



Displaying city and nation in the Prague City Museum (1883-1938)

Jaroslav Ira

To cite this article: Jaroslav Ira (2022) Displaying city and nation in the Prague City Museum (1883-1938), *Museum History Journal*, 15:1, 33-56, DOI: [10.1080/19369816.2022.2042074](https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2022.2042074)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/19369816.2022.2042074>



© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group



Published online: 16 Apr 2022.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 469



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Displaying city and nation in the Prague City Museum (1883–1938)

Jaroslav Ira 

Institute of World History, Faculty of Arts, Charles University, Prague, Czechia

ABSTRACT

From the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, Prague transformed from the provincial hub of Bohemia to a modern metropolis, head of the Czech nation, and capital of the new Czechoslovak state. This article explores what place Prague City Museum inhabited during this process. In particular, it looks at how the role of the museum was debated concerning its location and construction, in the meaning-making practices related to its collections, and in reflections on its somewhat weak outreach to the larger public. Analysis of the museum's permanent exhibitions as well as four temporary exhibitions organised in 1895, 1916, and 1934–35, shed further light on how the city was conceptualised and its national historical narrative interwoven with that of its urban past, while also discussing various modes of representation and signification used in promoting its existence.

KEYWORDS

Prague; city museums; urban past; exhibitions; F.X. Harlas; A. Novotný; A. Jirásek

1. Introduction

From the mid-nineteenth to the mid-twentieth century, Prague changed in many respects. It went from the capital of the Bohemian Kingdom, a mere province in the Habsburg Empire, to Prague, the incontestable centre of the Czechs, becoming ultimately the capital city of the newly established Czechoslovakia in 1918. In terms of urban development, Prague, the loose agglomeration, grew into the metropolitan Greater Prague (*Velká Praha*) by 1922, while witnessing feverish building activity, as well as plans to rebuild the Prague city centre into a distinctively modern, *fin-de-siècle* metropolis, and impressive capital city after independence.¹ On the symbolic level, Prague was recast and retrospectively mythologised by the Czech elites as a fundamentally Czech or Slavic city, its multiethnic character notwithstanding. Furthermore, the city was progressively represented as not only a great Slavic city but also a truly great European city, able to offer architecture and culture equal to that of Paris or Berlin. The desire to regain the status of capital city, implicit in Czech national aspirations, went hand-in-hand with reclaiming the position of a first-rate European modern metropolis, in order to overcome the anxiety of being a mere province, a feeling for which Austrian rule was blamed.²

CONTACT Jaroslav Ira  Jaroslav.Ira@ff.cuni.cz

© 2022 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group
This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited, and is not altered, transformed, or built upon in any way.

This article explores the relationship of the Prague City Museum (*Muzeum města Prahy*) to the city of Prague itself as it emerged as a modern metropolis and prospective capital of the arising Czech nation, as well as how the museum reflected this development in its curation, collections, and exhibitions. Adopting the perspectives of urban historians, museum studies, and research into representations of the past, the museum is approached here both as an institution, which existed in an urban context, and as a medium that produced particular narratives of the urban past and images of the city. Focusing on a single case, this article hopes to contribute to the larger debate concerning the role of museums in urban modernity, as well as discussions about the social relevance of city museums, relations between museums and their audiences, and the role of objects in the pre-war museums.

Urban historians have recently begun studying museums in closer relation to their urban context, as markers of urbanity and important landmarks of the urban landscape in the late nineteenth century. Furthermore, museums have been assessed as sites of knowledge production, in which ‘the past was reformulated “scientifically”’ in order to authorise a narrative of linear progress, embodied most powerfully by the modernised cities of the West.³ Recent enquiries into the history of city museums, comparatively recent institutions that were created to deal with each city’s particular urban past, bring further insights. In particular, the close links between the massive rebuilding of urban spaces and the emergence of city museums, epitomised especially by Parisian Carnavalet, are emphasised. Likewise, it is argued that city museums wrestled from the very inception with the question as to how to tackle urban history in a manner that would be meaningful to urban audiences and relevant *vis a vis* complex and highly dynamic urban realities; a puzzle that also translated into the question of what the appropriate location and architecture for these museums should be.⁴ This article touches upon some of these themes, while also delving more thoroughly into the semantics of the collections and exhibitions. Furthermore, it complements some of the very recent insights made by Markian Prokopovych, who has discussed the early Prague City Museum in a broader context of other city museums in the late Habsburg Empire. According to his inquiry, Prague museum was to some degree particular, especially in terms of acquiring its own building early, which also suggests a possibly higher relevance of local urban history for Prague.⁵ As will be shown, the museum’s monumental building was a mixed blessing. However, it corresponded to one of the museum’s discernible goals, namely, promoting Prague as a cultural centre of European merit through collecting and displaying her rich cultural history.

In the prevailing narrative, city museums have been depicted as heavily object-based and focused on the (elite-biased) material culture, disconnected from urban society, and merely reactive to its problems; a change to this paradigm, so the argument goes, has appeared only in the last three decades.⁶ The story of the Prague City Museum doesn’t turn the narrative on its head, to be sure, but it makes a case for a more complex perspective. While the museum typically looked at the past, and due to many reasons remained often merely ‘in the city’, it nonetheless made efforts to be ‘of the city’, to make the objects talk to the public, and even if indirectly, to endorse particular paths of Prague’s future development. Historicising the perspective on a museum’s engagement with the public reveals that museum curators were concerned about visitors’ interests as early as the turn of the twentieth century. Furthermore, although the museum curators relied on objects and their power to convey meaning, adhering to what Steven Conn has called ‘object-based epistemology’,⁷ it is worthy of looking more closely at how the objects

served as makers of particular images and narratives of the city, as well as to explore ways in which curators tried to make meaning of these objects, rather than just dismiss the object-based paradigm altogether.

To understand the story of the museum in its proper complexity, two other points should be made: First, the modernisation of Prague was a contentious process because of a split in the Czech intelligentsia. Since the controversial clearance of the Old Town and the former Jewish Town in the 1890s, the Czech public grew seriously divided about the future development of Prague. As Cathleen Giustino has shown, modernisation of the Western-European style, endorsed by liberals amongst the Czech political elites in Prague, with apartment blocks and boulevards as their yardstick of modern progress, was increasingly opposed by much of the Czech cultural intelligentsia, who thought it was the old-Prague architectural heritage that boosted Czech national distinctiveness and not the emulation of Western models.⁸ Second, while the museum's operation should be placed within the broader contexts of nation-building and urban development, one should not ignore endogenous factors, such as the museum staff's vision for future progress, trends in museology, or limits imposed by the physicality of the museum building itself, which often played a principal role in what was displayed and how. Likewise, the museum objects often seemed to have an agency of their own: many of them came to Prague City Museum somewhat arbitrarily, preceding a clear concept of the display, and only at a later stage prompting efforts to make some sense of them.

The structure of the article loosely follows the questions, *what* to display, *where* to display, and *how*. The text opens with the illustrative story of an unwanted building and ill-fated attempts to get a better one. The second part focuses on the museum's programme, its collections, and permanent exhibits, while looking at how the collections were given meaning and social relevance by the museum staff. The final part discusses in detail a few temporary exhibitions that succeeded in addressing a wider audience, while also bringing creative solutions to museum displays and powerful ways of representing the city. The article uses newspaper articles and reviews about the museum and its exhibitions, published texts about the museum by museum staff members, and catalogues of the museum's collections and exhibitions. Furthermore, it makes use of archival fonds of Zdeněk Wirth, an art historian and the key figure of the Czech heritage movement, who served as a member of the museum board since 1929.⁹

2. At the margin: searching for a proper home

The origins of the Prague museum date back to the late 1870s, when concerns were raised amidst local elites about the expatriation of what was considered Czech national heritage.¹⁰ The establishment of city museums elsewhere in Europe, especially in German cities and Paris, were another incentive to create a city museum.¹¹ The idea became reality in 1883 when the museum was opened for the public. Out of necessity, the museum was deposited in a Café Pavilion, a recent building that stood alone in a small park, which had replaced torn-down city walls. Seen from the outset as provisory, the museum board set out to seek another solution. For practical reasons, the final decision was taken to build a larger building at the same location.¹² The new, Neo-Renaissance edifice welcomed its first visitors on September 28, 1900, symbolically on the day dedicated to the Czech national patron, St. Wenceslas.¹³ The monumental

two-story building provided some space for the growing collections that had begun to pour in from private and corporate donations, acquisitions, and demolitions. Nine exhibition halls also allowed for a more elaborate exposition. The solution wasn't much appraised in the following decades, though. What is more, the spatial limitations of the building, and failed attempts to obtain a new location, turned out to be important factors impacting the museum's outreach and exhibition policy in the following years.

