

# Exhibiting Central European baroque art in Cold War Britain: 'The works themselves refute geographical separatism'

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This article analyses the organization and reception of one exhibition of baroque art, *Baroque in Bohemia*.<sup>1</sup> Organized collaboratively across the Iron Curtain, it formed part of an official governmental programme of cultural exchanges between Britain and Czechoslovakia. It was shown in two British locations in the summer and autumn of 1969: firstly, London's Victoria and Albert Museum (henceforward V&A) and later the City Museum and Art Gallery in Birmingham.<sup>2</sup> The press release summarized its content as 'Baroque sculpture, paintings, glass, silver, ecclesiastical vestments and metalwork ranging in date from the beginning of the seventeenth to the end of the eighteenth century', noting that the exhibition aimed to trace 'the evolution of the Bohemian Baroque in all its aspects'.<sup>3</sup> Exhibits were drawn mostly from Czech sources, predominantly museum collections in Prague and churches in Bohemia.<sup>4</sup> However, planning the show was a more collaborative effort, requiring co-operation between a number of administrative and governmental bodies both across the East-West divide and within each individual country. The Czechoslovak Ministry of Culture took a lead role alongside various Czech museums, notably the National Gallery in Prague. Various British cultural and governmental organizations also worked together to realize the exhibition. The nominally apolitical Arts Council of Great Britain was in charge of general administration with input from the two museums in London and Birmingham; the British Foreign Office dealt with diplomatic talks and planning; and the British Council – an organization more familiar for its promotion of British culture abroad – provided funds and negotiated and implemented the exchanges of exhibitions on behalf of the Government.<sup>5</sup>

*Baroque in Bohemia* was an instrument of cultural diplomacy: it had a political role in the context of the wider ideological conflict of the Cold War and can be examined alongside other officially sanctioned exhibitions from the Eastern Bloc

<sup>1</sup> This research was supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council's Collaborative Doctoral Award scheme.

<sup>2</sup> The London showing was from 10 July to 14 September 1969; the subsequent Birmingham display ran from 3 October to 30 November 1969.

<sup>3</sup> Archive of Art and Design, Blythe House, London (AAD), Arts Council of Great Britain archive (ACGB/121/123), Publicity, 'Baroque Art in Bohemia' (1969).

<sup>4</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123. At least one exhibit was already in Britain: Adriaen De Vries' bronze entitled 'Allegory of Rudolf II as Patron of the Arts' (1609) was loaned by Queen Elizabeth II.

<sup>5</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, John Hulton, British Council. Letter to John Lowe, City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, 13 March 1968, CZ/651/2.

shown in Britain in the 1960s.<sup>6</sup> These utilized historical and contemporary art and design, often publicly proclaiming the distinctive national characteristics of the countries of the Bloc to foreign audiences.<sup>7</sup> Exhibitions had long been used as a method of publicly demonstrating and asserting such national characteristics but against the backdrop of the Cold War this practice took on new features.<sup>8</sup> Critical responses to displays like *Baroque in Bohemia* often revolved around whether these national identities were as apparent in the exhibition content as their titles and catalogues suggested. In writing about the exhibition, British critic and curator Norbert Lynton noted the conflict between twentieth-century claims to individual nationhood and the political realities of the seventeenth century, commenting that the ‘works themselves refute geographical separatism’ because ‘Central European Baroque was international in its aspirations, patrons and creators’.<sup>9</sup> Having fled Germany as a child in 1935, Lynton may have been particularly conscious of the slippery concept of nationality; however his concerns were typical of British press reviews of similar Eastern Bloc exhibitions.<sup>10</sup>

In other ways, *Baroque in Bohemia* stood apart from comparable exhibitions held in Britain. It was distinct in its exclusive focus on baroque art; although later exhibitions like the extremely popular *1000 Years of Art in Poland* (1970) held at the Royal Academy in London incorporated some baroque pieces yet these were presented as part of a broader national survey of artistic developments.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, this exhibition facilitates an analysis of how one artistic style gained new political significance in the geo-political context of the 1960s. *Baroque in Bohemia* can be studied in order to unpick how Central European baroque art was used in Cold War cultural diplomacy to represent a particular nation and to explore the relationship between this exhibition and wider political events. In particular, this article situates the exhibition in relation to British official and public responses to Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring in August 1968, seeking to understand why the display failed to attract large audiences in London and Birmingham. It examines the organization and context of the exhibition before placing this analysis in the context of anglophone perceptions of baroque art and aesthetics in the 1960s. This article suggests that whilst the ambiguity of the term baroque was helpful to the

<sup>6</sup> See for example Verity Clarkson, ‘“Sputniks and Sideboards”: Exhibiting the Soviet “Way of Life” in Cold War Britain 1961–1979’ in Anthony Cross, ed., *A People Passing Rude: British responses to Russian culture*, Cambridge: Open Book Publishers, 2012, 285–300.

