



National Museums in the Czech Republic

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Summary

National museum institutions in Bohemia were formed in two distinct areas: art and sciences. Although the Picture Gallery of the Society of Patriotic Friends and the Patriotic Museum, established in 1796 and 1818 respectively, were the creations of enlightened aristocrats as elitist institutions to improve local taste and civilization, they became crucial in shaping Czech nationalism since the 1830s. As a consequence, historical and archaeological collections began to be built. As Czech society increasingly started to participate in the modernization and industrialization process of late nineteenth century Austria, applied and decorative arts emerged as the unique marks of a distinctively modern Czech national identity. Two museums originally devoted to industrial production illustrate this development, the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures and the Museum of Decorative Arts. Historical identity inseparable of the idea of building a Czechoslovak nation after 1918, began to emerge at the Vítkov Hill monument, which was revitalized after 1989 as a major site of historical exhibitions.

Summary table, Czech Republic

| Name | Inaugurated | Initiated | Actors | Ownership | Type | Values | Temporal reach | Style Location |
|---|-------------|-----------|---|--|--|------------------------|-----------------------------|--|
| National Museum | 1818 | 1796 | Aristocracy | Private until 1934, thereafter owned by the state. | Natural History and Science, Archaeology, History, Numismatics | National and Universal | History of civilization | Purpose built (1891). Neo-Renaissance, central location in Prague. |
| National Gallery | 1796 | 1796 | Aristocracy | Private until 1934, thereafter owned by the state. | Art | National and Universal | History of European art | Purposed built, Neo-Renaissance, located downtown Prague. |
| Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures | 1862 | 1862 | Private, business educated middle-classes | Private, until 1932, thereafter state. | Industrial Design, Applied Arts, Global Ethnography | Universal and National | History of civilization | Purpose built historicist, central, location Prague. |
| Museum of Decorative Arts | 1885 | 1885 | Middle-classes | Private foundation, then nationalized. | Applied and Decorative Arts | National and Universal | History of civilization | Purpose built, Neo-Renaissance, 1901, central Prague. |
| Vítkov Hill Monument | 1938 | 1929 | Government | State | Memorial to the WWI Czechoslovak legion | National | 20 th c. history | Memorial building (1938), Prague-Zizkov. |

Introduction

The Czech National Museum (*Národní muzeum*) is currently the main museum institution of the Czech Republic. The Museum obtained the name 'national' following the dissolution of the Austro-Hungarian Monarchy and the foundation of the first Czechoslovak Republic after WWI. The origins of the state, which currently hosts the museum as a national institution, is historically connected to the second wave of founding Christian kingdoms in Europe around the year 1000 BC, when feudal monarchies were established in Poland, Hungary and Bohemia. Although, Czech kings in principle accepted feudal subordination to the Holy Roman Emperor, in practice Bohemian rulers acted independently and the Kingdom of Bohemia remained an independent medieval state up until the early sixteenth century. The Habsburg dynasty ascended to the Bohemian throne in 1526-27, which brought the Czech lands into a conglomerate dynastic state consisting of Austrian, Hungarian and Bohemian provinces. Following the defeat in the 30 Year War, in which the Czech aristocracy and political elite fought against the Habsburgs, the Bohemian lands were integrated into a centralized imperial system of governance. Besides, imperial, and mostly German, newcomers loyal to the dynasty replaced the original regional Bohemian aristocracy.

Yet, a regional identity within the Bohemian elite remained strong and, completed by romanticist democratic nationalism, contributed to the shaping of Czech national identity during the first half of the nineteenth century. The Kingdom of Bohemia remained integral to the Austrian part of the Empire subsequent to the 1867 compromise between the dynasty and the Hungarian political elite, which granted large-scale autonomy to Hungary. Although, the Czech political elite developed a program for similar autonomy, the reshaping of the dynastic empire in federal terms was never realized. During WWI, the Czech political class was increasingly attracted to the program of an independent Czechoslovak nation state, which was indeed founded during the peace treaties. The first Czechoslovak Republic was imagined as a 'Czechoslovak' nation state by its elite, however this vision proved to be an illusion by the 1930s when Slovak separatism also increased.

