



Barbara Drake Boehm, Jiri Fajt, eds. *Prague, the Crown of Bohemia, 1347-1437*. Metropolitan Museum of Art Series. New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005. Illustrations. xiii + 366 pp. \$65.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-300-11138-5.

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Medieval Bohemian Art

This handsome book is the catalogue and companion volume for the landmark exhibition of nearly two hundred objects from the age of the Holy Roman Emperor Charles IV and his sons, shown first at the Metropolitan Museum in New York City from September 20, 2005, to January 3, 2006, and continued (as “*Karel IV-Cišař. z Boží milosti. Kultura a umění za vlády posledních Lucemburků 1347-1437*”) at Prague Castle from February 16 to May 21, 2006. The most comprehensive display of medieval Bohemian art ever held, this exhibition not only drew on the collections of institutions in the Czech Republic and Slovakia, but also included loans from Austria, Belgium, Germany, Hungary, Italy and the Vatican, Sweden, Spain, Switzerland, the United Kingdom, and the United States. This exhibition thus far surpassed the few smaller exhibitions of panel painting and *Schöne Madonnen* shown in Western Europe during the Cold War, most notably in Cologne’s Schnütgen Museum (1987), and earlier in Brussels and Rotterdam (1966).

Until now, there has never before been a work of substantial scholarship in English to rival and update either Karl M. Swoboda’s *Gotik in Böhmen* (1966) or the two volumes edited by Ferdinand Seibt (1978), which were produced in honor of the great historical exhibition honoring the six hundredth anniversary of Charles IV’s death. Seibt’s volumes in particular rescued Charles’s political reputation from the neglect of German historians of that era, who viewed the emperor’s failure to expand imperial holdings in Italy, as well as his establishment of the system of imperial electors, as signs of weakness rather than as masterful *Realpolitik*, and who failed to acknowledge Charles’s enormous contributions to all aspects of late gothic culture. The current volume, which incorporates the very best of modern scholarship, even further advances our understanding of Charles’s influence on the arts. The list of contributors and acknowledgments form a veritable Who’s Who of scholars who have published

on the arts in late medieval Bohemia. Furthermore, as the first substantial publication in English on Bohemian art under the Luxembourg monarchs, this volume goes a very long way toward redressing the American tendency to see nothing of artistic importance being produced in fourteenth-century Europe beyond the frontiers of France. It also challenges the equally erroneous belief that the Black Death brought European art to a virtual standstill between 1349 and 1400.

Among the great strengths of this volume are the eleven historical essays by various authors, including the volume’s two editors, Barbara Drake Boehm, who is a curator at the Department of Medieval Art and The Cloisters at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, and Jiří Fajt, who is a specialist in east European culture on loan from the Universität Leipzig to the Technische Universität Berlin. The other contributors include the prominent German medievalist, Robert Suckale of Berlin; Paul Crossley and Zoë Opačić of the Courtauld Institute, London; Vivian Mann of New York’s Jewish Museum; Gerhard Schmidt of the Universität Wien; Jan Royt of the university actually founded by Charles IV—the Univerzita Karlova in Prague; and Ernő Marosi of the Magyar Tudományos Akadémia, Budapest. Together, their essays provide a rich context for the works of art displayed at the exhibition, and bring much new information to bear on the period.

Fajt, in “Charles IV: Toward a New Imperial Style,” deals with Prague’s position between East and West; with hopes for possible reconciliation with the Byzantine church; and with the emperor’s importation of artists and architects from France, Italy, Flanders, and Cologne. He also foregrounds Suckale’s seminal work on Cologne’s elusive Meister Wilhelm as the probable source of Theodoric of Prague’s style, which was formerly regarded by the Pan-Slavists as having been created *ex nihilo*.

Suckale and Fajt together, in “The Circle of Charles

IV,” portray Charles as the most successful emperor of the late Middle Ages. They describe the means by which he gradually built vast political power through a network of personal relationships, prudently choosing to emulate his great uncle Baldwin, the archbishop of Trier, and his foreign advisers, among them the art-loving pope Clement VI, rather than his reckless, knight-errant of a father. In a second essay, “The Example of Prague in Europe,” the same authors compare the houses of Luxembourg and Habsburg. They argue that each gained power by moving eastward and inventing fictitious ancestries for themselves, as well as by shrewdly contracting marriages—sometimes from the cradle—as acts of state.

