

THE SEARCH FOR DEEP ROOTS: MEDIEVAL ART IN THE HISTORIOGRAPHIES OF THE CENTRAL EUROPEAN NATIONS

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1.1 HISTORY OF ART IN THE FRAMEWORK OF HISTORIO- GRAPHY AND ITS HERMENEUTIC PROBLEMS

During the 19th century, one area of historical sources was proclaimed as a special field and a new branch of historiography was developed: it was the history of visual arts.¹ This establishment was possible only in the framework of the Hegelian concept of history. Specialized interest in artistic monuments of the past has had a longer tradition, based, on the one hand, on the connoisseurship of antiquities, and, on the other hand, on an aesthetic approach, as formulated by Johann Wincklemann. However, it was Hegel's inclusion of art into the program of development and manifestation of the "world spirit" that not only allowed but, in fact, initiated the establishment of a coherent set of methods and approaches which made it possible to make the relationship between individual works of art the theme of a special scientific study. These inter-object relations became the factual matter of art history and "development" its key concept.²

Individual works of art remained in the position of a raw material for the construction of "art history" proper. Unlike other sources used by historiography, works of art do, however, con-

1 For a standard outline of the history of art history see, for example, Michael Podro, *The Critical Historians of Art* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1982).

2 Keith Moxey, "Art History's Hegelian Unconscious. Naturalism as Nationalism in the Study of Early Netherlandish Painting," in idem, *The Practice of Persuasion* (Ithaca, London: Cornell University Press, 2001), pp. 8-41.

tain in their deep structure something which makes them rather difficult to deal with – that is, the art. The general theory of art forms a part of philosophical aesthetics and we can choose from several definitions of the nature of art;³ what they have in common might be formulated as the conviction of a transcendental quality of the “artistic core” of the works of art. For our present theme, we will stress only one point from this rather complex field: the methodological problem created by precisely this status of artworks. The hermeneutics of visual arts have to come to terms not only with the well-known obstacles in the way of any interpretation, but also with two rather important additional ones. The first one stems from the just mentioned special status of artworks: the conviction that any talk about art must be based on its artistic nature, is precisely what makes art historical texts often elusive and many art historical methods rather subjective. The second hermeneutic problem of art history is based on the complexities inherent in translating visual images into the intentionally one-dimensional and unambiguous words of a scholarly discourse. While the second of these problems came into focus only in the last decades, the first one lay at the core of developments in art history during the late 19th and most of the 20th centuries.

The most widely accepted solution to the question of how to properly include the “artistic” nature of the works of art into a modern scientific concept, was by placing stress upon pure form as separate from both contents and meaning. Such a separation was always acknowledged as rather superficial and was mostly admitted to be only a working procedure. Nevertheless, the treatment of pure form seemed, to most art historical schools since the turn of the century, to be the only possible way to deal properly with art. Moreover, the development of specific methods of understanding and interpreting forms of artwork and of constructing their history from such an understanding, served very well the growing wish for the emancipation of art history from its birthplace inside history *sensu lato*, nurtured by the wish

3 One of the recent standard handbooks on the theory of art is Gordon Graham, *Philosophy of the Arts* (London: Routledge, 1997).

to have special university professorships established. The coincidence of the formal character of the art historical approach with preoccupations of contemporary visual arts since the 1860s is clearly visible. While we might be ready to interpret such a coincidence as an expression of “something deeper” and try to read from it information about the inherent mental or spiritual qualities of the 20th century, we should be warned that in so doing we would be, unreflectively, using the methods of the Hegelian, so to say, classical art history, which has been profoundly criticized during the last decades. We must not, for example, forget, that art history itself has executed an important influence on the concepts employed by contemporary art, and, even more important for a historian, that the aesthetics of formalist, or abstract, art have been and are still today accepted by only a rather small segment of society.

The hermeneutically naïve approach to pure form, predominant in the art history of the late 19th and most of the 20th centuries, lies at the root of the paradigm of classical art history which has begun to be considered grossly inadequate during the last decades. What interests us here is one of the important aspects of the formalist art history – the alleged capability of its working procedures to make visible, and easily understandable, those qualities that tended to remain rather obscure to historical research, as long as it was based predominantly on analyses of written sources dealing with political affairs. One of the questions which was very important during a large part of the 20th century, particularly during the 1930s and 1940s, was the theme of nationality. Quite extensive efforts were devoted to the development of scientifically acceptable techniques that would make the national identity of individual artworks visible and recognizable. The moving force behind the conviction concerning the close relationship between nationality and art were, of course, the demands of actual artistic production. It was particularly in the states newly founded after the World War I that the wish to recognize, define and apply a specific national style in public artworks was most powerful. I will, however, concentrate on a different field, where these deep-lying interconnections might easily escape our attention, although they have of-

ten helped to shape our understanding of whole cultural regions: on the reception of European medieval art; that is, on what little has come down to us from the artistic production of the epoch stretching all the way from the 9th to the 15th centuries, a long and quite varied period within itself.