<sup>7</sup> Brian Wallis, ‘Selling Nations: international exhibitions and cultural diplomacy’, in Daniel J. Sherman and Irit Rogott, eds, *Museum Culture: histories discourses spectacles*, London: Routledge, 1994, 266.

<sup>8</sup> See for example David Crowley, ‘Humanity rearranged: the Polish and Czechoslovak pavilions at Expo 58’, *West 86th*, 19:1, 2012, 88–105; Robert H. Haddow, *Pavilions of Plenty: exhibiting American culture abroad in the 1950s*, Washington / London: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1997; György Péteri, ‘Sites of Convergence: The USSR and communist Eastern Europe at international fairs abroad and at home’, *Journal of Contemporary History*, 47:1, 2012, 3–12; Robert W. Rydell, *World of Fairs: the century-of-progress expositions*, Chicago / London: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

<sup>9</sup> Norbert Lynton, ‘Baroque art in Bohemia’, *Guardian*, 12 July 1969, 6.

<sup>10</sup> ‘Obituary: Norbert Lynton’, *The Times*, 6 November 2007.

<sup>11</sup> Anna Różycka-Bryzek, ed., *1000 Years of Art in Poland*, London: Royal Academy of Arts, 1970.

British and Czech organizers, allowing the exhibition simultaneously to emphasize links with a wider Western European artistic heritage and to proclaim a distinctive national style apart from Soviet control, a lack of understanding and awareness of the baroque amongst the wider British public undermined the organizers' aim of demonstrating 'solidarity' with the Czech people.

This original research comes from a design history perspective, examining the role of exhibitions more broadly as tools of cultural diplomacy in the Cold War. It draws on material located in official British archives of government and administration (notably the records of the Foreign Office), arts organizations and museums. As such, the perspective it takes is one-sided, but revealing of nuanced, pragmatic Cold War relationships and attitudes. Sadly, no installation images of *Baroque in Bohemia* have been located; details about layout and appearance have been inferred from reviews and the exhibition designer's comments. Public responses – always tricky to pin down – are drawn from information and correspondence recorded in the official archives as there were no visitors' books. The critical response is also significant here; though usually positive, it seems to have been slight, perhaps a reflection of broader attitudes in Britain to both these so-called 'embassy exhibitions' and baroque style more generally.

### **Cultural diplomacy, exhibitions and the Cold War**

*Baroque in Bohemia* was part of an unprecedented flurry of reciprocal exhibitions between Britain and countries such as Poland, Romania, Czechoslovakia and Hungary during the 1960s and early 1970s.<sup>12</sup> Official cultural exchanges with the Soviet Union had been taking place since the later 1950s following the cautious relaxation of East-West antagonisms that accompanied the Thaw. However, it was not until 1959–1960 that direct cultural contacts were tentatively initiated between the British government and the rest of the Eastern Bloc.<sup>13</sup> The impetus for this cultural diplomacy was political: to enhance these states' individual prestige and cultural standing – what the Foreign Office called 'respectability' – separate from Soviet influence.<sup>14</sup> Whilst acknowledging the diversity of the different countries of the Eastern Bloc, the Foreign Office also perceived overarching similarities: it is notable that Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Poland and Romania were still referred to as 'satellites' under the influence of the USSR.<sup>15</sup> Their populations were perceived to have a 'very different' relationship with their governments in comparison to the

<sup>12</sup> Such exhibitions were rare in Britain prior to the 1960s. Exceptions include the exhibition *Hungarian Modern Painting* shown in London in 1948 and *Masterpieces of Czechoslovak Art* shown at the Edinburgh Festival in 1959, both organized with the support of the Arts Council of Great Britain.

<sup>13</sup> The National Archives of the UK, Kew, London (TNA), Foreign Office Archive, (FO924/1367), 'US-UK Information Working Group Meetings', April 1961, CR60211/7.

<sup>14</sup> TNA, FO924/1589, Cultural Relations Department, Foreign Office. Confidential Paper: 'Cultural agreements with East Europe', 13 April 1966.

<sup>15</sup> TNA, FO924/1595, Richard Speaight, director of East-West contacts, Foreign Office. 'East-West cultural contacts 1959–66' CR6111/27.

people of the USSR.<sup>16</sup> From the early 1960s, official Foreign Office policy was to help such countries grow in independence from Moscow via an expansion of cultural contacts.<sup>17</sup> It was convinced that by ‘developing closer commercial, cultural and scientific contacts with the Warsaw Pact states’, Britain and the other NATO powers could ‘tacitly encourage internal reform behind the Iron Curtain’.<sup>18</sup> These countries’ common European heritage, shared with the West, was exploited for political ends: the British Council noted that the populations of countries like Czechoslovakia and Poland had been ‘out of touch with the West’ only for a matter of years.<sup>19</sup> It was thought that the persuasive potential of such cultural diplomacy – more recently described as ‘soft power’ – could be particularly important in influencing the people of countries like Czechoslovakia.<sup>20</sup> Both the British Council and the Foreign Office believed that the populations of the Eastern Bloc were ‘deeply susceptible’ to the effects of ‘first class artistic displays (dramatic, musical or pictorial)’, especially the ‘young and intelligent’.<sup>21</sup> Interest in the arts was understood to be more ‘widespread in all classes in the Soviet Union and East Europe’ than in Britain; thus the Foreign Office commented (with a typical note of superiority) that ‘the impact of a tour by a first rate theatre company or of an exhibition of things we do better in the West can be deep and lasting’.<sup>22</sup>

