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in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Vladimir Brych, ed. *A Thousand Years of Czech Culture: Riches from the National Museum in Prague.* Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996. xiii + 166 pp. $40.00 (paper), ISBN 978-1-879704-02-2.

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Published on HABSBURG (February, 1997)

A Thousand Years of Czech Culture

As Franz Szabo noted in a 1996 review on HABSBURG[1] catalogs of Central European historical exhibitions are growing in size, number, and historiographic pretensions. Not only do these volumes document exhibits with rich color photographs and historical commentary; they also include separate essays, often scholarly and occasionally highly original.

The catalog under review here does not quite fit this model. First of all, it accompanies an eclectic exhibition dedicated to documenting *A Thousand Years of Czech Culture.* The exhibition, which continued until mid-March of 1997, is a cooperative effort between the Gallery at Old Salem (Winston-Salem, North Carolina) and the National Museum in Prague. The Gallery at Old Salem decided to feature "Czech culture" in celebration of the city's foundation in the eighteenth century by members of the exiled Czech Protestant sect, the Moravian Brethren. The catalog indicates that a wide range of valuable historic objects have been selected, though not in keeping with any particular theme.

The exhibition guidebook, edited by Vladimir Brych of the Czech National Museum, is divided into two parts, both richly illustrated. The first 100 pages are dedicated to ten essays on the history, art, and culture of the Czech lands from the early Middle Ages to 1918. A catalog of the 212 artistic and historical objects on display in Winston-Salem follows, including short descriptions and bibliographic material on almost every item. The latter should be most useful for art historians who might want to pursue particular themes in some detail. For example, a historian of the rich Czech tradition of puppetry will find at least five relevant sources accompanying the puppet entries on p. 156.

As a historian, I will limit my comments primarily to the essays in part I. Three of these essays are strictly historical, including Brych's capable synopsis of the medieval history of the Czech lands. There are some recurring themes in these articles, most notably that the Bohemian kingdom's central location in Europe opened it to a wide range of artistic, political, and religious influences. Brych illustrates how the foreign king, Charles IV of Luxemburg, successfully adopted and adapted Czech tradition during his reign from 1346 to 1378. Most notably, he invented the "Crown of St. Wenceslas," capitalizing on Czech veneration of the unfortunate saint to consolidate his rule (p. 12). This potent symbol of the unity of the Czech lands still sits under careful watch in the Prague Castle. Brych and others also note that religion has been the most reliable purveyor of high culture and architecture, including the Gothic and Baroque masterpieces that so captivate present-day visitors to Prague. But these styles receive only passing mention in the historical essays.

Fortunately, Martin Madl covers the fine arts in historical context in a fine essay making up the centerpiece of the volume. Madl makes a compelling case for the often close connection between historical events and artistic production in the Czech lands. Early Baroque art and architecture, for example, "extravagantly conveyed the strength of the victory that the Catholic Church and the Catholic nobility had won" in the Thirty Years War (pp. 63-64). In a tantalizing note, Madl points out that Baroque became thoroughly "assimilated in the local environment" in Bohemia and Moravia in the eighteenth century, persisting "in small towns and in the country well into the nineteenth century" (pp. 65, 67). Here is confirmation for historians of the Pekar school, who have argued against the claim that the Counter-reformation was a period of darkness (*temno*) in the Czech lands. Like many other imported artistic styles, Madl shows, Baroque became a vital part of local Czech culture.

Unfortunately, the book's other essays on the arts do not approach the quality of Madl's contribution. Brief summaries of the history of Czech theater and music read like encyclopedia entries. An essay on Czech folk art dredges up the usual painted eggs and colorful costumes,

but gives no indication of their uniqueness or importance to Czech peasants. I was particularly disappointed with this summary treatment of folk art, given the stimulating recent debate on HABSBURG concerning Galician craft production. One wonders what impact the Czech National Revival of the early nineteenth century had on art in the countryside. Did the balance between utility and aesthetics change after folk art was "discovered" by Czech folklorists? At what point did folk art become commodified? To what extent did it survive industrialization?

