physical capabilities and [...] mental abilities of the Czechs. For Matiegka, 'the most advanced nations [were] most complex in their racial and ethnical composition' and such mixing later gave rise to the creation of strong culture.²³ In this line of thinking, people in remote areas were subjected to fewer exchanges of any kind which led to preservation of their visual and material culture. According to Wirth, these 'small people' therefore insisted on 'rigorous stylistic expression' and the purity of styles.²⁴

Wirth's critical view of folk art therefore stemmed from his belief, similar to Riegl's, that as a product of a specific class, which was for a long time closed to external influences, it was bound to extinction. There was no way progress could be stopped.

Folk art and creativity: Antonín Matějček

These issues are intimately linked with the understanding of capitalist modernity as driven by industrialisation, migration (from the countryside to the city) and the increasing class stratification. The two art historians I am interested in, Wirth and Antonín Matějček (1889-1950) discussed them in reference to contemporary art, national art and folk art. The two scholars paid a close attention to the impact of these concerns on society and art, yet they did not address them directly in any consistent theory.

Matějček studied under Max Dvořák, with whom he had also worked in the Central Commission for Monument Protection and Research before 1918 in Vienna. His main scholarly focus was mediaeval art and architecture, nineteenth century painting as well as contemporary and folk art.²⁵ Matějček's views on folk art and its place in Czech art history are pertinent here because he defined different kinds of art and their respective creators. Looking into the past, Matějček believed that in Austria-Hungary, there were works of art of various ranks, or estates (he did not use the notion of class). Those of the first estate were works by gifted creators, which had timeless, original and outstanding values. Then there were works,

²² Artur Brožek, *Zušlechťování lidstva (Eugenika)*, Prague: F. Topič, 1922; Vladislav Růžička, *O dědičnosti*, Prague: J. R. Vilímek, 1917; Bohumil Sekla, *Růst národa. Úvaha populačně-biologická*, Prague: Nakladatelství Volné myšlenky, 1940.

²³ Matiegka, *Vznik národa československého*, 53.

²⁴ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění', 9.

²⁵ For instance Antonín Matějček, *Dějepis umění I-VI*, Prague: Jan Štenc, 1922-1936; Antonín Matějček, *Dílo Josefa Mánesa 1-3*. Prague: Jan Štenc, 1920-1927; Antonín Matějček, Emil Filla, Prague: Melantrich, 1938. Antonín Matějček, *Gotische Malerei in Böhmen*, Prague: Melantrich, 1939.

Matějček argued, that were less authentic, and these were created by those with lesser individual will. And these works ranked lower for him.²⁶

Folk art was in Matějček's view a 'specifically rural art and as such it [was a product of] popular creativity,' or in other words, the creativity of the common people. Crucially, in a way which would not be out of place in the nationalistic art history of nineteenth century written as in Bohemia as a defense of Czech art, he related this anonymous origin to the status (or the lack of) of the author in the history of art. 'When the individual will in the work drops below a certain threshold, our interest in the author disappears. Here starts the anonymous art, folk art in the broadest sense.'²⁷ According to Matějček, the only art of value was that produced by an identifiable author – or rather, high art. And it was primarily this high art by creative personalities that formulated the specific epoch, the style. He, therefore, saw important differences between high art and folk art in the relation to their value and originality. High art, Matějček maintained, consisted of independent, original works of art by great individuals and these works were genetically interconnected. Like Dvořák, who believed in the spiritual and intellectual lead that brings evolution in art, Matějček emphasised the creative individual.²⁸ Folk art sat for him at the other end of the spectrum because it was anonymous, derivative, and unable to create new values.²⁹ As much as for Wirth, the 'small people' were not the true creatives for Matějček.

