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Modernism, Seen from Prague, March 1937

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Abstract
Focusing on the period 1890-1939, this paper explores exchanges between three generations of Prague artists and international—especially Parisian—avant-gardes. Documenting the extraordinary receptiveness of Prague to modernism, particularly in the applied arts, it argues for a thorough rethink of the conceptual geographies of art history.

Résumé
En se concentrant sur la période 1890-1939, cet essai examine les relations de trois générations d’artistes pragois avec les avant-gardes internationales, en particulier parisiennes. A travers une mise en lumière de l’ouverture extraordinaire de Prague au modernisme, surtout ou niveau des arts appliqués, il invite à repenser les géographies conceptuelles de l’histoire de l’art.

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The circumstance that the fiftieth anniversary celebrations of the founding of the MÁNES Artists’ Society (27.IV.1887) will open with an exhibition of modern French painting clearly documents the fundamental line of the program and intellectual orientation of this artistic association, which from the beginning of its activities made its chief aim to break out of the provincial backwater of Czech cultural life half a century ago, catch up with Europe and open the road to the world, so that a blast of fresh international air could blow away the musty and stale atmosphere and petty-bourgeois backwardness in which every more modern artistic movement withered before it was able to develop.1

I quote the Czech critic Karel Teige, writing on 31 March 1937. Coming from such a quarter this was praise indeed. The MÁNES Artists’ Society was by that time a pillar of the Czechoslovak art establishment, while Teige was the leading spokesman of the Prague avant-garde. Born in 1900—as old as the new century—he was a founder of Devětsil, the multidisciplinary group of writers, poets, visual artists, architects, composers, dramatists, and performers that dominated the city’s avant-garde scene in the 1920s, the first president of the Left Front (Levá fronta) established in 1929 “to unify and mobilize the cultural left,”2 and a prominent figure in the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group founded in 1934.3 He at one time or another edited Devětsil’s magazines Disk (1923-5) and ReD (1927-31), the Prague Architects’ Club journal Stavba (Construction, 1922-38), and the Communist Party cultural organ Tvorba (Production, 1925-37). He was also extremely well connected internationally, counting figures as diverse as Le Corbusier, Theo Van Doesburg, and André Breton in his extensive circle of contacts.

Originating in a Czech students’ club in Munich (of which the young Alfons Mucha was a leading light), the MÁNES Artists’ Society—generally known simply as MÁNES—was established in 1887 by students at Prague’s Academy of Fine Arts unhappy with the conservatism of Umělecká beseda (The Artistic Society), which was then the principal organization in Czech cultural life. The beseda—the Czech word, which literally means a discussion, has connotations of a homely get-together, a palaver round the fire or down the pub—was a product of the nineteenth-century “national revival” (národní obrození). Founded in 1863, its mission was to foster a specifically Czech art, music, and literature to combat the supposed “Germanization” that had taken place since the Kingdom of Bohemia lost the last vestiges of its independence to Austria at the Battle of the White Mountain in 1620. Teige, who had his own Marxist axe to grind, downplays the extent of MÁNES’s own patriotism; the society took its name from the painter Josef Mánes, who served on Umělecká beseda’s first committee, and invited Mikoláš Aleš to become its honorary president. Aleš was a member of the so-called “Generation of the National Theater” (Generace Národního divadla), whose young artists made their name decorating “the cathedral of Czech art.”4 The theater occupies a pivotal position in the national imaginary: funded by a public campaign that began in 1845, it opened in 1881, burnt down after only twelve performances, and was rebuilt—again from voluntary subscriptions—to rise like a phoenix from the ashes in 1883. Aleš furnished the foyer with a grand series of paintings from Czech legend and history. Later in life he designed frescoes for many public and civic buildings including Prague’s Old Town Hall, the Municipal House (Obecní dům), and the Land Bank (Zemská banka), but he was even better loved, perhaps for his illustrations for

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4 The description is from Alois Jirásek, speech of 16 May 1918 in Pantheon of National Museum, in Za právo a stát: sborník dokladů o československé společné vůli k svobodě 1848-1918 (Prague: Státní nakladatelství, 1928), 298-300.
the Špalíček národních písní a říkadel (Chapbook of Popular Songs and Rhymes), an indispensable part of every Czech childhood.⁵ He is widely acknowledged as “the founder of the national tradition in painting.”⁶

