

The Museum Age in Austria-Hungary: Art and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century. By Matthew Rampley, Markian Prokopovych, and Nóra Veszprémi.

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More and more often nowadays, museums are finding themselves on the frontlines of cultural wars on the past. The museums of Central and Eastern Europe seem to be more willing to acknowledge their nineteenth century foundations, as these institutions were forged during the struggles for identity at that time.

Matthew Rampley and his research fellows in the “Continuity and Rupture in Central European Art and Architecture, 1918–1939” research project have recently moved from Birmingham to the field of their studies, Central Europe, to Brno’s Masaryk University. In 2020, Matthew Rampley, Markian Prokopovych, and Nóra Veszprémi published a volume of studies entitled “Liberalism, Nationalism and Design Reform in the Habsburg Empire: Museums of Design, Industry and the Applied Arts”. Its essays discuss newly emerging artistic and design movements and their collections in our region. These did not merely follow European trends in the late nineteenth century, but were actually some of the initiators and earliest adopters of these movements. A fitting counterpart to this publication is a book from the same trio that has shifted focus towards national museums and museums of fine arts, which is being reviewed here.

The scope of *The Museum Age in Austria-Hungary* is the genealogy of the national museums placed in the context of the entire empire. Therefore, the book provides an alternative to the linear national historiographies encapsulated by the many successor states, narratives that—especially in the communist bloc—became diluted by the mandatory Marxist ideology of class struggle. Imperialism was a swear word behind the iron curtain, also a semipermeable cultural boundary that ironically detached the region’s cultural capital cities from their key reference point, imperial Vienna.

The target audience of the book is the community of Anglophone scholars, for whom a comprehensive study on the museums founded in Austria–Hungary has not yet been available. Since English has become the lingua franca in the Babylonian confusion of Central Europe, this book is immensely important for art historians in the region to understand the shared but fragmented heritage of their institutions.

The chronological and geographical frame of the book encompass Austria–Hungary (1867–1918), broadened by an introduction to the history of collections in the pre-compromise Habsburg Monarchy as well as with an epilogue relating subsequent events that took place after the collapse of the empire in 1918.

The museums of Austria–Hungary are exceptions in the field of the history of collections in the long nineteenth century, where the theory of the royal and private collections converging into a National Museum is only partly applicable. Austria–Hungary was the last descendant of the Early Modern composite states, political patchworks of rights, privileges, duties, immunities, and interdependencies between the monarch, the estates, the churches, the nobility, and the common people. After the compromise, Austria–Hungary became a multinational, multiethnic, and multiconfessional constitutional Monarchy that was characterized by a relative unity of culture. At the same time, the external borders of the empire did split nations and its internal borders were not in line with the ethno-linguistic or religious boundaries. Moreover, the social stratification within these groups was just as complicated. The main academic value of this book comes from its multifaceted approach, which uncovers the main tendencies and discusses the complex factors that shaped the museums. The various aspects are discussed through many case studies and examples, which takes its toll on chronological consistency, meaning the book sometimes jumps back and forth along the timeline.

Regarding the title of the book (*The Museum Age...*), the reader may wonder why exactly the long nineteenth century is the age of museums. In other words, how is it that these institutions are the hallmark of the entire era in which they were created. In truth, the title itself already suggests a hypothesis for this.

In the second paragraph of the book, Matthew Rampley starts by saying: “The nineteenth century is often referred to as the museum age; many of the major public art museums in Europe and America were founded during this period.” (p. 1) The era was not only characterized by the founding of museums, but it was also the time when theories of art history and curatorial practices developed hand in hand, mutually validating the paradigm of stylistic evolution. It was also a period when painters painted in the museums and for the museums.

The opening thought of the *Introduction* follows the ideas of Tony Bennett and Donald Preziosi and posits the narrative that collections evolved into museums during the nineteenth century and became the “temples of the nation”, but questioned

how this could function in the “prison of nations”. This book does not define the concept of nation or nationalism, but does include examples for interpretation that range from imperial identity and enlightened nation building, through the contexts of integration or assimilation, to ethnicism, chauvinism, and separatism.

The leitmotif of the *Introduction* is that rivalry and competition were the driving forces behind the formation of the museums, and these motifs continue throughout the chapters of the book (Cf. Bourdieu’s habitus and field as well as cultural capital, although this is not specifically cited).