Matějček articulated these views in a number of articles, but perhaps most notably in 'O vyschlém prameni,' from 1917. The title of the article translates as 'On a Dried-Up Spring' and unambiguously indicates his critical attitude to what had become of folk art and culture. For Matějček, folk art was always derived from primary, higher forms of art, and it was this high art that produced the particular creative style of an epoch. Importantly, he presented his argument why folk art could not be seen as the basis of a national art – which was a topic that Czech art historians discussed frequently.³⁰ In this relation, Matějček argued that folk art only flourished when there was a lack of Czech artists and, 'when the nation as a whole was pushed away from cooperation in artistic culture and [... Czech art] was only local art. [...] In this period without national art, the common people took the creative lead and nationalized the outcomes of the great international culture.'³¹ Therefore for Matějček, during the times when there was a lack of what could be interpreted as original national art authored by local artists, creators of folk art took inspiration from higher, universal artistic forms and localised them into a national art. Simultaneously, he did acknowledge – like Wirth and Riegl – the historical

²⁶ Matějček, 'O vyschlém prameni', 220.

²⁷ Matějček, 'O vyschlém prameni', 205.

²⁸ Mitchell Schwarzer, 'Cosmopolitan Difference in Max Dvořák's Art Historiography', *The Art Bulletin* 74:4, 1992, 677.

²⁹ Antonín Matějček, 'O vyschlém prameni', *Národ*, 1917, reprinted in Antonín Matějček, *Hlasý světa a domova*, Prague: Spolek výtvarných umělců Mánes v Praze, 200-220, 205.

³⁰ Marta Filipová, 'Identity,' in *Modernity, History and Politics in Czech Art*, New York-Oxon: Routledge, 2020, 116-143.

³¹ Matějček, 'O vyschlém prameni', 218.

significance of folk art, at a specific period in the past, but just not in the present and future.

Matějček therefore seems to have embraced the idea of the universal development of art of the Vienna school and the reliance of each artistic era on shared historical circumstances.³² At the same time, he also repeatedly referred to the existence of national art when discussing Czech art and architecture. The topic of art's relationship to Czech national identity has been explored a number of times, so let me focus on the more specific issue of how Czech art historians at the beginning of the twentieth century perceived the link between national and folk art.³³ Matějček himself was preoccupied with *who* could create national art, where and what it looked like. He reiterated the view that contemporary national art – art that he believed reflected the nation's character – could not be found amongst the class that once produced folk art (i.e. among the peasantry), but rather where 'the power of the national spirit has its greatest creative tension, where a true artistic act is born,' that is in the stratum of consciously creative individuals.³⁴

Matějček was also concerned with the relationship between folk art and national art and he dismantled the association of the two. 'If we struggle today for national art, we need to attune ourselves to the creative national movements not in the class which once gave us folk art but rather where the spiritual power of the nation has its biggest creative tension, where the true artistic deed is borne, i. e. in the class of personalities creative in a responsible and conscious way.'³⁵ He again confirmed that it was only the great artists that were capable of creating national art.

Zdeněk Wirth held similar views on the existence of national art and its relationship with folk art. 'The vernacular art of the people is a rusticated (appropriated) artistic culture, deposited from the original majestic place of the style, and used (I'm not saying misused) by a culture of a different level, closer to nature, more naïve and simpler.'³⁶ The art the people in villages created was for him an appropriated, or derivate, version of high art. Such a view concurred with that of Jakob von Falke (1825-97), the director of the Museum for Art and Industry in

³² For example Alois Riegl, 'Kunstgeschichte und Universalgeschichte', in *Festgaben zu Ehren Max Bäumling's von seinen Freunden und Schülern*, Innsbruck 1898, 449-457 and Franz Wickhoff, 'Über die historische Einheitlichkeit der gesamten Kunstentwicklung', in *Abhandlungen, Vorträge und Anzeigen*. Berlin: Meyer & Jessen, 1913, 81-91.