From 1962 onwards, two-way cultural contacts with the ‘satellites’ were formalized as a series of cultural programmes. Although these were less official than the biennial cultural agreements with the USSR, both types were negotiated every few years to permit Britain to send ‘Western’ culture, seen as embodying ideas of freedom and democracy, across the Iron Curtain.<sup>23</sup> In return for this outgoing cultural diplomacy, Britain was compelled to receive people and events from the Eastern Bloc, including what were informally referred to by those involved in their organization as ‘embassy exhibitions’. *Baroque in Bohemia* was one such show; as part of the 1968–1970 cultural programme between Britain and Czechoslovakia, the exhibition nestled amongst an array of other exchanges including those of academics, scientists, performing arts, cinema, books and youth exchanges.<sup>24</sup> The

<sup>16</sup> TNA, British Council Archive (BW2/532), ‘Report of meeting to discuss cultural relations with satellite countries, 9 April 1957’.

<sup>17</sup> TNA, FO924/1367. Notes of meeting: East Europe department at the British Council, 27 November 1961. CR60211/10.

<sup>18</sup> See TNA, FO371/177821, ‘United Kingdom policy towards the satellites’, 27 Jan 1964, SC(61)25, quoted in Geraint Hughes, ‘British policy towards Eastern Europe and the impact of the “Prague Spring” 1964–1968’, *Cold War History*, 4:2, 2004, 118–9.

<sup>19</sup> TNA, BW2/532, ‘Report of meeting to discuss cultural relations with satellite countries’, 9 April 1957.

<sup>20</sup> Joseph S. Nye, *Soft Power: the means to success in world politics*, New York: PublicAffairs, 2004.

<sup>21</sup> TNA, BW2/532, Deputy director general, British Council. Memo to director general, British Council. ‘USSR manifestations’, 11 November 1957.

<sup>22</sup> TNA, FO924/1595, Speaight, Foreign Office. ‘East-West cultural contacts 1959–66’, CR6111/27.

<sup>23</sup> TNA, FO924/1367, Notes of meeting: East Europe department at the British Council. 27 November 1961. CR60211/10.

<sup>24</sup> V&A Museum Archive, London (V&A), VX.1969.008, ‘Cultural programme between Britain and Czechoslovakia 1968–1970’.

mid 1960s arguably represented a high point for exhibitions from Czechoslovakia in Britain. The 1965 show *Bohemian Glass* at the V&A was followed by two more London displays in 1967: an exhibition of *Czech Cubism* at the Tate Gallery and a show of contemporary design at the Design Council's Design Centre in Haymarket. In 1966 the Foreign Office reported that for Czechoslovakia, 'progress is more marked there than anywhere else in East Europe' and 'cultural and scientific traffic outside the programme is increasing and easier than with more other East European countries'.<sup>25</sup> Impetus for the inclusion of named exhibitions in the cultural programme came strongly from the Czech side: the specific baroque theme was suggested by the Czechs as early as 1966.<sup>26</sup> They also insisted on confining the display to Bohemian painting and sculpture, excluding 'baroque art in other parts of Czechoslovakia'.<sup>27</sup> The V&A was earmarked as a venue as early as 1967; the Foreign Office commented that the 'Czechs seemed confident that their Baroque exhibition would prove a success and believed they had a great deal to offer. They said that they were very keen to receive an Old Masters Exhibition in return'.<sup>28</sup>

This principle of reciprocity was key to these exchanges of exhibitions. The term referred to the 'balance' between incoming and outgoing cultural exchanges for each country.<sup>29</sup> Each visiting exhibition was partnered by a return show sent from Britain; in the case of *Baroque in Bohemia* the reciprocal exhibition was a display of 200 years of British art organized by the Birmingham City Museum and comprising work by Constable, Turner and Reynolds.<sup>30</sup> But the British authorities were ambivalent about the principle of reciprocity. Although it allowed for Western culture to be displayed in the Eastern Bloc, there were complaints that it was restrictive, obliging them to receive incoming cultural events that may be of a propagandist nature, of poor quality or of little interest in Britain. The Foreign Office noted in 1966 that '[our] main problem is the demand for reciprocity from countries whose artistic achievements have relatively small appeal to the British public'.<sup>31</sup> Accommodating these Eastern Bloc exhibitions in prestigious British exhibition spaces could be problematic. In October 1966, the valedictory report by Richard Speaight, outgoing director of East-West contacts at the Foreign Office, even suggested the creation of a dedicated gallery to house them. He lamented that

<sup>25</sup> TNA, FO924/1601, Speaight, Foreign Office. 'British experience in East-West cultural contacts', June 1966.

