Czech Cubism

Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts 1910–1925

Edited by
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With texts by
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Published in 1992 by Laurence King Publishing

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN 1 85669 030 x

Printed and bound in Canada

Design and production
Stefanie Lew
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Special thanks to
Tim Fast, Antje Fritsch, Clare Jacobson, Wolf-Dieter Thiem, Erika Updike, Ann C. Urban, and Lisa Wolf

The exhibition on which this book is based was prepared by the Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague, in collaboration with the National Technical Museum, Prague, and Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein, Germany.

The exhibition was realised under the patronage of Václav Havel, President, Czechoslovak Federal Republic, and Richard von Weizsäcker, President, German Federal Republic.

Acknowledgments
The following individuals and institutions assisted with the demanding preparations of the exhibition:
Dr. Kateřina Dostálová, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague
Dr. Karel Holešovský, Moravian Gallery, Brno
Dr. Daniela Karasová, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague
Stanislava Korcová, Prague
Dr. Dagmar Koudelková, Moravian Gallery, Brno
Dr. Hana Lendrová, Regional Museum, Hradec Králové
Dr. Eliska Lysková, Moravian Gallery, Brno
Angelo Raguza, Rome
Jitka Rottová, Prague
Adriena Skálová, painter, member of the Academy
Zdeněk Svoboda, C.Sc., Prague
Dr. Věra Vokáčová, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague
Dr. Mimi Wilms, Stedelijk Hoger Instituut Voor Visuelle Kommunikatieen, Amsterdam
The Embassy of the German Federal Republic in Prague
The organizers of the exhibition wish to express their gratitude for the help and cooperation provided by the above.

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Foreword

About eighty years ago, in 1911, progressive young Czech architects, painters, sculptors, and theoreticians founded the Group of Plastic Artists, and just a year later they exhibited their work at the Municipal Hall in Prague. The following year, they participated in an exhibition in Munich, and in 1914 they were represented at the exhibition of the German Werkbund in Cologne. In a speech he made at the time, V. V. Štech, the Group's theoretician, identified the entry of Czech modern art into the European context as the result of a national culture created over the previous hundred years. He said that Prague had played a decisive role in the process, since it was the only centre and the only point of departure of Czech cultural activity; it thus was part of the spirit of Europe.

After the disruptions of wars and postwar events, the "return to Europe" is very real for Czechs today—not only in terms of culture, not only in Prague, but throughout the nation. The exhibition *Czech Cubism: Architecture and Design, 1910–1925* is one step in this direction: through it we are repaying a debt we owe not only to ourselves, but also to Europe, which is why it was conceived as a travelling exhibition. It is also significant that the last venture of this kind, which uncovered the phenomenon of Czech cubism, took place in Paris in 1966—that is, at a time of political relaxation. Cubist interior work was for the first time extensively incorporated into the 1969 exhibition *Czech Cubism* in Prague. At the very beginning of the years of normalization, the Museum of Decorative Arts managed to include in its exhibition schedule *Czech Cubist Interior*, representing a summation of the museum's specialized activity, but above all, of its collecting efforts. As early as 1951, the director of the museum, E. Poche, had purchased the first cubist furniture, a group by Josef Gočár. To Olga Herbenová (d. 1990), Milena Lamarová, and the other curators of the museum goes the credit for the systematic searching out, acquisition, and restoration of objects, resulting in the creation of the museum's largest and most complete collection. In the eighties, despite definite interest from abroad, it was not possible to exhibit the hitherto unknown material in Europe, although in 1984 the exhibition travelled to Japan.

Since the cubist collection of the Museum of Decorative Arts is linked with the portfolio of architectural drawings deposited at the National Technical Museum, this exhibition of Czech cubism includes the full breadth of its unique three-dimensional aspect—furniture, pictorial documentation, and architecture. The thoroughness of the exhibition was helped in no small measure by the co-operation and interest displayed by the Vitra Design Museum, whose director, Alexander von Vegesack, immediately understood the unusual nature and complexity of the Czech cubist phenomenon and its relationship to modern culture and design.