1.2 EXPRESSION OF NATIONAL VALUES AND QUALITIES THROUGH MEDIEVAL ART

Recent art history is slowly moving toward a rather general acceptance of the fact that, during the European middle ages, the “artistic” nature of paintings, sculptures, architecture and so-called precious arts formed a less important aspect of their function, while diverse aspects of socially relevant visual communication were much more pronounced. The classical art historical paradigm has, however, seen the theme quite differently. Together with similar expressions of both Europe before classical Antiquity and, even more importantly, the products of visual culture of the so-called primitive peoples, medieval art was placed in the category of “primitive art.” The term still resounds in labels given by popular culture to the so-called Italian or Netherlandish “Primitives” of the 14th and 15th centuries, respectively, although it has been relinquished in scholarly art history during the last decades.⁴ Such primitive art was understood in the wider context of social Darwinism as being closer and more imminent to the inner core of human nature, than the more sophisticated post-Renaissance art. It was also thus allegedly capable of showing more clearly than later styles the specific national quality of the artists who created it.

Now, the capacity of formalist art history to interpret a “deeper meaning” in the pure form of a work of art was employed to attain the desired state in which any of the notoriously anonymous medieval images could be attributed to a certain European country. The concept itself was differentiated according to the meaning given to the term “nation.” In 1933 and 1936, at the

4 Hayden B. Maginnis, “Reflections on Formalism: The Post-Impressionists and the Early Italians,” *Art History* 19 (1996), pp. 191-207.

international congresses of art history in Stockholm and Basle, an important part of the proceedings was devoted to scholarly attempts at fulfilling the demands of contemporary society and developing reliable nation-telling methods for anonymous art. Most of the approaches were based on ethnic or racial concepts, because both ethnicity and primitive art shared a place in the sphere of the natural, innate, unchangeable and non-reflected core of both individual humans and whole nations.

The prevailing atmosphere was strong and seductive, so that even Great Britain's leading art historian wrote a treatise demonstrating *the Englishness of English Art*.⁵ No wonder, however, that we encounter the nation-telling activities at their strongest in the countries with a split national, or ethnic, self-consciousness. In the West, these were, above all, Belgium and Alsace-Lorraine. In Central Europe, there was not a single country that could remain aloof from ethnic strife over medieval art. I will return to the shaky terrain of Central Europe in the second part of my text, where concrete examples will be presented. For now, let us stress some of the more general points. The whole procedure was based on an assumption of unquestioned and total continuity between the medieval nations and the modern ones. Another interesting aspect is the position of high authority given to the methods and results of the natural sciences of the period. To rely on them has been – and still is – very seductive for art history, which remains a bit insecure over the undeniable subjective lean of its methods and procedures. In this case, it meant that the ethnic differentiation was explained on the basis of race and understood as natural and unchangeable. Artistic expression was seen as an ethnic, or racial, attribute, to the same degree as were language or the shape of skulls.

At this point, I must introduce another peculiar category, that of the psychology of forms. Since the 1920s, there has existed a strong tendency in art history to use psychological categories as a matrix with which to interpret visual forms. While this approach seems rather sensible if applied to more or less

5 Nicolaus Pevsner, *The Englishness of English Art* (London, 1937).

contemporary art, we have recently recognized that it can be thoroughly misleading if applied to art created in past (or foreign) cultures. Forms of artistic expression are today understood as means relatively freely selected to proclaim certain meanings. These meanings were in the past epochs, namely in the Middle Ages, related predominantly to the function of artworks as pertaining to the social visual communication, and only marginally to individual expression of inner convictions and emotions of the artist himself – which is, of course, the predominant aspect in the context of industrial, or modern, European culture. To give an example of the ensuing differences in interpretation, I offer the case of the specific dynamic qualities of late Gothic sculpture from the circle of Veit Stoss, which used to be interpreted as expressing the typically German spirit of the dramatic pronouncement of spiritual empathy, while the more recent explanation tends to see in them, above all, instances of artistic virtuosity, highly appreciated by the contemporary public both in Germany and Renaissance Italy.⁶

Based on this psychology of style, a whole set of categories were constructed during the 1920s and 1930s that helped to distinguish the formal characteristics of individual nations and thus it became possible to tell, for example, which of the works of art in the new states that have arisen from the Austro-Hungarian monarchy after 1918 belong to each of them. A telling example may be found in the magnificent altarpiece created sometime in the 1430s or 1440s for the parish church of the Czech town of Znojmo, lying in southern Moravia close to the Austrian border, and inhabited by both Czech and German speakers in a 50:50 ratio throughout its history (up to 1945). On the basis of the dramatic and expressionist character of its carvings, it was, in the 1930s, attributed to a Bavarian artist active in Vienna. The ends to which these methods can lead are made visible by the

