

Complexities, conflicts, and cooperations in a shared cultural space

Review of:

The Museum Age in Austria-Hungary: Art and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century, by Matthew Rampley, Markian Prokopovych, and Nóra Veszprémi, University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021, 290pp., 47 b. & w. illus., \$99.95 hdbk, \$39.95 pbk ISBN 9780271087108.

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The historiography of the fine arts museum in Europe is a narrative that has mostly followed the arc of the developing nation-state after the French Revolution. This approach has often focused on the emergence of the public museum as part of an 'exhibitionary complex' that helped to shape an 'imagined community' of patriotic citizens during the long nineteenth century. For the most part these nationally-based perspectives have been extremely productive, but they cannot do justice to many of the museums that emerged in the Austro-Hungarian Empire before its collapse. Indeed, the three authors of this excellent volume remind us that many of the 'national' fine arts museums of the former Austro-Hungarian Empire took shape well before the outbreak of war in 1914 and only took on their official status as representatives of their specific 'nations' in the years after 1918. Thus, the historiography of museums in central Europe needs a more nuanced approach. As the volume's editor and contributor Matthew Rampley writes, 'current state boundaries are not a meaningful framework for the study of museums in Habsburg Central Europe.'

This volume both suggests and models that new framework. To make their point the authors use several, more complicated (social, trans-national, and local) approaches to demonstrate how museums in the Empire's important cities (Lemberg, Prague, Budapest, Cracow, and Zagreb) emerged from a complex set of Imperial, local and, as the century progressed, civic and nationalist ambitions. Together the authors unanimously argue in favor of viewing Austria-Hungary as a 'shared cultural space' with complex interactions that formed a web of relationships across the many nationalities of the Empire—a web that remains invisible to the post-1945 observer.

In a set of six essays the authors consider several significant museological topics and how they changed throughout the century: the interaction between the rise of urban identities and the formation of municipal museums with divergent, often competing goals (Prokopovych), the museum as an architectural monument within the rapidly-changing urban landscape (Rampley), the increasing

professionalization of museum workers—largely due to the rise of art-historical scholarship in Vienna (Veszprémi), the gulf between a museum’s idealized collection and the material realities of its gallery space and specific holdings (Veszprémi), and the elusive ‘publics’ each museum attempted either to attract or control (Prokopovych). Using local case studies in comparison while reaching across the many crownlands and linguistic boundaries of the Empire, the authors demonstrate how it is possible to create a considerably more detailed understanding of the ways in which geographically-distanced museum workers communicated with the Imperial capital, Vienna, with experts in Berlin or Paris, with local aristocrats and patrons, and with each other across provincial boundaries.

The Introduction, ‘The Museological Landscape of Austria-Hungary’ by Matthew Rampley, provides considerable background on the origins of the most-well known of Vienna’s art museums, the Kunsthistorisches Museum, which dominated the museum scene of Austria-Hungary in several significant ways. He demonstrates, however, that the museum had changed significantly since it first opened to the public in the Belvedere Palace in the late eighteenth century. The political upheavals of 1848 and the Compromise with Hungary in 1868 contributed to the rise of conflicting nationalisms within the Empire and the monumental new building, completed in 1891, served, in part, to demonstrate the glories of the Imperial family and to legitimize the empire. The new Museum, with its architecture, decorative scheme, organization of collections, and its mission to glorify the Habsburg dynasty, sent reverberations across the Empire. In addition, the First Conference of Art Historians in Vienna (1873) set the stage for the development of an academic approach to art historiography with Vienna as its intellectual center. The museological and academic center of the Empire was in Vienna; the influence of the Imperial Fine Arts Museum was felt across the Imperial lands. At times, however, the provinces pushed back, and this power struggle contributed to the complexities of the museum world in Austria-Hungary.

