

Dream of Freedom. Czech Interwar Artists and Classical Mythology

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ABSTRACT

The study focuses on the themes of classical mythology in the Czech visual art with an emphasis on the period between the two World Wars. The depiction of classical myth in the work of modern Czech artists became not only a means of expressing their attitudes towards the tradition and the past, but was also a reflection of the current period's events as well as the tool of perception of themselves in a modern society. Some Czech works of art inspired by classical mythology are very interesting examples dealing with conventional topics, but rendered with modern art forms. Moreover, they are very surprising in their contexts and meanings. The study deals with selected works of art on the theme of classical mythology, whose origin was influenced by the contemporary political environment. These works of art mirror the turbulent atmosphere of the first half of the 20th century, and show the myth in the original Czech (or more precisely Czechoslovak) context. Emil Filla, Alois Wachsman and Vladimír Sychra, prominent representatives of the Czech mythological painting, and other artists and their work are presented here.

KEYWORDS

Classical mythology; heroes; Czechoslovakia; modern art; avant-garde; World War; independence.

INTRODUCTION

A detailed focus on the Czech visual art of the first half of the 20th century shows that classical mythology remains an important source of inspiration even for modern artists. A relatively large number of Czech works of art inspired by classical mythology have been revealed, as well as a variety of original artistic interpretations of the myths (HAVLÍKOVÁ 2014). Some works of art and their interpretations are linked to the contemporary European mythological art, as is described for example by Bernstock (1993, 153–183). Others are based on the original Czech and Czechoslovak context.

During the first half of the 20th century, a revived interest in the classical mythology is observable in European art across genres due to, among other things, the emerging fields of psychology and psychoanalysis. Through mythological artworks, artists reflect contemporary living conditions and situations, problems of modern life under the influence of collective or personal experience. To cope with the tradition of the past, many of them choose new artistic styles and avant-garde approaches. Classical iconography enters the field of cubism, surrealism, expressionism, imaginative and even abstract painting. Sometimes the title is the only guide for reading an artwork.

Shortly after World War I, and especially since the mid-1930s, the Czech art encounters an increased incidence of mythological themes. Dramatic and tragic myths prevail. The pursuit of maximum severity in the period leads to a sense of tradition and historically valid values (VARCL *et al.* 1978, 437). World War I, the rise of Nazism in Germany, the Spanish Civil War, and also the situation of Czechoslovakia as a neighbour of Nazi Germany, all in fact directly

influenced the work of numerous Czech artists. Some artistic responses to the turbulent times were in the form of classical myths embedded into a brand new context. Emil Filla, Alois Wachsmann, Antonín Procházka, Břetislav Benda, Vladimír Sychra can be named among other Czech artists. Their mythological works of art bring critical appeal to the dramatic events of the first half of the 20th century. Antiquity, which we can perceive as instances of tradition and cultural continuity (BOUZEK – KRATOCHVÍL 1994, 61), becomes a widely accepted bearer of a universal humanistic message here.

In this study, we briefly mention only a few examples of works of art inspired by classical mythology. We focus on those reflecting the dramatic social and political events of interwar Central Europe. So we reveal a specific thematic line of Czech interwar art, where classical myth is used as a tool for intelligible reflection of the then events.

CLASSICAL MYTH AND ITS CZECH INTERWAR INTERPRETATION: SELECTED TOPICS AND ARTWORKS

CZECHOSLOVAK ICARUS

In the 20th century the myth of Icarus remains a popular artistic theme, which is strongly associated, among other things, with the development of aviation. Kilinsky (2002) reveals an overview of the Icarus myth interpretation in art. For Czechoslovak art, the tragic death of general Milan Rastislav Štefánik, a military pilot and co-founder of the Czechoslovak Republic, becomes an impulse for enlivening the myth. On May 4, 1919, a plane carrying Štefánik on his return home from Italy crashed near Bratislava. Contemporary interpretations of Štefánik's death referred to him as both a national and an ancient hero (MACHO 2011, 50–52). Despite the ambiguous tone of the myth with regard to the main character, Štefánik was likened also to Icarus. A celebratory poem dedicated to Štefánik in 1920 by the Slovak poet Vladimír Roy likened the general to the young Icarus for his desire to fly, high ambitions, tragic fate, i.e. his flight and fall (ROY 1920).

