

# BOOK OF OBJECTS: *DESIGN IN THE CZECH LANDS 1900-2000, INSTITUTIONS OF MODERN DESIGN*

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**Abstract:** *The contribution will describe the process of creation of the book of design objects in the Czech Lands 1900-2000. Its main motivation was the fact that the interest of the Czech audience in design has been growing in the last decades, but the historical knowledge and understanding of the design's essential context has been still missing. The book focuses on institutions that played a fundamental role in the social functioning of design and were closely related to the historical turbulence of the Czech Lands in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.*

**Keywords:** *design objects; different contexts; new perceptions; Czech Lands; institutions of design.*

**Resumo:** *A contribuição irá descrever o processo de criação do livro de objetos de design nas Terras Checas 1900-2000. A sua principal motivação foi o facto de o interesse do público checo pelo design ter crescido nas últimas décadas, embora o conhecimento histórico e a compreensão do contexto essencial do design não sejam ainda conhecidos. O livro tem por enfoque instituições que desempenharam um papel fundamental no funcionamento social do design e estiveram intimamente relacionadas com a turbulência histórica das Terras Checas no século XX.*

**Palavras-chave:** *objetos de design; diferentes contextos; novas percepções; Terras Checas; instituições de design.*

The text is focused on the process of creation of the book *Design in the Czech Lands* which was issued in 2016 as a result of a long-term research project of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, the central institution of acquisition, documentation and presentation of design objects in the Czech Republic.

Our main motivation was the fact that the interest of the Czech audience in design has been growing in the last decades, but the historical knowledge and understanding of the design's essential context has been still missing. Design became a popular feature of leisure time magazines. Design festivals taking place in different Czech cities attract crowds of people. In 1999 the annual festival Designblok was founded, today the biggest design festival in Central Europe and Czech Grand Design Award annual ceremonies have been generating design medialised celebrities who seem to fall from heaven.

The research was undertaken in the time when the museum was closed due to renovation and new depository building construction. The first step was the list of institutions to investigate. Why institution was the key topic? The institutional basis influences the character of design more than objects of fine art. The design

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object is very often the result of complex relationships where the institutional aspect becomes determining. We investigated schools, magazines, associations, factories and cooperatives, research institutes, design studios as well as leading figures who became also institutions themselves. As a definition of institution we used the broad sociological perspective when the most interesting institutional feature is its ideal spiritual core, the «guiding principle», which in the opinion of some modern theoreticians creates the basis of each institution and defines its character and function<sup>1</sup>. We were also inspired by Michel Foucault's notion of the dynamics of modern institutions. Institutions appear as a field of ideas in constant tension, balancing contradictions through reciprocal actions of individual actors<sup>2</sup>.

The publication follows the idea of the «improvement of production and taste» in the decorative art revival movement beginning in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, efforts in creating «minor art for everyday use» in the programme of the Artěl group after 1908, and later «the artistic overcoming of matter» in the production of Cubist artists through the Prague Art Workshops (Pražské umělecké dílny), ideals of «modern housing and living standards» in the activities of the Czechoslovak Werkbund (Svaz československého díla), or the effort to engage the «artistic imagination» in the shapes of machines and work tools in Zdeněk Kovář's school after WWII, as well as the scientific and research activities in the field of housing culture developed at the Institute of Housing and Clothing Culture (ÚBOK) in the 60s. The publication illustrates also the idea of the representation of the socialist state and socialist consumerist culture, discussed at the Institute of Industrial Design (IPD) in the 70s, as well as the alternative approaches which emerged on the margins away from official institutions and socialist industry. The programme of the Czechoslovak transformation after 1989 is shown in the building up of new design institutions in a liberal democratic society as the Design Centre.

Images of objects play the role of the materialisation of institutional guiding ideas, as their manifesto, testimony, authentic document, visual studies example, sensual pleasure, technical innovation or artistic endeavour. The aim of the research was the book of interpretative texts illustrated by objects/images. We wanted to offer a double reading of the book: textual and pictorial. That's why the most important images have comments enabling this autonomous visual insight into design area.