6 Cf., for example, the relevant chapters in Wilhelm Pinder, *Die deutsche Plastik vom ausgehenden Mittelalter bis zum Ende der Renaissance (Handbuch der Kunstgeschichte, II)* (Wildpark-Potsdam, 1929); and Michael Baxandall, *Limewood Sculptors of Renaissance Germany* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1980).

learned opinions expressed in the 1940s in a Nazi context. The reliefs were attributed to two carvers, with the borderline somewhere in the axis of the central cross of Christ. The formal qualities of the whole were typical “*of the central Bajuvarian art; that is, crudeness, loudness, the daring working out of new paths and a wild obsession in both expression and method. [...] The left half, with figures more heavy and plebeian, was undoubtedly made by the main master who came from Bavaria and who was also responsible for the overall design. The right half comes from a hand not less gifted, but finer and more conciliatory, which is more in accord with the character of the Danube area.*”⁷ The Altarpiece from Znojmo thus provided an especially clear proof of the close and immediate relationship between the *Ostmarkstämme* and the *bajuvarisches Stammland*, but also of the subtle differences between them.

1.3 MEDIEVAL ARTISTIC MONUMENTS AS DOCUMENTS OF DEEP NATIONAL ROOTS

The precise attribution of artworks to individual nations in Central Europe was important for a quite specific reason. An uninterrupted line of artistic development; i.e., a continuous national story of art, was – and, in fact, still is – considered an important part of the formation of a national self-consciousness. Not only does art visibly show specific national, or ethnic, qualities, but the very existence of important medieval artistic monuments provides a visible proof of the material roots of the nation in its own land. Folklore could serve the same purpose, but old art represents, at the same time, the participation of the nation in the development of the world spirit, in the Hegelian sense. In contrast to old literature or music, works of visual art are relatively easily accessible to the general public and are capable of being installed in museums. The institution of a public art museum containing old art was inaugurated during the French

⁷ Karl Oettinger, “Der blütezeit der Münchener gotischen Malerei,” *Zeitschrift des deutschen Vereins für Kunstwissenschaft* 7 (1940), pp. 217-224; and *ibid.* 8 (1941), pp. 17-30, cited from p. 29.

Revolution.⁸ In the Central European political situation of the second half of the 19th century, museums, often called “national,” served the important role of being not only “temples of the Muses,” but also a kind of national sanctuary. A typical case in point is provided by the National Museum in Prague, whose monumental building, opened in 1881, also contains central rooms equipped as a “national Pantheon” and used as a place for the laying in state of important personalities of the Czech national emancipation movement.

The dominant concept of 20th century classical art history had to reconcile the conviction of a general development of art as a projection of the developments of the world spirit with the growing demands for national specification of the continual story of local art, and had to do it within a framework of values that preferred innovation and originality over tradition and repetition. The concept that succeeded in meeting such partially antagonistic demands was formulated in the 1930s as the “law of transgression.” According to this concept, the progressive initiative in the development of styles, which, as a whole, represents the unified development of art (*ars una*), was seen as moving from one country to another. New styles are born in different countries according to the degree to which the specific inner formal qualities of each style correspond to the innate psychological qualities and tendencies of each nation. It is, therefore, not surprising, that not every country and nation has quality examples of each of the successive artistic styles. On the other hand, such monuments of art, both movable and immovable – i.e., both architecture and images – that are to be found in each country, attest to important aspects of its national identity and must be cared for accordingly.

The German origin of the concept of the care, or cult, of monuments is attested by the difficulties that the term *Denkmalpflege* poses during translation into other languages. It is important that, up to now, the cult of monuments is typically a

8 Francis Haskell, *History and Its Images: Art and the Interpretation of the Past* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1993).

state project in Central Europe (and in France). On the other hand, the English speaking cultural sphere, for example, has difficulties understanding the concept at all. The alternative concept of “cultural heritage” brings practical results equal to those of the state system, whose political connotations are clearly visible in this comparison. The monuments of architecture form a natural part of the everyday lives of contemporary people and a large group of them, such as the churches, serve still more or less the same function as that for which they were created. This often arouses strong initiatives on the part of the users to make changes in the building so that it would better fit the actual demands of sanitary and technical equipment. The institutional care of monuments represents a deeply conservative attitude in this respect in any political system, opposed by the prophets of modernity and by the anarchists: Karel Teige, the leading Czech left-wing surrealist and architect of the 1930s and 1940s, demanded that the Renaissance Belvedere in Prague be either turned into a modern dancing bar, or torn down. The central European Communist regimes from 1950-80 often realized such acts to demonstrate their power and ideology. A good example is the 13th century Dominican and University church of St. Paul’s in Leipzig, which was blown up in 1968. A different aspect of the typical political role of this practical art historical discipline is provided by the cult of monuments in Austria in the last decades of the 19th century. It had played an important role in the conceptual secularization of such artworks that could not be taken out of their original religious context.⁹