We hope that the unique contribution of Czech cubism from the early twentieth century will, at the century's end—thanks to this exhibition—reintroduce Czech culture into Europe.

Dr. Helena Koenigsmarková
Assistant Director, Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague

Foreword

More than eighty years ago, when the National Technical Museum at the Schwarzenberg Palace in Prague's Hradčany Castle first opened its collections to the public, visitors could view a large model of the St. Vít cathedral. The establishment of an architectural archive thus became part of the museum's birthright. The archive later evolved into a department of architecture and construction which documents the history of these fields, especially from the nineteenth and the first half of the twentieth centuries. In addition to its large archive, the museum owns an important collection of architectural models, and its technical library, with its wealth of literature on architecture and urbanism, has become essential to scientific research.

The cultural politics of recent years did not favour modern art or avant-garde architecture. Although the times of paying tribute to historicism – the traditionally oriented architecture of the fifties – are long gone, information on and exhibitions of Czech avant-garde work are still inaccessible or nonexistent, both abroad and at home. Architectural cubism is a specific aspect of the avant-garde: in the global context it was the only building style which, in the years 1910–1914 (that is, until the beginning of the First World War) and 1918–1924 (in the form of rondocubism) evolved in both theoretical and practical terms. This exhibition is therefore the first large, conceptually thorough presentation of Czech cubist architecture and design in relation to its time.

When we speak of Czech cubist architecture and design, it is clear that the principal task of preparing and realizing an appropriate exhibition rested with the Museum of Decorative Arts and the National Technical Museum, both in Prague, for these institutions have the most extensive collections and the most knowledgeable staff. (There is also a historical tradition of mutual co-operation: in 1940, during the Second World War, when the National Technical Museum did not have its own building, the Museum of Decorative Arts staged an exhibition called *Toward New Architecture* from the former's collection, dealing with buildings from the years 1918–1940). Another significant factor is the fact that the same circle of designers is involved in both parts of the exhibition. The names Josef Gočár, Pavel Janák, Vlastislav Hofman, Josef Chochol, and Otakar Novotný (other architects, even Jan Kotěra, were, of course, also influenced by cubism) are found on architectural documentation, as well as on furniture creations and designs. This attests to the fact that Czech cubism penetrated into all areas of the arts – the applied arts and architecture as well as fine art; it actually created a style, an aesthetic, and a life style.

This exhibition has an important mission: to remind the Czech public of the refinement of its past culture. It also serves as an invitation to foreigners to visit Prague, since the city, with its centuries of harmoniously blended architecture, richly deserves its label "the Jewel of Europe." A walking tour of the city should also include cubist architecture: Chochol's buildings below Vyšehrad, Gočár's At the Black Mother of God building, the cubist street lamp on Jungmann Square. We hope that this exhibition will serve as a guide.