The book consists of six main chapters. The first three chapters are dedicated to the problems of spatiality from the macro to the micro level, starting from the cultural landscape, moving through the internal matters within cultural capital cities, and arriving at the issues of form and function for the museum buildings. In the second three chapters, the focus shifts to the human factor. The train of thought leads from professional back office matters of museum management through the exhibition spaces, and on to the wider public.

Unfortunately, the book only has a few, black-and-white illustrations, but these grey-scale images provide a unified layout to various visual sources, such as archival materials as well as vintage or stock photographs and reproductions.

The “*Introduction – Museum and Cultural Politics in the Habsburg World*” depicts rivalry and tension between the cultural capitals as the leitmotif, which recurs throughout the other chapters of the book. Vienna was eager to assert its imperial rank amongst the European capitals in the cultural sphere, and thus cast its gaze towards Paris as well as towards Berlin, which had established greater cultural dominance in the German-speaking world out of the Austrian crownlands. After the compromise, Budapest emerged as a rival secondary capital enjoying constitutional autonomy, which had not been granted to Prague even though its throne had been passed down to the Habsburgs on the very same basis of Habsburg–Jagellonian dynastic marriage contract. Zagreb also gained autonomy within autonomous Hungary (even though the Croatian-speaking territories were distributed through three provinces on both sides of the Cisleithan and Transleithan domains). The Polish nation had also been partitioned between three countries, or rather empires. Thus, Cracow took on a cultural mission that extended beyond borders, while it challenged Lemberg within Galicia, the administrative center of the territory, which was on the fringes of the western world where the coexistence of Polish, Ukrainian, and (the unmentioned) Jewish communities shaped the cultural sphere.

The first chapter, entitled *The Museological Landscape of Austria–Hungary*, places the aforementioned rivalries into the socio-economic-cultural matrix. It shows that in terms of local conditions, each region and city had different initiators and actors that were the driving forces behind the foundation of the museums.

In Vienna, the art collections of the emperors were transformed into the imperial collection of the Kunsthistorisches Museum, where art remained supranational under the auspices and patronage of the Habsburgs. In the case of Buda and Pest in Hungary, the high and middle nobility of the diet (which at that time still seated in Pozsony/Pressburg, present-day Bratislava) proved to be the initiator and donator of the newly founded Hungarian National Museum, created in the spirit of *Aufklärer* national awakening. Later these foundations further developed their collections and stemmed further under Ministerial frameworks.

In Prague, the legacy of a social circle of Germanic aristocratic connoisseurs and collectors came into conflict with Slavism, institutionalization, and professionalization driven by the Czech-speaking urban elite. This conflict was also caused by the disintegration of their mutual Bohemian identity. In Cracow, the bourgeoisie and the aristocratic collectors acted together for the sake of the entire Polish nation when establishing their museums.

Taking into account the many particularities in the Habsburg territories, there are many examples listed that do not easily fit into a national, social, or evolutionist lineage of the development of their collections. In Innsbruck, the Schloss Ambrass preserved the context of a Kunst und Wunderkammer for a while. The Belvedere Galleries had been available to a limited extent to the general public even before the idea of the Kunsthistorisches Museum was conceived. In addition, some private or princely collections in Vienna seemed to be curated in more modern ways than the imperial collections.

It was not only the aristocracy, but also clergymen who played an important role as contributors to the future national collections, for example, Josip Strossmayer (for the Croatian Academy of Science in Zagreb), Vladislaus Pyrker, and Flóris Rómer (for the Hungarian National Museum of Budapest). Furthermore, there were many public collections in the Habsburg lands that cannot be placed in the context of empire versus nation, as they can be distinguished by local characteristics. These include the Museo Revoltella in the port city of Trieste, or the Bruckenthal Collection in the Transylvanian Saxon centre of Hermannstadt (present-day Sibiu).

The second chapter, entitled *Museum and the City: Art, Municipal Programs, and Urban Agendas*, describes cities as multi-layered cultural arenas. Prokopovych points out that cultural capitals acted not only as the headquarters of a national or local government but as municipal communities in their own right when they established art museums or collections reflecting on their own urban histories. Moreover, Cracow's case proves that urban initiatives from below could extend far beyond the former city walls.