Movable images were most usually moved into museums, where they could be more or less safe from the actual demands of contemporary society. They present another kind of challenge for art history in that they have to be presented to the public, because they have shifted from the sphere of specific social functions, for which they were once created, to the sphere of art. Today, they occupy an important position in the context

9 Margaret Olin, “The Cult of Monuments as a State Religion in Late 19th Century Austria,” *Wiener Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte* 38 (1985), pp. 177-198.

of elite cultural values, including the important function of the accumulation of money. Images must be manipulated in a special way if we want to find a place for them in the context of popular culture. The important tool in achieving this is a special kind of performance – a large temporary exhibition. The first of its kind was the exhibition of the so-called Flemish Primitives, organized in the Bruges in 1902 as a pronouncement of the Belgian national identity of this important stylistic group, in defense against both German and French claims to it.¹⁰ In our times, the big art exhibition has moved into the sphere of “edutainment,” and its role in staging the theme of national self-awareness appears only in specific cases.

2.1 GERMAN-SPEAKING ART HISTORY

Should we turn to a study of the specific instances of the nationalistic matrix active in explaining medieval art in Central Europe, we must turn first to German-speaking art history.¹¹ During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it was here that modern art history as field of scientific research was established. The initial interest focused on the art of the classical Antiquity and of the Renaissance, but medieval art took a dominant position after the World War I.¹²

The German interest in medieval art was rooted a century earlier, in the Romantic period, when it started to be understood as a pronouncement of the German spirit in contrast to the classical styles, which embodied the spirit of the southern, Latin nations. In the early decades of the 20th century, we can recognize a differentiation between the accents of the Viennese and Berlin art historical schools. While the art historians in Vienna

10 Francis Haskell, *The Ephemeral Museum: Old Master Paintings and the Rise of the Art Exhibition* (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 2000).

11 In the 2nd part of my text, the selected national art historiographies are questioned solely from the point of view of their relation to the question of nationalism, leaving all the other aspects aside.

12 I suspect a direct connection with the rise of the national question in Central Europe, but, so far, I have not been able to document it precisely.

tended to support the official, transnational ideology of the Hapsburg empire with their concept of *ars una* lacking any specific ethnic differentiation, the Berlin school produced, in the personality of Wilhelm Pinder, the main proponent of the formal analytic art historical methods used for national identification.¹³ The 1920s and 1930s saw the appearance of numerous art historical studies of medieval art created in the areas of Central Europe inhabited by a German-speaking populace outside the borders of modern Germany. These studies were not understood as political pamphlets, but they belonged to the firm core of the science of art history and were understood as “objective” because their approach was based on formal analysis and on the so-called laws of artistic development. The nationalistic bent was, however, present in the methods themselves, so that art history may be called a nationalistic scholarly discipline from its beginnings and in very deep levels of its structure.¹⁴

The authors suggested a unique German form of artistic expression, which can be identified in the medieval art of areas such as the Spiš (Zips) region in Slovakia,¹⁵ Transylvania (Siebenbürgen) in modern Romania¹⁶ and the Pomerania (Pommern) in modern Poland.¹⁷ A mixed national character in medieval art, which was even too strongly influenced by the local Slavic milieu, was recognized in Bohemia.¹⁸ A similar “weakening”

13 On the Vienna School cf. Ján Bakoš, “The Vienna School’s Views of the Structure of the Art Historical Process,” *Akten des 25. Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte* 1 (Wien, Köln, Graz, 1984), pp. 117-122. For an extended version accompanied by other texts on the theme see in idem, *Štyri trasy metodológie umenia* (Bratislava: Veda, 2000). On Wilhelm Pinder cf. Marlite Halbertsma, *Wilhelm Pinder und die deutsche Kunstgeschichte* (Worms, 1992). Cf. also Heinrich Dilly, *Deutsche Kunsthistoriker 1933-1945* (München, 1988).

14 Robert Suckale, *Kunst in Deutschland. Von Karl dem Grossen bis heute* (Köln am Rhein: DuMont, 1998), pp. 8-13.

15 Oskar Schürer, Erich Wiese, *Deutsche Kunst in der Zips* (Brünn, Wien, Leipzig, 1938).

16 Victor Roth, *Die deutsche Kunst in Siebenbürgen* (Leipzig, 1934).

17 Karl-Heinz Clasen, *Die mittellaterliche Bildhauerkunst in Deutschordensland Preussen* (Berlin, 1939).

18 Karl Oettinger, “Altböhmische Malerei,” *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 6 (1937), pp. 397-406; Karl M. Swoboda, *Zum deutschen Anteil an*

of the true German spirit was seen in the medieval art of the Austrian segment of the Danube basin.¹⁹ A special case in point appears in the studies devoted to smaller “islands” of predominantly German-speaking settlement, such as Krakow in Poland or Bratislava in Czechoslovakia. The alleged existence of a typical German nature in the medieval art of these countries provided strong support to the claim of a unified German nation, existing outside modern state boundaries.²⁰

