

# The Search for Identity and Modernity: Motion in Czech Cubist Architecture

PATRICIA M. BOGE  
Louisiana State University

Profound changes began to stir European society as the twentieth century edged to the horizon. The Industrial Age continued to advance modern technology, and socio-political revolutions were gaining strength in Italy, Germany, Hungary, and elsewhere. It is during this time that Nietzsche declared God is dead, and Einstein worked toward developing a theory that would overturn all former beliefs of the relationship between space and time. Into this stimulating—but fearful—climate, a Czech national identity began to emerge.<sup>1</sup>

For almost 300 years, the Czech lands of Bohemia and Moravia had revolved as a satellite around the Austro-Hungarian Empire. It was a period called “darkness” by the Czechs, as they were denied political, religious, and social freedoms. They were also isolated from the beginnings of the Modernist trends of the early 1800s, which intensified their alienation from the European community.<sup>2</sup> But, as nationalistic drives spread through Europe, flamed by the new dynamics of modernism and the diverse new social structures formed by capitalist progress, the Czechs made a move for sovereignty. Their modern search for an ethnic identity, an individual expression, and a part in the formation of the European culture thus “prompted radical political and artistic stances that envisioned the end of the old world and the beginning of a new one.”<sup>3</sup> By the time the Czechs finally emerged free in 1918, the nation was already amidst a rapid succession of such artistic stances. Spreading and developing over three generations, there were Art Nouveau (pre-1905), Cubism (1911-1914), and finally Functionalism (1920-1938).

The history of modern Czech architecture is one of a brief, but intense, desire to find a balance between two opposing forces. The first was a desperate and prideful search for a Czech national identity. After being denied self-rule for three centuries, it was difficult to determine what actually defined the Czech people. The second force was the international push toward modernism. Czech society was suddenly cast into a world of rapidly changing technology and innovation. The

resultant of these dual forces was a constant struggle to unite the search for a specific cultural identity with the race of global technological progress.

These opposing forces can be described as subjective and objective, respectively. The subjective force (search for identity) is characterized by personal, psychological, and emotional concerns of individuals or societies of individuals. In contrast, the objective force (push towards modernism) is driven by mathematical logic and machine technology.

In Czech architecture, the struggle between these forces expressed itself in the development and manipulation of both phenomenal and real motion. As a common denominator between the subjective and objective, motion symbolized and attempted to unite both forces. As a subjective force, motion represented the dynamism of the inner spirit and unconscious psyche as the Czech people struggled to find their place in a completely new world. As an objective force, motion represented industrial progress, mass production, space efficiency, and time economy. In Czech philosophy and building, efforts to resolve this conflict resulted in a constant oscillation between history and modernity, plasticity and structure, poetics and construction, romance and technology, and realism and abstraction.

Few other nations, if any, experienced this kind of struggle. In Germany, great changes also occurred due to the modern movement, but these changes had a previously defined relationship to elements that were already uniquely German—the German language, the German economy, and German history. In contrast, the Czechs emerged into the 20th century with little except the notion that to be “Czech” must mean something. They only had to discover what that something was. This paper focuses on the pursuit of a Czech architectural identity during the cubist period.

## BACKGROUND

In the period of Art Nouveau, the struggle between subjective and objective forces was just beginning to emerge, and much more in theory than in built artifacts. The Czechs were looking for anything disassociated with the Austro-Hungarian Empire as a first step in defining who they were by defining instead who they were not. The classically inspired imperial style of architecture prominent during the reign of the Habsburgs was not based on modern principles and technologies. Because modernism was free from Austro-Hungarian associations, the Czechs adopted it as something that had the potential to be Czech. But soon, the youngest generation of architects would view this new architecture as overly rational and excessively objective. The scene was set for cubism.

By 1900, the Empire had been considerably weakened by wars and nationalistic revolts. So, as political constraints loosened and their own national strength grew, the Czechs turned away from Vienna, the political center of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and looked instead to other parts of Europe for inspiration. Paris was especially influential. As explained by F. X. Šalda, a leading Czech critic of the day, it was "a time when all that was great and rooted in the past [was] dead."<sup>4</sup>