<sup>26</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/223, Josef Grohmann, vice minister for education and culture, Czechoslovakia. Letter to Speaight, Foreign Office, 14 February 1966.

<sup>27</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, John Pope-Hennessy, director, V&A Museum. Letter to Lilian Somerville, British Council, 23 April 1968.

<sup>28</sup> V&A, VX.1969.008, Robert Brash, East-West Contacts Department, Foreign Office. Letter to Gabriel White, Arts Council, 16 November 1967.

<sup>29</sup> TNA, FCO13/80, Cecil King, Foreign Office. 'The problems of reciprocity in East-West cultural exchanges', 3 March 1967.

<sup>30</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Hulton, British Council. Letter to Lowe, City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, 13 March 1968, CZ/651/2.

<sup>31</sup> TNA, FO924/1601, Speaight, Foreign Office. 'British experience in East-West cultural contacts', June 1966.

‘[our] major museums and galleries cannot be expected to accept exhibitions of limited artistic value to satisfy the political requirements of the Foreign Office’.<sup>32</sup>

In order to offset this anticipated lack of appeal, the British side aimed to enhance the quality of incoming exhibits; however, reciprocity restricted their autonomy. In the case of *Baroque in Bohemia*, the three British curators – the director of the V&A John Pope-Hennessy, the art historian Peter Cannon-Brookes from Birmingham Museum and Gabriel White, director of art at the Arts Council – expressed ‘considerable concern’<sup>33</sup> that the quality of the exhibits sent from Czechoslovakia would be merely a ‘quid pro quo’ for the quality of the show proposed for Prague and Bratislava which had a working title of *200 Years of British Painting*.<sup>34</sup> An exhibition of Czech baroque arts shown in Milan in 1966 was used as the basis for the British version, and the British curators each visited Prague to negotiate content directly with the director of the Czech National Gallery, Jiří Kotalík, in 1968.<sup>35</sup> Whilst White said that it was important that the Czechs must produce the initial lists of exhibits, there was some discussion around what would be shown.<sup>36</sup> The British side wanted to emphasize sculpture and organize the exhibition around key artistic personalities, especially Ferdinand Maximilian Brokof (Czech Ferdinand Maximilián Brokoff) and Matthias Bernhard Braun (Czech Matyáš Bernard Braun).<sup>37</sup> Pope-Hennessy, a scholarly and ‘forbidding’ man whose specialism was Italian sculpture,<sup>38</sup> used these meetings to maintain his demands for a ‘sharply focused’, ‘first rate exhibition’.<sup>39</sup> In particular, he wanted to avoid the use of lower-quality reproductions and casts that had dominated the earlier Milan show.<sup>40</sup> The Birmingham curator, Cannon-Brookes, was an equally important influence.<sup>41</sup> Due to his in-depth knowledge of Central European Baroque art, he played a key role in advising on the ‘scope and size’ of the exhibition throughout.<sup>42</sup>

Negotiations were disrupted by the violent events of August 1968. In his autobiography, Pope-Hennessy recalled the impact of political developments on *Baroque in Bohemia*: ‘It started in the exhilarating Dubček period, and when I first

<sup>32</sup> TNA, FO924/1595, Speaight, Foreign Office ‘East-West cultural contacts 1959–66’, CR6111/27.

<sup>33</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Peter Cannon-Brookes, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Letter to White, Arts Council (incorporating notes from meeting between Cannon-Brookes and Dr Kesner, Národní galerie, Prague, 21 June 1968), 5 July 1968.

<sup>34</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Hulton, British Council. Letter to Lowe, City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, 13 March 1968. CZ/651/2.

<sup>35</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Pope-Hennessy, V&A. Letter to Somerville, British Council, 23 April 1968.

<sup>36</sup> AAD, ACGB /121/ 123, White, Arts Council. ‘Czech baroque’. Handwritten note [undated].

<sup>37</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Notes on meeting between Cannon-Brookes and Dr Kesner, Národní galerie, Prague, 21 June 1968.

<sup>38</sup> Anthony Burton, *Vision and Accident: the story of the Victoria and Albert Museum*, London: V&A Publications, 1999, 216.

<sup>39</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Pope-Hennessy, V&A. Letter to Somerville, British Council, 23 April 1968.

<sup>40</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Pope-Hennessy, V&A. Letter to White, Arts Council, 25 July 1968.

<sup>41</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Hulton, British Council. Letter to Lowe, City Museum and Art Gallery, Birmingham, 13 March 1968. CZ/651/2.