During the Nazi era, the nationalistic tendency in the interpretation of medieval art reached a kind of apex. The care of monuments faced the unparalleled challenge of protecting old art from being destroyed by the war. The concept of old, predominantly medieval artworks as important witnesses to the national self-consciousness lay at the basis of the truly heroic plan and practical execution of salvaging the artistic monuments into safe depots. Thanks to the high social position of pre-war German art history and to the efficient state system of the cult of the monuments, most of the old paintings and sculptures in Germany and its occupied territories came down to us unscathed, although the churches and museums, where they used to be found before the war, fell in ashes and ruins. Although the racially inspired nationalist arguments were abandoned after the war, the idea of a German cultural predominance in Central Europe is fading but rather slowly. Most of its proponents continued both their research and teaching up to the 1970s, and one of the key studies advocating the inability of the Slavic peoples to create progressive artistic values in the Middle Ages was published in 1974 – though it met an almost universally negative critical

der Kunst der Sudetenländern. Beiträge zur Geschichte der Kunst in Sudetenraum, I (Brünn, 1938); Otto Kletzl, *Die deutsche Kunst in Böhmen und Mähren* (Prag, 1941).

19 Oettinger, “Der blütezeit der Münchener gotischen Malerei.”

20 Adam S. Labuda, “Die Ostsiedlung und die gotische Kunst. Begriffe und Realitäten,” in *Artistic Exchange – Künstlerischer Austausch. Akten des 28. Kongresses für Kunstgeschichte 2* (Berlin, 1993), pp. 31-38; idem, “...eine von sinnvollen Zweckgefühlen erfüllte, herbe und großartige Kolonialkunst...,” in *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 56 (1993), pp. 1-17.

response.²¹ The change was brought by the generation of German-speaking art historians who began their careers after 1968, but relics of the earlier nationalistic approach are still to be found in many an interpretation, though mostly only on the unreflected level of hidden presumptions and terminology.

2.2 CZECHOSLOVAK (CZECH) ART HISTORY

After the creation of individual national states succeeding the Austro-Hungarian empire in 1918, one of the tasks of their intellectual elites was the formulation of new stories of national art, suited to the new state boundaries, and the establishment of state systems of the cult of monuments. In Czechoslovakia, the main center of art historical activity was the capital, Prague. (The special case of Slovakia will be discussed separately – see 2.4.) The modern national identity of the Czechs was based predominantly on a strong language differentiation, and so the inherently insecure language character of visual arts relegated them to a secondary position in the framework of the emancipation movement. The corpus of Czech national artists was set up only after 1912, when the necessity to separate Czech paintings from the rest of the central artistic collection arose. If differentiation was difficult for the recently deceased artists, it was, of course, much more difficult to do so for the medieval ones. The question of the national identity of medieval artists belonged rather to the context of popular culture, nurtured by the surviving Romantic approach. Thus, important medieval artists' names, which were rendered in German or Latin in the relevant historical sources, were used in their Czech variants (Theoderic – Dětřich) and any convincingly Czech-speaking place of origin was stressed (Matthias Rejsek from Prostějov). A strange case in point is illustrated by the probably falsified, or at least extensively retouched, inscriptions over the busts in the triforium of the Prague cathedral of St. Vitus. According to the inscriptions, the chief architect and sculptor, Peter Parler, came to Prague in 1356

21 Karl-Heinz Clasen, *Der Meister der Schönen Madonnen* (New York, Berlin, 1970).

“de Polonia”; i.e., from Slavic Poland (instead of the correct reading “de Colonia,” from Cologne).²²

Czechoslovak art history between the wars was, with few exceptions, derived from the Vienna school.²³ Although there existed two chairs of art history at both the Czech and the German Prague universities (divided since 1874), many of the more active youth went rather to study in Vienna, particularly due to the attraction of the great personality of the Czech native, Max Dvořák. Both his pupils and the students of his follower, Vojtěch Birnbaum (who taught in Prague from 1919, although not in the position of a professor until 1927), occupied all the key positions in the art history establishment. The conviction that only the Vienna school of art history represents a true scientific approach was deeply rooted in Czech art history up to the end of the 20th century.²⁴ Such a “Viennese” orientation brought with it a relatively weak interest in research into the national properties of our old art; in this respect this field had differed from the research into the art of the 19th century Czech emancipation movement, which used to be seen through an exclusively national matrix.