Critical voices decried building location, proportions, and its fundamental character. Located at the border of the original city of Prague, at the place called Poříčí that lay between the district of New Town and the autonomous town Karlín, the museum was perceived as remote and off-the-track. In 1895, one commentator talked with disdain about 'boxes in the solitary stone hovel in the park at Poříčí, called "city museum"', in which 'precious documents rot'.¹⁴ A new building, established at the same place, did little to change this feeling. Unification of the Greater Prague area notwithstanding, the museum was still seen in 1934 as lying 'sort of aside of the remaining city, forgotten, excluded from the active pulse of life in the neighbourhood'.¹⁵ The museum was hidden and suggestions were made at least to rearrange the park around the museum to make it more visible.¹⁶ Despite its monumentality, the museum did not reach the status of a major landmark in the urban fabric. At best, it may have served as a nodal point at the junction of two city quarters. Though flagged in guidebooks and tourist plans, the museum often slipped off inhabitants' mental maps (Figure 1).



Figure 1. The new building of the Prague city museum, completed in 1898, with the older home of the museum, Café Pavillon, standing to the right. Credit: J. Eckert, 1900 © The City of Prague Museum (Inventory number: H 013 874/001).

Seen from a larger perspective, some voices criticised the dispersion of Prague museums and collections around the city and in relatively remote places, in contrast to some other cities. Berlin, for instance, was presented as a good example of how 'other cities, by clustering collections in one big complex, create magnificent attractions that significantly support the boom in the visits of foreigners, impressing them by quality as well as by quantity', whereas Prague collections, scattered in smaller and less accessible museums, '*fall short of the goal and the fame, which they might achieve for their valuable and brilliant content* if they were in the middle of the city and grouped into large complexes.'¹⁷ The deputy director of the city museum, František Xaver Harlas, saw dispersion of collections as one of the factors that undermined efforts to make Prague a fully-fledged 'city of culture', akin to Dresden and other cities in Germany that often served as close-at-hand models for Czech professionals, national animosities notwithstanding.¹⁸

Some critics considered both the provisional pavilion and the new building as an inappropriate setting for displaying the museum's major theme, which was *historical* Prague. Ideas for the proper site ranged from some of the many palaces, convents, churches, or towers, to the summer palace at the Prague Castle, or a complex of old burgher houses. Ideally, the building would serve as an artefact in its own right. Besides, an authentic and evocative environment was desired. Although acclaimed as a nice piece of the Neo-Renaissance architecture, the new building was not able to evoke the atmosphere of old world charm such as the *Musée Carnavalet* in Paris, for instance, which was often compared to Prague City Museum. Nor did it imitate historical styles, such as the *Märkisches Museum* in Berlin, completed in 1907. All that the Prague museum could offer was an 'authentic' torture chamber in the basement – the most sought-after part of the exposition – which was partly constructed from the gothic vault that had been replaced from a rebuilt house in the Old Town. Other ideas remained only wishful thinking, such as the hope that some model of a typical old-time Prague apartment might be arranged in the museum.¹⁹

An article from 1910 in the art magazine *Dílo* illustrates this critique. It applauded the newly founded museum of the provincial town Mladá Boleslav, arranged in a historical house, while reflecting about the city museums in general. Big museums were seen as out-lived concepts that served as mere depositories of antiquities while uprooting objects from their historical environments and 'destroying mercilessly all the scent of an era and magic of the past'. As the task of museums was now to evoke the atmosphere of ages past, the way forward was to concentrate collections into smaller and specialised museums, located in authentic environments. In Prague, the solution was to be found in the Lesser Town, one of the historic quarters of Prague, in which 'a smaller (...) museum, breathing with the Old-Prague charm, could and should exist, and in which the atmosphere, life, and beauty of Old Prague would be seized.'²⁰

A turn in early twentieth-century museology toward education, adopted by the Czechs,²¹ and the new role of Prague as capital of Czechoslovakia after 1918, prompted the search for an appropriate museum building once again. The existing one was increasingly seen as small and ill-designed, formed, as Zdeněk Wirth lamented retrospectively, by the turn-of-the-century ideas of 'mistaken monumentality',²² and thus unsuitable for new tasks, such as organising public lectures and temporary exhibitions. Furthermore, the museum remained poorly visited and acquired a sense of obsolescence, an institution which was disconnected from (the needs of) the metropolitan Prague. Antonín Novotný,

curator and director of the museum from 1930 to 1938, articulated these feelings in the language of different chrono-topoi: 'Between two railway stations and close to one of the major arteries of the city, stands Prague's Carnavalet. New Prague rushes along at a mighty pace and she doesn't realise in her bustle that behind the green scenery of the Poříčí park, the Old [Prague] was resurrected, the long-vanished one, that once lived as intensely as the contemporary one.'²³ The new building seemed to be one of the ways to reconnect these worlds.

In the mid-1920s, the museum board resuscitated older plans to house the museum in the Convent of Bl. Agnes.²⁴ This provided several advantages, as the convent was centrally located, historic, and the spaciousness of the complex made it possible to add a structure in the adjacent area. Furthermore, The Club for Old Prague (*Klub za starou Prahu*), the most vocal association of the Prague heritage protection movement, believed that the relocation would guarantee the preservation of the convent in what was otherwise damned as a 'destroyed area' after prior urban renewal.²⁵ Still, the idea wasn't adopted without reservations. Novotný expressed several concerns, not least of which concerned the impractical division of the museum into the original building and an addition, connected by a corridor, in an area that was predicted to turn into a 'lifeless' administrative quarter. Besides, the structure of the convent would prevent the installation of a linearly-organised exposition. The otherwise admired Parisian Carnavalet served in this regard as a negative example of a complicated museum space, in which 'the complexity of the sequence of halls makes the visitor exhausted by excessive crossing, makes him anxious about having not seen everything, and expels him from the museum earlier than it is desirable.'²⁶ The idea of Agnes' convent nevertheless prevailed and Novotný elaborated plans for the new building within the area. Exhibition and educative activities were made central: the new building anticipated a lecture hall for three hundred people and generous spaces for temporary exhibitions. In terms of architecture, the idea of an authentic, or evocative environment gave way to practicality, and so did the ornamental design of palaces. Rather, 'a serene building of the monumental form, expressing the seriousness of its purpose' would suffice. As an example, Novotný pointed out the *Museum für Ostasiatische Kunst* in Cologne, a building 'of very serious character, yet not heavy and gloomy, or bare.'²⁷

Next to public outreach and the possibility of creating new displays, the project of a new building also allowed for the development of the museum from a depository of resources into a fully-fledged research institution with a library, laboratories, and spaces for qualified research staff.²⁸ The research agenda had formed in the earlier decades of the twentieth century, and was signalled, for instance, by a short-lived attempt to publish scholarly articles in the museum's printed annual reports.²⁹ Likewise, the research aims were partly followed at the exhibition 'Prague 1750-1850', organised by the museum in 1916, which will be discussed in the next section. The vision formulated in the early 1930s, which was revived by Wirth again during World War II, anticipated quite a higher level of the research profile of the museum, that would carry out 'scientifically-based' acquisition, ordering, and display of objects, as well as conduct a multidisciplinary research on Prague's history and territory.³⁰

The project failed to materialise due to economic troubles of the 1930s, and because of disagreement about the ideal urban solution for the adjacent area. In this respect, the museum's building shared the destiny of many other unrealised projects conceived

during interwar Prague.³¹ Other efforts failed too, such as the idea to gain the temporarily available Neo-Renaissance Gröb's Villa in the district of Vinohrady that would become home to collections of the nineteenth- and early twentieth century and that would enable, with Carnavalet's exposition evoked as the archetype, the city museum to install lively and interesting expositions concerning the modern history of Prague.³² All that remained was the museum's 'opulent building', that would, much to Wirth's regret, serve merely as a "permanent display" of its [museum's] material, rather than being a vivid and illustrative abridgment of the city's development.³³

3. Making meaning of the collections

In spite of Prague's multiethnic character, with its small but vigorous German population, municipal politics was firmly controlled by the Czech majority in 1880s.³⁴ The city museum, which was a municipal undertaking, was therefore from the outset overseen by the Czech urban and cultural elites. The national programme thus found its way on to museum's agenda, although, as Markian Prokopovych has aptly noted, the museum kept off the nationalistic antagonisms.³⁵ The very creation of the institution was partly justified by concerns about the looting of the Czech national heritage by foreign museums and private collectors. The museum was seen as the repository of Czech cultural history, embodied in pieces of fine and decorative arts. It was assumed that since Prague, as the time-honoured capital of the Czech Lands, had coalesced the history of the whole nation, its museum would inevitably reflect the cultural history of the nation at large.³⁶ Finally, in the early years, part of the Czech intelligentsia envisioned that the museum would serve as a sort of national gallery of modern Czech painters, and although this idea failed to materialise, the visual arts remained an important part of the museum's agenda until 1918.³⁷

The national agenda of the city museum partly ran parallel to – and partly supplemented that of – the Museum of the Bohemian Kingdom, known after 1918 as the National Museum, and a handful of other institutions, such as Náprstek's Museum or Ethnographic museum, that formed the Prague-based cluster of national museums in a broader sense.³⁸ Their agendas partly overlapped due to the lack of hard boundaries between the museum specialties and no clear 'division of labor,' though it was assumed that national museum provided images of the homeland, whereas Prague city museum focused on Prague, serving partly as part of the network of local and regional museums. The national museum was founded in 1818 as a land-based institution, but it soon developed into a major centre of the Czech national intelligentsia, thanks in part to the strong engagement of František Palacký, the leading protagonist of the Czech national revival. Furthermore, from its inception the museum stored large collections of old Czech literary materials. By the late nineteenth century, the symbolic role of the museum came to the fore, which was augmented by the creation of its new monumental building in 1891 on the top of the Wenceslas Square, and in particular, with the ornamentation of its central hall – the pantheon – which depicts emblems of national history and mythology.³⁹ As such, the national museum outshone the city museum in terms of national and urban prominence, as the prime landmark of Prague's modern, urban landscape, and later as the scene of nationally important events, such as state celebrations and funerals, as well as in terms of visitor interest.