The tragic event became a source of inspiration also for the sculptor Jan Štursa (MATĚJČEK 1923, 27). His *Icarus* (**Fig. 1**), dated 1919, whose style reminds us of another famous sculpture of his *Raněný [Wounded]*,¹ elaborates the matter of a body movement and shows a young man collapsing in a tragic fall with arms raised to the heavens. Icarus' heroic take-off and subsequent tragic downfall, a symbol of human endeavour, are shown in a single motion. The same inspiration also stands behind the origin of the wooden sculpture *Pád letce [Fall of aviator]* by the sculptor Josef Kubíček (HLUŠIČKA 2000, 16–17). In 1920, the sculpture was published under the name of Icarus in *Volné směry XXI*.²

The aviation industry made the myth of Icarus a reality. The period atmosphere where people were standing in the street pointing their fingers to the sky (HOFFMEISTER 1961, 11) had also its dark side. Air disasters were perceived as the result of human pride and technological development turning against mankind. The Icarus myth is the parable of the two aspects of human endeavour – pride and fall, including the fall due to careless technological development

1 *Raněný [Wounded]*, dated 1921, is one of the most famous of Štursa's works. It reflects World War I events and is a universal reminder of the lives lost in the war.

2 *Volné směry*, translated to English as *Free Trends or Open Paths*: monthly journal of Mánes Union of Fine Arts was published in 1897–1949.

(ŠMEJKAL 1988, 209), but also, as is the example of Štefánik's death interpretation, efforts for higher goals, for surmounting human possibilities, and the struggle for freedom.



Fig. 1: Icarus (study) by Jan Štursa, 1919, bronze, National Gallery Prague (MAŠÍN - HONTY 1981).

LEGIONARY ODYSSEY

The Odysseus of the 20th century is a vulnerable person, a lone wanderer in life, searching for and always continuing towards his destination. Modern art brings a wide range of interesting interpretations of the figure (STANFORD - LUCE 1974). Also *Vraždící Odysseus* [*Killing Odysseus*] (Fig. 2), dated 1934, by the sculptor Jakub Obrovský is a wanderer. The sculptor was inspired by Homer's *Odyssey* in the translation by his close friend, Otmar Vaňorný (DVOŘÁK 1969) and especially by the contemporary political events. The initial inspiration was the waiting for the return of the legionaries from World War I (BARTŮŠKOVÁ 1999, 13) to the newly founded independent republic.



Fig. 2: Vraždicí Odysseus [Killing Odysseus] by Jakub Obrovský, 1934, bronze, National Gallery Prague.

Obrovský reminisces about his Odysseus (as cited in KOŤA 2011, 42): he began to work in 1918, when the news from the Russian front awakened inspiration. The complicated return of Czechoslovak legionaries from the Russian front, travelling back home through many stops e.g. Japan, the Philippines, the United States, reminds him of the wanderings of Odysseus and his desire to return home, his commitment and struggle for freedom. Moreover, Odysseus became literally a life program for the sculptor, who, for many years, again and again searched for the right facial expression (KOLMAN-CASSIUS 1935, 172).

Obrovský portrayed Odysseus as a hardened old man holding out a javelin. The hero throws the javelin for revenge; the emotion is inscribed in his face. Revenge on those who had claimed his home. Obrovský reflected deeply on the ethical aspect of Odysseus's revenge and finally he understood it in the noble sense (as cited in KOLMAN-CASSIUS 1935, 172) as a result of the events. As added by Kolman-Cassius (1935, 172), Obrovský's close friend: "Sometimes the face must harden as bronze and the whole person fulfil only thought in judgement, revenge,

mercilessness almost elemental, all in one. And above all, a desire for homeland so terrible, a desire for family, cleverness in the service of ideas, which must all overcome and prevail in spite of everything!" Obrovský's *Vraždící Odysseus* [*Killing Odysseus*] thus becomes a symbol of a long journey, faith in returning home and hope for a positive future of a very young nation.