Indeed, Vienna’s influence was not always welcome. The rapid growth of several major cities with cultural ambitions of their own gave rise to the formation of fine arts associations, museums, and galleries in the provinces—each of them a product of unique local circumstances. The emerging public sphere—the growth of intellectuals and professionals in the middle classes—created a new environment in which aspects of the museum, any museum, became the focus of public interest, commentary, and local ambition. Outside of Vienna, therefore, the museums of the Dual Monarchy did not always share similar goals. While the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna represented dynastic and Imperial interests, this was not the case in the provinces. This complex dynamic informed the development of local museums across the empire—and it differed considerably from a historiographical approach based upon more centralized developments in France or (after 1871) the German Reich.

In Chapter 2, ‘The Museum and the City’. Markian Prokopovych demonstrates how urban growth and the emergence of municipal identities shaped different museological programs in important regional cities. In some instances, ‘new municipal agendas’ developed in tandem with local initiatives for urban

beautification resulting in the construction of new, purpose-built structures to house local collections (Zagreb); in other locations new municipal actors created pushed for historical restoration for the same reasons (as in Cracow's Cloth Hall). Such local trends, along with the decreasing significance of local aristocratic elites and the rise of civic organizations, also served to challenge the cultural hegemony of the Imperial capital. In several instances, a new municipal museum emerged with its own set of priorities. Prokopovych demonstrates how local influencers sought to situate their collections in a way that celebrated a local and provincial identity. Although they were often required to pay homage to the Imperial ideal, they sometimes resisted. Local institutions across the Empire did not always march to the beat of the same drum.

Chapter 3, 'Visions in Stone'. by Matthew Rampley examines the ideological power of the museum building itself, particularly the new purpose-built edifices that emerged within rapidly-changing urban spaces. In these instances, the 'architectural language' or 'style' of the new museum was dominated by historicism. In an historical overview of museum architecture since the French Revolution, Rampley reminds the reader how historical styles, particularly the Greek, became associated with Enlightenment values and the fine arts, informing the design of several prominent German museums before the 1860s. Examples include the Altes Museum (Berlin, 1826-36), Munich's Alte Pinakothek (1836) and the Dresdener Gemäldegalerie (1853). In these cases, the 'museum as temple' metaphor used art to 'cultivate the public sphere' (85) with nationalist undertones in the German lands.

But neo-classicism was one of many historical styles, and it did not catch hold everywhere. In Vienna, for example, the art historian Rudolf von Eitelberger (1817-1885) emphasized pluralism in historicism, believing the function of a building should determine its historical style. This was in accordance with the eclecticism of the Ringstrasse. He preferred the neo-Renaissance style for institutions dedicated to public use—the monumental Museum for Art and Industry on Vienna's Ringstrasse (completed in 1871) was in that style. (Eitelberger was also named its first director in 1864.) But the neo-Renaissance style had other symbolic meanings, too. For Eitelberger the neo-Renaissance 'offered a visual analogue of the individual freedom that flourished in the Renaissance and that he, as a Liberal, believed to be central to social progress in his own time.' (89) Yet Eitelberger also embraced eclecticism because it mirrored the diversity of the Empire, which he saw as a 'cosmopolitan space.'

Not everyone adopted their architectural ideals from Vienna, however. In Budapest, for example, Mihály Pollack's design for the Hungarian National Museum (begun 1835) took its cue from Berlin and evoked the Greek temple; his neo classical design 'appealed to the intellectual and cultural aspirations of the Hungarian noble and middle-class intelligentsia of the early 1800s.' (91) This sentiment was reinforced when the National Museum became a rallying point for supporters of the revolution of 1848. Thereafter the museum became a 'central part of the political memory of Hungarian nationalism'. (95) and neo classical architecture remained *de rigueur* for two subsequent institutions in Budapest: The

House of Art (1896) and the Museum of Fine Arts (1899-1907), even as historicism was giving way at the end of the nineteenth century.