The national aspect lingered on in subtle forms of exhibition semantics, as will be shown later, but it receded from the manifest objectives of the museum. After the turn of the century, the museum narrowed down its scope to an urban focus, which was most eloquently articulated in Harlas' axiom 'Prague and nothing but Prague'.⁴⁰ Also, following the broader pattern of a sharpening of museums' types and clear demarcation of their boundaries, the museum took the profile of a historical museum rather than an artistic one. Prague itself became the unifying theme of the museum; the administrators penned programmatic texts that postulated Prague as the guiding principle and criterion for the acquisition and exhibition policies. What was worthy of being added to the museum's collection was nevertheless quite broad and embraced 'everything that in whatever way is related to the life of Prague,'⁴¹ or, in other words, 'all that was produced in Prague, used there, all that depicts Prague, either by image, or by text.'⁴² The ultimate goal was 'to illustrate the past life of the metropolis.'⁴³ In this sense, Prague City Museum followed the strategy adopted by city museums in Paris and Vienna, that focused on a comprehensive image of the local urban past.⁴⁴

Prague remained the major subject of the museum, but some alterations appeared in territorial, temporal and thematic scope. In 1911, Harlas still saw the institution as the 'museum of Old Prague,' restrained spatially to its historical core and temporally up to the mid-nineteenth century, with a focus on the sixteenth- to the early nineteenth century.⁴⁵ This programme became untenable. The concept of the museum's reform, which was elaborated in the late 1920s, but only partially put into practice, turned away from this narrow scope and postulated that the new museum should 'illustrate the development of "Greater Prague" in all spheres of human activity and all periods of the city's existence.'⁴⁶ The Prague territory expanded and the transformation was echoed in the Museum's conceptual shifts: Prague was to be approached more broadly as 'locality', with the exploration of the metropolitan area of Prague by natural sciences supplementing the (artistic) historical focus on 'city'. Furthermore, the reform assumed a subtle but significant shift in terminology from the 'past' to the 'historical development' of the city. This temporal perspective now coexisted with the view held by Novotný and Harlas, who saw the museum's role in the collection and re-presentation of bygone Prague, or Prague in the past. Finally, the cultural history of Prague, which was an important component from the outset, turned toward the history of everyday life, regardless of the social class, with the collection practices adjusted accordingly. Low-quality artefacts were now appreciated too, since 'not just nobles and the rich men used to live in Prague (...) but also people of lower financial abilities and of various, and not always refined taste,' and thus even apparent trash could not be disregarded, explained Novotný, so the museum could 'reproduce the image of the urban life as it really was.'⁴⁷ In addition documents of the routine events such as obituaries and graduation ceremony invitations, or exhibitions and even circus performances – though significant in the lives of individuals – were deemed to have much value.⁴⁸

The concept of a new permanent exhibition, outlined in 1930, presupposed a basic division into a natural-geographic, prehistorical, and historical contexts. History, its major part, was further divided into themes that ranged from the iconography of Prague and architectural history to a linear and event-based synopsis of Prague's history, to various segments of urban history, such as administration, civic corporations, commerce as well as industrial and religious organisations, to 'public life' on the streets

and the 'private life' of all social strata.⁴⁹ The division of historical stuff was loosely based on the organisational scheme for the historical museums that were proposed by German museologist Otto Lauffer in 1907.⁵⁰ It is worth reiterating the argument that city museums have long endorsed an elitist view of urban history,⁵¹ since the case of Prague museum partly defies this statement. To be sure, critical engagement with social history remained beyond the scope of the Prague museum. The accent on the history of all social strata, as well as the value given to ordinary objects and everyday culture beyond the social elites, nevertheless makes a case for a more nuanced picture of city museums' social bias.

As with the new building, the new exposition remained on paper and unrealised. The exhibition that visitors could see was installed in 1900 and remained largely intact until World War II, though adjustments took place to sharpen its focus on Prague. Archeological artefacts (these were later removed, as the collection was given to the National Museum), fragments from the demolished old houses, city-views, religious objects, arms depots, guilds-related objects, and objects of daily use (pieces of decorative arts) were all on display in seven halls. Other spaces were used for sculptures and torture instruments. Two halls contained a chronological account of Prague's history. As a comparison of catalogues from 1900 and 1933 reveals, many of the items featured in the first version that documented battles and other events elsewhere in the Czech Lands were replaced with Prague-related items, which reflected the increasing focus on urban history. Also, military events gave way to more emphasis on the social and cultural life of the city (Figure 2).⁵²

The exhibition did not attract many visitors. The distant location of the museum may have played a role. Lack of interest was also attributed to poor advertising.⁵³ This partly stemmed from the museum's first director, Břetislav Jelínek, and his tendency to focus on acquisition rather than public outreach. After the turn of the century, measures for more active promotions began thanks to younger curators, especially deputy director František X. Harlas, promoted to director from 1913 to 1930. An art historian by training and well-acquainted with the contemporary debates in the world of museology, as his references to expert platforms such as the journal *Museumskunde* reveal,⁵⁴ Harlas dedicated his professional life to the popularisation of arts and making collections more accessible to the wider public. He adopted the idea of British museologist Francis A. Bather that museums should encourage investigation, instruction, and inspiration while stressing the last point, translated as the cultivation of the masses. From this standpoint, Harlas reflected on the barriers between museums and the Prague audience, such as the dispersal of museums around the city, ill-designed museum buildings, and the fact that local citizens simply never acquired the habit to visit museums and galleries.⁵⁵

Harlas adopted a range of strategies to raise interest in the city museum. He published a number of articles in the early decades of the twentieth century that elucidated the history as well as the importance of modern museums in general while promoting the city museum in particular.⁵⁶ Acknowledgement from outsiders is a powerful enhancer of reputation and Harlas, therefore, missed no opportunity to remind the public of the appreciative words of the German professor of applied arts, Alfred Gotthold Meyer, who likened the Prague City Museum to Carnavalet in Paris.⁵⁷ Furthermore, he tried to put the museum on the map by linking it virtually, through art collections of particular epochs, with other museums in Prague.⁵⁸ Many articles issued in newspapers, guides, and



Figure 2. The display of guilds-related artefacts, part of the permanent exhibition in the Prague city museum. Credit: J. Eckert, 1900 © The City of Prague Museum (Inventory number: H 013 874/005).

city portraits brought detailed descriptions of the permanent exhibition of the museum. As a rule, they enumerated and highlighted dozens of concrete objects. It became evident, though, that belief in the power of objects alone to attract visitors was rather futile. Their relevance had to be communicated. Harlas tried to impose some meaning on the array of objects that were displayed in the museum, having differentiated audiences in his mind. The collection of guild-related objects, for instance, that filled one of the thirteen halls, should serve as a repository of skills and taste in the decorative arts, instructive for contemporary artisans, while also being an important source for researchers in the history of applied arts; for an occasional *flâneur*, pondering on the objects served to imagine the past life.⁵⁹

But it was a vast collection of historical city-views that might have yielded some relevance for the museum, as it could be linked to the public controversy at the turn of the century concerning Prague's urban development. In several articles, Harlas drew connections between the museum and the struggle between proponents of modernisation and defenders of 'Old Prague.'⁶⁰ Harlas stood on the side of preservationists. Yet, rather than engaging in the conflict, the city museum should have contributed to the cultivation of the exchange of views. Harlas considered the museum as a well of knowledge that both sides seemed to be missing: 'Indeed, the participants are in discord even on what the ancient look of Prague consists in. Few people look at old and numerous depictions of Prague (...) and yet those old engravings and etchings instruct us about Prague's

appearance, they provide us with a look into her development and register many important changes. For one thing cannot be denied: the building up of a big city is subject (...) to permanent change.⁶¹ The question as to the proper path toward urban development was of an academic rather than political nature and the unfortunate demolitions in the Old Prague centre stemmed from a lack of knowledge and an incorrectly understood idea of progress.⁶² Combatants in both camps could therefore learn a lot from the museum's collection: proponents of modernisation needed to consider the gradual evolution of urban landscapes and appreciate the aesthetic qualities of historical Prague; supporters of the Old Prague needed to recognise the fact that Prague did change over time, as well. In a broader sense, the museum was seen as a repository that kept a tangible memory of Prague's historical beauty and the aesthetic sensibilities of her previous designers, hopefully, to be reused in future modernisation.⁶³ In this perspective, the Prague City Museum, while focusing on – and valuing – the vanished Prague cityscape, could not be described as simply a conservative and backward-looking institution. Rather, it seems more accurate to understand the museum as a facilitator of an alternative modernisation that would respect the programme of 'beautiful Prague' (*krásná Praha*), which meant the development of an aesthetically appealing city based on respect for existing architectural heritage and historical appearance.