³³ See for example Ján Bakoš, 'From Universalism to Nationalism'; Milena Bartlová, 'Continuity and discontinuity in the Czech legacy of the Vienna School of Art History', *Journal of Art Historiography* 8, 2013, 8-MB/1; Marta Filipová, 'National Treasure or a Redundant Relic: The Roles of the Vernacular in Czech Art', *RIHA Journal* 0066 (26 February 2013), <http://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2013/2013-jan-mar/filipova-national-treasure-or-a-redundant-relic> (date of access: 5 September 2019); Jindřich Vybíral, 'National Style as a Construction of Art History', in *The Plurality of Europe: Identities and Spaces*, ed. Winfried Eberhard and Christian Lübke, 465-474, Leipzig: Universitätsverlag, 2010; Jindřich Vybíral, 'What Is 'Czech' in Art in Bohemia? Alfred Woltmann and Defensive Mechanisms of Czech Artistic Historiography', *Kunstchronik* 59:1, 2006, 1-7.

³⁴ Matějček, 'O vyschlém prameni', 220.

³⁵ Matějček, 'O vyschlém prameni', 220.

³⁶ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění', 10.

Vienna, who maintained some fifty years earlier that folk art was generally a simplified version of high art. This opinion was also accepted by many Czech art historians – apart from Wirth and Matějček, it was Václav Vilém Štech (1885-1974) who used the term 'rustication' in reaction to Matějček's criticism of folk art.³⁷ His application of the notion in reference to vernacular art was similar to Wirth's but generally, Štech was more positive about it as he attributed an active and creative role to the peasantry in the process of nation-building in various several studies that were published in the twenties and thirties.³⁸

Wirth and Matějček therefore both inevitably focused on the impact of advancing industrialisation on art in various stages of development. Matějček identified an important difference between the creative individual, an educated artist predominantly based in the city, on the one hand and the collective practices of the small people of the countryside on the other. This difference was crucial for Matějček's distinction between the quality and originality of the art produced.

Modern town versus ancient countryside

This split was rather dependent on one aspect of industrialisation, namely the increasing divide between the city and the countryside especially in the context of changing political and ethnic composition in Central Europe in the early 20th century. As I mentioned above, the art historians in question saw the effects of modernity and modernisation having an immense impact on folk art production. Villages, Wirth stressed, were rapidly industrialised in the second half of the nineteenth century and peasants started adopting urban social and cultural habits. Importantly, they also started producing craft objects not only for themselves but also for others. Here, for him, lay the problem with the adoption of folk art for contemporary artistic production because its version appropriated by the middle classes is ultimately offered and sold to the class from which it originated:

The culture, which was once lowered by several ranks for simpler needs, the culture of burlap, woollen threads, wood paintings and coarse clay, the culture of naivety, and many illiterate people which leaves us in awe when we see it in museums or in Slovak villages, gets elevated again in an attempt to express the goals of the culture which is too refined, too distant in time (when we compare the pace of progress today and in the past).³⁹

Both Wirth and Matějček therefore saw a great gap between folk art and the art of the city, which they believed could not be bridged. Wirth, moreover, complained

³⁷ Štech was another influential figure in Czech art history who worked as a director of the Municipal Museum in Prague and, after 1918, at the Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment.

³⁸ Štech, 'Podstata lidového umění', in *Pod povrchem tvarů*, Prague: Václav Petr, 1941, 43-51; Štech, 'Umění města a venkova', in *Pod povrchem tvarů*, Prague: Václav Petr, 1941, 52-60; Marta Filipová, 'National treasure or a redundant relic'.

³⁹ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění', 15.

that modern people, the urban middle classes, fell for the folk fashion and, as a result, could not be trusted when deciding what national art was: 'The discretion of the wider audiences is so misguided that they see the application of familiar and cosy folk forms and colours as the so called national character of art, its local (regional) character, while they see truly modern artistic progress as a detrimental cosmopolitanism.'⁴⁰ Wirth therefore criticised modernisation and industrialisation for not only destroying folk production but also for changing consumers and their artistic taste.