The republic lasted until 1938, when it fell to the aggression of the Third Reich. The re-creation of Czechoslovakia following 1945 ended in the formation of a Communist dictatorship, in which the relationships of Czechs and Slovaks remained troublesome despite the attempt to regenerate Czechoslovakia as a federal state of two nations. Modern Czech national identity was also shaped by the Soviet intervention in 1968 and the emergence of the idea of Central Europe as a distinct historico-geographical region between Western and Eastern Europe cultivated by critical intellectuals in Poland, Hungary and Czechoslovakia. The fall of Communism brought independence and also the dismantling of the Czech and Slovak common state and the birth of an independent Czech Republic in 1993.

Cultural policy and the concept of the National Museum in Bohemia

The Czech National Museum was founded on April 15th, 1818 by a ceremonial act of the Bohemian Society of the Patriotic Museum. The Society, which consisted of Bohemian aristocrats motivated by the confidence of the Enlightenment in the relevance of art and sciences for the furthering of civilization, was headed by Count Kaspar Maria Sternberg (1761 – 1838),

himself an internationally renowned palaeontologist. Count Sternberg was one among the Bohemian regional aristocrats who cultivated the idea of art and learned societies and also the man to found the Society of the Patriotic Friends of Art in 1796. This society of aristocrats established the Academy of Fine Arts, a training school in arts in 1800. Shaped also by Count Sternberg's personal interest in botany and mineralogy, the Museum originally collected material related to natural history and geology. In this perspective, the Museum was founded as the regional branch of the typical universal Enlightenment museums, however, it also claimed a certain national mission manifested also by its first official name, Patriotic Museum (Vlastenecké muzeum v Čechách): to improve the general conditions of the Fatherland.

Count Franz Anton von Kolowrat-Liebsteinsky (1778–1861), governor of the Bohemian Lands and would-be member of the Austrian State Council responsible for the Interior and Finances supported the idea in Vienna believing that the improvement of culture would divert attention from politics in Bohemia. Endorsed by the Viennese government, the Museum remained the property of the Society of the Patriotic Museum, which actually administered the institution up until 1934.

The elitist concept that considered the Museum an institution of rooting civilized knowledge and manners in a country was gradually replaced by the idea of national museums keeping and forging national identity and culture. Count Sternberg actually donated to the Museum a palace in the castle that was replaced by another in the downtown middle-class area bought by the Society in 1847. Although members of the mostly supra-national imperial aristocracy donated the collections, Czech patriotic intelligentsia with a clear nation-building program performed the actual museum activities.

In Bohemia, the renowned historian, Frantisek Palacky (1798-1876) was crucial in reshaping the vocation of the Patriotic Museum in these terms. Although, the Museum had already undermined the dominance of the upper class in erudition as it promoted universal access for all citizens, Palacky understood its role not only in regional terms, but also in cultural ones as an institution fostering Czech language culture. Since 1825, he had become the first editor of the *Journal of the Patriotic Museum in Bohemia*. Since 1830, he had been a member of the Society of the Patriotic Museum and ten years later, he became the leading person of this institution. An important part of Palacký's program was the consistent nationalization of the museum and marginalization of its aristocratic character by making it openly accessible to broader audiences. Accordingly, in 1827 he suggested founding two parallel museum periodicals: one in German and the other in Czech. Palacky was also strongly involved in the 1831 foundation of *Matice česká* fostering the publication of Czech language, science and literature.

Palacky, the historian, was a member of a generation influenced largely by romanticist ideas of the historical roots of nations that connected cultural identity to the venerable history of statehood manifested most spectacularly by medieval kingdoms. Palacky himself strongly encouraged the collection of historical objects and, indeed, was crucial in founding the historical collections of the museum. The era spanning from the 1830s to the 1840s was, in fact, crucial for the museum's development - during this time it definitely has become a national museum. According to the shift from the universal-regional towards the cultural understanding of the nation, the Museum was renamed the Czech Museum in 1848, in the heights of revolutionary fervour in Prague, a movement Palacky crucially influenced.

This development was not seriously hampered even when, after the defeat of nationalist revolutions in 1848–1849, the most prominent personalities had to leave the museum and it had to be renamed the Museum of the Bohemian Kingdom in 1854. This meant a clear attempt to detach the institution from a cultural and ethnic concept of the nation and to highlight its territorial status. The museum was under constant surveillance of the Austrian bureaucratic apparatus and had to struggle with financial problems. Therefore it was unable to continue its nation-building program and increasingly turned towards scientific activities. Especially in the 1860s, the museum supervised and supported the establishment of a network of regional museums, which contributed to the shaping of local national middle classes and intellectuals. Even if the central museum suffered from serious crisis in the second half of the nineteenth century, it was still regarded as the central institution by (Czech) regional museums.