In Prague, however, the Renaissance style did not carry the meanings that Eitelberger attributed to it. Here the Renaissance symbolized local history--insofar as the city had been a crossroads of European intellectual and cultural life in the 16th century. Here the Renaissance revival became associated with local, in this case Bohemian, cultural politics of its German aristocrats. But this ideal was also fraught with opposing interpretations at home: as a constituent part of the Holy Roman Empire in the 16th century was Bohemia an extension of 'German' culture, or was it a 'Czech' political realm? By the end of the nineteenth century, this bitter debate added to the political strife of the late nineteenth century. (99) Nevertheless, the completion of the Rudolfinium (1885) and the Museum of Decorative Arts (1900) confirmed the resilience of the Renaissance style in the midst of the 'toxic politics of national identity that shaped cultural discussion in Prague.' (103) For Rampley, the examples of Budapest and Prague demonstrate how the growth of local political identities and aspirations could affect the choice of an architectural style that was a conscious departure from both the neo-Renaissance or the Imperial 'Roman' style that served as the 'visual emblem of the Habsburg Monarchy' after the completion of the Kunsthistorisches Museum in 1891.

Inseparable from the debates about local and national identities, however, was the diversity of circumstances surrounding the construction of these edifices in Prague – the new monumental buildings were not the outcome of 'a single unified plan.' (102) Each of Prague's neo-Renaissance art institutions (the Rudolfinium, the Museum of Decorative Arts, and the Design School) all had different social origins and different sponsoring organizations. This diversity of origins and missions among similar institutions is but one neglected part of the historiography of provincial museums across the Dual Monarchy that the authors call to our attention.

The next two chapters by Nora Veszprémi provide additional complexity. Chapter 4, 'Curators, Conservators, Scholars'. emphasizes just how much museum development in the Austro-Hungarian Empire was 'fundamentally different' from the new nation-states of contemporary Europe. (119). While museum leaders in the Austrian half of the monarchy benefitted from the centralized influence and bureaucratic practices of Vienna, this trajectory was not uniform. Hungary and the remainder of the Empire proceeded more slowly; in many places within the Hungarian half of the monarchy, museums were guided by local enthusiasts, painters, and self-educated curators who were only slowly edged out in favor of the trained, professional expert. It took several decades for the Hungarian museum workers to become 'civil servants' as they were in cisleithanian Austria; this process was even slower in places like Bukovina or Croatia. Nevertheless, the slow professionalization of museum workers not only created a new social identity for its participants, it also occurred in a uniquely transnational setting. As museum workers gradually created catalogues, published research, and discussed emerging professional standards among themselves, they communicated across national and linguistic borders within the Empire. Veszprémi uses this unique transnational context to present 'the history of museums ... in central Europe in a new light,

disentangling them from the context of nationalism in which they are usually analyzed.' (141)

In Chapter 5, 'Uniques' and Stories'. Vesprémi examines the distance between the real and the ideal in all aspects of a given museum's activities. While it is tempting to describe the central European museum in an evolutionary narrative undergirded by the professionalization of museum disciplines and the universal application of professional standards, the author reminds us that the 'accidental, the unique, and the idiosyncratic' were features of museum life outside of Vienna. Every local museum had limitations of budget, space, and collections—they functioned in a real world that did not always conform to their idealized goals. In contrast to the massive Imperial collections, local collections were often incomplete and housed in inadequate and temporary spaces. In Hungary, for example, the long 'development' of the Fine Arts Museum was not completed until all of the state-owned fine arts collections were housed under one roof after the completion of the new building in 1906. Before then—that is for much of the period under review—the situation in Budapest was 'provisional' and 'overwritten by material reality.' (143) This was true across the provinces; it was often impossible for a local or civic museum to present either a comprehensive history of art based on its collections or a convincing national chronicle; these limitations influenced the narratives that curators were able to create in their galleries.

Vesprémi uses extensive archival sources to examine how curators in Prague and Budapest managed and adapted national narratives within their collections. In Prague, the Picture Gallery of the Society of Patriotic Friends of Art began as a regional institution that attempted to present a 'continuous narrative of Bohemian art from the Middle Ages to the nineteenth century' by incorporating both German and Italian influences and viewing Bohemian art as an 'branch' of German art. This view was hotly contested by Czech nationalists by the end of the century, however. In contrast, curators at the National Museum of Budapest viewed their mandate as that of creating a cohesive national narrative. Only the great Imperial Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna did not need to construct a 'continuous narrative' of Austrian art—it did not need to.