The alleged strictly scientific and objective character of German written classical art history moved Czech art historians to accept the differentiation made between typically German and typically Slavic formal features that were particularly sought in medieval art. The basic Slavic (and, at the same time, Czech) formal character was described as “soft” and “lyrical.” According to the “law of transgression,” elaborated most carefully by Birnbaum, this helped to explain the inherently, or naturally,

22 For the latest overview see *Petr Parlér 1399-1999* (Praha: Prague Castle, 1999), pp. 149-157; and Jaromír Neumann, “Malíř František Horčíčka a Hankova falza,” in *Falza a podvody české historie* (Praha: Akropolis, 2001), pp. 109-127.

23 One of the rare exceptions was the German-speaking Prague art historian Josef Opitz. On the paradoxes of his life cf. Milena Bartlová, “Život a dílo Josefa Opitze,” in *Gotické malířství a sochařství v severozápadních Čechách* (Ústí nad Labem: Albis international, 1999), pp. 8-24.

24 It lies at the bases of the survey of Czech art history *Kapitoly z českého dějepisu umění*, I-II (Praha: Odeon, 1987).

Czech character of the art of the “Beautiful Style” of around 1400. After World War II, this concept was further elaborated to provide historical arguments for legitimating the new national situation created by the transfer of the German-speaking population in 1945. Moreover, clues in the formal structure of medieval images were sought in order to show that medieval art expressed the wishes of the Slavonic populace of the country to draw closer to the Slavs in the East than to the Germans in the West.²⁵

Czechoslovak art history shared another typical feature of its approach with the Hungarians and the Poles (and, after World War II, even the Austrians): a strong tendency to overlook close connections to the neighboring German-speaking countries in favor of finding alleged relationships directly with the centers of artistic development in the Latin countries; i.e., in France and Italy. This trend must be seen in the actual political context and as a reaction to the above-mentioned attempts from the German side to claim the highest quality medieval art in the whole of Central Europe for the local German populace. Because the regions of Silesia and Lusatia were inhabited by German speakers, the fact of their historical affiliation to the Bohemian Crown was intentionally overlooked and their art was never included in the story of Czech art. If confronted with the historical processes as we now understand them, this equalled the willing embrace of an alien identity. Silesia and its medieval (and Baroque) art represent all the complexities of the national implications of historical research in Central Europe: between the 14th and 18th centuries Silesia was one of the lands of the Crown of Bohemia; up to 1945 it was understood to be a completely German country and was studied accordingly; while after 1945 it was incorporated into Polish history and, from the Polish side, its art is conceived as an integral part of a unified Polish national whole.

25 For more detail, see Milena Bartlová, “‘Slavonic Features’ of Bohemian Medieval Painting from the Viewpoints of Racism and Marxism-Leninism,” *Symposium “Ostmitteleuropäische Kunsthistoriographien und der nationale Diskurs”* (Humboldt-Universität, Berlin, June 28-30, 2001) (proceedings in print).

In 1933, one of the leading Czech art historians formulated another attempt at defining the specific formal character of Czech art. Based on his analyses of prehistoric art, he arrived at the concept of “rusticalisation.”²⁶ According to this theory, what makes the forms of “Czechoslovak” art typical is their reduction of sophistication and acquisition of a certain coarseness in comparison to their sources in the artistic contexts of France and Italy. These qualities can be interpreted positively as heightening their honesty and closeness to the people (in the sense of the category of *Volk*). The concept of rusticalisation was accepted mainly for use in the interpretation of Bohemian art up to the 14th century (i.e., before the creative spirit transgressed to Bohemia during the reign of Charles IV) and of Gothic art in Slovakia, but it was most influential in the unique attempt at an art historical evaluation of historical folklore.²⁷

2.3 HUNGARIAN ART HISTORY

Hungary found itself in quite a different situation from Czechoslovakia in 1918. While Czech politics during the emancipation period rarely claimed the larger extension of the past state borders of the historical Crown of Bohemia, the Hungarians had to cope suddenly with a radically diminished state. From the point of view of the demand for a continuous art history, this situation became quite impossible to bear – the area which now formed the Hungarian state was almost devoid of old art monuments due to the Turkish wars and a century of Turkish occupation. On the contrary, both Upper Hungary, now in Czechoslovakia, and Transylvania, now in Romania, held most of the medieval art works to come down from the medieval Hungarian state. This situation has caused a rather unique situation in Hun-

26 Václav V. Štech, “Rustikalisace jako činitel slohového vývoje,” in idem, *Pod povrchem tvarů* (Praha: Václav Petr, 1941), pp. 20-26 (translation of the contribution of V.V. Štech on the Congress of Art History held in Stockholm in 1933).