Harlas also touched upon the more symbolic role of collections as co-producers of a desirable image of Prague as an ancient and important city, and in many ways the true centre of the country, and one of the most important culture centres of Europe. Next to promoting 'beautiful Prague', the city-portraits had another task to perform, namely to illustrate the centuries-long interest Prague held for foreign painters, and those who commissioned their services. This, according to Harlas, ultimately proved the historical importance of Prague and her leading role in European history.⁶⁴ In a similar vein, guild items proved her economic vigour; prehistorical artefacts depicted her abiding antiquity, objects of arts mirrored her cultural vitality. In an article on the city museum written in German, Harlas justified its existence by the paramount importance of Prague, while in turn making this importance a major theme of the museum: 'Prague as a former royal seat, Prague as the queen of Bohemian cities, Prague as an exceptionally important centre of cultural life in terms of art history – that's the actual content of the museum.'⁶⁵ Prague was described by him as 'the ancient seat of culture,' as 'one of the most beautiful and most interesting cities of the globe,' as the 'stage of centuries-long dramas', or as 'ground of mediaeval cultural contests and modern wars,' and the museum should have served to attest to all this. In the light of Prague's ambitions, the museum's collections were instrumental in the fabrication of Prague as a true European metropolis and *de facto* capital city.

In spite of Harlas' efforts, the permanent exhibition continued to be poorly visited. And when visitors appeared, their visit often had a superficial effect, much to the curators' discontent. Novotný addressed the problem head-on in the late 1920s. In a short but thought-provoking essay, he contemplated the meaning of the museum and explained how visitors should approach its objects. In his view, the museum was not merely 'a cemetery of vanished cultures,' that is, storage of dead clutter. Rather, objects were imbued with energy – or spirit of the time – that once formed them, and as such, they could 'speak' of a bygone era. But it was the visitor who was supposed to make the objects talk, and moreover, to make them reveal a web of connections to various themes and

places in history, as he illustrated on the example of an English coin issued by Edward III and found in a Prague house. To be sure, the visitor had to be armed with some preliminary knowledge, and the art of looking, and intuition, to be capable of grasping the spirit of the objects and constructing wide-reaching historical connections. The capacity of imagination was crucial for producing numerous historical scenes that, as Novotný articulated metaphorically, flashed in front of the inner eye, 'as if they unreeled from the cylinder of a cinematographic machine.'⁶⁶ On a broader scale of museum epistemology, Novotný's thoughts can be read as signals of erosion in the belief that objects can communicate meaning easily and transparently, just by means of visual engagement with them, the process that became apparent in the second quarter of the century.⁶⁷

But apart from two exhibitions in 1895 and 1916, that were organised outside of the museum premises and thus enabled the museum to address a wider public, it was only the series of temporary exhibitions, organised in 1933-1936, that finally brought more visitors to the museum. Two exhibitions in particular, which were conceptualised as illustrations of two widely-read historical novels, succeeded in connecting their readership with the museum. Its former director could appraise one of them as 'an example of lively connection of museum with the life of bygone ages, with culture of centuries, with Prague as she used to be,' concluding that the museum's activity finally became more understandable for the public than it was when the museum was 'a collection of antiquities and monuments, lifeless for the majority of visitors.'⁶⁸

4. Coming closer to the public: temporary exhibitions

The Czecho-Slavic Ethnographic Exhibition in 1895 provided the first occasion for the Prague City Museum to present its collections to a mass audience. To be sure, the exhibition was concerned primarily with a variety of Czech folk regional cultures.⁶⁹ Historical Prague nevertheless found its place at the exhibition. It was displayed in two modes. First, the replica of the sixteenth-century Old Town was constructed in the exhibition area, following the popular trend in Europe of installing full-sized models of historic old towns at exhibitions.⁷⁰ The replica was considered a major attraction, as it could offer a simulation of the historical atmosphere that was missing in the city museum. But the motives behind the installation went beyond amusement. The creators aimed at providing the public with knowledge about architecture and urban everyday life in the past. Furthermore, the Old Town replica served as an argument in the emerging struggle for the protection of the real but endangered Old Prague.⁷¹

Second, the Prague City Museum installed its own exposition on Prague history. The concept wasn't particularly innovative. Arranged in one of the ordinary rectangular pavilions, it comprised several rooms with thematically clustered collections, complemented by a chronological display of the city's history, thus somewhat replicating the permanent exposition in the museum's main building.⁷² It is the overall context of the ethnographic exhibition that is important here. Since the event was organised as the display of Czech folk in all its varieties and understood as a manifestation of the Czech national revival (German folklore and German-speaking parts of the Czech Lands were ignored), Prague was reaffirmed - through hosting the event as well as through its expositions— as a Slavic city, as an integral part of the Czech culture, and as the self-evident centre of the Czech nation.

A fictional educational story about a visit to the exhibition gives us some insight into the behaviour of primary school pupils, in this case, a group of young boys coming from the countryside. The general impression of the displayed objects was that of rich visual sensation. The boys weren't capable of mastering the abundance of stimuli, viewing all the objects, or understanding them in their totality. Still, the visit brought joy.⁷³ One may argue that for the children from the countryside, the spectacle of objects provided a sense of cultivated urban pleasure. Another report pointed out the relevance for the adult audience: the exposition displayed a number of important objects that deserved regular visits and serious and thorough contemplation. This visual impression was to be followed by critical insights that might go well beyond the history of the city. For instance, the juxtaposition of conflicting visual depictions such as historical engravings of the same historical event, for example, the infamous execution of leaders of the Bohemian uprising in 1621, provided knowledge about the early modern propaganda and logic of competition concerning the market that had sprung up around the recently invented printing press.⁷⁴

Two decades later, in 1916, the museum stepped out of its confines again. This time, it orchestrated a rather ambitious exhibition called 'Prague 1750–1850', that was arranged at Old Town city hall and lasted for several months. Twenty-seven halls of the large Gothic complex hosted thematic expositions that covered Prague imagery and history; architecture; history of the book; history of musical life in Prague; schools; costumes and luxury goods, or glass and porcelain. Nine halls were arranged to be displayed as apartment interiors and seven halls served as galleries for paintings and graphics by Czech national artists of the period.⁷⁵ One might wonder, how such an event could take place in the middle of war hardships and militarised atmosphere, not to mention relatively high visits by a broader public reported by the press. But as Claire Nolte has shown, Prague artistic and cultural life, such as exhibitions and theatre performances, was restored shortly after the break-up of war, even if curbed by censorship, the shortage of concessions, and many artists' drafts to the army.⁷⁶ A mere glance at newspapers' cultural rubrics reveals that the 'Prague 1750–1850' exhibition ran in parallel to several other exhibitions. Cultural events allowed for psychological cultural retreat from war from the pressures of war. It should be also noted that the event took place before the economic conditions started dramatically worsening.⁷⁷ The city museum coordinated the exhibition, but the undertaking took place under the auspices of the city of Prague, and was organised with the help of several other institutions and individuals. The organising committee included the city museum's board, as well as representatives of other cultural and educational institutions, and a range of professionals, including five female members. Well-advertised and widely covered by newspapers, the exhibition pursued several objectives, such as raising awareness about Prague's collections and encouraging individuals to donate heritage items to museums.⁷⁸ After all, the majority of the displayed objects were borrowed from other museums or private holders. The project nevertheless followed two more specific objectives: to achieve a better understanding of the period of 1750–1850; and to honour the beginnings of the Czech National Revival (Figure 3).

The time frame of 1750–1850 was deliberately chosen as the period of major transformations in European society and culture.⁷⁹ It also covered the early phases of the Czech national movement, of which Prague was an important centre.⁸⁰ And finally,



Figure 3. The exhibition 'Prague 1750-1850' at the Old Town Hall, featuring the display of the Prague city views and synoptic account of Prague history. Credit: 1916 © The City of Prague Museum (Inventory number: HNX 000 944).