The museum continued to be one of the most important scholarly institutions in the Czech lands. The Czech elite considered it crucial for pursuing scientific research at an internationally commensurable level and endorsed its further professionalization and expansion. Science remained the core of its collection and exhibition policies, particularly botanic studies and palaeontology. The strong historical legacy of Palacky, however, also helped the improvement of the archaeological collection.

The building in downtown Prague, however, proved to be not only insufficient for housing the expanding collections, but also unable to visually represent national pride related to the concepts of civilization and technical progress. A new and magnificent building started to be planned in 1876 when the Prague City Council offered a sizable piece of land in Venceslav Square. Following a competition, architectural design began in 1883 and construction works in 1885. The new neo-renaissance building of the Museum opened in 1891.

After 1918, the emerging Czechoslovak state inherited the relatively stable and well-developed museum organization of the Czech part of the new republic, especially in comparison to the Slovak part. The main problem the Czechs concerned the National Museum (renamed in 1918), as its mission and a field of activities appeared unclear in the new political context. Since the last third of the nineteenth century, the museum lost its dominant position in Czech culture and scholarship (Charles University in Prague became a more influential centre). Besides, as the imperial Austrian authorities had closely monitored its activities, it could not significantly shape the Czech nationalist movement.

The political elite of the Czechoslovak republic, in general, showed only a minimal interest in the problems of museums, except the National Museum. The state administration was actively participating in its management through representatives of the Ministry of Education and National Culture on the directorial board of the Society of the National Museum. The emerging Czechoslovak nation state considered the Museum in Prague as the central museum of the Czechoslovak nation and tried to manage museums in Slovakia as regional institutions. The government sought to centralize the infrastructure of museums in the Republic and created the Museum Department in the Ministry of Education and National Culture in 1920. However, as museums in the country, including the traditional Bohemian institutions and the emerging Slovak ones were private property, the Ministry had little capacity to influence museum policy.

In 1928, the territory of Czechoslovakia was divided into four “lands” (Bohemia, Moravia-Silesia, Slovakia and Carpathian Ruthenia). In 1934, the National Museum was taken under the

direct administration of the 'Bohemian Land' and it became the duty of the Land Council to finance the National Museum. The Museum, therefore, virtually became a state property, which solved its financial problems and fostered the professionalization of the museum's activities.

The communist government nationalized the museum in 1949 and a special Museum and Galleries Act of 1959 regulated its mission and activities. In May 1964, the Museum was turned into an organization of five professionally autonomous components: the Museum of Natural Science, the Historical Museum, the Naprstek Museum of Asia, African, and American Cultures, the National Museum Library and the Central Office of Museology. A sixth autonomous unit, the Museum of Czech Music, was established in 1976.

Currently, the Czech National Museum manifests itself as a genuine institution whose primary purpose is to contribute to nation building efforts. As director Michal Lukeš puts it in the 2009 annual report of the Museum, its "mission is to contribute to the formation of national identity". The Museum, however, does not equate this mission with the production of abstract cultural meanings. On the contrary, it sees itself a truly important social institution: one that creates communities by providing meeting places and invites visitors to learn and have fun. The Museum seeks to fulfil this mission through a variety of permanent and temporal exhibitions, but also by publishing activity and lecture series and by organising teaching programs and broader cultural events.

The National Museum currently consists of five thematic museum institutions - the Museum of Natural Sciences, the Historical Museum, the Library of the National Museum, the Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures (part of the National Museum since 1932), the Czech Museum of Music (part of the National Museum since 1984) and two technical and administrative departments – the Department of Economic Management and the Department of Central Exhibiting and Collecting Work. The National Museum collects material concerning natural history, archaeological objects of prehistory and history, ethnography, numismatics, history of theatre, history of physical education and sport, prehistory and ancient history of the Near East and Africa, and non-European ethnography, particularly Asian culture.