HERAKLES THE LIBERATOR

Heroes liberating the ancient Greeks from the forces of darkness became a symbol of the fight for freedom for the Czechoslovak nation in the works of Emil Filla. His cycle *Boje a zápasy* [*Fights and struggles*]³ (1936–1937) treats the theme of a struggle of a man with animals.⁴ Although inspired by the works of Pablo Picasso and André Masson, Filla's work is an open critical challenge, closely linked to the Czechoslovak pre-war situation, calling for the rise of the nation in the most difficult of times, i.e. under the threat to the Czechoslovak Republic from Nazi Germany. The ancient hero Herakles is the main character of the cycle. His engagement is, in the context of Filla's work of this period, the most important and most extensive. To a lesser extent there are also other heroes present: Theseus, the founder of the Athenian democracy, Perseus, and marginally Phaethon and Orpheus. Herakles fights against the Nemean lion, Erymanthian boar, Lernaean hydra and other creatures. Theseus fights the Cretan bull.

For Emil Filla, Herakles is the embodiment of the Greek spirit. He is the symbol of victory over the dark forces, an expression of struggle for freedom. And according to Filla (1947, 49), freedom is the holiest thing one may have.

During 1936–1937 Filla produced dozens of works, thematically related with a common theme and mainly common ideological humanistic message. Herakles and Theseus, the main heroes of the cycle are, for Filla, tools for expressing the need of a fight for freedom. The traits characteristic of all the mythological paintings of the cycle are timelessness and ideal neutral space that bring up images of *greater importance* and a *supra-individual form* (LAHODA 2007, 514).

The graphic cycle *Boje a zápasy* [*Fights and struggles*] directly links the mythological theme with the threat to Czechoslovakia by Nazi Germany since Emil Filla also included the dramatic prints entitled *Nacismus* [*Nazism*] among other prints of the cycle.

Filla returned to the topic even after the end of World War II after his return from the Buchenwald concentration camp. The graphic cycle *Herakles* now conceives the hero's life chronologically pointing out ten important moments (**Fig. 3**). The scenes are framed by decorative borders. These borders and their details make Herakles topical for the Czechoslovak environment and the modern times. Among the motifs in borders, there are for example a panorama of the Central Bohemian Mountains or typical products of homeland farming. Herakles remains for Filla a hero and freedom fighter. Herakles' works are, according to Filla, the liberation that the Greeks first succeeded to appoint: freedom (as cited in BERKA 1969, 102).

The humanistic appeal hidden in *Boje a zápasy* [*Fights and Struggles*] was highly praised by art critics even at the time before World War II, for example by Karel Čapek and Jiří Krejčí. According to the latter, Emil Filla does not cope with the Ancient Greece. He copes with today and does it very persuasively and powerfully (as cited in WINTER 2004, 68).

3 The term *Boje a zápasy* [*Fights and Struggles*] is used as a title for a cycle of works by Emil Filla. In 1936–1937, the author depicted again and again the struggle between man and beast in sculpture, painting and graphic techniques. Originally the term referred only to the graphic cycle, subsequently it came to embrace the entire thematic unit, that means dozens of works.

4 For various *Fights and Struggles* works see BERKA 1968; BYDŽOVSKÁ – SRP 2006; LAHODA 2007; MATĚJČEK 1938; ZEMINA 2002.



Fig. 3: Héraklés a Kerberos [Herakles fighting Kerberos] by Emil Filla, 1945, dry needle (BERKA 1968).

PHAETHON TRIUMPHANT

The Czech mythological painting of the first half of the 20th century emphasises the heroic aspect in the tragic story of Phaethon, the son of Helios. *Phaethon* (1937) also made part of Filla's *Boje a zápasy* [*Fights and struggles*], mentioned above. The painter achieved a highly dynamic composition when solving the relationship of animal and human bodies at the moment of the fall of the Sun chariot.