While Wirth expressed his scepticism in the first decade of the twentieth century, the relationship between cosmopolitan modernism, the remnants of folk art and national art animated the interest of Czech art historians as well as artists, architects and designers well into the new century. This became especially felt in the first years of the new Czechoslovak state which emerged out of the Habsburg Monarchy in 1918. Consisting of the geographical regions of Bohemia, Moravia, Silesia, Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia, the new political entity also comprised of a wide range of ethnic groups, whose place within the state had to be defined and often justified. The substantial German and Hungarian population of Czechoslovakia was thus counter-balanced by the conscious emphasis on the Slavic majority of the so-called Czechoslovaks – this was an artificial concept of a nation with a shared culture and some historical moments, the language of which also showed important similarities.⁴¹

In this politicised effort to create a sense of a single Czechoslovak nation and its art, folk art could play a vital homogenising role. Similarities in the visual and ritual practices of the countryside inhabited by the different Slavic groups were used as one of the proofs that the territory of what was now Czechoslovakia had always had a common historic and Slavic culture that withheld the administrative and political separation in Austria-Hungary. There was a resurgence of artistic and scholarly interest in vernacular art in the 1920s and in addition to the scholarly attempts at using folk art as a common denominator of Czechoslovakism, it also materialised in the efforts by various individuals and organisations to revive the language of contemporary applied and decorative arts, some of them I will mention shortly.⁴²

The renewed interest in folk art, especially from art historians that were previously critical of it, may seem paradoxical. In 1928, Wirth, Matějček and a few other art historians published an exploratory book entitled *The Art of the Czechoslovak People* which surveyed folk art of the new geopolitical entity of

⁴⁰ Wirth, 'Lidové a moderní umění', 9.

⁴¹ Pražák Albert, *Československý národ*. Prague: Akademie, 1925; Leopold Weigner, *Lidové umění československé*, Prague: Josef Vilímeček, 1917; Renata Tyršová, *Svěráz v zemích československých*, Plzeň: Český deník, 1921; Zdeněk Wirth ed. *Československé umění*, Prague: Vesmír, 1926.

⁴² Lada Hubatová Vacková, 'Folklorismy', *Budování státu. Reprezentace Československa v umění, architektuře a designu/Building a State. The Representation of Czechoslovakia in Art, Architecture and Design*, eds. Milena Bartlová and Jindřich Vybíral, Prague: UMPRUM, 2015.

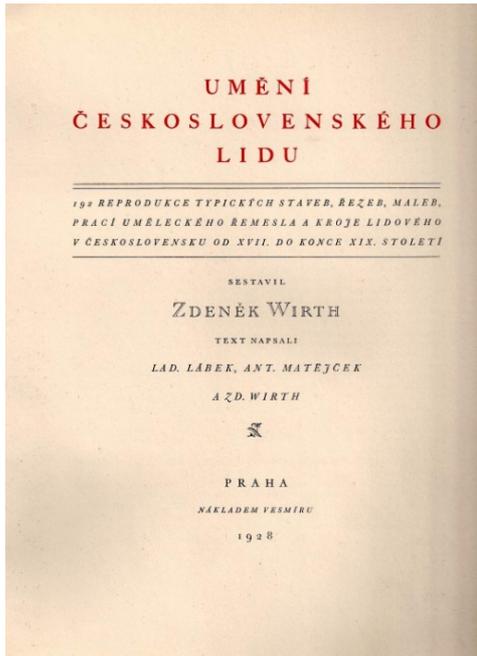


Figure 2 Zdeněk Wirth, *Umění československého lidu* (The Art of the Czechoslovak People), Prague: Vesmír, 1928. Author's collection

Czechoslovakia [fig. 2].⁴³ The official Czechoslovak identity was devised early in the history of the new state to provide a sense of a Slavic majority of especially the Czechs and Slovaks which would compete with the territorial and political demands of the German and Hungarian minorities. In the wake of the new political identity construction came a number of publications that used the same concept for various historical and art historical subjects.⁴⁴ The authors of the book on Czechoslovak art applied this very notion to folk art; they were critical of the generalised view that folk art was identical with national art and they repeated their arguments constructed before and during the First World War. They maintained that folk culture had been derived from high art and there was only one period, between the end of the eighteenth and the beginning of the nineteenth century, when folk art had 'adopted the role [...] of being an active cultural agent in the nation.'⁴⁵

Industrialisation and the advancement of modernity played a significant part in this narrative. The authors held that different speed of progress (both industrial and cultural) caused a 'different level of cultural maturity in the individual Czechoslovak lands by the mid-nineteenth century.'⁴⁶ This was why folk art had been lost in Bohemia, according to the authors, because this region had become so industrialised and urbanised. However, they believed that there were a

⁴³ Zdeněk Wirth, *Umění československého lidu*. Prague: Vesmír, 1928.

