

„Concentrated attack on the eye of the spectator“. „Radical Baroque“ architecture in the writings of Czech art historians

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This thesis examines the origins of the term „Radical Baroque“ in Czech art history and how this concept influenced the approach of Czech historians and art historians to the architecture of the 17th and 18th centuries.

The text begins by tracing how the Czech written history of architecture struggled to find an appreciation to the work of the 17th and 18th centuries and to the Baroque as a fully-fledged style period. It shows that by the 1890s art historians were ready to fully rehabilitate the entire phase, including its most expressive manifestations in the form of buildings above the curve-shaped ground plan. The cornerstone of this rehabilitation was the work of Kilian Ignaz Dientzenhofer, which did not fall out of favour even with the revivalist patriotic scholars who were otherwise sharply critical of 18th-century art.

The text then examines how, in the 1920s, this scholarly rehabilitation of the Baroque was followed by efforts to gain a more detailed understanding of individual creative personalities, as well as the main stylistic features and layers. It focuses in detail on the line of thought that eventually led to the creation of the term "Radical Baroque" and traces its origins to Karel Boromejský Mádl. In a study from the early 1920s, Mádl paid detailed attention to the then-known buildings of Kryštof Dientzenhofer and, with support from contemporary German art history, introduced two key concepts into Czech written literature. Firstly, the principle of the interpenetration of spatial units over oval floor plans; secondly, movement as a key concept in the characterisation of Baroque architecture. An important impulse was subsequently provided by Vojtěch Birnbaum, who in his famous study *Barokní princip v dějinách architektury* (1924) for the first time linked the most expressive – in his term „perspective“ – type of Baroque architecture with the term "radicality" and who was also the first to suggest that this form of the Baroque was the most advanced in the art of the 17th and 18th centuries.

However, the greatest attention is paid to the work of Oldřich Stefan, who in a pair of extensive studies (1926, 1927), following Mádl, Birnbaum and German and Viennese art historians, presented a groundbreaking theory of the development and significance of Central European Baroque architecture. The basis of Stefan's approach was the use of exact formal-analytic methods, which were based on his original training as an architect. Stefan used them to carefully analyse the structural principles and development of Guarino Guarini's buildings, composed on the principle of spatial interpenetrations, and as a result he found a continuation of Guarini's architectural thinking in a small group of buildings created in Vienna and Bohemia – a lineage he saw as having culminated in the work of Kilian Ignaz Dientzenhofer. Stefan called this direction of Baroque architecture „extreme“ or „extremist“ and placed it at the very pinnacle of the development of Baroque architecture, noting that its most significant results were coincidentally produced in Bohemia. He thus built the basic content construction of the term we know as „radical baroque“ today.

Stefan's narrative, developed in other texts as well, had considerable resonance among Czech art historians and became the basic outline for all subsequent interpretations of the history of Baroque architecture in Bohemia. However, his notion of an „extreme“ Baroque did not take hold, and it was gradually replaced by Birnbaum's „radicalism“, which was arguably more understandable at the time. The final form of the term „radical baroque“ as we know it today is, however, the work of Antonín Matějček, who used it repeatedly in his overview monographs on world art, most significantly in his famous *Dějiny umění v obrysech* (1948). In Matějček's edition, though, Stefan's original concept underwent a series of shifts – originally a term denoting the Guarinian direction of architecture, it became a name for all architecture working with curvilinear modelling of mass, and also became synonymous with the „high“ Baroque (Matějček in literary shorthand opposed „Radical Baroque“ against the „academicism“ and „conservatism“ of 17th and 18th centuries).

Final chapter traces how the concept established by Matějček took hold and became established in the post-war Czech art history, despite the fact that Matějček's contribution significantly blurred the meaning of the original term and that „Radical Baroque“ had no counterpart in contemporary foreign literature on Baroque architecture. The text chronicles the definitive establishment of the term in the works of Jaromír Neumann and Oldřich J. Blažíček, and only briefly outlines the forms that the term „Radical Baroque“ took in the works of other art historians.

The way in which the term „Radical baroque“ was conceived and received did not correspond to the importance it acquired in the Czech art history. There has never been a coherent definition of it, and that the final construct of „Radical Baroque“ is not the result of transparent discussion and conceptual refinement, but rather the product of the collective intuition of art historians of the 1920s and 1930s (which, moreover, largely confirmed the canon already established by the generation Czech National Revival historians). Even in the decades that followed, the concept did not receive a more thorough reflection – even by those art historians who kept their distance from it and did not eventually adopt it as their own. „Radical Baroque“, as a dominant concept, but one that has gradually become obscured, loosened and faded over time, has therefore brought a number of contradictions and ambiguities to the modern Czech history of architecture.