<sup>42</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Cannon-Brookes, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Letter to Pope-Hennessy, V&A, 15 April 1968. ART/CB/35.

went to Prague in connection with it the atmosphere was one of buoyancy and hope. But by the time that it took place all this had changed.’<sup>43</sup> David Hughes, the British cultural attaché in Prague, gave some impression of the difficulties of planning an international exhibition following the invasion of Warsaw Pact forces. Writing to the British Council, he explained:

The list of exhibits is even now being worked on by Dr Blažíček and we will hope to let you have it soon, but please plead for patience in Birmingham and the V and A, because communications and indeed life itself present problems here at present.<sup>44</sup>

In common with the other Western powers, the British government had reacted cautiously to the suppression of the Prague Spring, deliberately avoiding ‘any gestures of support’.<sup>45</sup> The historian Geraint Hughes explains how, after ‘brief expressions of outrage’ in August 1968, the USA, Britain, France and others reverted to a ‘business as usual’ approach in relations with the Soviet Bloc.<sup>46</sup> Whilst some ‘spectacular events’ arranged with the USSR – notably the imminent Anglo-Soviet historical exhibition scheduled for Moscow in September 1968 – were cancelled in the aftermath of the military action, cultural exchanges with Czechoslovakia gained renewed significance. Very quickly, a decision was made to continue with *Baroque in Bohemia* as a gesture of ‘solidarity’ with the Czechs.<sup>47</sup> The Foreign Office explained in early September that such interactions contributed ‘to the flow of ideas’ and that they considered ‘their continuance in present circumstances as more important than ever’.<sup>48</sup> Reassurances were made to anxious British lenders concerned about the safety of their paintings destined for the reciprocal exhibition of British Old Masters intended to be shown in Prague and Bratislava in spring 1969.<sup>49</sup> The principle of reciprocity dictated that this could not be cancelled; indeed, the Foreign Office emphasized that due to the events of summer 1968 ‘we attach particular significance to continuing the exchanges in both directions with the Czechoslovaks’.<sup>50</sup> Thus, *Baroque in Bohemia* came to Britain in 1969.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>43</sup> John Pope-Hennessy, *Learning to Look: my life in art*, London, New York: Doubleday, 1991, 187

<sup>44</sup> AAD, ACG/121/123, FD Hughes, cultural attaché, British Embassy Prague. Letter to Hulton, British Council, 5 September 1968.

<sup>45</sup> Hughes, ‘British policy towards Eastern Europe’, 133.

<sup>46</sup> Hughes, ‘British policy towards Eastern Europe’, 131.

<sup>47</sup> V&A, VX.1969.008, Somerville, British Council. Draft letter to lenders, 28 January 1969.

<sup>48</sup> TNA, BW 27/31, Brash, Foreign Office. Letter to HD Mitchell, DFC, Prague ref EWZ1/1, 4 September 1968.

<sup>49</sup> V&A, VX.1969.008, Somerville, British Council. Draft letter to lenders, 28 January 1969.

<sup>50</sup> TNA, BW 27/31, R Brash, Foreign Office. Letter to HD Mitchell, DFC, Prague ref EWZ1/1, 4 September 1968.

<sup>51</sup> The exhibition was shown at the V&A Museum from 9 July to 14 September 1969 and at Birmingham City Museum and Art Gallery from 3 October to 30 November 1969.

## Cold War baroque

Recent anglophone studies have probed the complexities of the term 'baroque' in art historiography. In *Rethinking the Baroque*, the art historian Helen Hills brings together writers from a range of disciplines to analyze the tensions within the idea of baroque as both a stylistic and a philosophical term, noting in particular how baroque has always been an anachronistic concept applied retrospectively.<sup>52</sup> Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Professor of art and archaeology, also highlights inconsistencies of periodization but additionally draws attention to issues with geography that are relevant to the Bohemian strain of the baroque. He suggests that the 'ambiguous' term baroque is 'not particularly helpful' in seeking to understand artistic developments in Central Europe c. 1600 that did not 'fit' conventional definitions of a term transposed from Italy.<sup>53</sup> Yet perhaps at this moment in the Cold War the very ambiguity and hybridity of this term became helpful in planning *Baroque in Bohemia*. This was a multifaceted style that on the one hand could refute geographical separatism, emphasizing links with a wider Western European artistic heritage whilst, on the other, simultaneously proclaim a distinctive national style apart from the Soviet controlled Eastern Bloc.

This complexity is apparent in the catalogue text for *Baroque in Bohemia*, the centerpiece of which was an essay by the Czech art historian Oldřich J. Blažíček. It acknowledged that 'the Baroque reached Bohemia rather late', stating that it was only after the devastation of the Thirty Years War that it began to develop properly.<sup>54</sup> Blažíček also emphasized the power of art as a means to overcome the geographical separation of mountain ranges and forests, claiming that Bohemia never became 'isolated or inward-looking'.<sup>55</sup> A similar idea of baroque art as means to express national identity in the face of external aggression was more fully articulated in an essay written by the Czech scholar Jaromír Neumann and published in the respected British art journal *Apollo* in 1969, just prior to the opening of the London exhibition. The text suggested that, after 1620:

At a period when the very existence of the nation was threatened, the introduction of the Baroque style assisted the Bohemian inhabitants, who were Czechs, to gain some kind of national identity. The brilliant achievement of Baroque art saved the country from declining to the state of a cultural backwater, though, politically and economically, it was condemned to such a position under the Hapsburgs.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Helen Hills, 'Introduction' in Helen Hills, ed., *Rethinking the Baroque*, Farnham: Ashgate, 2011, 3.