The years following the 1905 Edvard Munch exhibition in Prague were characterized by a flurry of activity by young Czech artists. Although the look was still impressionistic, the focus shifted from primarily external perceptions of a subject, typical of Art Nouveau, to a style that better expressed internal emotional states.<sup>5</sup> Pavel Janák, a student of Otto Wagner and an apprentice of Jan Kotěra (leader of the Czech secessionists), became the leading voice of the new architectural movement. Helping to spread the movement's influence through volumes of theoretical writings, Janák called for a new manifesto with less emphasis on structure and more on intellectual theory and individual passion. "Artistic thought and abstraction," Janák proclaimed, "will take over leadership from practicality, which cedes its place."<sup>6</sup> He and his collaborators began to separate themselves from Art Nouveau, which they considered to be trapped by stylistic conventions and historical models. As architect Josef Chochol later wrote, "standing at the threshold of the newly developing world of artistic forms, we replace the former decorative detailing with the fuller and more concentrated expression of the three-dimensional evolving matter."<sup>7</sup>

The Czech cubists were growing strong. The functionalist theories of Semper and Wagner, which had previously guided modern design through the union of "function, construction and poetry," now drew a strong negative reaction from the young architects.<sup>8</sup> Modern architecture, Janák believed, should focus on the poetic aspect of Wagner's theory.<sup>9</sup> Division between the two generations finally occurred in 1911 over a disagreement about the validity of an article by Emil Filla, a young cubist painter and critic, entitled "On the Virtues of Neo-

Primitivism" and illustrated by Picasso. Janák, with Josef Gočár and Josef Chochol, became so disillusioned with the rationalism of the current milieu that they proclaimed a new program of Czech architecture dedicated to cubism. Brought together by their common passion and the search for their own "total work of art," young painters, writers, composers, and architects banded together and produced a journal, *The Artistic Monthly*, that quickly became a primary outlet for radical artistic views.<sup>10</sup>

## INFLUENCES

In turning away from Viennese culture, the Czech cubist movement was influenced by many sources including French cubist painting, German writings on aesthetics, and Gothic and Baroque architecture.<sup>11</sup>

Initially, inspiration came from cubist painters working in France, particularly Picasso and Braque, whose work exhibited a vitality and dynamism previously unseen. By editing out all inessential details, they simplified the focus of their paintings and altered the geometries of both object and place in order to more deeply understand the composition of space. As the work filtered into Prague via publications, exhibitions, and information from expatriates living in Paris, the Czech architects attempted to interpret the psychological origins of the paintings, as well as those of their Czech counterparts.<sup>12</sup> The two groups

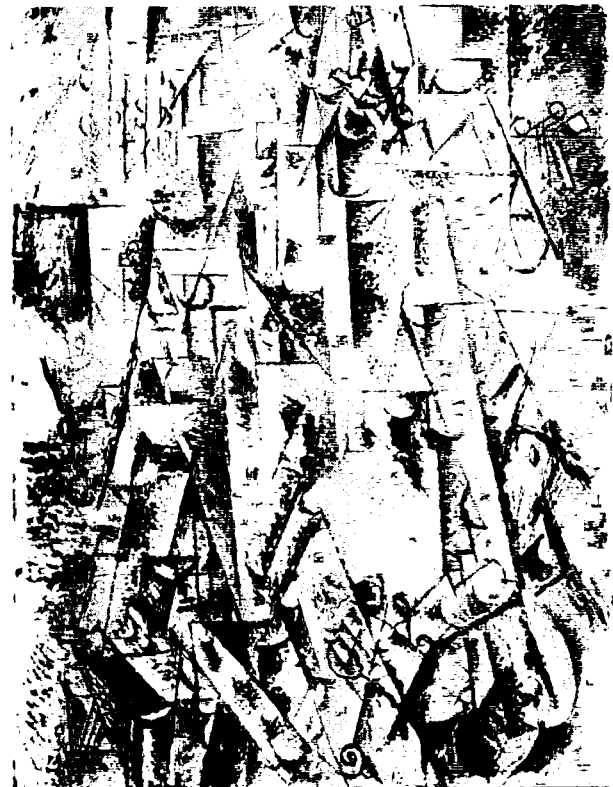


Fig. 1. Pablo Picasso, *The Poet*, 1911.

of painters did differ somewhat significantly, however. In "The Poet" (1911), for instance, Picasso uses variations of brightness to create diagonal lines that manipulate and explore the physical form of the subject through all three typical dimensions-plus the added cubist idea of time. (Fig. 1) Czech cubist painters, in contrast to their French counterparts, were more interested in human psychological states as a focus of their work.<sup>13</sup> In Kubišta's "Hypnotist" painted just one year later, the human subconscious, rather than the subject itself, is explored. Here, the values of light and dark and the prismatic forms of color on the hands and faces serve to accentuate the intensity of the moment. (Fig. 2) The presence of this psychological element in architecture was unique to Bohemian cubism. In architecture, oblique lines and crystalline shapes began to appear prominently as painting and architecture became closely united. Yet, because a painter's canvas lacks physical depth and because cubist architecture was a phenomenon that occurred only in Bohemia, Moravia, and to a lesser extent in France, the architects had no direct role model for "cubist architecture." Consequently, they went in a direction entirely their own.