Curators also had to take the organization and hanging of art in their unique spaces into account. Over time, the organization and reorganization of gallery spaces generally reflected a trend toward the comfort of the viewer and the gradual decluttering of museum walls, but these trends were neither uniform nor monolithic across the empire. Indeed, the discrepancies between museums in Prague, Budapest, or Cracow 'make it difficult to impose a broad narrative of modernist transformation across the museums of the Habsburg Monarchy.' (179) Rather than collapsing the histories of such a variety of institutions into ideal models, however, Vreszprémi makes a convincing argument for appreciating uniqueness, difference and the 'accidents' of reality.

In Chapter 6, 'Museums and Their Publics'. Markian Prokopovych returns to examine the many different publics that participated in (or observed) the activities of a local museum. Drawing from the research into the 'public sphere' conducted by

Carl Schorske and Péter Hanák, this chapter emphasizes how the centralizing example of Vienna was offset by the interests of a local museum's new 'public' who pushed for their own agendas. Museum leaders were obliged to consider the questions of who this public was comprised of, and how to both attract and expand it.

Prokopovych examines the steady expansion of a variety of 'publics' during the long nineteenth century. First, there was the Imperial Public and its distinguished visitors who graced the galleries of not only the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, but also the (formerly aristocratic) collections of Cracow, Prague, or Budapest. These dignitaries were given special privileges—on Thursdays the Kunsthistorisches Museum was open only to nobility, for example—and these visitors reaffirmed both the quality of the collection and their homage to the dynasty. Another targeted public for the Imperial museums was the Viennese—who flocked to important exhibitions. This public was documented (or imagined) in a series of watercolors by Carl Goebel the Younger (1824-1899) from 1875-1899. [Figure 43] As Prokopovych writes, we see both 'distinguished and scholarly-looking men, ... [and] an elegant couple deep in conversation.' (187) But that is not all. The watercolor also depicts 'the presence of more extraordinary people, such as the playful children, the widow in a traditional dress, and...Tyrolean men....'(187) Such a rendering allows the author to argue that the presence of these individuals suggest that the 'public' was far more diverse than the 'educated bourgeoisie of the metropolis.' (187) Another painting of the staircase of the new Kunsthistorisches Museum (1891) shows the respectable public in the 'highly structured and impressive space' of the museum staircase. (190)

A third category of the museum public included those members of 'gentlemanly and professional' groups that often overlapped with academic circles and museum staff. Over time, these associations began to exclude prominent women who had once held greater influence in some local societies as private collectors. This was the case in Cracow and Lemberg where Helena Dąbczańska (1863-1956) amassed a large collection of paintings, books, engravings, textiles and furniture—much of it housed in her villa in Lemberg. As a member of a special category of private collectors, Dąbczańska and others like her exerted a great deal of influence in the margins of public space; over time, however, the professionalization of museum careers and the proliferation of new local art associations (lead by men) gradually resulted in a greater exclusion of women.

Local associations, often influenced by local elites and wealthy collectors, were another example of gentlemanly and professional groups. One of the more prominent of these public associations in Prague was the Society of Patriotic Friends of Art, established in 1796. Dominated by the aristocracy, the Society gradually absorbed collections belonging to leading noble families—but it was obliged to house the collection in various local palaces until it occupied the Rudolfinium in 1885. The Society was enormously influential during its heyday; while it had only 94 (aristocratic) members in the 1890s, over two hundred thousand visitors had visited the collection in the new Rudolfinium by 1890. By the early twentieth century, however, the influence of the Society had waned—largely due to

challenges from the more 'outspokenly modernist and nationalist artistic institutions' such as the Modern Gallery of the Bohemian Kingdom, established in 1903. (198)

By comparing the Society of Patriotic Friends in Prague with a similar association in Cracow--the Friends of the Fine Arts (established 1854) — the author demonstrates how the group in Cracow was better able to connect with its local community and attract visitors with novel exhibitions and innovative strategies well past the turn of the century. Prokopvych concludes that a comparative examination of the two fine arts societies illustrates how our current assessments of the slow demise of the Patriotic Friends Society in Prague needs revision; it was not a matter of its antiquated format or limited membership 'but rather its ineffectiveness in embracing the national and local community.' (199) Such was the significance of the local public contexts in the Habsburg Monarchy.