Ivo Janoušek, Dip. Eng., C.Sc.
Director, National Technical Museum, Prague

Preface

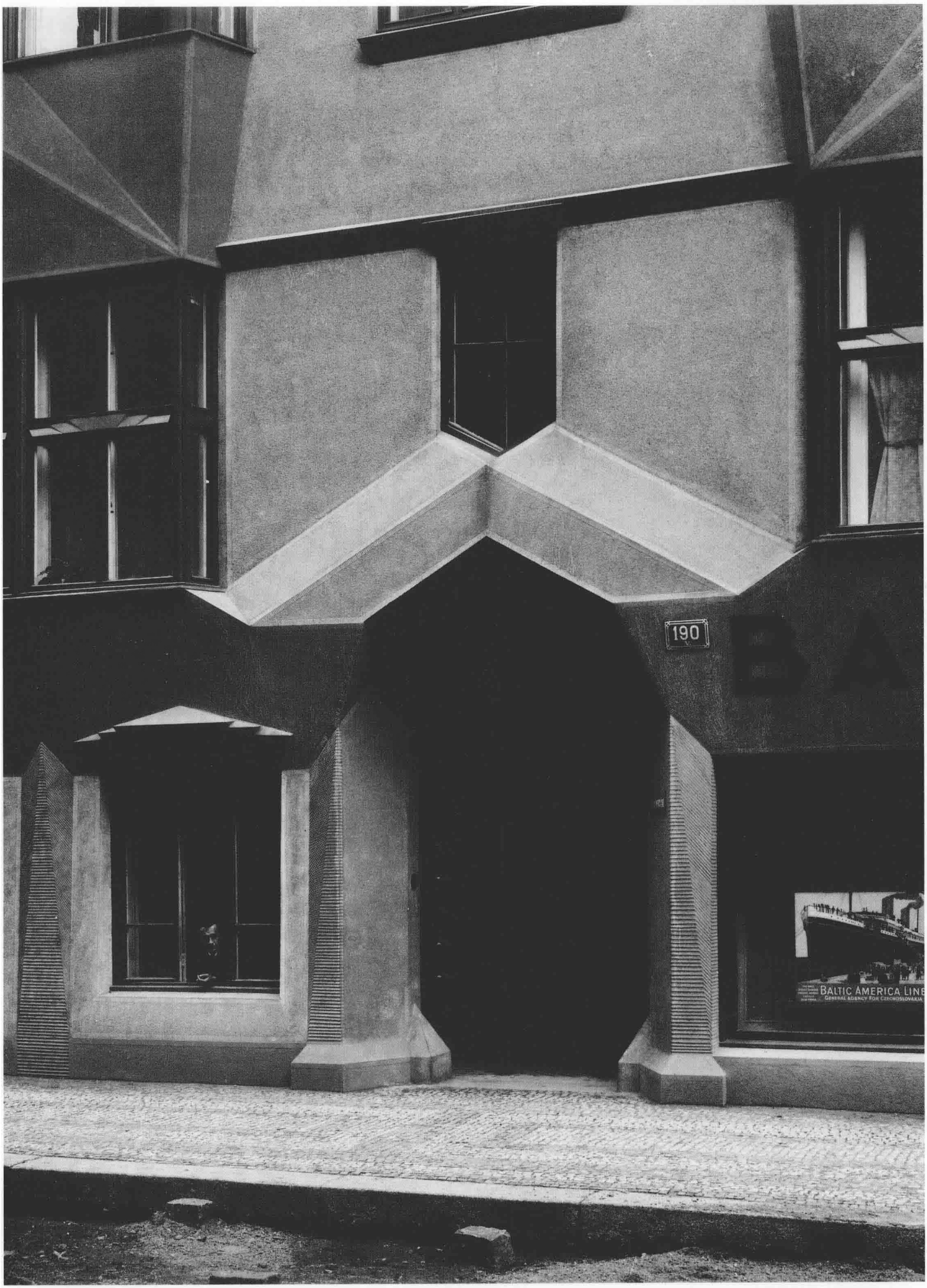
Three decisive influences affected my work on the exhibition *Czech Cubism: Architecture and Design, 1910–1925.* The first was the deconstructivist architecture of our museum, designed by Frank O. Gehry; the second was an earlier project realized in co-operation with the Czechoslovak museums; and the third consisted of the friendly and collegial relations that developed during the collaboration with the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, and especially my respect for the admirable work of the curator Milena Lamarová.

If I had been an art historian I most certainly would have at some point come across the unique national phenomenon of Czech cubism. But I am not an art historian, and so my primary tool was not books and documents, but rather my enthusiasm about the artists and their works, which strengthened my resolve to document the unique collection in Prague's Museum of Decorative Arts and the broad range of architectural drawings and designs at the National Technical Museum in Prague.

Still, without the friendly relationships that were established, we would not have had a strong enough motivation to overcome the complications stemming from the current political transition. Nor would we have established such a lively approach to our theme, which I hope will be reflected in the exhibition.

I also consider the fact that the presidents of our two countries, Václav Havel and Richard von Weizsäcker, are patrons of the exhibition to be a confirmation of our renewed acquaintance and an appeal for more intensive exchanges.