27 Václav Mencl, *Lidová architektura v Československu* (Praha, 1980), esp. pp. 587-611.

garian art history, which became probably the most faithful heir to the universalistic tradition of the School of Vienna.²⁸

The Hungarian concept of national art history remained based on the non-ethnic definition of nation, replaced by the domination of the state, as projected into the Middle Ages from the rather totalitarian state idea of the 20th century. This remained the dominating concept, although the tendency to project the identification of the Hungarian state with Magyar ethnicity back into the Middle Ages was also present. In this respect, the Hungarian concept of national art history was bound to clash with the respective histories of both Romania and Czechoslovakia (and Slovakia). Relative weight was, in this connection, shifted to both periods when the role of the extant monuments in both of the now neighboring countries was not pronounced; i.e., to the Romanesque and, above all, the Renaissance. The fragmented artworks extant from the period of the reign of King Matthias Corvinus represent the earliest valuable acceptance of Italian Renaissance art this side of the Alps, and thus throw a glamorous light on Hungarian art history.

Medieval works of art from the area of the medieval Hungarian state which have come down to us are concentrated, predominantly, in the region of north-eastern Slovakia, which neighbors Poland and, in fact, an important group of the local towns remained in the hands of Polish rulers between the 15th and 18th centuries. In addition to local economic ties, this has led to the fact that a large number of the artworks can be attributed as more or less direct or close derivatives from workshops active in Krakow. This has called forth a dispute between the Hungarian and Polish art historians as to which of the national stories of art these objects should be incorporated into. Slovak, and Czechoslovak, art historians remained reserved; i.e., none of them took up the theme during the "Niedzice Seminaria," organized jointly by all three sides in a small township in the Tatra mountains region, which is now in Poland, but historically belonged

28 Ernő Marosi, ed., *Die ungarische Kunstgeschichte und die Wiener Schule 1846-1930* (Budapest, 1986); György E. Szönyi, "Warburg's Institution in Light of Postmodern Challenges," *Umění* 49 (2001), pp. 3-10.

to Upper Hungary or Slovakia. The reserve may be felt to be justified by the fact that a close examination shows that, in such cases, it is impossible to disentangle the theme of national attribution of medieval artworks while remaining in the framework of the classical art historical paradigm.

2.4 SLOVAK ART HISTORY

There was an absence of art historians among the Slovak intellectuals after 1918, probably because of the strong predominance given to folklore culture in the process of self-identification of the Slovak nation and also thanks to the influence of the ideas of the Calvinist reformation ideas in the emancipationist circles.²⁹ Art history was brought to Slovakia by the Czechs. During the 1920s, a professorship at the newly established Comenius university in Bratislava was founded and a system of a state cult of monuments introduced. Still, the number of Czechoslovak and Slovak art historians grew only slowly in meeting the challenges provided by both the German and Hungarian claims to the medieval art in the region of Slovakia. The first major step in the incorporation of the Slovak art history into the new framework was the big exhibition, “Art in Slovakia,” held in Prague in 1938, paradoxically only a few months before the first breakup of the Czechoslovak state.

The problematic aspect of this patronizing of Slovak art history was, of course, the tendency to supplant the dominance of the Hungarian state point of view with the ethnically based Czech one. Medieval art was considered an especially suitable terrain for this construct: as we have seen, the influential “Beautiful Style” of around 1400 was understood as a typical expression of the Czech nation and, in Slovakia, there could be found some extremely late cases of its application even after 1450.³⁰ It should not surprise us that an exponent of this approach held the posi-

29 Ján Bakoš, “O umeleckohistorickom vedomí na Slovensku,” in idem, *Periféria a symbolický skok* (Bratislava: Kalligram, 2000), pp. 151-164.

30 Karol Vaculík, *Gotické umenie Slovenska* (Bratislava, Zvolen: Slovenská národná galéria, 1975), pp. 44-47.

tion of director of the Slovak National Gallery between the years 1964 and 1989 (and that of deputy director from its foundation in 1951). An alternative construct of the history of medieval art in Slovakia tried to make it a self-sufficient territory, incorporated into the larger context of Central Europe.³¹ Drawing this concept to its extreme was the theory that tried to strengthen self-sufficiency at the cost of the incorporation, thus attempting to tell a continuous story of medieval art in Slovakia that would express the local developments as closed to outside influences.³² This approach is, however, untenable in view of the inherent variety of medieval art in Slovakia, which itself perfectly mirrors the decentralized social relations in the country.

Slovakia thus presents a most telling example of the problems posed by the use of the nationalistic matrix in the interpretation of art history. On the one hand, there exists a demand to tell a continuous story of national art, starting in the early Middle Ages, which could attest to the alleged continuous presence of the local ethnic group in the country and, at the same time, to its participation in the general developments of the “world spirit.” On the other hand, the turns of historical fate make it virtually impossible to attribute the medieval artworks to only one of the nations which pronounce a claim to it. Still, the framework of the Slovak state, though nonexistent in the Middle Ages, is a necessary matrix for any historio-graphical construct of a “story of art” that would be acceptable to the local people.