But when it came to matters aesthetic Teige was right. Mánes indeed did represent a radical break with these iconographies of the recent past, “smashing windows onto Europe, through which the fertilizing rays of international intellectual and artistic movements and isms could penetrate into Czech artistic life.”⁷ The society’s magazine Volné směry (Free Directions), published from 1896, and the ambitious exhibition program it launched two years later exposed Prague audiences to the latest in European artistic trends. Notable early Mánes exhibitions (which Teige goes on to describe as “a practical seminar for modern Czech artists”) were devoted to Rodin—the biggest exhibition of the sculptor’s work yet seen outside France—in 1902,⁸ Munch in 1905,⁹ “impressionists” (which included Gauguin, Van Gogh, and Cézanne) in 1907,¹⁰ fauvists in 1910,¹¹ and cubists in 1914.¹² Rodin and Munch both visited the city for their exhibitions, the first of many avant-garde figures to do so over the next three decades.¹³ The cubist Skupina výtvarných umělců (Group of Fine Artists) seceded from Mánes in 1911 to launch the magazine Umělecký měsíčník (Artistic Monthly) and an exhibition series whose guests included Braque, Picasso, and Gris, but several of the group, including the brothers Josef and Karel Čapek, returned to the Mánes fold the following year.¹⁴

The society remained a broad church thereafter, accommodating modern artists of many different styles.

Modern French Painting from Manet to Today, as Mánes’s fiftieth anniversary exhibition was titled, was neither the first nor the largest retrospective of contemporary French painting the society had hosted over the previous half-century, but it was an impressive display. The 164 exhibits, which featured works from several private collections as well as from the Musée du Louvre and the Musée du Luxembourg, ran the gamut from impressionism, symbolism, and post-impressionism through fauvism, cubism, and surrealism. Several works had not been shown in the city before. The largest exhibition of L’École de Paris in interwar Prague (525 exhibits), however, was hosted by Umělecká beseda—a backhanded testimony to just how successful Mánes had been in achieving its modernizing objectives. Josef Čapek curated the spectacle, which showed at the Municipal House in 1931.¹⁵ By then he had become as celebrated a figure in Czech art as his brother Karel was in Czech letters. Mánes staged its own Art of Contemporary France show the same year, whose 220 exhibits included 15 Braques, 13 Derains, 16 Picassos, 45 Matisses, 9 Modiglianis and 14 Massons.¹⁶ A year later the society displayed Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen, Vincenc Makovský, and other Czech artists together with Jean Arp, Salvador Dalí, Giorgio de Chirico, Max Ernst, Paul Klee, Joan Miró, Wolfgang Paalen, and Yves Tanguy in the largest exhibition of surrealist art yet seen anywhere in the world.¹⁷ With 155 works, Poesie 1932 was three times the size of The Newer Super-Realism exhibition the previous fall at the Wadsworth Atheneum, the first exhibition of surrealism in the United States. Mánes followed up this exploration of the poetics of modernity with Contemporary Architecture in the USSR,¹⁸ which portrayed as down-to-earth a Utopia as one would