The article on Jewish culture was also disappointing, especially given the wealth of Jewish artifacts that has survived in Prague. This section is the least effectively illustrated, and the catalog has only five items directly relating to Jews. Lena Korba-Novotna, the author of this essay, chooses to focus primarily on the internal history and ritual of the Jewish community. But in a book dedicated to "Czech culture," I would expect some reflections on the complex relationship between Jews and Czechs, especially given the ambiguous position of Jews in nineteenth- and twentieth-century struggles between Czechs and Germans.

Korba-Novotna's article mirrors a general weakness of this book in its failure to give an adequate accounting of modern (i.e., the last two hundred years) Czech history and art. The National Revival and the ensuing struggle for Czech autonomy after 1848 produced an explosion of consciously Czech art. The catalog has a few works of this period, including a colorful Sokol (Falcon) flag, but it ignores many other Czech wonders of the modern era, including Czech cubism, modernist sculpture, and the like.

The final article on "Modern Czech History" only makes matters worse in its deceptive synopsis of events since the 1780s. For example, the Czech revivalists, the author claims, were "overtly poor," because the "revival did not have its own aristocracy" (p. 95). This is particularly shocking to read in a volume co-produced by the Czech National Museum, founded as the Bohemian Museum in 1818 by aristocratic patrons of the Czech revival. Like the essay on Jewish culture, this one could use more illustrations. It leaves the reader with at least the visual impression that the Czech lands became a cultural backwater after Baroque inspiration dried up.

All of the essays consistently confuse ethnic and territorial terminology, a problem not unique to this book. I have here a number of terms describing the territory of the modern day Czech Republic, including "the Bohemian Kingdom," "historic Bohemia," "lands of the Bohemian crown," and "Bohemia-Moravia." All of these have their advantages and disadvantages, but all seem better than "the Czech state" or "the Czech kingdom," as the catalog puts it. In a particularly confusing formulation in the final historical essay, Stanislav Slavik even refers to the Sudeten Germans as "German-Czechs" (p. 96). Given the prevalence of foreign dynasties, intermarriage, and ethnic intermingling in Central and Eastern Europe, territorial labels tend to be safer and less inaccurate than ethnic ones.

The title of the book is itself deceptive. The book is not about only Czech culture; it in fact chronicles the history of culture in Bohemia and Moravia, no matter the ethnic origin of the artists. The Bavarian German Dientzenhofers are rightly praised for their Baroque architectural masterpieces, but uncritically calling their work Czech art obscures the fascinating interplay between local and international influences during the Baroque era. One might also get the mistaken impression that Bohemian crystal was a purely Czech art form, whereas in fact it thrived in the German regions of northern Bohemia.

All in all, this is a handsome book with a wealth of information and illustrations. In a foreword, Vaclav Havel expresses his hopes that it will "not only inform, but also please" (p. viii). To an enthusiast of Central European culture, it should certainly do both. The historian will find the uneven essays less useful. Unlike the works mentioned by Prof. Szabo in his review of *The Esterhazy Princes*, it is not a contribution to historical scholarship. It is, however, a fine exhibition catalog.

NOTE

[1]. Jakob Perschy and Harald Prickler, eds., *Die Fuersten Esterhazy: Magnaten, Diplomaten and Maezene* (Eisenstadt: Amt der Burgenlaendischen Landesregierung, 1995), Katalog der Ausstellung der Republik Oesterreich, des Landes Burgenland und der Freistadt Eisenstadt, Eisenstadt, Schloss Esterhazy, 28 April - 31 October 1995 (Burgenlaendische Forschungen, Sonderband XVI), on HABSBURG August 14, 1996, gopher://gopher.ttu.edu:70/00/Pubs/lijpn/HABS/Books/perschy.

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Citation: Eagle Glassheim. Review of Brych, Vladimir, ed., *A Thousand Years of Czech Culture: Riches from the National Museum in Prague.* HABSBURG, H-Net Reviews. February, 1997.
URL: http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=825

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