The Department of Prehistory and Protohistory contains a rich collection of pre-historical artefacts, however its main assets are objects of Greek and Roman arts and crafts. Among its most appreciated objects are a painted dish of Nikosthenes, a glass bottle from the port of Puteolo, and a gilded silver rhyton. The Department of Classical Archaeology collects and displays objects of medieval history with a focus on Czech and, in certain cases, Slovak territories. Its activities are concentrated on constructing a great narrative on Czech historical glory by highlighting objects commemorating canonical Czech historical persons, particularly those related to the core of Czech historical national identity, the Hussite movement of the fifteenth century (a significant proportion of the medieval collection is dedicated to the weapons used by Hussite warriors). Besides, objects are employed to represent the progressive narrative of civilization. Exhibitions concentrate on spectacular masterpieces of high culture such as a silver tiara from the twelfth century; Medieval, Renaissance and Baroque jewellery; the reliquary of St. Eligius; or Bohemian porcelain and glass from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

The Department of Ethnography collects the material culture of Czech and European rural societies. Yet, the focus of the department is on Slavic peoples, associating Czech cultural identity to ethnic Slavic heritage and components. The core of the ethnographic collection derives from

the late nineteenth century and exhibitions therefore, could highlight the transformation of traditional Czech society into an increasingly urbanized modern milieu, a core component of Czech national identity that claims a distinct position for itself among the allegedly dominant rural East-Central European nations.

The Department of Numismatics is based on the original donation of Count Sternberg. Currently, its ambitions are to complete a collection of coins that were used and are still in use in the territory of the Czech Republic. Although, the department possesses a large quantity of 'foreign' coins, its territorial focus clearly marks the intention to 'nationalize' the history of the Czech lands by representing a continuous historical trajectory from antiquity up to the present. The Department of Theatre, originally a part of the National Museum Library, was created as a separate entity in 1930. It highlights the lively theatre and opera scene of Prague commensurable to that of Vienna since the eighteenth century and thus connects Czech identity to instances of a sophisticated high culture and the 'Golden Age' of the Habsburg Empire.

The National Gallery (Narodni galerie)

Arguably, the first national gallery in the Bohemian Kingdom was founded on February 5th, 1796. The Society of Patriotic Friends of Art, the group of enlightened aristocrats of the kingdom that also initiated the National Museum, established the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague. In addition, they also decided to open their collections of pictures to the broader public and founded the Picture Gallery of the Society of Patriotic Friends of Art, which is the direct predecessor of the current National Gallery. These aristocrats had a clear, even if somewhat elitist, nation-building agenda: to 'elevate the deteriorated taste of the local public', as the Society formulated its intention. The improvement of a sophisticated artistic taste in Czech lands was, and still is the mission both the staff and directorate of the Museum maintains. The original Picture Gallery displaying works of art produced before the end of the eighteenth century was completed by a collection from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in 1902, when Emperor Franz Joseph I founded the Modern Gallery in Prague.

Following the creation of the Czechoslovak nation state, the two complementary galleries became the central institution of art in the republic obtaining, thus, a manifestly national status of collecting and displaying works of art. In 1949, the two collections were nationalized by the new Communist state as the National Gallery.

In general, the Gallery has two complementary missions concerning national identity. On the one hand, it focuses on what is generally considered the height of Czech national arts: the building of a collection of Czech cubism highlighted by *Don Quixote* by Otto Gutfreund, *Military Funeral* by Vincenc Benes and an array of paintings by František Kupka. Besides, the Gallery also aims at creating a representative collection of Czech and Slovak artists. On the other hand, the museum intends to develop into an institution of national pride as an internationally renowned collection of extraordinary works of art. In addition to icons of European modernism such as Picasso, Rodin, Gauguin, Cezanne, Monet, Van Gogh and Renoir, the Gallery is an important museum of Viennese fin-de-siècle painting, notably Gustav Klimt and Egon Schiele.

Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American cultures

The museum was founded by Vojta Náprstek, a renowned cultural figure in late nineteenth century Prague as a museum of industry in 1862. Náprstek considered his institution an

important site of documenting the technology of contemporary industrial production as well as fostering the development of new technologies. It was a completely private institution established by its founder's collections from the 1862 London World Exhibition and displayed in his house. Náprstek transformed his institution from a museum that merely recorded practices of the past into a thriving centre of emerging industrialists, inventors and cultural elite. The museum, hence, contributed to the shaping of a modern Czech middle-class and also of a modernist national identity by commemorating the achievements of national industry.

This networking role of the museum laid the grounds for the ethnographic collections as visitors to Náprstek house regularly donated collections from their study trips in far away countries. In 1932, the Land of Bohemia took over the administration of the museum, transported its collections to special museum departments in Prague except for the ethnographic material, which was used to form the basis of a new museum, the Náprstek Museum of General Ethnography. This Museum was incorporated into the National Museum as a special autonomous institution following WWII. In 1962, it acquired its current name Náprstek Museum of Asian, African and American Cultures.