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¹² Moderní umění, sborník sestaven A. Mercereauem v Paříži: 45. výstava SVU Mánes v Praze, introduction by Alexandre Mercereau (Prague: Mánes, 1914).
¹¹ An incomplete list of such visitors would include the futurists Enrico Prampolini and F. T. Marinetti; the dadaists Raoul Hausmann, Kurt Schwitters, and Hannah Höch; the architects Le Corbusier, J. J. P. Oud, Walter Gropius, and Mart Stam; the surrealists Philippe Soupault, René Crevel, André Breton, and Paul Éluard; Giorgio de Chirico, Theo van Doesburg, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Breuer, Hannes Meyer, Alexandre Archipenko, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Ilya Ehrenburg and—in-cognito—to play chess—Marcel Duchamp.
⁸ Francouzská moderní umění, L’École de Paris, introduction by André Salmon (Prague: Umělecká beseda, 1931).
⁵ Mikoláš Aleš, Špalíček národních písní a říkadel (Prague: Orbis, 1950).
³ Teige, “Mezinárodní orientace českého umění,” 391.
¹ Moderní umění, soubor sestaven A. Mercereauem v Paříži: 45. výstava SVU Mánes v Praze, introduction by Alexandre Mercereau (Prague: Mánes, 1914).
⁷ Teige, “Mezinárodní orientace českého umění,” 391.
⁵ Mikoláš Aleš, Špalíček národních písní a říkadel (Prague: Orbis, 1950).
³ Teige, “Mezinárodní orientace českého umění,” 391.
¹ Moderní umění, soubor sestaven A. Mercereauem v Paříži: 45. výstava SVU Mánes v Praze, introduction by K. Svoboda (Prague: Mánes, 1905).
¹² Moderní umění, sborník sestaven A. Mercereauem v Paříži: 45. výstava SVU Mánes v Praze, introduction by Alexandre Mercereau (Prague: Muplus, 1914).
¹³ An incomplete list of such visitors would include the futurists Enrico Prampolini and F. T. Marinetti; the dadaists Raoul Hausmann, Kurt Schwitters, and Hannah Hoch; the architects Le Corbusier, J. J. P. Oud, Walter Gropius, and Mart Stam; the surrealists Philippe Soupault, René Crevel, André Breton, and Paul Éluard; Giorgio De Chirico, Theo van Doesburg, Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Marcel Breuer, Hannes Meyer, Alexandre Archipenko, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Vsevolod Meyerhold, Ilya Ehrenburg and—in-cognito—to play chess—Marcel Duchamp.
expect of socialist construction—factories, social housing, parks of culture, schools, workers’ clubs, hospitals, sports stadiums, cinemas, the Dnieper dam. Alois Wachsmann produced a landscape painted in dreamlike pastels simultaneously advertising both events. It was a meeting of umbrellas and sewing machines that few cities in Western Europe, let alone the United States, would have conceived, still less organized, at the time.

Teige portrays Mánes’s openness to international modernism as part of a wider culture war between “progressive” and “reactionary” historical forces in the Czech Lands. He cites as early examples of the same cultural turn the magazine Moderní revue, a major vehicle for Czech symbolists and decadents (Modern Review, 1894-1925); the manifesto Česká moderna (Czech Modernism, 1895), which called for universal suffrage and workers’ rights and opposed the strident cultural nationalism of the Young Czech party; and the Almanach secese (Almanac of the Secession, 1896), edited by the enfant terrible and future communist poet S. K. Neumann. Neumann went on to write the futurist manifesto “Open Windows” (1913) and edit the magazine Červen (June, 1918-21), which was notable among other things for publishing the first translation of Apollinaire’s “Zone” into Czech.23 “The lively spiritual disquiet of the fin de siècle,” Teige argues, plugged Czech art into the circuits of the whole of cultural and political life. The progressive cultural front, directly or indirectly linked with progressive political forces, tore down for good the Chinese wall with which Bohemia was then surrounded, turned its back on the struggles of traditionalism and nationalism, rejected the insipid ideals of revivalist historicism [buditeckého historismu], and put into effect a new hierarchy of values.

Anticipating Hobsbawm and Ranger’s iconiclastic analysis of “invented traditions” by half a century,24 he insists that it was necessary above all “to wage fierce struggles against the cult of domestic (and incidentally to a considerable extent fictitious) tradition [emphasis added].” Teige accepts that Mánes’s first generation often showed “a passive and uncritical acceptance of foreign influences,” noting that many of its early exhibitions “could not avoid the necessity of a certain retrospectivism … the first exhibitions of impressionism, which [Mánes] organized in 1902 and 1907, were a belated survey of an artistic movement whose development was already finished in France but which was only then bearing its first beautiful fruits in Bohemia.” But Prague’s peripheral status would not last for long. Czech artists, he goes on, not only “soon learned to assimilate the influences of modern French painting,” but “in the years immediately before the [First] World War, thanks to the generation of Czech cubists … joined the most forward ranks of the avant-garde. Just as Prague was then the leading center of cubism beside Paris, so is it today the leading center, beside Paris, of surrealism.”25