The exterior reflected the content, so the museum buildings themselves had to be works of art mirroring their cultural missions. The museum as a work of art

could be the motto of the third chapter, entitled *Vison in Stone: Museums and Their Architecture*. Here, a typological study on the architecture of museum buildings explains the motivations behind the preferred styles of various museums as purpose-built structures within the turmoil of revival styles and historicism prior to the advent of modernism.

Matthew Rampley re-evaluates the critique of historicist architecture (which continues today with its modernist bias) while taking into account the viewpoints from the period. On the one hand, he explains the positive effect that architectural plurality had on embracing the diversity of the empire. However, on the other hand, this diversity was restricted to architectural norms (of classical and historical styles that “re-feudalised” the modernizing cities). In these idioms of architecture, various sets of values and virtues were attributed to different styles, types, and forms of buildings.

Regarding the distinctive features of Austria-Hungary, Rampley shows that the discussion about the most appropriate styles for museum buildings encompassed the problems of cultural appropriation and the search for a national style. Due to this, efforts were made to differentiate each museum from their rivals. The commissioners of the Hungarian National Museum preferred Neo-Classicism to Late Baroque designs. In the case of Prague’s Rudolfinum, a kind of German–Czech culture war broke out over the heritage of the Rudolphine era. In Cracow, existing historical buildings were preferred to house the collections. In Vienna, the most influential theoreticians such as Professor Rudolf Eitelberger and Gottfried Semper, a living legend in the field of architecture, were also involved in the design and construction of the Kunsthistorisches Museum. The role of these individuals foreshadows a shift in focus seen in the chapters on the institutionalisation and professionalisation of museums, with special attention on human resources and human relations.

Nóra Veszprémi’s first chapter has the quite telling title, *Curators, Conservators, Scholars: The Rise of the Museum Professions*, and is based on plentiful archival records. By tracing numerous individual career paths, it discusses the fall of painter and connoisseur keepers and the emergence of professionals. The biographical case studies show that professionalisation and institutionalisation were two parallel processes, and it was difficult for individuals to adapt to both trends. There is an extended case study dedicated to Károly Pulszky, a Hungarian emigre nobleman who evolved from a protégé connoisseur to become a professionally trained art historian and curator in his own right, but he failed as a public servant. Pulszky had a keen eye for quality due to his dual background, and this benefited him when purchasing artworks for the State Picture Gallery, the predecessor of the Museum of Fine Arts.

However, this campaign was ill-fated. Pulszky’s tragic suicide is mentioned but unfortunately his so-called “Piombo scandal” is not detailed (this scandal showed

that the bureaucrats had an interest in purchasing works from the greatest household names but not those of quality. Pulszky's fate demonstrates how tangible attributions were in the long nineteenth century.) Another multifaceted, scholarly curator is discussed at length in this chapter, Izidor Kršnjavi at the Zagreb Strossmayer Gallery of Old Masters' collection. He seemed to be a loyal monarchist, which is why he was ostracised by nationalist groups. On the one hand, museums became centres for research, publishers of periodicals, and venues for conferences due to their professionalization, but on the other hand, institutionalisation increased the political stake in their management.

The next chapter is also from Nóra Veszprémi, bearing the title "*Uniques*" and *Stories: Principles and Practices of Display*, and is itself as complex as the entire book. This chapter in particular scrutinises how museums actually worked in the long nineteenth century. It studies how museums arranged their exhibition spaces, what the principles and the realities were behind the juxtaposition of objects, how museums and contemporary artists, in particular the prominent painters, interacted, how the interiors as well as their decorations and furnishings reflected upon the artworks housed within them, and finally, what general changes in public taste were evoked by modernism that also affected the displays in the exhibition spaces.

Nóra Veszprémi, just like her co-authors, points out that the application of a unilinear, teleological narrative has its limitations. The ways of displaying paintings tended from the gentlemanly, symmetrical, aesthetic hanging of paintings on pre-designated walls to displays systematically arranged by the principals of school and chronology in art history, but the concerns of real life "made room for the accidental, to unique, and idiosyncratic" (p. 143).