Prague changed in that era, too. The period provided a convenient framework in which to intertwine European, national, and local dimensions of Prague's history. The curators nonetheless followed a different aim. They wished to get an accurate understanding of the period by juxtaposing – and making connections between – its manifestations in various domains of culture. This also necessitated the gathering of the objects, since 'only by assembling them in a professional way, one can get a complex image and acquire an accurate view of the period.'⁸¹ Even if the audiences focused on the specific branches, the organisers hoped that 'common attributes of the period' would be found in an otherwise rather heterogeneous era, in which late Baroque gave way to Classicism and Biedermeier, the ultimate decline of Czech literature was followed by the resuscitation of the Czech language, and bright musical life in Prague, crowned by W. A. Mozart, contrasted with the decline of glassmaking in Bohemia thanks to British industrial competition. In this respect, the exhibition was a testimony to what Conn captured in his concept of the object-based epistemology: the belief in the power of the museum objects, if well-arranged, to generate knowledge.⁸²

The second aim was to commemorate the beginnings of the national revival. This task was highlighted in the announcement that called for crowdsourcing of the objects. As the organisers explained, they intended to 'display a vivid and clear image of the age, in which the national awakening was born and matured,' and for that reason, the public was encouraged to provide 'monuments, that in whatever way can revive the memory

and elucidate activities of our national awakeners.⁸³ In the exhibition, this idea materialised in ways that ranged from the display of objects that directly embodied the awakening, such as books in Czech (or about Czech) language, Czech newspapers, and patriotic treatises, to artefacts that furnished houses of the Czech intelligentsia and nationally-minded Prague burghers, to items that illustrated urban spaces, the everyday private life and cultural environment of the city, in which nationally conscious intelligentsia operated. The event no doubt nurtured a sense of national self-confidence, and historical parallels were drawn between hard but hopeful times for the Czech nation, during Austrian centralism and the Napoleonic Wars, and now, amidst World War One. On the other hand, the whole undertaking maintained loyalty toward Austria-Hungary, marked, among others, by the display of Habsburg Empire-related objects, or approval by the high-ranking representatives of the state. A sense of loyalism was also reinforced by the fact that half of the entrance revenues were redistributed to war orphans.⁸⁴

However, it was Prague's centrality for the aspirant nation, and – on a broader scale of the European cultural and intellectual history – its historical agency, cultural centrality, and creative potential, that was arguably the most important message conveyed by the exposition. Concerning the latter aspect, the catalogue's preface explained: 'Waves that brought general trends in lifestyles and arts, engulfed with bigger or smaller strength all lively cultural centres of Europe. Prague was experiencing those influences vividly and retained in all regards interesting traces of them; but even in that period, she did not live merely by the echoes of an alien culture; she lived her own intellectual life.'⁸⁵ The limited outreach of Prague's cultural life and its lesser impact on general trends in European culture stemmed from 'external reasons', rather than from a 'lower intellectual potential' of the city. As part of the broader effort to claim Prague's position amongst the full-grown European metropolises, the city was represented as the inherently 'creative cultural milieu',⁸⁶ capable of intellectual productivity even when devoid of favourable political conditions. In addition, although Prague sank to the most provincial position in her history in that period, as the Czech Lands lost nearly all traces of former independence in the eighteenth century, with cities as corporate bodies losing any autonomy *vis a vis* the centralising state, the city was nevertheless portrayed in a positive sense: not as a peripheral, sleepy town, but a culturally lively city that underwent its first wave of modernisation.

The half-centenary in 1933 motivated a series of temporary exhibitions that ranged from two about the history of the museum and its 'hidden' collections to several thematic ones, featuring historical advertisements and funeral ceremonies, to three exhibitions based on historical novels. Two of them illustrated the novels *F. L. Věk* and *Temno*, both written by the Czech novelist Alois Jirásek (1851–1930). Both were widely read among Czechs, which explains the success of the exhibitions in terms of the rate of visitors.⁸⁷ Furthermore, they were influential in shaping the national memory. The national dimension was integral to the topics of the novels, while Prague figured as a major setting in both stories. *F. L. Věk* (1887–1906) describes a nationally-conscious small, Czech merchant, modelled after a real historical figure, whose trajectory becomes entangled with Prague cultural and intellectual circles of the late Enlightenment and the Napoleonic Wars, concurrent with the early phase of the Czech national revival (the novel is set from 1769 to 1816). *Temno* (1915–1916) alludes by its very title to the period of history that was known as the 'Dark Age' in Czech historical memory, although not

without objections by part of the Czech intelligentsia. Framed by the years 1723 and 1729, the novel unfolds mainly in Prague at the highpoint of her Baroque splendour, and traces the fortunes of a few non-conformists during the zenith of Recatholicization of the Czech Lands, linked with the consolidation of the Habsburgs' rule.

Compared with the 'Prague 1750-1850' exhibition, the museum curators refrained from displaying Prague history of the given periods. This time, the novels became the focus of the exhibitions, and their themes became the themes of the displays. These were aimed primarily at documenting the novels through authentic historical artefacts.⁸⁸ The technical arrangement was remarkably simple even by the standards of the day: display cases and wall frameworks in two halls of the museum displayed a multitude of artefacts, such as city images, portraits of historical persons, books, and letters, and objects of daily use. Printed catalogues linked each artefact by reference to an exact page of specific editions of the respective novels, on which the site, person, event, or object, was represented by the artefact featured.⁸⁹ The opening of the *Temno* exhibition was augmented by a musical performance, a choir singing from one of the Baroque religious festivities portrayed in the novel.

The recent death of Jirásek might have served as an extra incentive for arranging these exhibitions, but the idea had matured for a long time. It was the intimate knowledge of museum's collections, rich in eighteenth- and early-nineteenth-century items, combined with the curators' literary knowledge that sparked the idea. Novotný reminisced about his childhood love of the novels when introducing the exhibitions, and as early as 1929, he speculated that the museum's collections could well illustrate some of Jirásek's novels.⁹⁰ Yet, there was still another source for the idea, namely, Novotný's thoughts concerning the inherent energy of museum objects and the animation of museum collections.

In terms of the animation of the exposition, Novotný made an innovative step forward. Animation was no more limited by the visitor's historical imagination. Instead, Novotný made objects speak by utilising his intimate knowledge of the novels, their emotional potential, and their imaginative power as tools that help visitors immerse themselves in the exhibit and assist in making sense of the displayed objects. As he explained, well-known pieces of literature were chosen so that that a visitor, familiar with the novel and well-prepared for the content of the exhibition, would feel at home at the exhibition, encountering intimately-known environment, people, and events. The relation between novel and exhibition was nevertheless complementary: the novel was to animate the exhibition, whereas the exhibition was supposed to add to the knowledge gained from the novel and rectify factual incorrections stemming from poetic licence.⁹¹ Furthermore, Novotný understood the literary exhibitions as an experiment that should have proven his theory that museum objects were not dead artefacts, but living and meaningful witnesses of the past. In this respect, he returned to his idea about formative energy that remained present in the objects and could have effects in different contexts. Using the example of the novels, he specified the idea as follows: something happened, caused a reaction, and made someone create an artefact, which keeps the memory of the formative context. The artefact emanates the formative energy all the time and had an impact on the novelist, who conveyed the energy via his book further to the minds and hearts of his readers. Novels and their impact were but a recent manifestation of the original energy that stood behind the emergence of the object.⁹²

The exhibition promised more than just animating the objects. Some believed that the exhibition would evoke times of joy spent reading the novels and help immerse one again in the fictional universe of the novels.⁹³ Others hoped that the image and atmosphere of historical Prague would arise from the displayed objects, animated by the literary imagination. Harlas, in particular, believed that the exhibition would bring the vanished Old Prague back to life, even if only in visitors' minds: 'Old Prague will emerge,' he prophesied ahead of the exhibition, 'so changed, so devastated in her appearance by the ravages of time. Erstwhile gardens will turn green, old houses, long torn-down, will grow up in front of us (...) streets will open to the life of the old times.' Harlas saw the undertaking primarily as 'an exhibition about the Old Prague of F. L. Věk, as far as she can be documented from what was left and what has survived.'⁹⁴

To be sure, the script of the exhibitions was determined by the narratives and chronologies of the fictional texts. As a result, Prague was represented in a haphazard way. On the other hand, the fictional world of the novel provided an effective perspective that connected artefacts in a comprehensible way. Furthermore, it entangled different scales of history and dimensions of the city. In the case of *F. L. Věk*, for instance, the local resonances of events and processes of European scale and importance, such as the battle of Austerlitz or the twilight of feudalism, were connected by the story with glimpses into the social and cultural life of neoclassical and early romantic Prague; the latter included some of the outstanding events, such as the world premiere of Mozart's opera *Don Giovanni* in Prague, referenced by items such as theatre performance announcements. Novotný read *F. L. Věk* as a two-layered narrative, first, of the major upheavals in European history that indirectly reverberated in Prague, and second, the struggle for the Czech national revival that calmly advanced in the Bohemian capital.⁹⁵ Objects from Prague's provenience were preferred in the exhibition, as they proved that Prague and Bohemia 'went through the period of history, during which new Europe began to take form, intensely and with full awareness of the significance of the events,' even if they stood apart from the major political and military events of the period.⁹⁶ Reproducing the message of the 'Prague 1750–1850' exhibition, turn of the nineteenth century Prague re-emerged through the exhibition again as an active social and cultural milieu; this endowed the city with an agency that depicted Prague as a participant in the major dramas of European history, especially in regard to the rise of modern European society, of which the Czech national movement was seen to take an integral part (Figure 4).