25 Karel Teige, “Poetism Manifesto,” originally published in Osma a Skupina výtvarných umělců 1894-1918-21, which was notable among other things for publishing the first translation of Apollinaire’s “Zone” into Czech.23 “The lively spiritual disquiet of the fin de siècle,” Teige argues, plugged Czech art into the circuits of the whole of cultural and political life. The progressive cultural front, directly or indirectly linked with progressive political forces, tore down for good the Chinese wall with which Bohemia was then surrounded, turned its back on the struggles of traditionalism and nationalism, rejected the insipid ideals of revivalist historicism [buditeckého historismu], and put into effect a new hierarchy of values.

26 Jaromír Lang, Neumannův Červen (Prague: Orbis, 1957).
“The International Orientation of Czech Art” (as Teige’s article was titled) ends with a sharp reminder of the darkening political context in which Mánes was celebrating its fiftieth birthday. The Paris school, he told his readers, is not just a French school; indeed, “the most important and innovative artists of our day, the most prominent representatives of this Paris school, are not French: Picasso is a Spaniard, Dali a Catalan, Max Ernst a German.” To that list we might add—among many other artists based in interwar Paris—the Italians Modigliani and Giacometti, the Romanians Tzara and Brancusi, the Hungarians Brassai, Capa, and Kertesz, the Japanese Foujita, the Belarusians Soutine and Zadkine, the Lithuanian Lipschitz, and the Americans Alexander Calder, Lee Miller, and Man Ray. “International art,” Teige insists, “is ... a universal possession,” and Paris “the collective studio of artists from the four corners of the world.” It was exactly these cosmopolitan, enlightened, modernist values—the values for which, in Teige’s reading of its history, Mánés had been fighting for the past half-century—that were now in jeopardy. Modernism was under siege from two directions:

In a time in which in the Third Reich art has been subjugated by reactionary racist and nationalist ideologies and a once vibrant artistic center has been changed into a cultural jailhouse, and in which artistic policies in the USSR have anathematized the remarkable avant-garde originating in LEF (the Left Front) and returned to old-fashioned academic Russian realism, we must be all the more grateful for the activity of Czech modernism and above all for the systematic enterprise of Mánés, which transformed Prague, which was then on the periphery of artistic events, into one of the most intense hotbeds of international poetic and artistic modern ideas.

Teige hardly needed to remind his readers that Czechoslovakia was by then the last surviving democracy in Central and Eastern Europe. “The Paris school, which is to say the international artistic avant-garde,” he warned, “has in today’s Europe only two powerful concentric points of support beside Paris: Prague and Barcelona.”

29 On the artistic links between Paris and Prague see Paris Prague 1906-1930 (Paris: Musée d’Art moderne, 1966); Pavla Horská, Prague—Paris (Prague: Orbis, 1998); Prague sur Seine, texts by Patrizia Rudolf, Gérard-Georges Lemaire, and Olivier Poivre d’Arvor (Paris: Paris Musées, 1989); Čermák, Václav Brožík, Vojtěch Hynais (Fig. 1), Antonín Chittussi, Karel Vítězslav Mašek, Luděk Marold, and Viktor Oliva all spent long periods in la ville-lumière. Čermák and Brožík are best known for their large academic paintings on historical themes: Brožík’s Jan Hus before the Council of Konstanz 1415 (1883) and Election of Jiří z Poděbrad as King of Bohemia 1458 (1897) now hang in Prague’s Old Town Hall. Mašek’s The Prophetess Libuše (c. 1893), a Seurat-influenced depiction of the mythical founder of Prague that today graces the Musée d’Orsay, and Marold’s The Battle of Lipany, a gigantic diorama of the culminating engagement of the fifteenth-century Hussite Wars, also reflect the nationalist enthusiasms of the period. It may seem strange that The Battle of Lipany was created for the 1898 Prague Exhibition of Architecture and Engineering, but the association did not jar at the time. Oliva, whose Absinth Drinker (1901) nowadays presides over Prague’s Café Slavia, and Chittussi, an impressionist landscape painter who lived in Paris from 1879-1884, bring us closer to standard western image-repertoires of the modern. Oliva
returned to Prague in 1897 after a decade in Paris to become artistic editor of the popular magazine *Zlatá Praha* (Golden Prague). Hynais is best remembered for his curtain for the National Theater. He first sketched the curtain while living in Montmartre. Ironically, but not at all unfittingly, the model for the sexy winged figure at the center of his allegory of national revival was the French painter Suzanne Valadon, who was then just eighteen.