Phaethon is somewhat special when compared to other works of the cycle. It does not take place in a mythological timelessness and neutral space. The reflection of the landscape and the architecture can be seen in fragments of the collapsing quadriga. These details collocate

the tragic fall in Central Europe and the modern times. In the context of the entire cycle *Boje a zápasy* [*Fights and struggles*] the story of Phaethon can be interpreted as a warning of doom and impending disaster, based on the threat from Nazi Germany. For Emil Filla the fall of Phaethon is the moment of restoration of the cosmic order on the threshold of danger (BERKA 1969, 91).

A very different approach permeates the *Phaethon* by Alois Wachsman in the early 1940s. Past and present, different geographical regions, that all mingle in the works of Wachsman as a characteristic trait.⁵ The viewer's attention is directed to the flying Sun chariot, which is watched by people standing on the edge of a town. We can identify them as a group of students. The memories of Karel Honzík (1963, 14–15), a well known Czech architect, confirms that identification. On the ground we cannot see any signs of destruction, caused by Phaethon driving the Sun chariot; surprisingly, the young man controls the chariot with confidence.



Fig. 4: *Phaethon* by Alois Wachsman, 1942, tempera on cardboard (PEČÍRKA 1963).

5 Alois Wachsman is one of the most prominent personalities of Czech mythological painting. His work includes besides other works a unique Oedipus cycle (cf. MICHALOVÁ 2003).

Phaethon (1942) by Alois Wachsman (**Fig. 4**) comes at the moment of the Czechoslovak nation struggling for its freedom and independence. Compared to Filla's painting mentioned above, a different interpretation can be offered. In 1917, *Phaethon*, an original dramatic piece by Otakar Theer, was staged at the National Theatre in Prague. In the context of the World War I events, the piece was rendered as a call for national political resolve (ŠALDA 2013, 227), as an expression of hope for the emergence of an independent state. Theer's hero opposes the divine order and struggles against the inequality between men and gods. The piece became a celebration of the free will and revolt against the given order (HOMOLOVÁ – OTRUBA 1971, 298). "I will smash mankind's shackles [...] I bring justice and freedom" (THEER 1922) says the hero. As does Wachsman's *Phaethon*. And mankind represented by a group of students, the generation of the future, enthusiastically welcomes the hope of restoring freedom.

WOMEN POWER

An openly critical tone is also present in the works of Břetislav Benda during World War II. For the sculptor, the struggle for freedom brings many ideas for artistic creation (BENDA 1977, 110). The female body plays an important role in Benda's creation. Thus the sculptor embodied the fight for freedom and faith in liberation in the characters of female heroines. Classical mythology was the source of inspiration for several artworks.



Fig. 5: Amazonka (Odboj) [Amazon (Resistance)] by Břetislav Benda, bronze, 1941 (KOTALÍK 1982).

Amazonka (Odboj) [*Amazon (Resistance)*] (**Fig. 5**) is among the politically engaged works of art, celebrating the resistance against the enemy. Also *Andromeda* (1941), a young girl fastened to a rock, can be interpreted as the hope for liberation from the shackles of occupation (KOTALÍK 1982, 52). The tragic events were also mirrored in *Matka (Niobé)* [*Mother (Niobe)*], dated 1943.

Benda's sculptures show an interesting aspect of visualization of the classical myth. While *Andromeda* was conceived from its origin as a sculpture based on an ancient theme, *Amazonka (Odboj)* [*Amazon (Resistance)*] is an example of a title secondarily assigned to the relevant content. There, a classical myth served as a tool to outwit the censorship during the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia. And it served also as a guide for the audience. Benda (1977, 110) remembers, that for a show in the south Bohemian town of Tábor he renamed the *Resistance* statue *Amazon*. When a Nazi censor asked him about the statue, the author talked about antiquity. But it was clear to the local visitors what the statue of a woman holding a stone in her hands meant.

Břetislav Benda felt the creation of politically engaged works was an obligation in the difficult times for his nation. According to him (BENDA 1977, 112), a sculptor must stay with the nation and cope with its suffering and difficulties. This is the aspect that should be present in the arts.

A female body had an irreplaceable role in the work of Benda. But Benda enhanced the female nude with an ideological context by reference to the classical mythology. As stated by Kotalík (1982, 53), that return to the past becomes a way to hide the immediate response to the events of the period and direct a political challenge there.