If the *F. L. Věk* exhibition reflected Prague's self-affirmative efforts for recognition as European metropolis, and more generally, mirrored the aspirations of Czechs to a more central role in Europe, the *Temno* exhibition touched on the sensitive issue of historical memory. Unlike the first novel, *Temno* carried certain ambivalence. Some readers understood it as a decisively anti-Catholic manifesto; others interpreted the novel in a more nuanced way, pointing out that the Catholic Church and its devotees were portrayed in a range of characters, from fanatics to open-minded, and were not the major target of Jirásek. Novotný adopted this position in his preface to the catalogue, which earned him a critical reaction from the anti-clerical and atheistic position of Czech freethinkers, who regretted this apologetic framing of the otherwise interesting exhibition.⁹⁷ Some reports linked both exhibitions to the relatively recent polemics about Jirásek and his influential literary account of Czech history, believing that the exhibitions would



Figure 4. Invitation card and complimentary ticket to the opening of the exhibition ‘Jirásek’s Temno in the Light of Historical Documents’, 4 May, 1935. The visual motif of book burning underlined the dark side of Recatholicization, depicted in Jirásek’s novel. © The City of Prague Museum (Inventory number: H 59 279_00a-001).

bolster his reputation as ‘national writer.’⁹⁸ The critique of the ‘Dark Age’ imagery, coming from Catholic intelligence and conservative historians, was part of a broader debate about how to interpret Czech history after the ill-famed Battle of White Mountain in 1620 and how to properly evaluate the Baroque epoch of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. This question had a specifically Prague-related aspect. As Novotný was ready to admit, it was precisely the Baroque cultural movement, as an integral part of the re-catholicization policies, that left a major imprint on the historical urban landscape of Prague, making it unique on the European scale. The veneration of Baroque Prague was an undercurrent message of the exhibition, and Novotný thus needed to counter the Baroque beauty of Prague with an appropriate national narrative: rather than memorials of humiliation, Baroque monuments, created by national adversaries, were to be seen as testimonies to the heroic struggle between the two major opposing worldviews, Catholic and Protestant, that both mobilised the best of the city’s cultural creativity.⁹⁹ Once again, Prague turned out to be the focal point of European history.

5. Conclusion

In this article, the early history and curatorial activities of the Prague City Museum have been analyzed in their broader urban and national contexts. The museum emerged in the 1870s as a result of Prague’s modernisation. Though run by the ambitious elites of the city of Prague, which also provided the institution with a new and rather monumental building in 1898, for most of this period the museum struggled with a sense of marginality. Its reach out to the larger public was hindered by failures to achieve an appropriate museum building, and so were its plans to arrange more ambitious displays. Likewise, the accent on historical Prague and object-based display strategies made it difficult to create stronger connections between the museum and contemporary urban society. The museum staff nevertheless came up with a variety of interpretive efforts and creative solutions to make the museum collections relevant and meaningful for the audience. The exhibition ‘Prague 1750–1850’, organised during World War I, and a series of literature-based exhibitions in 1930s were the museum’s most successful undertakings,

partly as they managed to create a meaningful image of Prague in specific periods, defined by the national movement and specific literary narratives, respectively. In the latter case, curators also employed pre-visit knowledge, achieved through the reading of highly popular novels, for making sense of the expositions.

Aimed largely at collecting and displaying a broadly conceived cultural history, the museum produced images of Prague that testified to its historical heritage as an age-old capital city and an intrinsically creative milieu, and thus helped solidify the idea of Prague as central to European culture and history. Furthermore, the museum loosely participated in the broader movement to promote an alternative, heritage-based modernisation of Prague, centred around the preservation of Old Prague's urban landscape. The national aspect surfaced mainly in the temporary exhibitions. While in 1895 the national dimension rested in the overall context of the ethnographical exhibition, in 1916, the Czech national revival served as a unifying framework, and again partly as an exhibition theme. In the mid-1930s, literature-based exhibitions drew national themes from the popular novels of Alois Jirásek, which also provided the organisational rubric for displays.

While the museum produced particular messages for the public, the available sources tell us little about their reception by the audience. We may posit that many visitors' responses remained limited to transient and superficial impressions from the objects and from the monumental and well-decorated building, while a smaller segment of specialised visitors focused on particular aspects of their interest. It would be overstated to claim that the museum staff wanted to impose a particular message or control the meanings in any stronger sense. It was the *unrealised* exposition that would arguably bring more authoritative narrative. Rather, the created meanings partly served to promote the museum as such. Nor were the conveyed messages and desired effects uniform: providing a synoptic view of Prague history over the centuries, with the aim of better understanding of the historical development, went hand in hand with the aims of promoting the importance of Prague, cultivating a sense of local identity, and raising heritage awareness and sense of museums' importance.

After all, the primary task in the period was to draw the visitors into the museum in the first place, as the institution remained in the shadow of other museums. This was followed by the desire to make their visit productive in terms of receiving knowledge or an intellectual enhancement, even if it was based on a very selective inspection of a particular set of objects. Some ideal models of reception and museum behaviours were drawn, to be sure: for instance, Harlas alluded to the figure of a teacher or a professor capable of setting a particular object in a wider historical context for his or her group of pupils and students, who formed an important segment of the museum's visitors; Novotný dreamt of a visitor who was willing to – and capable of – reading historical connections out of the artefacts and immerse himself in the spirit of a historical period on his own. An opposite figure was an ignorant visitor who resorted to museum to 'kill the time' or 'hide away from rain'.¹⁰⁰

The case study of Prague City Museum suggests some broader implications. While the city museums often reflected urban and national aspirations, of which Prague museum is a clear example, we should nevertheless avoid simplified models of museums as mere ideological vehicles, through which urban and national claims were conveyed. It turned out that urban and national aspirations entered in more subtle ways, as framings that provided sense of the displayed objects, and often with the aim to win legitimacy for

the museum's existence. Furthermore, this article has tried to historicise recent debates on the genre of city museums, arguing that the turn-of-century city museums weren't necessarily disconnected from – or even ignorant of – their public and urban issues of the day. Rather, the Prague case calls for a more complex picture of museums' interactions with visitors and cities, as well as for the more systematic research into the varieties of 'object-based epistemology', in which the pre-war city museums rested. A locally and institutionally-sensitive approach seems essential here: what the Prague case suggests is that a sense of relative marginality, shortage of major 'magnets' to display, and less than favourable spatial and working conditions, may have in fact often stimulated rather innovative ideas on museum objects and exhibitions. This also urges us to study smaller and less central museums on their own right, while rethinking the relations between major model-institutions, smaller museums, and expert knowledge.

Notes

1. For the basic account of Prague history, see e.g. V. Ledvinka and J. Pešek, *Praha* (Praha: NLN, 2000); J. Pešek, *Od aglomerace k velkoměstu: Praha a středoevropské metropole 1850–1920* (Praha: Scriptorium, 1999).
2. On these topics, see e.g., C. E. Nolte, 'Celebrating Slavic Prague: Festivals and the Urban Environment, 1891-1912,' *Bohemia*, 52 (2012), 37–54; B. Soukupová, "Beautiful Prague" – Experiencing the Antiquity and Beauty of a City in the Czech Society of the 20th Century,' *Urban People*, 20 (2007), 9–27; B. Soukupová, 'Asanace a Velká Praha - symboly modernizace Prahy v posledním desetiletí 19. a v prvním desetiletí 20. století,' in *Město a městská společnost v procesu modernizace 1740-1918*, ed. by P. Kladiwa and A. Zářícký (Ostrava: Ostravská Univerzita v Ostravě, 2009), pp. 275–292; C. Paces, *Prague Panoramas: National Memory and Sacred Space in the Twentieth Century* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009).
3. M. R. Levin et al., *Urban Modernity: Cultural Innovation in the Second Industrial Revolution* (Cambridge – London: The MIT Press, 2010), p. 3. See also M. Rampley, M. Prokopovych and N. Veszprémi, *Liberalism, Nationalism and Design Reform in the Habsburg Empire: Museums of Design, Industry and the Applied Arts* (New York – London: Routledge, 2020); M. Rampley, M. Prokopovych and N. Veszprémi, *The Museum Age in Austria-Hungary: Art and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2021).
4. E. Sandweiss, "The Novelties of the Town": Museums, Cities, and Historical Representation,' in *City Museums and City Development*, ed. by I. Jones, R. R. Macdonald and D. McIntyre (Lanham: Altamira Press, 2008), pp. 40–59; E. Sandweiss, 'History and Reality Have Become the Same Thing: City Museums and City Plans in London, 1912–2012,' *Museum History Journal*, 7 (2014), 2–17; M. Prokopovych, 'The Museum and the City: Art, Municipal Programs, and Urban Agendas,' in M. Rampley, M. Prokopovych and N. Veszprémi, *The Museum Age in Austria-Hungary: Art and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century* (The Pennsylvania State University Press, University Park, 2021), pp. 74–80.
5. Prokopovych, 'The Museum and the City', p. 75.
6. For example D. Fleming, 'Making city histories,' in *Making Histories in Museums*, ed. by G. Kavanagh (London: Continuum International Publishing, 1996), pp. 131–42; R. Tisdale, 'City Museums and Urban Learning,' *Journal of Museum Education*, 38 (2013), 3–8.
7. S. Conn, *Museum and American Intellectual Life, 1876–1926* (Chicago – London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998); S. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects?* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010).
8. C. Giustino, *Tearing Down Prague's Jewish Town: Ghetto Clearance and the Legacy of Middle-Class Ethnic Politics around 1900* (Boulder: East European Monographs, 2003).