The two Czech artists best known to western audiences are probably Alfons Mucha (whose name, transliterated as Alphonse, became synonymous with Paris art nouveau) and František Kupka. Having shot to international fame with his sinuous posters for Sarah Bernhard, Perfecta cycles, Job cigarette papers, and Lefèvre-Utile biscuits, Mucha returned to Prague with the intention of serving his nation with everything from postage stamps and banknotes to the monumental *Slav Epic*, a cycle of twenty enormous paintings on Czech and Slavonic history—but only in 1910, having spent a quarter-century abroad, much of it in the Quartier Latin. Mánes took the lead in opposing the celebrity émigré artist being given the commission to decorate Prague’s Municipal House in 1909, not perhaps the most glorious chapter in the society’s history. Mucha’s contribution was eventually confined to the Mayoral Chamber. Kupka, who had lived in Paris since 1895, moved in 1906 to Puteaux, where he hung out with the Section d’Or cubists and inspired Apollinaire to coin the term Orphism. Alfred Barr credited him with painting “the first pure abstraction in Western Europe.”

Teige is correct to emphasize the Czech contribution to cubism, even if the cubism in question was generally closer to the Section d’Or than the high analytic cubism of Picasso and Braque. Emil Filla, Otakar Kubín, and Josef Čapek all made lengthy visits to Paris between 1910 and 1914 (where Čapek researched his pioneering *Art of Primitive Peoples* in the Musée d’Ethnographie in the Trocadéro, a study that predated Carl Einstein’s *Negerplastik* of 1915, even though it was not published until much later).

So did the architects Josef Gočár, Josef Chochol (Fig. 2), Pavel Janák, and Vlastislav Hofman, whose buildings made Prague a unique center of “cubist architecture” (and whose designs for everything from armchairs to ashtrays and light fittings to typefaces took the cubist impulse in equally unfamiliar directions (Fig. 3)—for those schooled in western art history alone).

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31 Quoted in Meda Mládková and Jan Sekera, *František Kupka ze sbírky Jana a Medy Mládkových/From the Jan and Meda Mládek Collection* (Prague: Museum Kampa, 2007), 385.


33 Sara Fanelli, *Tate Artist Timeline* (London: Tate, 2006). This is a printed version of the large flowchart that covers the foyer areas of levels 3 and 5 of the Tate Modern. Several hundred artists and movements are included.


whose 1911 heads can claim to be among the earliest cubist sculptures in the world, studied for a year in Paris in 1909-10 under E. A. Bourdelle. He returned in 1914, making the acquaintance of Apollinaire, Picasso, and Jean Gris.

On the outbreak of war he enlisted in the French Foreign Legion. Perhaps the most original of the Czech cubist painters, Bohumil Kubišta, also spent eight months in Paris in 1909-10. Unlike the other artists and architects mentioned above, he declined to join the Skupina výtvarných umělců but—confusingly, for those who like their art histories neat and tidy—became a member of the Dresden expressionist group Die Brücke. Czech cubism is sometimes uncertainly referred to as “cubo-expressionism,” illustrating the difficulties that arise when we try to focus the whole world through pre-calibrated western lenses.36

The love affair between avant-garde Paris and Prague continued after World War I. Josef Šíma settled in France in 1921, married a French girl, and became a French citizen in 1926.