3 . AN OUTLOOK FOR THE FUTURE OF A DISCIPLINE

When the German-dominated applications of the “law of transgression” had to be discarded after World War II, the progressivist value system posed another important question: how

31 Jaromír Homolka, *Gotická plastika na Slovensku* (Bratislava: Tatran, 1972); theoretically elaborated by Ján Bakoš, “Český dejepis umenia a Slovensko,” *Umění* 44 (1986), pp. 211-228; idem, “Jaromír Homolka – historik stredovekého umenia Slovenska,” *Ars* 1-3 (1996), pp. 3-10.

32 For a comprehensive discussion, see, Anton C. Glatz, “Gothic Art,” in *Art of Slovakia. Permanent Exhibitions of the Slovak National Gallery* (Bratislava: Slovenská národná galéria, 1994).

can the nations living on the periphery of European cultural development assess the quality of their national art if all of the inventions (which carry the highest value label in progressivism) appeared in the center? The question of the relationship between the center and periphery was prominent during the final decades of the last century and it dominated the World Congress of Art History in Washington in 1986. We should not be surprised to find that some of the widely acknowledged answers were given by art historians from our part of Europe. One of the concepts offered suggests a specific value “added” to the new stylistic inventions when they are accepted by the peripheral nations: here the artists are more free in their dealing with imported forms and thus they may reach a quality of expression that is out of the reach of artists at the center, bound as they are by a social system of visual conventions.³³ Another suggestion tries to transcend the progressivist value system and to interpret art in the provinces as a pronouncement of local peoples in their specific historical situation and to evaluate it from their point of view, not from the vantage point of the center. The stress is not, in this case, seen on the part of those who have created the artworks and who would be responsible for its “art” quality, but on the part of the donors or patrons (who were, in fact, called “auctores” in medieval Latin). Their initiative in ordering artworks from workshops operating in the large towns of what are nowadays different states is considered to be the culturally decisive factor.³⁴

The current political situation in unifying Europe provides another possible approach – that of transcending the national categories themselves. Such cases as the Slovak situation (and many others like it) could only be solved by changing our vantage point and replacing the individual national states of the 20th

33 Jan Białostocki, “Some Values of Artistic peripheries,” in *Acts of the 26th World Congress of Art History* (Washington, 1986).

34 Ján Bakoš, “Rekonstruieren oder konstruieren wir die Geschichte der Kunst? Beispiel: Die Kunst der Slowakei,” *Kunstchronik* 50 (2002), pp. 122-130. For a more extensive version of the text together with other studies on the theme, see in Bakoš, *Periféria a symbolický skok*.

century by a “cultural region” of Central Europe. An argument over its definition has been under way for some decades. While the convenient term “Mitteleuropa” was still burdened with connections of Greater Germany, there appeared a category of “Ostmitteleuropa” in the 1960s.³⁵ It was designed by an internationally renowned Polish art historian to provide a sharp distinction between, on the one hand, Poland (including its historical eastern reaches), Hungary, Romania and Czechoslovakia, and, on the other hand, the Soviet Union. But even this term has an infamous past, as it was used to describe the “colonial regions” in which Germans used to live outside of the borders of their state.³⁶ After 1990, the term lost its actual significance and there are strong arguments proposed in favor of replacing it with new-old “Mitteleuropa.”³⁷ The main difference between the two terms lies in the inclusion – or exclusion – of the German-speaking countries, including Austria, which were relegated by the term “Ostmitteluropa” to belonging to “the West,” although Vienna lies well to the east of Prague, Brno, Wrocław (Breslau, Vratislav) and Poznań (Posen).

Art history itself is, of course, unable to solve any of the problems associated with the nationalist ideas in the complex situation of Central Europe. What it can and should do, however, is to reflect its own approaches, methods and procedures, in order to carefully handle the nationalist question. The program of possible new interpretations can be seen in two directions. First, the perspective of individual national states could be transcended and supplemented, perhaps even supplanted, by a Central European perspective. Second, the important role of historical artworks in their original place and context could be seen in their ability to provide concrete, even palpable, connections with

35 Jan Białostocki, *The Art of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe* (Ithaca, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1976).

36 Labuda, “Die Ostsiedlung und die gotische Kunst...”

37 Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister and the City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe 1450-1800* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995), esp. pp. 12-27. The conference referred to in note 25 has brought several contributions complementing the argument.

the past of local communities, leaving the larger whole of a modern national state aside. The cult of monuments and the arrangement of large exhibitions can offer the possibility of meeting true material art objects, whose prestige steadily grows in the face of still easier technologies of image multiplication. But – in variance from the looming concepts of the past two centuries – the relevant interpretation of past artworks does not have to be mediated through the “larger wholes” of an ethnic group or a national state.