The other neuralgic problem is the term Czech Lands. We avoid the term Czech design, which is difficult to define historically and is linked with the complicated term «nation»<sup>3</sup>. We prefer the geographical delimitation. The region of Czech Lands has suffered historical turbulences — disintegration of Austro-Hungarian Monarchy,

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<sup>1</sup> See VONDRÁČEK, 2016.

<sup>2</sup> FOUCAULT, 1961, 1963, 1975.

<sup>3</sup> See the text of Jonathan M Woodham here questioning the term British design.

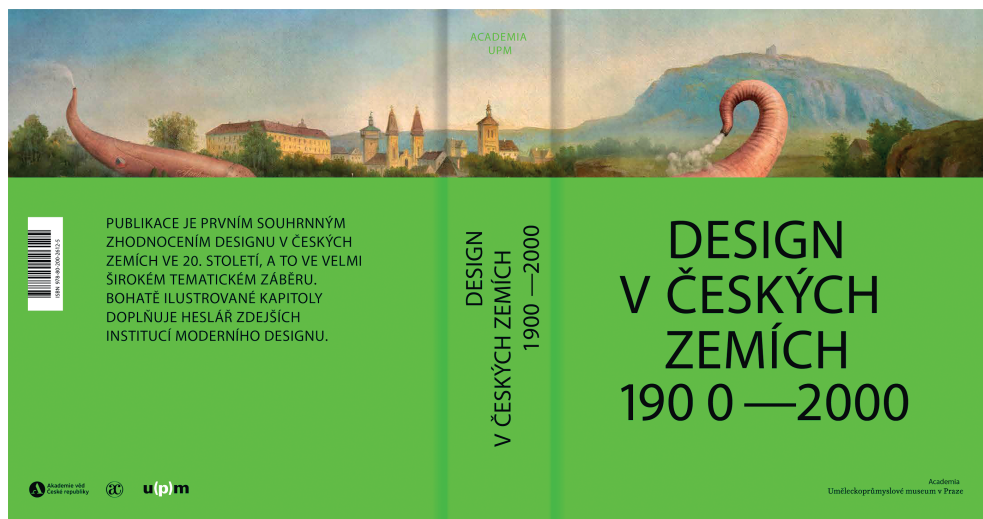


Fig. 1. *Design in the Czech Lands 1900-2000* book cover

Source: Design Štěpán Malovec, illustration Adolf Lachman, Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague

then independent Czechoslovak state with part of Ukraine, which was multi-ethnic and the German population created more than 30% of its population. After WWII, the expulsion of the German population affected sensitively the situation of post-war glass and textile industry. During socialism many designers were forced to emigrate, especially after the Soviet invasion in 1968. Is their work part of the design in the Czech Lands or Czech design? In the beginning of the 90s Czechoslovakia was divided into the independent Czech and Slovak Republics, some émigré designers (Bořek Šípek, Eva Jiřičná, Jan Kaplický) came back and had a strong influence on the new generation thanks to their cosmopolitan experience.

Czech Lands — historically Bohemia, Moravia and Silesia — are in the centre of the turbulent and culturally hybrid phenomenon of Central Europe, a geopolitical territory which has been always part of the more global European context and its geopolitical dynamic<sup>4</sup>. We can observe some kind of integrity in design created in the Czech Lands but the publication suggests other crossovers reacting on global geopolitical and cultural situation. The famous Thonet factory, which is the milestone of industrial design and stands at the beginning of design history in Czech Lands, is a very good example of the complicated «national» and geopolitical design trademark. The founder of the factory, Michael Thonet, was a German who accepted Austrian citizenship and his most important factories were founded in Moravia due to wood's high quality<sup>5</sup>.

<sup>4</sup> KROUTVOR, 1990: 51.

<sup>5</sup> The factory changed owners and name in the past century, but the production of bent wood furniture still continues under the trademark TON.