German aesthetics also had a crucial impact on the Czechs. Theories on "empathy" by Theodor Lipps and Wilhelm Worringer seemed to give a resounding vote of approval for the cubist program. As Lipps writes:

Empathy means to objectify our sensations, to project ourselves into the insides of objects. An apperceptive motion, which creates a line, is 'empathic' into it. The act of creation of something spatial is in fact a motion. This motion is not only in our mind, but is directly experienced. It is firstly a motion of my inner operations, it is my activity.<sup>14</sup>



Fig. 2. Bohumil Kubišta, Hypnotist, 1912.

Worringer combined these ideas of empathetic expression with his own belief that the use of abstraction in art leads to a higher level of expression.<sup>15</sup> For the Czechs, these theories evolved into the belief that what was truthful and natural in art and architecture was not the organic forms of nature or the mechanical logic of modernism, but the inner explorations of the human soul. It is this subjective, personal, psychological energy that inspired the young Czech architects to experiment in new dynamic forms, giving inner motion an exterior presence.

Apart from modern developments in art and criticism, however, the architects also looked to their own architectural history for a justification for the cubist movement. They turned away from the Classical forms often used by the Habsburgs and toward the late Gothic and late Baroque periods, which were known for their powerful emotive inspiration and a fluidity of form. The prominence of Bohemian churches, palaces, and institutions in these styles gave their influence a nationalistic quality, which thus fit well into the subjective view the architects chose to explore.

According to Janák, Czech architecture was influenced by both southern and northern European architecture. Classic Greek and Roman architecture (and their later Renaissance re-birth) were in the southern style and were based on simple elements stacked together into perfect geometries according to the natural, earthly laws of gravity. Northern architecture, on the other hand, was not concerned with the earth and its laws but with the heavens and with the spirit.<sup>16</sup> It was exemplified by the Gothic that "overcomes the tranquility and material quality of matter by delving into it, and by reducing matter in the direction of the third oblique plane."<sup>17</sup> Certain decorative elements, such as diamond vaulting, were adopted into cubist works. Design in the imperially ruled Bohemia and Moravia had focused solely on the southern style; now, the north drew the architects' attention. But since the southern style was also a part of Czech history, its influence was sought through the Baroque. Baroque architecture, Janák felt, had intensified the expression of the Classical by "the rotation and movement of entire forms from their original, calm, antique position into planes standing obliquely and dramatically against the heart of the building."<sup>18</sup>

Janák and his contemporaries used these influences in the creation of new subjectively motivated forms. They believed that since orthogonal forms, elemental building techniques, and gravity together produced inherently stable constructions, then an "oblique" form must be the result of more dramatic forces as "the oblique fall of rain is caused by the additional element of wind."<sup>19</sup> The third diagonal plane thus became a tool to represent motion.

## THEORY

Each of these influences pushed the Czech cubists toward an exploration of motion as a representation of their search for identity. "Motion," Václav Vilém Štech wrote, "was perceived as a spiritual activity which transformed matter: it was the assertion of the creative will against mere existence."<sup>20</sup> In this way, the cubist architects rebelled against the machine age, but not against the psychological and emotive feelings it caused. While modernist trends in European architecture began to assert that "form follows function," the Czechs argued instead that the objective functionality of architecture should be regulated by a more subjective creation of form. Unlike the mass-produced objects now becoming commonplace in Europe, the Czechs believed architecture involved the search for individual expression. Consequently, they turned away from utilitarian notions of modernism to a more personal search for a sense of place in a rapidly changing world. They strove towards a truly free subject – one that followed a spiritual logic rather than a scientific one. It was a subject that was fearful, complex, and confused but strong and full of national and ethnic pride.

The key term of cubism was synthesis – often described as the union of art and life. The dynamic new theories in art and architecture mirrored advances the Czechs were making in re-establishing their own cultural heritage and national identity. In 1905, for instance, the Czech Progressive Party was formed and campaigned for universal voting rights. Meanwhile, growing industries simulated the Czech economy and sense of self-reliance. The era's "dynamic and dramatic movement of [. . .]

form" became inspired not by the rational mechanics of the modern machine process (as would happen later with Functionalism), but by an inner movement that was "artistically empowered" to conquer matter.<sup>21</sup> These new forms, imbued with the power of an awakening ethnic and national consciousness, could accurately portray the spirit of the times. Cubism was thus concerned solely with the spiritual value of form and was not dependent on material, color, or decoration. Applied ornament was discarded in the architects' work as the structure itself was molded to create movement.<sup>22</sup> This movement was often phenomenal, rather than physical, and relied on a viewer's perception and the manipulation of that perception through the imagination. It was an inner motion born out of the psychological restlessness of the industrial revolution and the nationalistic movement.