9. The fonds 'Zdeněk Wirth' is stored in *Ústav dějin umění AV ČR, v.v.i., odd. dokumentace* (ÚDU AV ČR, OD). For Wirth's professional activities until the Second World War, see K. Uhlíková, *Zdeněk Wirth, první dvě životní etapy (1878-1939)* (Praha: Národní památkový ústav, 2010).
10. For a concise history of the museum in the period covered here, see: A. Liška, 'Museum hlav. města Prahy od r. 1913 do revoluce 1945,' in *Pražskou minulostí I.* (Praha 1949), pp. 119–157; Z. Míka, *Sto let Muzea hlavního města Prahy* (Praha: Muzeum hlavního města Prahy, 1983). For the origins and the early phase, see P. Státníková, 'Městské muzeum Pražské roku 1883: příspěvek ke 120. výročí otevření první expozice Muzea veřejnosti,' *Historica Pragensia*, 1 (2003), 9–46, and recently, Prokopovych, 'The Museum and the city'.
11. A. Novotný, *Praha a její museum*, typescript, n. d. (1936-) (ÚDU AV ČR, OD), Zdeněk Wirth, LXIII–W/11, f. 254.
12. A recent exhibition in the museum summarized the story, connecting it with current plans and competition for a new major building in a nearby area. See P. Státníková and M. Šmolíková, *Muzeum města Prahy na Těšnově?* (Praha: Muzeum hlavního města Prahy, 2020).
13. The opening ceremony took place a day before, on 27 September.
14. 'Národopisná výstava československá,' *Národní Listy*, 29 May 1895, p. 5.
15. 'Mluvící minulost,' *Národní Listy*, 28 August 1934, p. 3.
16. *Věstník hlavního města Prahy*, 41 (1934), 123.
17. *Věstník obecní královského hlavního města Prahy*, 17 (1910), 445 (highlighted in original).
18. F. X. Harlas, 'O pražských sbírkách uměleckých I.,' *Osvěta*, 35 (1905), 451–456.
19. *Volné Směry*, 4 (1897), 278–279.
20. A. M., 'Musea,' *Dílo*, 8 (1910), 224–225.
21. J. Špét, *Přehled vývoje českého muzejnictví I.: (do roku 1945)* 2nd ed. (Brno: Masarykova univerzita, 2003); L. Jagošová, O. Kirsch et al., *Muzejní profese a veřejnost 1. Nástin historie a současnosti vztahů muzeí a jejich publika* (Brno: Masarykova Univerzita, 2016).
22. Z. Wirth, 'Museum hlav. města Prahy,' *Umění* 15, 5 (1943), 19.
23. A. Novotný, 'Museum hlavního města Prahy,' *Národní Listy*, 1 May 1927, p. 17 (supplement).
24. See Liška, pp. 129–132.
25. 'Návrh regulace pro staré město pražské,' *Za starou Prahu: věstník pro ochranu památek*, 13 (1929), 2.
26. A. Novotný, *Instalační schéma a princip musea hlavního města Prahy*, typescript, sent to Z. Wirth on 22 November 1929, ÚDU AV ČR, OD, Zdeněk Wirth, W-A-36/2, f. 40.
27. Novotný, *Instalační schéma*, f. 36.
28. Ibid.
29. See, *Zpráva kuratoria městského musea za rok 1911* (Praha 1912).
30. Wirth, 'Museum hlav. města Prahy,' 17–19. The archeological research halted after retirement of the first director Břetislav Jelínek and it was partly due to the lack of qualified research staff that the archaeological collection was moved to National Museum in the early 1920s. See, M. Hlava, 'Archeologická sbírka Muzea hlavního města Prahy a její osudy,' *Archaeologica Pragensia*, 22 (2014), 182.
31. For this topic, see K. Brůhová, *Praha nepostavená: vltavské břehy jako urbanistické téma moderní metropole* (Praha: Česká technika – nakladatelství ČVUT, 2017).
32. *Muzeum hlavního města Prahy, zřízení moderního oddělení ve vile Gröbovů v Havlíčkových sadech na Královských Vinohradech*, not dated (approx. mid-1930's) anonymous typescript, ÚDU AV ČR, OD, Zdeněk Wirth, W-A-36/2, fols. 18–19.
33. Wirth, 'Museum hlav. města Prahy,' 19.
34. On this topic, see especially G. Cohen, *The Politics of Ethnic Survival: Germans in Prague, 1861–1914* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1981); I. Koeltzsch, *Geteilte Kulturen: eine Geschichte der tschechisch-jüdisch-deutschen Beziehungen in Prag (1918–1938)* (München: Oldenbourg, 2012).
35. Prokopovych, 'The Museum and the City,' p. 75.

36. E. g.: 'Městské museum,' *Národní Listy*, 19 May 1883, p. 2.
37. On this topic, see especially Prokopových, 'The Museum and the City'.
38. For the broader understanding of national museum, see P. Aronsson, 'National museums as cultural constitutions,' in *National Museums and Nation Building in Europe 1750–2010: Mobilization and legitimacy, continuity and change*, ed. by P. Aronsson and G. Elgenius (London – New York: Routledge, 2015), p. 171.
39. For the recent accounts, e.g. K. Sklenář, 'Dějiny Národního muzea,' in *Velká kniha o Národním muzeu*, ed. by K. Sklenář et al. (Praha: Národní muzeum, 2016), pp. 12–79; K. Woitschová and L. Jůn, *Národní muzeum v éře Československa* (Praha: Národní muzeum, 2019). For the last point, see J. Bažant, 'Czech Myths in the National Museum in Prague,' in *The Nineteenth-Century Process of "Musealization" in Hungary and Europe*, ed. by E. Marosi and B. Klaniczay (Budapest: Collegium Budapest, 2006), pp. 61–76.
40. A. Novotný, 'Dr. F. X. Harlas,' *Národní Listy*, 1 October 1930, p. 4.
41. A. Novotný, *Museum hlav. města Prahy: průvodce sbírkami* (Praha 1933), p. 11.
42. F. X. Harlas, *Stará Praha: Nástin vývoje města a průvodce jeho sbírkami* (Praha 1911), p. 11.
43. Novotný, 'Museum,' p. 17.
44. For Paris, see Sandweiss, 'The Novelties' and 'History and Reality'; for Vienna, Prokopových, p. 70.
45. Harlas, *Stará Praha*, p. 11.
46. Z. Wirth, *Museum hlavního města Prahy, stav nynější a návrhy pro budoucnost*, typescript, dated April 1930, (ÚDU AV ČR, OD), Zdeněk Wirth, W-A-36/2, f. 9; For a retrospective reflection, see also Wirth, 'Museum hlav. města Prahy'.
47. A. Novotný, *Museum hlav. města Prahy: průvodce sbírkami* (Praha 1933), p. 11.
48. F. X. Harlas, 'Museum hlav. města Prahy,' *Národní Listy*, 14 May 1933, p. 4 (supplement).
49. Wirth, *Museum hlavního města Prahy*, f. 9. The scheme was a modified version of Novotný's proposal in Novotný, *Instalační schéma*, fols. 31–34.
50. Novotný, *Instalační schéma*, f. 31; Novotný referred to O. Lauffer, 'Das Historische Museum: Sein Wesen und Wirken und sein Unterschied von den Kunst- und Kunstgewerbe Museen,' *Museumskunde* 3 (1907), 231.
51. E.g., Fleming, p. 131.
52. *Průvodce museem král. hlav. města Prahy* (Praha 1900); A. Novotný, *Museum hlav. města Prahy: průvodce sbírkami* (Praha 1933).
53. 'Zajímavosti městského musea v Praze, na Poříčí,' *Národní Listy*, 18 August 1904, p. 2; See also the memoirs of Václav Vilém Štech, who served as the museum assistant in 1910–1918: V.V. Štech, *V zaměřeném zrcadle* (Praha: Československý spisovatel, 1967), p. 217.
54. F. X. Harlas, 'Modernes Musealwesen II.,' *Politik*, 17 October 1905, pp. 1–2.
55. F. X. Harlas, 'O pražských sbírkách uměleckých II.,' *Osvěta*, 35 (1905), 655.
56. E. g., F. X. Harlas, 'Neues aus der Museum der Stadt Prag,' *Politik*, 12 June 1902, pp. 1–2.
57. F. X. Harlas, 'Neues aus dem Museum der kgl. Hauptstadt Prag,' *Politik*, 22 January 1904, p. 1.
58. See, Harlas, *Stará Praha*, which served as a guide around collections in various Prague museums.
59. F. X. Harlas, 'Das Zunftwesen in Prag,' *Politik*, 2 October 1900, pp. 1–2.
60. For more details about the controversy, see Giustino, especially chapter 11.
61. F. X. Harlas, *Z pokladů pražských* (Praha: Vilímek, 1902), p. 104.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 105.
63. E. g.: J. Dolenský and V. Jansa, *Praha ve své slávě i utrpení* (Praha 1903), pp. 521–522.
64. Harlas, *Z pokladů*, p. 76.
65. F. X. Harlas, 'Neues aus dem Museum der königl. Hauptstadt Prag,' *Politik*, 27 January 1906, p. 1.
66. A. Novotný, 'Musejní úvaha,' *Národní Listy*, 26 May 1929, p. 9 (supplement).
67. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects*, pp. 25–26.
68. F. X. Harlas, 'Temno,' *Národní Politika*, 17 May 1935, p. 1 (afternoon issue).