<sup>53</sup> Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Discomfited by the baroque: a personal journey' in Hills, ed., *Rethinking the Baroque*, 86–88.

<sup>54</sup> Oldřich J. Blažíček, 'The Baroque Period in Bohemia' in Oldřich J. Blažíček, ed., *Baroque in Bohemia: an exhibition of Czech art organized by the National Gallery, Prague*, London: Arts Council of Great Britain, 1969.

<sup>55</sup> Blažíček, *Baroque in Bohemia*

<sup>56</sup> Jaromír Neumann, 'Baroque art in Bohemia: background to an exhibition', *Apollo*, June 1969, 435.



To a British reader, this historical narrative must have resonated. In emphasizing specifically the Czech people under attack, it appeared to parallel the Soviet-led aggression in Prague in 1968. However, it is important to note that both Neumann's text and the catalogue contributions from the Czech side were heavily edited and modified upon their arrival in Britain. Denys Sutton, the editor of *Apollo*, wrote to White in April 1969 complaining that he had received a 14,000-word essay already translated from French into what he called 'a weird English' which required extensive re-writing and cutting.<sup>57</sup> Cannon-Brookes bemoaned spending 100 hours rewriting the catalogue essays by Blažíček and others, claiming that they had originally been 'thin, unscholarly and so stilted as to be unpublishable in that form'.<sup>58</sup> Whilst it is difficult to quantify the extent to which the British editors modified the emphasis of these texts, evidently they were jointly constructed by scholars in Britain and Czechoslovakia.

Undeniably, the published version of Neumann's text stressed the differences between a Bohemian version of baroque and that in neighbouring countries. But this was not a pure, separate national identity: Neumann explains that their 'specific qualities' developed as architects and artists assimilated and adapted external influences.<sup>59</sup> The scholar of art history and literature, Peter Davidson, has argued that the baroque embraces this 'hybridity', working across multiple artistic traditions.<sup>60</sup> Bohemia, itself a smaller kingdom within what would become the Czechoslovakian nation, was described in the exhibition catalogue as a 'cultural cross-roads of Europe'.<sup>61</sup> Hybridity and a lack of strict boundaries were manifest when selecting the exhibition content for *Baroque in Bohemia*. Cannon-Brookes expressed the tension between foreign and domestic Czech influences in a letter to Pope-Hennessy, querying how much work to include by 'visiting' artists such as the sculptor Johan Georg Heerman from Dresden, responsible for 'that splendid staircase at Troja'.<sup>62</sup> He noted that the artist Ján Kupecký raised 'the same problem in reverse as he was one of the best painters ever to come from Czechoslovakia and yet hardly worked there'.<sup>63</sup> Both artists were ultimately included in the exhibition, prompting the reviewer Lynton to make his criticism about 'geographical separatism':

Half the artists represented in this [exhibition] are not Czech, and those that are got their training elsewhere, and it wouldn't matter if these exhibitions did not force one to look for some special Czech or Hungarian or Bavarian characteristic.<sup>64</sup>

<sup>57</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Denys Sutton, editor, *Apollo*. Letter to White, Arts Council, 22 April 1969.

<sup>58</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Cannon-Brookes, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Letter to White, Arts Council, 18 November 1969.

<sup>59</sup> Neumann, 'Baroque art in Bohemia', 436.

<sup>60</sup> Peter Davidson, *The Universal Baroque*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007, 12.

<sup>61</sup> Blažíček, *Baroque in Bohemia*, unpaginated.

<sup>62</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Cannon-Brookes, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Letter to Pope-Hennessy, V&A, 15 April 1968. ART/CB/35.

<sup>63</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Cannon-Brookes, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Letter to Pope-Hennessy, V&A, 15 April 1968. ART/CB/35.

<sup>64</sup> Lynton, 'Baroque art in Bohemia', 6.

Although overall his piece was positive, Lynton expressed concern that such exhibitions shoehorned the Central European baroque into a narrow art historical narrative, determined by misleading ideas of 'national' styles.