Alexander von Vegesack
Director, Vitra Design Museum, Weil am Rhein



Otakar Novotný, teachers' housing, 1919, detail

On Cubism

Texts and Reflections

Texts and Contexts, 1910–1914

Milena Lamarová

In the period just before the First World War, the atmosphere in Europe was charged, filled with manifestos, programmes, and fantasies, most of them by artists trying to reformulate positions, means, and objectives. As if foreshadowing the coming catastrophic war, there was a feverish search for a model that would express the spiritual foundation of the person in a world increasingly dominated by industry and technology, in which new structural relationships of matter, energy, and space-time were being discovered.

Out of the ruins of the Secession flowed avant-garde European thought from north to south and from west to east, accompanied by anxiety, aggressiveness, protests, and declarations. Its legacy was provocation, cynicism, farce, and mystification: works which continue to excite us, although they have supposedly all been definitively analyzed, categorized, described, and evaluated.

No longer was the avant-garde concerned with only figurative art: it critiqued culture, protested against society. It was concerned with the articulation of a truthful image of the world. It was concerned with life. The spiritual and cultural unity of the nineteenth century had expired; there was nothing left to do but revolt and organize the resistance movement.

This may also explain why the avant-gardes integrated literature, architecture, applied arts, theatre, and dance. The artists themselves became theoreticians and critics. Beyond intellectualization, the gates into the realms of fantasy, utopia, and the world of visions were wide open. On club stages, in groups, newspapers, and magazines, cultural and creative efforts became institutionalized.

The avant-gardes of the first decade of the twentieth century had a very plastic topography. They did, however, have a common thematic denominator: in general, they were directed toward abstract expression. At the same time, they were revising the geometry of space in order to reach an understanding of its composition. In his 1913 essay "Les Peintres cubistes," Apollinaire wrote, "Geometry is for the plastic arts what grammar is for the art of writing. . . . The painters were quite naturally, as if by intuition, drawn toward dealing with possible measures of space, which in the language of modern studios are commonly and concisely referred to as the fourth dimension. . . . It is space as such, the dimension of infinity; it is this which gives plasticity to objects."[1]

Between 1909 and 1912, the Italian futurists published three seminal manifestos. The conclusion of the *Manifesto of the Futurist Painters* contains, among other things, a revolt against the tyranny of the words "harmony" and "taste," praise for every form of originality, regardless of how crazy or forced it might be, and expression and celebration of present-day life, ceaselessly and violently restructured by victorious science. The *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* states, "For us the gesture will no longer be a captured moment of general dynamism; it will simply be immortalized dynamic feeling." The proclamation declares, " . . . motion and light destroy the substantiality of objects."[2] In Kasimir Malevich's *Manifesto of Suprematism*, published in 1915 in Petrograd, is a passage which extends in a broader sense to the problems of applied art. Malevich writes, "The sensations of running, standing, and sitting are first of all plastic sensations, which give impetus to the creation of appropriate 'utilitarian objects' and determine their material appearance. A table, a bed, and a chair are not utilitarian objects, but forms of a creative sensation. Thus the common conviction that all objects of daily use are the result of practical considerations is based on false

assumptions. We have countless opportunities to prove to ourselves that we are never able to recognize the real practical value of things, and we will never manage to construct a truly practical and utilitarian object."[3]

In this context, two noteworthy influences came from northern Europe; as they spread through central Europe they left the same kind of impression as does a photographic negative: an imprint, but of a particular silhouette and hue. The first was the Edvard Munch exhibition, which in the Prague of 1905 caused a cultural explosion, and was greeted as a revelation. Munch's expressionist language aroused an ardent response among Czech artists. The second flowed from the views of German and Viennese modernists, who drew from the reformist tendencies of the Arts and Crafts movement. The German attitude, represented especially by the Werkbund, was directed not toward revolutionary destructiveness, but toward resolution of the relationship between art and production, a goal agreed on by such diverse personalities as Henry van de Velde, Hermann Muthesius, and Richard Riemerschmid, despite Adolf Loos's ironic commentaries.[4]