Museum of Decorative Arts

The Museum of Decorative Arts was founded in 1885, motivated by the idea of the corruption and degeneration of everyday taste and aesthetics that industrialization was believed to trigger. In this respect, the Prague museum was a counterpart of many similar museum initiatives in Europe. In fact, the South Kensington Museum in London (the current Victoria and Albert Museum), and more importantly the Viennese Österreichisches Museum für Kunst und Industrie meant direct stimuli for the Czech collections. Vojtěch Lanna, the most prolific donor and sponsor of the institution, was greatly impressed by decorative and applied arts exhibited at the Paris World Exhibition in 1867, which was the experience that led him to establish his own collections. Besides the obvious transnational context of the Museum, the founders had a clear national agenda as well. On the one hand, the idea of the Museum was to improve the taste and style of industrial design in the Czech lands following the model of nations believed to be more advanced at that period, particularly, Britain, France and Austria. On the other hand, the museum also aimed at demonstrating the creative spirit and sophisticated taste of Bohemian industrial design and developing a unique Czech style. The museum, thus, was shaped by the objective to construct a national identity reflecting the modern conditions of urbanization and industrialization discernible both for desired Czech citizens and foreigners.

The Museum of Decorative Arts obtained its current building in 1901, designed by Josef Schulz, the architect of the National Museum main building, in a similar neo-renaissance style. The building itself is appreciated as a work of art, reflecting the confidence in the educational capacity of good design. This is a purpose that the Museum currently also subscribes to. It manifests a mission to demonstrate the possibility of creating harmony between function, quality and beauty and to exhibit objects providing inspiration to follow the example in an entertaining mode. The Museum, thus, has a nation-building function in the contemporary global world: it is able to demonstrate the Czech nation as integrated among the nations of modern urban civilization and also the capacity of this nation to meet the challenges of the rapid transformations of contemporary cultures and societies.

The Vítkov Hill Monument

The Vítkov Hill Monument was constructed as the core component of the new post-1918 Czechoslovak national identity. The memorial, which was built over ten years between 1929 and 1938, was officially called the 'National Revival Memorial'. This, and the fact that it was meant to commemorate the deeds of the Czechoslovak legion fighting against the Central Powers in WWI, elucidates that 1918 was considered by the new elite as the resurrection of the long dormant, but truly existing Czechoslovak nation. Yet, as the memorial was completed, with a huge equestrian statue of fifteenth century Czech Hussite general, Jan Žižka who defeated Crusader anti-Hussite troops here in 1420, it soon became the symbol of a particularly distinct Czech national identity. The Germans were well aware of this fact and turned the memorial into a storage of weaponry during the occupation years, from 1939-1945. The post-war Communist dictatorship abused the cultural and ideological potential of the memorial and tried to establish the claim of the Communist Party as a national political force by connecting the memory of the chief party leader, Klement Gottwald with the implications of the history of the Hussite wars: Gottwald's mausoleum was situated within the memorial between 1953 and 1962 and further Communist leaders were also buried here.

After 1989, the Communists were gone, but Žižka remained the core symbol of the post-communist Czech national identity emphasizing a long-term historical legacy of democracy and equality. Members of the Czechoslovak legion were also kept inside the memorial thus making the focus on Czech statehood and national independence clear. Remarkably, the refurbished memorial was turned into a space for exhibitions. The major exhibition on modern Czech and Slovak history, 'Crossroads of Czech and Czechoslovak Statehood in the 20th Century' was installed here in 2009-10. The exhibition discovered five milestones of this history: 1918: the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic; 1938-1939: the end of the first Republic and the Munich Agreement; 1948: the Communist takeover (coup d'état in the terminology of the curators); 1968: the Prague Spring reform movement and the creation of the new federal state; 1989-1992: the Fall of Communism and the birth of the two new independent republics.

The exhibition ignores aspects of social history such as social transformations, the mentality of various classes and their relationships to political changes or opportunities for adaptation to the socialist dictatorship and also other possible milestones like 1945, the expulsion of German occupation armies and subsequently indigenous ethnic German inhabitants from Czechoslovakia. As a consequence, the exhibition simply reproduces the myth of Czech(oslovak) national history as the democratic island founded by Masaryk, fought against and oppressed by two dictatorial foreign powers and eventually liberated and re-created by the new post-Communist democratic republic(s). Accordingly, the exhibition neglects the troublesome occurrences of the Holocaust and the extermination of Czech Roma tolerated or even supported by groups from domestic society.

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