Boehm, in “Charles IV: The Realm of Faith,” details the emperor’s visions and his special devotions, including the practice of reciting the canonical hours, as a priest would; his generous donations of illuminated manuscripts, reliquaries, and liturgical objects to St. Vitus’s Cathedral and other Prague churches; and his energetic pursuit of relics. Among the latter, she explains, were a piece of the tablecloth from the Last Supper (of striped linen, and included in the exhibition); a piece of manna; and various bits of saints, including Saints Vitus, Wenceslas, Adalbert, Ludmilla, and Sigismund, and of other holy figures, such as Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. His personal emulation of Charlemagne figures prominently, and although the golden head reliquary of Charlemagne was not present at the exhibition, the equally splendid one containing a bone of John the Baptist was on display.

Mann’s revealing essay on the artistic culture of Prague’s Jews not only gives insight into the manuscripts of Maimonides, Isaac Alfasi, and Jacob ben Asher, and of the lavishly illustrated three-volume Bible included in the exhibition, but also places them in the context of Prague’s ancient Jewish community and its Old-New Synagogue—now the oldest extant synagogue in Europe (ca. 1260). Of special interest is the fact that thirteenth-century Hebrew books were the first to contain written examples of the Czech language.

In an essay on luxury artists at work in Prague, Boehm discusses a great rarity—the surviving record book of Prague’s Brotherhood of St. Luke, founded in the year of Charles’s coronation (1346). Using it, Boehm discusses the locations of the Old Town and New Town group headquarters, the special privileges given to artists—exemption both from taxes and from military service, and the alternate duties imposed in return. She details the types of artists, including glass painters, manuscript illuminators both sacred and secular (three

were women), goldsmiths, embroiderers, and lapidary polishers (one of them a widow). She explains that painters who were guild members had come from many places—Augsburg, Cottbus, Erfurt, Halberstadt, and Passau. The foreign artists imported expressly by the emperor were, of course, ineligible to belong.

Boehm and Fajt together then discuss the reign of Charles IV’s unfortunate heir, Wenceslas IV, which took place against a background of religious and political unrest. Born when his father was forty-four and then overindulged as a child, he became an alcoholic who was never crowned emperor and left no male heir. Twice imprisoned (once by his own half brother), his reign as Bohemian king nevertheless formed the apogee of the so-called Beautiful Style in all of the arts, from architecture, painting, and sculpture to embroidery and manuscript illumination—a fact often forgotten. It was his sister Anne who married Richard II of England, transporting Bohemian influence to Britain. Wenceslas privileged manuscript illumination over panel painting, and books on natural science over relics. While he relocated the Carolinum and provided financial aid for indigent students, he nevertheless weakened the university by giving preferential treatment to Bohemian professors, causing the German ones to leave. His copies of *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville* and Konrad Kyeser’s *Bellifortis* were among the wealth of illuminated manuscripts exhibited.

Schmidt’s excellent essay on the Beautiful Style not only discusses the basic types of images associated with the term—the *Schönen Madonnen* with voluminous gowns and active Christ children, the Pietas and the half-figure paintings of the Virgin in wide frames adorned with smaller images of saints—but also gives insight into the subtle individual differences, both stylistic and iconographic, that coexist within this Bohemian version of the International Style. Of particular interest is his discussion of manuscript illuminators, some of whom incorporated German, French, or Italian influences, while others are more closely related to the native Bohemian style of the panel painter known as the Master of the Třebon Altarpiece, or to the drapery style of the sculptor of the Beautiful Madonna of Krumlov. Using brilliantly reproduced examples, Schmidt distinguishes between French and Bohemian miniatures of the same period, noting that the French style is closer to nature, while the Bohemian is more artful and sophisticated. He also suggests that Bohemian gracefulness seems almost to have served as a remedy against the religious and political unrest of the period around 1400, a time that presaged the onset of the Hussite Wars and the eventual abdication of Wenceslas, who would be succeeded by Charles’s younger son Sigis-

mund.