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36 See Expresionismus a české umění 1905-1927, texts by Michel Bregant et al. (Prague: Národní galerie, 1994).
He remained a Devětsil member and continued to exhibit his paintings in Prague, but also helped found the dissident French surrealist group Le Grand Jeu (along with the writer Richard Weiner, whose day job was Paris correspondent for the Prague newspaper Lidové noviny). Šíma was responsible for the extensive Parisian participation in Poesie 1932. Jan Zrzavý, who along with Rudolf Kremlíčka (Fig. 4) and Skupina veterans Josef Čapek, Václav Špala, and Vlastislav Hofman formed the Tvrdšíní (Obstinates) in 1918, based himself in Paris and Brittany from 1923 to 1938. František Foltýn, another Czech cubist, lived in Paris from 1923-1934 and joined both Abstraction-Création and Cercle et Carré; he taught the English surrealist painter Eileen Agar her craft during her Paris sojourn in the late 1920s. Other Czechs sojourning in the French capital between the wars included the painters Alen Divíš (1926-39) and František Muzika (1924-5), the sculptors Hana Wichterlová and Vincenc Makovský (1926-30), the photographer Jaroslav Rössler (1927-35), the future Liberated Theater performer Jiří Voskovec (1921-24), and the composers Bohuslav Martinů (1923-40), Jaroslav Ježek (January to June 1928), and Vítězslava Kaprálová (1937-40). Others, like Karel Teige and the Devětsil poets Jaroslav Seifert and Vítězslav Nezval, contented themselves with shorter visits. The painter and caricaturist Adolf Hoffmeister came every year from 1922, when his mother first introduced him to the ville-lumière at the age of twenty, until 1939, when Louis Aragon procured him a visa that allowed him to escape Nazi-occupied Prague. Having sat out much of the war in New York, Hoffmeister would return as Czechoslovak ambassador to France from 1948-51.

Šíma and Foltýn showed their work in the 1925 Paris exhibition L’Art Aujourd’hui. So did Štyrský and Toyen, prominent members of Devětsil, who had just arrived in the city. Along with Nezval, Makovský, and Ježek, Štyrský and Toyen would later become founders of the Czechoslovak Surrealist Group. The pair stayed in Paris four years, during which time they produced a superb tourist guide to the city, published under Devětsil’s auspices in 1927 (Fig. 7). Though Štyrský and Toyen still await a decent retrospective in Britain or North America they were an integral part of the artistic history of their times. They showed their latest paintings, which in an accompanying manifesto they baptized “Artificielisme,” in their Montrouge studio in October 1926. The interest generated by this showing led to an exhibition at the Galerie d’Art Moderne. The next year they had a show at the Galerie Vavin, for which Philippe Soupault wrote a glowing endorsement. Štyrský’s three books of photographs The Frog Man, The Man With Blinkers on His Eyes, and Paris Afternoon (1934-5) are obviously indebted to Eugène Atget, whose albums he probably first encountered in Paris. His earliest experiments with the camera date from a visit to the Marquis de Sade’s Château de Lacoste in Provence in the summer of 1932. Over seventy of Štyrský’s photographs were displayed at the Czechoslovak

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40 Štyrský et Toyen, introduction by Philippe Soupault (Paris: Galerie Vavin, 1927), Unpaginated. Soupault’s text was translated in ReD, vol. 1, no. 6 (1928), 217-18.
Surrealist Group’s inaugural exhibition at the Mánes Gallery in 1935 (Fig. 5). Toyen (Marie Čermínová)—whose pseudonym supposedly derives from the French word *citoyen*—would become a true Parisian. Having survived the Nazi occupation, she left Prague with the younger Czech artist Jindřich Heisler to exhibit their “pagan altars” at *Surréalisme en 1947* at the Galerie Maeght, and they never went home. She is buried in Batignolles Cemetery, close to André Breton and Benjamin Péret.

Czechoslovakia won more prizes than any nation other than France at the *Exposition des arts décoratifs et industriels dans la vie moderne*, the 1925 Paris spectacle that gave Art Deco its name. František Drtikol’s sleek, geometric nudes-in-motion—which were deemed too outrageous for exhibition in the United States at the time—took a Grand Prix.

Drtikol participated in the *First International Salon of the Photographic Nude* in 1933 alongside Moholy-Nagy and Man Ray, as well as the *International Exhibition of Contemporary Photography* at the Musée des Arts Décoratifs in 1936. The Tvrdošíjní exhibited in the early 1920s.