⁴⁴ František Žákavec, *Dílo Josefa Mánesa II. Lid československý*, Prague: Štenc, 1923; Albert Pražák, *Československý národ*, Prague: Akademie, 1925; Renata Tyršová, *Svéráz v zemích československých*, Plzeň: Český deník, 1921.

⁴⁵ Wirth, *Umění československého lidu*, 24.

⁴⁶ Wirth, *Umění československého lidu*, 11. Ruthenia had already been focus of a number of ethnographic studies – apart from Renata Tyršová, *Svéráz v zemích československých* also Amalie Kožmínová, *Podkarpatská Rus. Práce a život lidu po stránce kulturní, hospodářské a národopisné*, Prague: Kobosil, 1922.

few pockets of regional folk art still left in Moravia alongside 'large areas of living vernacular art in Slovakia and Subcarpathian Ruthenia.'⁴⁷

In this regard, the short interwar embrace of vernacular language especially in contemporary architecture and design, which in effect received Wirth's and Matějček's backing, may seem to contradict that view. What came to be known as the national style was associated with experiments in the early 1920s by architects and designers such as Pavel Janák and Josef Gočár (1880-1945).⁴⁸ They both put emphasis on the use of bold primary colours in architecture as well as on the use of folk ornament and construction details. Their buildings from this short period include Gočár's design for the Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions in Prague from 1922, which featured bold, contrasting yellow and brown colours and Janák's crematorium in Pardubice of 1921-23 which emphasised pictorial effects of the colourful architecture. Here, the national colours of red, white and blue, were set next to each other in striking contrasts according to the way Janák imagined Early-Slavic pagan temples [fig. 3].



Figure 3 Pavel Janák, Crematorium in Pardubice, Czech Republic. Photograph by Zdeněk Pražák in public domain, Wikipedia.

One explanation for the renewed adoption of such visual expressions in modern architecture can be seen in the traumatic war experience when the vision of an emancipated Czech nation was threatened. A return to tradition, especially those

⁴⁷ Wirth, *Umění československého lidu*, 11.

⁴⁸ Vendula Hnídková, 'Rondocubism versus National Style', *RIHA Journal* 0011 (8 Nov, 2010). <https://www.riha-journal.org/articles/2010/hnidkova-rondocubism-versus-national-style>; Vendula Hnídková, *Národní styl: kultura a politika. National Style, Arts and Politics*, Prague: UMPRUM, 2013.

related to the countryside, was one of the forms of escapism common in other parts of the world. Moreover, in the period immediately after the war, the new state of Czechoslovakia and its artists tried to devise a new visual expression that would fit the new identity and geography. The state actively promoted the incorporation of vernacular motifs in its official buildings most often banks, administrative buildings or churches. Wirth in many ways represented the state through his position at the new Czechoslovak Ministry of Education and National Enlightenment, mentioned earlier. Here he oversaw a number of official building and renovation projects, many of which adopted the new colourful decorativism.

As an architect and theorist, Janák explored abstract concepts like mass and spirit in relation to his architecture with which he sought wide appeal. He stated in his own theoretical writings that he was looking for forms 'that would appeal to the understanding of the common folk' with his architecture.⁴⁹ Janák was in many ways a defender of applying what he termed 'authentic', i. e. vernacular forms, which he associated with unpretentious and genuine expressions of ancient vernacular art and what he saw as art's 'Czechness.'⁵⁰ While he rejected the *passive* adoption of forms taken from vernacular architecture and a repetition of vernacular details, he called for a more *spiritual* association of architecture with the land (meaning the countryside), in which this architecture was rooted.⁵¹