The German Werkbund (1907) set as its goal "the ennoblement of the artistic crafts, with the co-operation of art, industry, and crafts, through education, promotion, and responsible attitudes toward appropriate issues." Otto Wagner wrote, "Doubtless it may—indeed, must—reach the point that nothing visible to the eye can be created without the blessing of art,"[5] at the very same time as Jan Kotera, in Prague, and Walter Gropius, Richard Riemerschmid, and August Endell, in Germany, were designing the interiors of railway cars, and Peter Behrens was becoming the prototype of the modern industrial designer (his collaboration with AEG Berlin began in 1907).

The 1914 exhibition of the Werkbund in Cologne reflected the uncertainty of a Europe vacillating between the avant-gardes, the crafts, industrial design, and commerce. The interiors by Prague cubist architects drew considerable attention; the exhibition also included Bruno Taut's glass house, and among the other participants were Olbrich, Obrist, van de Velde, Pankok, Behrens, Endell, Gropius, Paul, and Riemerschmid.

Subsequent avant-gardes were aware of all the contradictory realities, but especially of the frustrating relationship between art, production, and commerce. In 1918 appeared the first *Manifesto of De Stijl*, the first *DADA Manifesto*, and Ozenfant and Jeanneret's *Manifesto of Purism*. But times had changed. The bitterness of the First World War had altered everything; the "imperial climate" described by Josef Kroutvor in his study *Fenomén 1910* (Phenomenon 1910) would never return. And yet cubism remained, recognized not as a style or a dogma, but as the point of departure for the modern perception of the world.

If we read even a fragmentary selection of the theoretical texts written between 1910 and 1914 by Prague architects, we recognize the reality, the thoroughness—indeed, the stubbornness—with which they, along with other European avant-gardists, pursued a subjective sense of life.

Notes

1. G. Apollinaire, "Les Peintres cubistes" (Paris, 1913), quoted in M. de Micheli, *Umělecké avantgardy dvacátého století* (Prague, 1964).

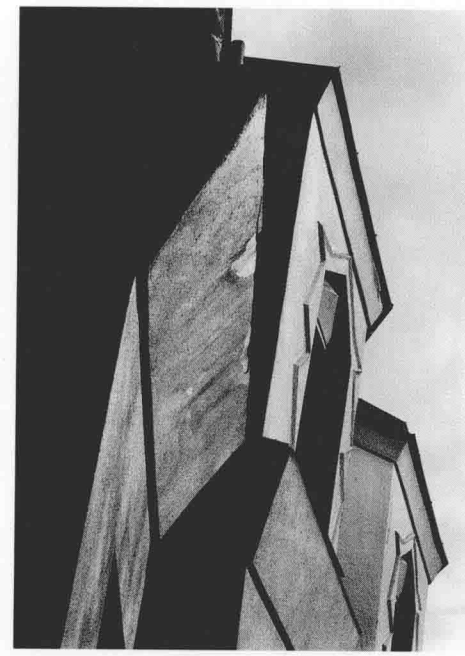
2. Italian futurism was known in Prague. Prampolini designed the set for the Teatro Sinttetico Futurista at the Švanda Theatre in Prague in 1921.

3. Quoted in M. de Micheli, *Umělecké avantgardy dvacátého století* (Prague, 1964).

4. See the essay "Přebyteční" (The Superfluous), quoted in Burkhardt, 1980, p. 104.

5. In Otto Wagner, *Moderne Architektur* (Vienna, 1914), p. 96.

Pavel Janák



J. Gočár, house in Libodřice, 1912–1913, detail

"Od moderní architektury k architektuře" (From Modern Architecture to Architecture)

Styl, vol. 2 (1910), pp. 105–109

Modern architects therefore behaved very materialistically, wanting to base their creations on construction and materials, because the expression of construction and the animation of materials comprise a materialistically narrowed principle; whenever it has appeared in history, it has always appeared at the beginning of new movements, and has always been soon abandoned—in favour of going beyond, toward the architectural form of the whole. The growth of architecture as a responsive, formative, and spiritual creation corresponds with the silencing of the material and construction elements and their subordination to the artistic intention. Even the modern architectural conception of the individualization of material—that is, the extraction of artistic form from the natural and physical properties of material—we find to be materialistic and directionless, and to result in the subordination of the architect's free creativity to the interpretation of material; it is advice and interdiction, which must necessarily result in a condition of flattening and monotony in modern architecture.