RAPE OF INTERWAR EUROPE

In the late 1930s, the violent mythological motifs resonated in the work of Vladimír Sychra.⁶ The motifs such as Rape of Ganymedes, Rape of Europa and Rape of the Sabine women are performed by the artist as allegories bearing a strong humanistic message in the reflection of the dramatic events associated with the Spanish Civil War (HLAVÁČEK 1983, 9).

The Spanish military conflict deeply affected European society and it was frequently reflected in contemporary art, including Czech contemporary art. The Spanish motifs and typical design appeared in the works of art, but also the reflection of the Spanish artistic models was present there. The „Spain in us“⁷ awareness, as poetically expressed by Josef Hora (1951, 289), was strongly present in the Czechoslovak reaction to the events.

Vladimír Sychra chose to reflect the current events by returning to the roots, to the universally understood symbols of antiquity as an element of tradition, the foundation of the European culture and democracy. In this way, a series of anti-war paintings based on classical mythology was created, including *Únos Sabineek* [*Rape of Sabine women*], a painting dated 1937, showing a dynamic tangle of deformed naked human bodies, on the background of burned ruins, with the author's typical motif of a man thrusting a dagger against a defenceless woman. An eponymous drawing dated 1939 follows the composition of Rubens' *Rape of the daughters of Leucippus* (1618) but Sychra changed the original erotic context completely to chaos and a frightening atmosphere.

6 For information about Vladimír Sychra's life and work see e.g. HLAVÁČEK 1956.

7 *Španělsko v nás* [*Spain in us*] is the title of a poem by Josef Hora. The poem became one of the symbols of Czechoslovak artistic reaction to the Spanish civil War. It also gave its title to a literary anthology of 23 poets published in 1937 in Brno.

A graphic print dated 1936 links Sychra's mythological work directly to the Spanish events. The print is kept in Czech galleries under various names: e.g. *Evropa* [Europe], *Španělsko* [Spain], *Únos Európy - Hrůza letící nad Evropou* [Rape of Europa - Horror over Europe] (Fig. 6). The print depicts a girl abducted by a bull-headed monster. The scene takes place in a mysterious architectural landscape in the De Chirico style. The girl is carried away with her head down, dressed in a Spanish bullfighter jacket *traje de luces*. There is a clear inspiration by Pablo Picasso's *Minotauromachia* (1935).



Fig. 6: *Evropa* [Europe] by Vladimír Sychra, 1936, etching.

The same composition was also used by Sychra for a curtain made for the Theatre D37 (VALENTA 2010, 319), for an evening of poetry by Josef Hora, who perceived Spain and its fight for democracy as an archetype of Czechoslovakia.⁸ The curtain by Vladimír Sychra openly expressed support for democratic Spain and also the fear of the future developments in Europe, for which the Spanish conflict was a prelude.

⁸ The D37 curtain composition was used as a motif for a stamp issued in 1986 on the occasion of the 50th anniversary of the International Brigades in Spain.

CONCLUSION

Czech art of the first half of the 20th century did not avoid the classical mythology inspiration at all. Approximately 200 works of art by known artistic personalities have been identified and gathered so far (HAVLÍKOVÁ 2014). Classical mythology finds its expression both in sculpture and painting, as well as in graphics. For some Czech artists the ancient mythology becomes literally an artistic life program. However, the motivation for the use of myth in modern art differs. Myth is a tool for the artist's coping with reality, with their own personality and destiny. It is also a reaction to a thousand-year tradition of art, as well as a reflection of contemporary foreign artistic personalities. For many artists, their work on illustration of classic authors, stage design or close friendship with writers, are the main sources of turning attention to mythology.

Via selected works of art, this essay illustrates an intriguing approach of some Czech artists to the ancient myth. For them the myth is the means of reflection of contemporary social and political events and the appeal of human struggle for freedom and national independence. The article presents several of the most significant examples of that thematic line of Czech art in the first half of the 20th century, which uses the classical myth as a tool for dealing with contemporary political and social events: the issue of freedom and democracy in the spirit of European humanistic tradition. So the classical myth is experiencing another of its endless transformations, this time in a very interesting and specific Czech, or more precisely Czechoslovak context.

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