And this may be the *key* why Wirth, especially, despite his pre-war scepticism, tolerated this adoption of folk motives on modern architecture. Janák could be seen as a creative genius with his own creative will. His use of such motives could therefore be related to the use of foreign (as in outsider) artistic sources which enrich (high) art and contribute to its continuous development. For instance, in his article 'Prism and Pyramid' of 1912, Janák related the development of local (meaning Czech) architecture to the impact of two 'streams' from abroad – the southern one which affected domestic architecture until about 1500 and northern one that followed.⁵² Janák himself was therefore informed by the Vienna school teaching, particularly Riegl's writing, extending the impact of the scholar into architectural theory.⁵³ Although Janák wrote his texts both sides of the First World War, the post-1918 acceptance of vernacular motives in Czech art history and architecture should also be seen as a consequence of the continued universal interest in primitivism, in this case found in local folk art.

⁴⁹ Pavel Janák, 'Čtyřicet let nové architektury za námi – pohled zpět', *Architektura* 2, 1940, 129-132, quoted in Hnídková, 'Rondokubismus', 74.

⁵⁰ Pavel Janák, 'Opět na rozcestí k svérázu', *Národ* 32, 1917, 577.

⁵¹ Pavel Janák, 'Ve třetině cesty', *Volné směry* 19, 1918, 218-226. Reprinted in Vendula Hnídková, ed. *Pavel Janák. Obrys dob*, Prague: Arbor vitae, 2009, 108-114.

⁵² Janák, 'Hranol a pyramida', *Umělecký měsíčník*, 1911-12, 162-170.

⁵³ Naomi Hume, 'Avant-Garde Anachronisms: Prague's Group of Fine Artists and Viennese Art Theory', *Slavic Review* 71, 2012, 522; Rostislav Švácha, *The Pyramid, the Prism and the Arc: Czech Cubist Architecture, 1911-23*, Prague, 2000, 34; Pavel Janák, 'Výjimky ve vývoji', *Umělecký měsíčník* 1:8, 1912, 237-238.

Conclusion

This acceptance, however, was conditional. Within the continuously industrialised world, folk art was indeed bound for extinction, Wirth and Matějček continued to believe. Industrialisation of one of the main consequences of modernity which contributed to this shift together with class stratification and the related rise of the individual. For Wirth and Matějček, especially, the creative individual, be it an artist, designer or architect with an individual will contributed to the universal development of high art. Such artist could indeed adopt elements of folk art in an original way. Folk art, on the other hand, was for them a thing of the past, conservative and unproductive art that could nowadays be found only as part of institutionalised display and in remote villages.

Such art was made by the anonymous lower class of peasants, or the small people, who lacked the creativity and resources of their urban counterparts. Their art was understood as derived from that in urban centres and therefore lacked originality. This attention to the class division is an important point in the attempts of the Czech art historians to approach folk art in the past as well as in the new political, economic and cultural environment of Interwar Czechoslovakia. Several scholars, including Vasold and Cordilione, have recently expressed their regret that Riegl's ideas about the social relationships in folk art production and consumption were not followed up by any of his successors. I would argue, however, that Wirth, Matějček (and Štech whose ideas on collectivity of artistic production I examined in detail elsewhere⁵⁴) did exactly that. Wirth and Matějček did not formulate a consistent theory of social art history, yet, their attention to the material and economic factors that they believed were behind the production of art and extinction of folk art was important in that it saw art as socially determined. Their view of folk art was therefore shaped by a rather conservative reliance on formal evolution and positivistic approach to the subject. Their discussions of folk art show how ideas of the Vienna School, in this case Riegl's views on folk art and on social and economic circumstances of art production, were developed in Czech art history. Here, adherence to the notion of national art was effectively combined with considerations of the impacts of modernity and led to the continued concern about the art of the small people.

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⁵⁴ Marta Filipová, 'Between East and West: The Vienna School and the idea of Czechoslovak art', *Journal of Art Historiography* 8, 2013, 8-MF/1.



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