. . . We set our abstract thoughts and forms above the individual properties of materials. Not only do we respect, but we count on the strength and bearing properties of materials, which we expose, for the sake of the idea, to certain stresses and tensions.

. . . Finally, we also have more certain ideas for poetry in architecture, through which we elevate poetry from its subordinate position in Wagner's motto. If we have a criticism of modern architecture, it is that until now it contained much poetry in the sense that could be expressed by the term "poetry in architecture," but not enough architectural beauty.

Evolution very soon saw through the absurdity of this kind of appended poetry—which is why it was discarded, and things remained as before—the technical, naked skeleton.

. . . Until now modern architecture understood only—and historically it was the correct evolution—the problems of practical need; it barely understood at all the problem of space or the problem of matter and form. Modern architecture did not recognize these problems, and it was not sufficiently theoretical: this will be its future field of activity, if it is to be architecture.

It is possible to predict the future direction of architecture: creativity, in which artistic thought and abstraction will take over leadership from practicality, which cedes its place. It will advance in its pursuit of plastic form, and in the plastic realization of architectural concepts.

"Užitečnost uměleckého průmyslu" (The Usefulness of Artistic Industry)

Umělecký měsíčník, vol. 1 (1911–1912), pp. 147–149

The seminal reason for the birth of the nineteenth-century industrial arts is therefore not internal and artistic in the sense of art growing a new branch. It has more of a socio-cultural character: ideas and reforms in living, brought about by the democratization of education and by humanitarianism, were added to newly instituted protective and altruistic social benefits. There is no mistake here: tasteful living is more a demand, a prescription, a guide, a notion of cultural hygiene than

a shift in nineteenth-century art; it is more a requirement for sustenance of life than the result of art.

Our interest in the industrial arts goes even further in the following sense: the plastic aspect of objects is more important to us than the utilitarian and motive aspect. To be perfectly clear: the shifting of interest to the plastic side does not mean negation of purpose, nor does it mean an effort to create useless things. Instead, it indicates that artistic interest has grown to the point that we no longer simply want to serve the industrial arts and create, out of a sense of duty, lamps, jewels, and inkwells, because that is what life demands. The minor arts grow in complementarity and conjunction with the rest of art because of our own inner need to create, not just for the good of society and out of necessity. In the past, art was used to create pillows, jewels, and so on; now it expresses itself in cups, trays, and so on. It is incumbent upon artists, who are led by conscious will toward form, to express as broadly as possible the newfound feelings of forms and relationships, to try them out in a number of realities and in all variations, in order to ensure their value and veracity. And production in a single material alone does not suffice: if form is to be a significant part of stylistic composition, it must be purified to the point of abstraction—that is, to its ultimate essence, which is valid in all materials (wood, glass, stone, etc.). It must be able to resist and conquer formally all of these materials without exception. This is how creativity in the minor arts comes to the aid of architecture: it does the preliminary work of architecture and complements its experiences.

In this regard, painters and sculptors will have the freedom of endeavour: they will create forms according to imagination, not market demand, as is the case with the industrial arts; as they do with paintings and sculptures, purchasers will choose this work primarily for its creative side.