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in Dresden, Berlin, Hanover, and Geneva, following the pre-war precedent set by the Skupina, who had exhibited as a group in Munich. There was significant Czech participation in the 1929 *Film und Foto* and *Neue Typografie* exhibitions in Stuttgart and Berlin and the 1930 *Plakate des Avantgardes* and *Das Lichtbild* in Munich. Jiří Kroha and Jaromír Krejcar took part in the 1927 *International Architecture Exhibition* in Moscow. Krejcar had edited Devětsil’s 1922 anthology Život (*Life*, subtitled “A Collection of New Beauty”), whose international contributors ranged from Ilya Ehrenburg to Le Corbusier (Fig. 6). Život was the first European magazine to reproduce Man Ray’s photograms, which had been published in a limited edition in Paris the previous December. Ray would subsequently guest in several Devětsil exhibitions. Krejcar went on to work with Moishe Ginzburg in the GIPROGOR town-planning institute in Moscow in 1934-5, but ended his life as an émigré from communism teaching at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London.46 Kenneth Frampton judges his Czechoslovak pavilion for the 1937 Paris World’s Fair to be “as seminal ... as the significant pavilions designed for the same occasion by Alvar Aalto, Le Corbusier and Junzo Sakakura.”47

Eight Czech architects (Krejcar, Bedřich Feuerstein, Josef Chochol, Jaroslav Fragner, Karel Honzík, Evžen Linhart, Vit Obrteln, and Jiří Koula) took part in the 1923 *Bauhaus Architecture Exhibition*. All but one were Devětsil members. Zdeněk Rossmann, Josef Hausenblás, Václav Zralý, and Antonín Urban were all Bauhaus students.48 Bauhaus designs were manufactured under license for the Krásná jízba (Beautiful Room) chain, and Karel Teige’s *Czechoslovak Architecture* was announced in 1927 as forthcoming in the Bauhaus Books series alongside works by Kandinsky, Schwitters, Oud, Marinetti, Mies, Le Corbusier, and other leading lights of the international avant-garde.49

Visiting Prague in 1929, Hannes Meyer invited Teige to lecture at the Bauhaus on typography and the sociology of architecture50—one of the foreign guests, Meyer wrote to the Mayor of Dessau, he had brought in “to counteract the dangers of pseudo-scientific activity.”51 *ReD* ran a special issue on the Bauhaus the following year. Another of the magazines Teige edited, *Stavba*, caught the eye of Richard Neutra, who commended “the most courageous periodical [that] has been immeasurably effective far beyond the boundaries of your country.”52

Neutra was not alone in recognizing Prague’s extraordinary vitality as a modernist center between the wars. Writing in *G*, a Berlin avant-
garde architecture, film, and design magazine whose contributors included Theo Van Doesberg, El Lissitzky, Raoul Hausmann, and Mies van der Rohe, Hans Richter observed: “That for which it is
necessary to struggle in many larger centers, and
which still hardly exists, is found in Prague: a
creatively active atmosphere.” “Modern
convictions can grow in this atmosphere,” he went
on, “a spirit of collective work, and the kind of
activity that arises from a ‘faith in life.’ The vivacity
of a number of young artists is manifested in
several journals—most vividly in the anthology
Život (Life). I know of no illustrated book that is
more ahead of its time.”53 Could it just be that
Teige was right: that there was something in
Prague’s situation in the early twentieth century
that allowed it to position itself, once it had broken
out of its “provincial backwater,” at the forefront
of the international avant-garde?

3

Barcelona fell to General Franco’s nationalists on
26 January 1939. Six weeks later, on 15 March, the
Wehrmacht entered Prague. World War II officially
started for the rest of the world six months after
that when Germany invaded Poland. When the
dust cleared, Europe was a different place.
Czechoslovakia elected a communist-led coalition
government in 1946 and the Communist Party
sealed its power with the coup d’état of February
1948. The next year Mánes was dissolved as a
“superfluous” organization whose continued
existence would “impede the building of socialism.” The society’s assets, including Otakar
Novotný’s stunning functionalist gallery on Slav
Island in the Vltava where André Breton lectured
in 1935, were nationalized. It would be inaccurate
to say that Prague’s prewar contributions to
international modernism became nothing but a
distant memory thereafter. On the contrary: so
comprehensively was that memory erased on both
sides of the Iron Curtain over the next four
decades that the very notion that the Czech capital
could ever have been a major avant-garde center
became almost unthinkable. I have discussed that
erasure elsewhere.54