### **British responses to *Baroque in Bohemia***

Was Lynton's knowledgeable response representative of the wider public? How British audiences and critics reacted to the *Baroque in Bohemia* exhibition depended to a large extent on their existing awareness of the style, which was usually very limited. The catalogue explained how the contribution of Bohemia to the baroque style has been 'virtually ignored' in Britain, hoping that the exhibition would fulfill its didactic role to 'remedy this neglect'.<sup>65</sup> This lacuna was indicative of a longstanding issue within anglophone studies of the baroque. DaCosta Kaufmann has noted how understanding of the baroque style more generally was largely confined to academic circles in the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>66</sup> The more specialist topic of Central European baroque was even less well known: one of the few English language publications focused exclusively on this subject was the 1965 Penguin edition of the work of the German scholar Eberhard Hempel.<sup>67</sup> During the preparations for *Baroque in Bohemia*, Cannon-Brookes even suggested he might be the sole English art historian with a specialism in Czech baroque art.<sup>68</sup>

Language was an additional obstacle to the success of the exhibition. The inaccessibility of Czech literature on the subject was undoubtedly an issue, but there were two deeper problems. By its nature, the baroque style was intended to cross boundaries: Davidson characterizes it as a supra-national style, a 'common visual language through which enemies could communicate with each other at moments of truce'.<sup>69</sup> But communicating the unfamiliar Bohemian baroque across time and space to 1960s Britain was difficult in the absence of this shared visual understanding. Additionally, the word 'baroque' carried negative connotations for anglophone audiences. Davidson has emphasized the significant cultural and linguistic difficulties surrounding the historical use of the term in the English-speaking world. He notes that 'it is hardly ever a neutral descriptor' and 'commonly synonymous with the tortuous, the devious, the perverse'.<sup>70</sup> Hills agrees that it is a 'stylistic term steeped in negative connotations denoting immodest excess, moral dubiousness, the supposed insubstantiality of rich ornament, dangerous emotional indulgence, the willfully bizarre, pernicious caprice and bad taste'.<sup>71</sup> This point was also made around the time of *Baroque in Bohemia*. The art dealer Julian Agnew, writing in *Apollo* in 1969, suggested that the absence of popular awareness of the

<sup>65</sup> Gabriel White, 'Foreword' in Blažiček, *Baroque in Bohemia*.

<sup>66</sup> DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Discomfited by the baroque', 88.

<sup>67</sup> Eberhard Hempel, *Baroque Art and Architecture in Central Europe*, Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1965.

<sup>68</sup> AAD, ACG/121/123, Cannon-Brookes, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery. Letter to White, Arts Council, 18 November 1969.

<sup>69</sup> Davidson, *The Universal Baroque*, 13.

<sup>70</sup> Davidson, *The Universal Baroque*, 25.

<sup>71</sup> Hills, 'Introduction', 5.

baroque was due to a 'distrust of the arts of the Counter Reformation', combined with 'a lack of outstanding examples of Baroque ensembles' in Britain. But antipathy and ignorance were arguably stronger forces than the negative undertones of the term: there was a failure on the part of art historians to 'present good popular accounts and explanations of the Baroque' to the general public. Agnew claimed that 'the eye accustomed to Rothko cannot jump unaided to the study of Rubens'. Whilst the extent to which the broader British public shared this familiarity with Rothko is debatable, it appears that there was very little general awareness of artistic styles between the Renaissance and the nineteenth century.<sup>72</sup> Combined with the Foreign Office's opinion that 'East European art, drama and literature has on the whole a limited and specialized appeal here', an exhibition of baroque art from Czechoslovakia faced a struggle to engage indifferent British audiences.<sup>73</sup>

To counteract this ignorance of the baroque style, the exhibition organizers attempted to provide the British public with some additional context. The press release claimed that the architect Christopher Firmstone's exhibition design '[evoked] the spirits of the Bohemian buildings from where many of the objects have come'.<sup>74</sup> According to White, Firmstone's installation – which was used in both London and Birmingham – was intended to be 'an integral part of the exhibition', providing 'a setting which will in some measure remedy the fact that so many sculptures and paintings are being shown divorced from the architectural site for which they were designed'.<sup>75</sup> The catalogue further acknowledged that this was a 'drawback from which all exhibitions of Baroque art must suffer' and hoped that the show would encourage people to visit Czechoslovakia to see the works in context (though venturing across the Iron Curtain was a challenge).<sup>76</sup> Further attempts to provide 'some idea of the appropriate architectural frame' for the art were provided by a supplementary exhibition of photographs of baroque architecture, settings and interiors, presented in an adjacent corridor to the main exhibition hall.<sup>77</sup> Some descriptions hint at a multi-media experience: two films of baroque architecture were shown,<sup>78</sup> and William Gaunt's review in *The Times* mentioned 'colour slides thrown on to a large screen',<sup>79</sup> whilst the press files provide evidence that background music was played during the exhibition.<sup>80</sup>

That these efforts to contextualize the exhibits touched some British attendees is not in doubt; one visitor wrote to the Arts Council in raptures at the 'absolutely delightful' and wide-ranging exhibition, claiming that 'no praise can be too high for Mr Christopher Firmstone's masterly setting'.<sup>81</sup> But this was an

<sup>72</sup> Julian Agnew, 'Problems of the Baroque', *Apollo*, June 1969, 482.

<sup>73</sup> TNA, FO924/1595, Speaight, Foreign Office. 'East-West cultural contacts 1959–66', CR6111/27.

<sup>74</sup> V&A, VX.1969.008, Press release, *Baroque in Bohemia: an exhibition of Czech art*.

<sup>75</sup> White, 'Foreword' in Blažíček, *Baroque in Bohemia*.