Royt's chapter on "The Hussite Revolution and Sacred Art" is extremely useful, calling attention to the fact that there was no official opinion among the followers of the martyred reformer Jan Hus either for or against the visual arts. Some, such as the Tabor group, were iconoclastic, while others were not. The chalice and the goose (*husa*) as symbols of Hussitism are discussed, as is the destruction of the ashes of Hus himself after his death at the stake, to prevent their use as relics. This was of course for naught, for the earth from the spot where his burning took place began to be collected and revered instead.

The historical section of the book concludes with Marosi's chapter, "Sigismund, the Last Luxembourg." For those of us who have thought of Sigismund only as the presumed model for Konrad Witz's King David from the Heisspiegel Altar, this chapter is a revelation. Marosi relates Sigismund's complicated early history in Brandenburg, Krakow, and Hungary, and discusses his still-controversial policies. He also details Sigismund's construction of new palaces in Buda and Bratislava; his recruitment of foreign artists and workmen in Italy, Germany, and France during his travels abroad; and his proto-Colbertian program for producing luxury goods (filigree enamels and goldwork in particular). Among the exhibited objects from his reign are three limestone heads from Buda Castle; a delightful embroidered badge of the Order of the Dragon (founded by Sigismund in 1408); his gilded silver aurochs horn (a present from the grand master of the Teutonic Knights); and a posthumous portrait of the emperor commissioned by the Görlitz city council, which was probably in imitation of Pisanello's earlier portrait of the emperor.

It was, of course, not possible to import to the New York exhibition certain key works, such as the Holy Cross Chapel at Karlstejn; Peter Parler's portrait busts of the imperial family from the triforium of St. Veit's Cathedral; and the Vyšší Brod Nativity or the Madonna of Klodzko, but their importance was duly noted among the historical introductory essays. Furthermore, the catalogue of ob-

jects actually displayed includes a generous number of works in all media, from panel painting and freestanding sculpture to illuminated manuscripts and reliquaries, embroidered vestments and small stained glass paintings, liturgical objects, jewels, and jasperware. Many of these objects are unfamiliar, ordinarily difficult to access, and extremely beautiful.

Among the key items more familiar to us and worthy of special mention here are the Kaufmann *Crucifixion* (cat. 1: ca. 1340); the Cloisters's own Moravian *Enthroned Virgin and Child* (cat. 4: ca. 1350)—a splendidly three-dimensional example with its polychrome intact; the elegant Madonna and Child in the style of Konrad of Haimburg's *Ave maris stella* (cat. 5: ca. 1345-50); the *Coronation of the Virgin Mary* attributed to Sebald Weinschröter (cat. 17: ca. 1355); the *Dormition of the Virgin from the Boston Museum* (cat. 26: ca. 1340-45); the *Madonna of Most* (cat. 27: ca. 1350); two panels from Karlstejn by Theodoric of Prague, *St. Luke* and *St. Charlesmagne* (cat. 33: 1360-64); the *Strahov Madonna* (cat. 37: 1340s); drawings for St. Vitus's Cathedral from Parler's workshop (cat. 46: ca. 1365); a *St. Quirinus* by Heinrich IV Parler (cat. 59: 1378-81); the British Library's *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (cat. 88: ca. 1410); the Göttingen *Bellefortis* of Konrad Kyeser von Eichstätt (cat. 89: 1405); the Virgin and Child from the treasury of the cathedral (cat. 91: here redated to 1415); the *Nativity* from the Třeboň Altar (cat. 97: 1380s); among many superb manuscripts, a Cistercian Gradual from Prague with a Mystic Mill illumination (cat. 104: ca. 1410); a limestone *Schöne Madonna* with extensive original paint and gilding (cat. 106: ca. 1390); a three-dimensional limestone Pieta (cat. 112: ca. 1400); the Vienna model book (cat. 117: ca. 1410-20); the gilded silver reliquary of St. Margaret (cat. 129: 1406); the *Resurrection* and the *Easter Miracle of St. Benedict* (cat. 146: 1427) by Tamás of Kolosvár; three panels by the Master of Rajhrad (cats. 153, 154a, 154b: ca. 1440); and the Bohemian edition of Jacobus de Cessolis's *Tractatus de Cessolis* ("the Play of Chess") (cat. 155: 1430-40).

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