Wherever they were situated, however, the story of local museums in the Austro-Hungarian Empire provides additional insight into aspects of 'social and cultural life that have often been overlooked.' (211) Indeed, Prokopvych argues that these local institutions are more important indicators of the expansion of the public sphere than the 'garden and the coffeehouse' tropes that have previously shaped the discourse that informs our views of Vienna and Budapest in the late nineteenth century. Museum leaders were relentless in expanding their reach; they increase public access to the museum through organized school visits and discounted (or eliminated) entrance fees for members of the working classes and other groups. Local diversity was the hallmark of all such initiatives, but it remained difficult to tell how much of the public was reached. This was not for lack of trying, however. Museums, Prokopvych asserts, 'spoke with several voices to their diverse imagined publics' even as their message was 'often lost behind a cacophony of those voices and reached out to only a fraction of the local public.' (211)

Yet by the 1890s the established fine arts museums of the Austro-Hungarian Empire were already being overtaken by the forces of modernism. In the Epilogue, entitled 'Modernity and Regime's End'. Matthew Rampley provides an overview of the challenges of modernism to the fine arts museums of the Empire, which had little flexibility to react to the new aesthetic. In Vienna (and elsewhere) new artistic movements and associations (most notably the Secession in 1897) resisted the traditions of the past. Recognizing the significance of modernism, however, and in an effort to curb some of its nationalist undercurrents, in 1896 administrators in Vienna's Ministry for Religion and Education formed a committee to develop the concept for a gallery of modern art. The project culminated in the formation of the Modern Gallery in 1903.

As Jeroen van Heerde has indicated, State support of the modernist agenda in Vienna symbolized its tolerance and cosmopolitanism, yet modernity was a two-edged sword. In the provinces 'modern art' was often associated with new nationalist movements such as Young Poland or (in Prague) the Mánes Union of Fine Artists. Nevertheless, the rapid proliferation of modernist artistic movements and societies across the Dual Monarchy challenged the relevance and authority of

traditional institutions. Thus, even before the outbreak of war the complex fabric of relationships within the Empire was beginning to fray. The collapse of the Dual Monarchy in 1918 paved the way for the reimagining of local museums as representatives of a new political reality.

By then, however, the scale and influence of the museum world had shrunk along with the Empire's borders. As Rampley argues, it was the social and cultural authority of the museum of art in nineteenth-century Austria-Hungary that is of significance here. Regardless of their locations, the 'museums' authority with the wider public was never questioned, and this related in part to the reverence for art itself.' (223) But art could not achieve what museum curators and critics hoped for—the creation of that shared space of cultural meaning that might preserve the Empire. This was the uniqueness of the situation in Austria-Hungary: its 'fractured political landscape.' This meant that the 'authority of art' as well as the 'identities and activities of museums were contested terrain' in ways that did not apply to museums elsewhere in western Europe. In contrast to Britain, France and Germany, there was no 'single museological regime' within the Dual Monarchy. This was the unique atmosphere that enveloped the museum world of the Austro-Hungarian Empire; this is the value of re-envisioning these topics from a more complex perspective.

Can we talk about the history of the 'national' fine arts museum before the nation itself appeared on a map? The authors suggest that such an approach is inadequate—that in the case of central Europe, the national perspective obscures the unique context of the many museums within the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It also neglects the fact that these museums operated in a transnational and 'shared cultural space.'

This invitation to complexity is both convincing and compelling and it opens a broad field of new research possibilities. Well-written and exquisitely researched, the volume also inadvertently highlights one of the greatest challenges to future scholars: fluency in the local languages. We are grateful to these authors to have given us this volume in English. Insofar as it models several museological approaches, it can be useful to any scholar who is interested in the historiography of museums in Europe's long nineteenth century. In addition, scholars and students of the Dual Monarchy will find much to enjoy. We sincerely hope that, as Rampley writes, this book will 'serve as a basis for further inquiry' (225) into the diverse and dynamic world of local museums in Austria-Hungary.

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