<sup>76</sup> White, 'Foreword' in Blažíček, *Baroque in Bohemia*.

<sup>77</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Press information.

<sup>78</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Susan Grayson, regional art officer, Arts Council. Memo to White, Arts Council, 25 June 1969; Hugh Evans, Art Film Office. Letter to Mr Foreman, Educational Television Films Ltd, London, 10 July 1969.

<sup>79</sup> William Gaunt, 'Baroque in Bohemia', *The Times*, 12 July 1969, 19.

<sup>80</sup> V&A, VX.1969.008, Press files.

<sup>81</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Cicely Wanless. Letter to White, Arts Council. 5 September 1969.

exception. Overall, the lack of public interest in and knowledge of the subject of Czech baroque was writ large in ‘extremely disappointing’ attendance figures.<sup>82</sup> Despite reducing entrance fees by a third,<sup>83</sup> visitor numbers peaked around 12,500 at the V&A, only a quarter of the 49,000 who had been forecast to attend.<sup>84</sup> By contrast, the reciprocal display of British art sent to Czechoslovakia attracted over 20,000 attendees at its first showing in Prague alone. Combined with a sell-out catalogue, this confirmed the Foreign Office’s opinion that there was a greater audience for British art in the Eastern Bloc than vice versa.<sup>85</sup> In London and Birmingham, the expected ‘great sympathy’ for the peoples of Czechoslovakia following the events of August 1968 did not materialize. Perhaps this was part of a broader trend in exhibitions: the British Council had commented in 1965 that the British ‘public interest in general surveys of national art has very much declined while there is great enthusiasm for what younger experimental artists are doing in all countries’.<sup>86</sup> Nonetheless, this failure to draw the public hit the Arts Council hard financially.<sup>87</sup> Such diplomatic exhibitions were frequently late additions to their programme and were not approved by the Art Panel in the usual way.<sup>88</sup> Although the British Council had guaranteed to cover £10,000 of losses, the exhibition incurred a £16,000 deficit and the Arts Council had to cover the additional shortfall. Those organizing the show in Britain felt that the public had ‘let them down’: the Secretary General of the Arts Council, Hugh Willatt sadly concluded that *Baroque in Bohemia* ‘simply did not attract’.<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

How and why was baroque art used in this moment of Cold War cultural diplomacy? An analysis of *Baroque in Bohemia* suggests that the ambiguous, hybrid baroque aesthetic allowed the organizers to proclaim geographical separatism in the aftermath of the suppression of the Prague Spring, referring back to the development of the original style in the face of external aggression. It could also refute geographical separatism by linking itself to a common – that is, Western – European heritage of baroque art, something which gained new resonance in the context of the Cold War more broadly and the invasion of Warsaw Pact troops specifically. However, the extent to which these themes were intended by the Czech

<sup>82</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Hugh Willatt, secretary general, Arts Council. Letter to Sir John Henniker, director general, British Council, 25 March 1970.

<sup>83</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Robin Campbell, deputy art director, Arts Council. Memo to Mr Wightman, 1 August 1969.

<sup>84</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, ‘Final attendance sheet week ending 14 September 1969’.

<sup>85</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, L Kesner, National Gallery Prague. Letter to Hulton, British Council, 18 June 1969.

<sup>86</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Hulton, British Council. Letter to Wesley, cultural attaché, British Embassy, Prague, 5 November 1965.

<sup>87</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Willatt, Arts Council. Letter to Henniker, British Council, 20 May 1970.

<sup>88</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Willatt, Arts Council. Letter to Henniker, British Council, 21 July 1970.

<sup>89</sup> AAD, ACGB/121/123, Willatt, Arts Council. Letter to Henniker, British Council, 20 May 1970.

contributors or emphasized by their British counterparts in the context of this collaborative venture remain to be determined. Geographical separatism was also negated by the position of this exhibition in the Anglo-Czech cultural programme. Such events were intended to forge links across the Iron Curtain for public and curators alike, demonstrating that cultural diplomacy could make a real impact in individuals' lives. Indeed, Pope-Hennessy stated in his autobiography (with a typical sense of Western superiority):

The merit of [...] Central European exhibitions was not bound up exclusively with the quality of the works lent. They enabled warm and lasting relationships to be built up between the beleaguered staffs of the museums involved and the free world.<sup>90</sup>

Yet *Baroque in Bohemia* ultimately failed to engage the wider British public; its artistic and political messages were largely ignored. As the catalogue observed, the baroque style was 'too little known'; it was not a common visual language that could be easily understood by anglophone audiences in London and Birmingham.<sup>91</sup> Any residual sympathy for the Czech people after the violent events of August 1968 was insufficient to overcome public antipathy towards an 'embassy exhibition' of unfamiliar baroque art a year later.

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<sup>90</sup> Pope-Hennessy, *Learning to look*, 187.

<sup>91</sup> White, 'Foreword' in Blažíček, *Baroque in Bohemia*.