"Hranol a pyramida" (The Prism and the Pyramid)

Umělecký měsíčník, vol. 1 (1911–1912), pp. 162–170

All shapes that occur in inanimate nature and are geometrically complex evolved with the collaboration of a third force. The oblique fall of rain is caused by the additional element of wind; similarly, snowdrifts, washouts, ravines, caves, sinkholes, and volcanoes are, in general, either positively or negatively created forms made out of inanimate matter by another invading force, which deforms it and diverts it from the natural form in which it was deposited. Crystallization offers the most beautiful example: here the invading force (crystallization) is so great in comparison to the weight that we can almost say that the weight of matter has no effect on crystallization; the force of crystallization itself seems to be some sort of a weight forcefully concentrated within matter; it is so powerful that it transforms itself, under all circumstances, into a concentrated, self-contained world.

. . . If, then, the vertical and horizontal bi-plane is the shape of rest and of the separated equilibrium of matter, the creation of obliquely shaped forms was preceded by more dramatic events and complex unions involving multiple forces.

The following conclusion can be drawn from all of this concerning the means of artistic creation: if inanimate matter is to be plastically overcome—that is, animated—so that something may happen within it, this must happen through the system of the third plane, which joins the natural bi-plane.

A beautiful parallel between the means of human activity and the means of artistic creation offers itself here: wedges, arrows, posts, knives, levers, all of which overcome matter physically, are generally oblique planes.

. . . In comparison to natural building, architecture is a superior activity. Generally, it combines two activities: technical, prismatic bi-planar construction and the abstract reconstitution of matter in a tri-planar system, be it oblique or curvilinear. The more dominant of the architectural impulses also creates the building's overall character.

. . . Baroque, as we know, augmented and affixed, intensified the expression of all shapes by further addition and agglomeration of matter: the pedestals and capitals of pillars, the architraves, and the cornices are more acutely profiled and extended farther out both as individual elements and as a whole; the slabs of architraves and the cornices are bevelled, and there are conically narrowed pilasters, consoles, and buttresses. Besides this means of intensifying expression of the original form as such, the Baroque discovered another way to reach abstraction, arising gradually and logically from this intensification: the rotation and movement of entire forms from their original, calm, antique position into planes standing obliquely and dramatically against the heart of the building. The pillars and posts in portals and the towers in the facades of churches are built obliquely against the diagonal, as if the matter of the building had come to life and erupted outward or withdrawn inward, moving all of the formerly flat composition of the architecture. In principle, the most abstract idea and opportunity is to allow a living, shaping force to remodel entire facades by lifting and by pressure, directed outward and inward to the foundation of the building.

. . . If Baroque abstraction consists of the strengthening and animation of matter and the moving of masses, then the principle of the northern style of architecture is quite the opposite: it overcomes the tranquillity and material quality of matter by delving into it, and by reducing matter in the direction of the third oblique plane.

"O nábytku a jiném" (Of Furniture and Other Matters)

Umělecký měsíčník, vol. 2 (1912–1913), pp. 21–29

There always were and always will be, side by side, cauldrons and goblets, rubber coats and vestments, granaries and great halls . . .

. . . The world is arranged in such a way that the human being draws upon, and always will, two separate spheres: the physical and the spiritual; as a result, technology and art are two independent, separate activities, which are, and will always be, simultaneously next to and independent of each other. A person is active in both spheres. Architecture and the industrial arts are therefore not a higher level of the technological. Technology is not directed by or subordinated to art.

It can no longer be claimed that all human activities should be ennobled by art, and it is no longer permissible to use one to fight against the other (by using technology—engineering projects, industry—against art, or by using art against technology). Art in particular should not be given the role of refining or tempering the world; it is a self-determined activity with no obligations outside of itself. Therefore: no more making life aesthetic—instead, life and art! Thus, furniture which used to be, is, and, by certain standards, always will be suited for merely practical—that is, non-artistic—human applications, nonetheless becomes the subject of art in other, higher states of spiritual life. This is because, although it appears to be inanimate matter, the mind demands that it be spatially oriented. It is the everlasting quest of the spirit to possess matter from all sides—by means of science to discover its measure, physical properties, chemistry, and so on. Our hearts demand that we explain its origin, reasons, and place in the universe through philosophy, and possess it emotionally by lending it form.

Pavel Janák, page from journal, 1912