Central Europe—in which, for present purposes, I
include Germany—provided fertile soil for
modernism during the early years of the twentieth
century.55 So did revolutionary Russia until Stalin
slammed on the brakes. Prague’s vitality was not
an anomaly: there were vibrant avant-gardes in
Budapest, Vienna, Warsaw, and Belgrade, not to
mention across Weimar Germany, before their
respective governments took their own
authoritarian turns. I have suggested elsewhere
that one reason for this receptiveness to the
modern was the late industrialization of much of

53 H.R. [Hans Richter], “Prague,” in G: Journal for Elemental Form-Creation, No. 3, June
1924, 140, in Detlef Martins and Michael W. Jennings, eds., G: An Avant-Garde Journal
of Art, Architecture, Design, and Film, 1923-6 (Los Angeles: Getty Research Institute
and London: Tate, 2010), 140. Emphasis added.
54 Derek Sayer, “How We Remember and What We Forget: Art History and the Czech
Avant-garde,” in Dariusz Galiczk and Derek Sayer, eds., The Inhabited Ruins of
Central Europe: Re-imagining Space, History and Memory (New York: Palgrave-
55 See Benson, Central European Avant-gardes; Benson and Forgacs, Between Worlds;
Steven A. Mansbach, Modern Art in Eastern Europe: from the Baltic to the Balkans, ca.
1890-1939 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); Matthew S. Widlofsky,
Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918-1945 (Washington: National Gallery of Art,
2007).
the region by comparison with Western Europe, which allowed for what Milan Kundera has called “a curious telescoping of different eras,” wherein “a nineteenth-century side: an extraordinary sense of reality, an attachment to the working classes and to popular arts, a more spontaneous rapport with the audience ... merged with the aesthetic of modernism in a surprising, inimitable, felicitous marriage.”

Equally important was the defeat of the Central Powers and disintegration of the Austrian and Ottoman Empires in 1918. The resulting uncertainty and instability proved productive, at least for the arts. Both Weimar Germany and the successor states (Austria, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland, Romania, Bulgaria, Yugoslavia) embraced modernism as part of a vocabulary of national identity that signaled a break with the imperial past and offered the possibility of building a prosperous and democratic future. This was—for a time—an environment in which avant-gardes could play a central part in public life. These were the same conditions that allowed the Bauhaus to flourish as the greatest design school of the twentieth century, before the Nazis forced its move from Dessau and eventual closure in 1933.

Of all the states in the region, these conditions lasted longest in Czechoslovakia, which remained a liberal democracy until it was assassinated by the great powers at Munich. In the 1930s Prague became a destination for artistic refugees from fascism. Among them were Oskar Kokoschka and John Heartfield, who lived in the city from 1933-38. Both men were welcomed as honorary members of Mánes and participated in its annual exhibitions. The view across the Vltava in Prague, Nostalgia, the first canvas Kokoschka painted after fleeing to London in September 1938, is heart-wrenching: and the more so for those who recognize the echo of Mikoláš Aleš’s “Libuše Prophesying the Glory of Prague” in the city’s Old Town Hall. Heartfield’s photomontages for the Arbeiter-Illustrierte-Zeitung (Workers’ Illustrated Weekly), which moved from Berlin to Prague after the Nazi takeover in 1933, are by common consent among the high points of his oeuvre. Inclusion of some of his montages (notably “Adolf Hitler: Swallows Gold and Spouts Junk”) in Mánes’s First International Exhibition of Caricature and Humor in 1934, alongside cartoons by George Grosz, Otto Dix, Josef Čapek, and Adolf Hoffmeister caused howls of protest from Germany, Austria, and the Vatican. We are a long way from the flow-chart of the origins of modernism on the front of Alfred Barr’s Cubism and Abstract Art and the aesthetic purities of Clement Greenberg’s “Avant-garde and Kitsch” — in a different world, we might say.

Perhaps that is just as well.

57 The painting currently belongs to the National Gallery of Scotland, and is reproduced on the gallery’s website: http://www.nationalgalleries.org/collection/artists-a-