In Vienna's imperial collections, the system of school and chronology was preferred in the arrangement of the art collections as early as the late eighteenth century, replacing arrangements where the purpose was merely to please the eye. However, in many other centres, the arrangement of collections, were supplemented with the issues of national art. At the National Museum in Budapest, "[a]ll art, whether foreign or local, belonged to the nation whose cultural progress was celebrated by the institution as a whole" (p. 158). The institutions housed art from Hungary (a neutral term already used at that time), European old masters, plaster casts, and Hungarian art that was mostly from after 1800. Amongst the latter were painters that were internationally renowned artist-heroes, living legends who demonstrated that Hungarian art had risen to the level of the happier nations. Cracow also had its artist heroes, such as Jan Matejko or Henryk Siemiradzki. The National Gallery in Cracow displayed artworks in such a way as to present the development of Polish art, which was supplemented by many objects and visual documents of historical connotation. In Prague's Rudolfinum, Bohemian art was placed chronologically in the context of

the related schools (in fact German schools) due to the heritage of The Society of Patriotic Friends of the Arts, but this was contested by the Czech art historians.

In the spirit of historicism and *Gesamtkunstwerk*, artworks in most collections were displayed in period rooms where the interior design reflected the style of the exhibited objects. However, tastes changed around the turn of the century due to the Vienna Secession and modernism, so the interior design and furnishing of exhibition spaces became simplified, the hangings were less crowded, the fine arts were segregated into media such as paintings, works on paper, and sculptures, while decorative arts were relegated to the category of applied arts. Curators tended to purge the exhibition rooms, sentencing artwork of low quality, copies, reproductions, and plaster casts to storage. This shows that originality and authenticity had become more appreciated. This book also scrutinizes a deeper theoretical issue, a meta-hypothesis, that was already preoccupying scholars in the nineteenth century. This question deals with whether art is an absolute singular universal human value or is the plurality of individual artworks, representing many efforts and purposes.

Nóra Veszprémi points out that the conditions in museums were never ideal in the museum age. The lack of funds and space caused temporary solutions to last for decades while plans were limited and their implementation was delayed.

In the summary of the chapter on museum displays, Nóra Veszprémi's (a former practising curator's) "suggestion is to look for the conclusion in the field of museum studies, rather than in the context of Austro-Hungarian history and politics. (...) the ideal models were never fully realized: they were modified not only by political aims but also by material reality and its consequences" (p. 179).

The immanent conditions for the displays in the exhibition spaces were determined by the inherent nature of the foundation of the institutions, the features of the museum buildings, and the components of the collections. In terms of external factors shaping the museums, the public was a factor in addition to politics.

The last chapter, entitled *Museums and Their Publics: Visitors, Societies, and the Press*, Markian Prokopovych scrutinises the museums of Austria-Hungary as an integral part of the entire public sphere. Museums were committed to the greater public, but they were only accessible to a distinguished group of visitors in the beginning. These first included amateurish gentlemen or patrons, then later museum professionals, and only gradually opened up to the middle and lower classes. However, the public itself was also changing in the meantime. Prokopovych points out that the more the museums opened to the public, the more the issues of the education and the conduct of the visitors became relevant. Despite broader social changes and general emancipation, there remained restrictions for visitors that extended to their opening hours, age limits, belongings allowed in, behaviour, etc. This may give some readers the impression that the ideas of twenty-first century inclusions are being projected onto the nineteenth century openness.

The *Epilogue* of the book with its subtitle *Modernity and the Regime's End* is dedicated to the impact of the collapse of Austria–Hungary on museums. This led to disputes and demands related to the possession of the collections as well as to new challenges within the frameworks of the new political entities. These dramatic changes more or less coincided with the canonisation of the modern movement in the collections. The book closes with the positive prospects for the growing recognition of commonalities in the region and the possibilities for cooperation and further research.

The Museum Age is an intriguing book comprised of several comparative case studies viewed from a novel supranational perspective written by scholars that are part of a transnational network of scholars. This book can be useful for curators and museum professionals to understand the deep structures that still define these collections and their ethos. It can also be of interest to academic art historians, allowing them to understand how museums facilitate the ways we perceive art. This book builds bridges between the centre and the peripheries, between the present and the past, and between art historical theory and curatorial practice.