69. M. Filipová, 'Peasants on display: The Czechoslovak Ethnographic Exhibition of 1895,' *Journal of Design History*, 24 (2011), 15–36.
70. On this genre, see K. Hill, "'Olde worlde" urban? Reconstructing historic urban environments at exhibitions, 1884–1908,' *Urban History*, 45 (2018), 306–330; W. Smith, 'Old London, Old Edinburgh: Constructing Historic Cities,' in *Cultures of International Exhibitions 1840-1940: Great Exhibitions in the Margin*, ed. by M. Filipová (Farnham: Ashgate, 2015), pp. 203–227.
71. For Prague's 'Old Town' reconstruction in comparative perspective, see E. Chazal, '*La circulation d'un divertissement historique au sein des expositions européennes: la reconstitution des "vieilles villes" de Prague, Budapest et Paris (1890-1900)*' (M.A. thesis, EHESS, CUNI and ELTE, 2020) In Charles University digital repository <<https://dspace.cuni.cz/handle/20.500.11956/124792>> [accessed April 22, 2021].
72. *Průvodce pavillonem města Prahy uspořádaným městským museem* (Praha 1895); 'Museum města Prahy,' in *Národopisná výstava československá v Praze 1895* (Praha 1895), pp. 409–414.
73. V. Špaček, *Filipkova cesta do Prahy: České mládeži v upomínku na Národopisnou výstavu českoslov[anskou]* (Praha 1896), pp. 19–21.
74. 'Národopisná výstava československá,' *Národní Listy*, 29 May 1895, p. 5.
75. Based on the exhibition's catalogue: *Praha 1750-1850: památky literární, umělecké a občanské* (Praha 1916).
76. C. Nolte, 'Ambivalent Patriots: Czech Culture in the Great War,' in *European Culture in the Great War: The Arts, Entertainment, and Propaganda*, ed. by Aviel Roshwald and Richard Stites (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 162–175.
77. The late 1916 is considered a turning point in the Czech Lands. See, e.g., I. Šedivý, *Češi, české země a Velká válka 1914-1918*, 2nd ed. (Praha: NLN, 2014), p. 218; For Prague, see Ledvinka and Pešek, p. 552.
78. Next to announcements, a range of general as well as more thematically focused reviews appeared, e.g.: 'Praha 1750-1850,' *Lidové Noviny*, 12 April 1916, p. 1–2; E. Edgar, 'Výstava "Praha 1750-1850",' *Národní Politika*, 23 March 1916, p. 4 and 29 March 1916, p. 4; 'Krása Prahy,' *Architektonický Obzor*, 15 (1916), 38–39; 'Praha 1750-1850: Hudba,' *Národní Listy*, 22 March 1916, p. 2; J. Marek, 'Výstavy a publikace výtvarné,' *Moderní Revue*, (1916), 122–128; R. Tyršová, 'Jak se v Praze šilo a vyšívalo za dob našich babiček a prababiček,' *Ženské Listy*, 11, 44 (1916), 1–4.
79. *Praha*, p. 6.
80. In the well-known periodization of national movements by M. Hroch, the period comprised the A and B phases, that of intellectual interest in own's culture and agitation for nation's existence, respectively. The revolution of 1848 is accepted as transition to the mass movement (phase C) in the Czech case. See, e.g., M. Hroch, *European Nations: Explaining their Formation* (London: Verso, 2015).
81. *Praha*, p. 5.
82. Conn, *Do Museums Still Need Objects*, p. 7.
83. 'Výstava Prahy v letech 1750-1850,' *Národní Politika*, 22 November 1915, p. 4.
84. E.g., *Věstník obecní královského hlavního města Prahy*, 23 (1916), 93–94.
85. *Praha*, p. 6.
86. For the concept in the historical perspective, see e.g. M. Heßler and C. Zimmermann (eds.), *Creative Urban Milieus: Historical Perspectives on Culture, Economy, and the City* (New York – London: Campus Verlag, 2008).
87. According to *Věstník hlavního města Prahy*, 42 (1935), 24, the most visited 'Jirásek's F. L. Věk' exhibition attracted 11.447 visitors between March 7 and June 30, 1934, raising the rate of visitors by nearly 2.000, in comparison to the preceding year. See also Míka, p. 25.
88. E. g.: (AMB), 'Jiráskův F. L. Věk ve světle soudobých dokumentů,' *Venkov*, 10 March 1934, p. 7.
89. A. Novotný, *Výstava Jiráskův F.L. Věk ve světle soudobých dokumentů: Museum hlav. města Prahy, 7. březen-30. červen 1934* (Praha 1934).
90. A. Novotný, 'Jiráskův F. L. Věk ve světle soudobých dokumentů,' *Národní Listy*, 11 March 1934, p. 13 (supplement); 'Museum města Prahy,' *Naše Praha*, 6 (1929), 70.

91. A. Novotný, *Wintrův Mistr Kampanus ve světle soudobých dokumentů* (Praha 1936), p. 6.
92. Ibid.
93. I. Padolský, 'F.L. Věk ve světle soudobých dokumentů,' *Pražský ilustrovaný zpravodaj*, 31 May 1934, p. 2.
94. F. X. Harlas, 'Jiráskův F. L. Věk ve světle musejních sbírek,' *Národní Politika*, 3 November 1933, p. 8.
95. Novotný, *Výstava 'Jiráskův F.L. Věk'*, p. 4.
96. Ibid., p. 6.
97. 'Omlouvají Jiráskova před klerikály,' *Volná myšlenka*, 20 September 1935, p. 297.
98. 'Výstava Jiráskova "Temna",' *Národní Listy*, 5 May 1935, p. 11. On the polemics concerning the *Temno* novel, see, e.g., J. Fiala, *Temno, doba Koniášova* (Praha: Eman, 2001), pp. 248–303.
99. A. Novotný: 'Jiráskova výstava "Temna"', *Národní Listy*, 28 April 1935, p. 9. (supplement).
100. Harlas, 'O pražských sbírkách musejních II'; Novotný, 'Musejní úvaha'.

Acknowledgement

I wish to express my gratitude to Tanja Vahtikari and Heidi Hein-Kircher to inviting me to contribute for this thematic issue. I am also grateful to them, as well as to the two anonymous reviewers for their constructive comments. Furthermore, I thank Kristina Uhlíková from the Institute of Art History of Czech Academy of Sciences for helping me with access to the archival fonds of Zdeněk Wirth, Kateřina Bečková from City of Prague Museum for her help with finding illustrations, and Brad Vice for his thorough language proofreading.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

Funding

The work was supported by the European Regional Development Fund-project 'Creativity and Adaptability as Conditions of the Success of Europe in an Interrelated World' (reg. no.: CZ.02.1.01/0.0/0.0/16_019/0000734) implemented at Charles University, Faculty of Arts. The project is carried out under the ERDF Call 'Excellent Research' and its output is aimed at employees of research organisations and Ph.D. students.

Notes on contributor

Jaroslav Ira studied for the MA in History and Political Science at Charles University, Prague, where he also received his PhD in History. He is Assistant Professor of History at Charles University, Faculty of Arts, where he teaches courses on modern comparative history of Europe, with emphasis on urban history, heritage, and the formation of local, regional, and national identities. His current research has dealt with small towns in modern society and culture, regionalism, small town heritage, local history, and uses of the urban past. His recent publications in English include the co-edited volume *Materializing Identities in Socialist and Post-Socialist Cities* (Prague: Karolinum, 2018) and the article 'Rethinking the Genre: Urban Biographies as Means of Creating Critical Public Spheres' in *Urban History* (2021).

ORCID

Jaroslav Ira  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3686-1801>