Fig. 2. Neon tube advertising from 1938

Source: Photography by Salim Issa Štěpánka Stein, *Design in the Czech Lands*, p. 261

Rich habitat of wood, sand, carbon and water was also the reason why Czech Lands became Austro-Hungarian monarchy's industrial zone in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The industrialisation of country and cities was extraordinarily fast and massive. New factories, the rail net, and new transport and communication system, the reform education professional schools and museums of decorative art and design were born in the last two decades of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Those institutions — factories, schools, groups, magazines — created the platform of the accelerated design progress in the Czech Lands in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The fast tempo of design development was acquired after the independent state, Czechoslovakia, was born in 1918.

The very broad and versatile network of institutions creates the content of the book which for the first time maps out this field in such a comprehensive manner, encompassing product, industrial, graphic and textile design, as well as fashion, jewellery, applied and advertising photography, interior design and the new materials of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We focus not only on official state command, but also on everyday use objects and luxury design products, pop culture, DIY phenomenon, industrial production and new craft endeavour. Through multidisciplinary approach we try to focus on metamorphosis of life style and complex environment.

The content on 700 pages is divided into 20 chapters with 1000 images from 100 private and state collections; the book embraces 400 design institutions whose



profiles are added in an appendix. We collaborated with curators of other museums, university professors and doctorands; almost 40 colleagues participated in the research.

The authors and editors of the publication have based their methodology on an art history approach, forming a unified interpretative schema, revealing close artistic and institutional connections between fine art and design. Beyond this, the publication also suggests further political, sociological, economic and gender links that are important for design as a multidisciplinary field. The publication clearly demonstrates that methods of art history are not always optimal and sufficient for the design research and that the contamination from other fields of human knowledge is needed corresponding with the multidisciplinary and hybrid character of the design objects and processes themselves. The complex nature of design is also the reason why design and applied art are often underestimated in the art history discipline.

The book reveals also the various roles design has played in the system of modern production, education, exhibitions, advertising and other forms of communication. In the publication, some themes are reinterpreted, some newly discovered and defined as for example the relationship of design to the pop culture in the 20s and the 30s, organic design and existentialist tendencies in the 30s, design under pressure of ideologies 1939/1953, individual studio creation under socialism, design and environment in the political period of Normalisation after 1970, and alternatives in design from the 60s to the 90s.



Fig. 3. Iron from the 60s

Source: Photography by Salim Issa and Štěpánka Stein, *Design in the Czech Lands*, p. 403



Fig. 4. Underground music, covers DIY, 80s

Source: Photography by Salim Issa and Štěpánka Stein, *Design in the Czech Lands*, p. 497

We invited artists to collaborate on the final visual form of the book and their interventions stimulate new interpretations of subjects, sometimes in a subversive way. Photographers Salim Issa and Štěpánka Stein created introduction photographs for every chapter and their elusive atmosphere suggests other design object's dimensions and levels we could perceive. The cover is the work of the graphic designer of the book, Štěpán Malovec, who invited the contemporary young artist Adolf Lachman. Štěpán found the idyllic painting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century describing the landscape of the mythical hill Říp, where according to ancient narratives the Czech nation was born. Adolf Lachman added biomechanical creatures with «Czechoslovak» trademark which are some kind of ironic, comic and strange features in the landscape. They suggest questioning about design's nature and sense, industry, environment, nationalism, progress... and other subversive readings.

The book *Design in the Czech Lands 1900-2000, Institutions of Modern Design* became the first encyclopaedia of design historical overview documented through objects of design. The journalists call it «the bible» of the Czech design or institution itself, which is not true. We did not want to create the canonical image of the design history in the Czech Lands but we aimed to open the door of design perception. That is also the statement of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, and always has been: to cultivate the understanding of the design objects and their context. But the

complete work has not been done yet. For this moment the book exists only in the Czech version. The English version is needed; due to minority language, this historical overview would never enter into global design history discourse<sup>6</sup>.

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<sup>6</sup> See Jonathan M Woodham in this volume and his preface in PELCL, 2012.