## WORK

The inner dynamics that fascinated the Czech cubists finds two of its best examples in the sanatorium at the Bohdaneč spa (1911) by Josef Gočár and a villa below Vyšehrad in Prague (1913) by Josef Chochol.

The basic elements of the cubist program can already be seen in Gočár's 1911 sanatorium at the Bohdaneč spa. The elevation shows the beginnings of a breakdown in mass to smaller volumes and a play of light and shadow that gives dynamism to the facade. (Fig. 3) In terms of real movement, however, the



Fig. 3. Josef Gočár. Principal facade, Bohdaneč sanatorium, 1911-1912.





Fig. 6. Josef Chochol. Elevation. Villa below Vyšehrad. 1911-1912.

Indeed, no built cubist works of this time reached the goals of external and internal spatial fluidity and movement of mass that the cubists had hoped to achieve. In Chochol's villa, for instance, the cubist diagonal has spread from the facade into the garden and fencing, surrounding the villa in a distorted horizontal ground plan. While these forms definitely fit into the language of cubism, their flatness does not reveal the deep mental and emotional forces present in the facade. In their intuitive sketches and competition designs, however, the Czech architects were much more free from the practical considerations of function. In a 1913 competition design by Janák for the Žižka Monument in Prague, for example, three-dimensional crystalline forms come together in an impassioned and unregulated way. (Fig. 7) In addition, Janák's earlier sketches for a columned and vaulted space begin to bring the cubist agenda to the interior. In these projects, the plastic and dynamic manipulations of the cubist exterior facades are finally explored in more fully three-dimensional forms. (Fig. 8)

By the mid-1910s, Prague would lead the cubist movement in central Europe. Since their split with the Austrian Secession, they had gained confidence, recognition, and some influence of their own. For the 1914 Werkbund Exhibition in Cologne, they strove to have Czech work represented separately from that which was Austrian, and by creating the "Association of Czech Accomplishment" (in opposition to the Austrian Werkbund), they succeeded. Though the four distinct rooms they received within the Austrian pavilion drew considerable attention, the Czech experiment in cubism would, for the most part, end here. When the First World War began in Europe, the Exhibition closed early and little news of the Czech success spread either to home or abroad.<sup>21</sup>

## FOREGROUND

With the defeat of Austria four years later, the Czechs finally gained independence. The Slovaks had earlier decided to unite

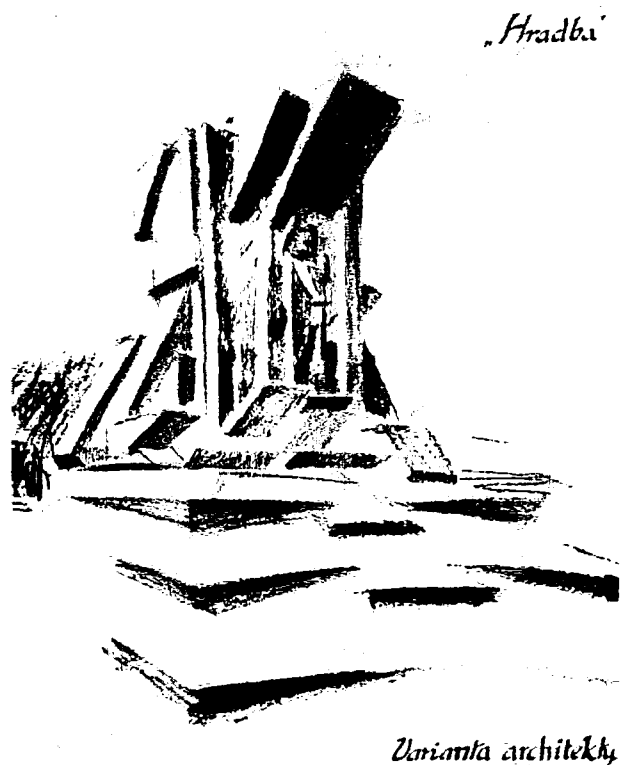


Fig. 7. Pavel Janák. Monument to Jan Žižka. 1913.

politically with them, and on October 28, 1918, the Czechoslovak Republic was formed. The period between the wars brought, perhaps predictably, another dramatic shift in Czech architecture. The new younger generation abandoned the further development of former paths to strike an original course of their own. The influx of artistic styles and the continuing struggles to find a Czech national identity based in traditional

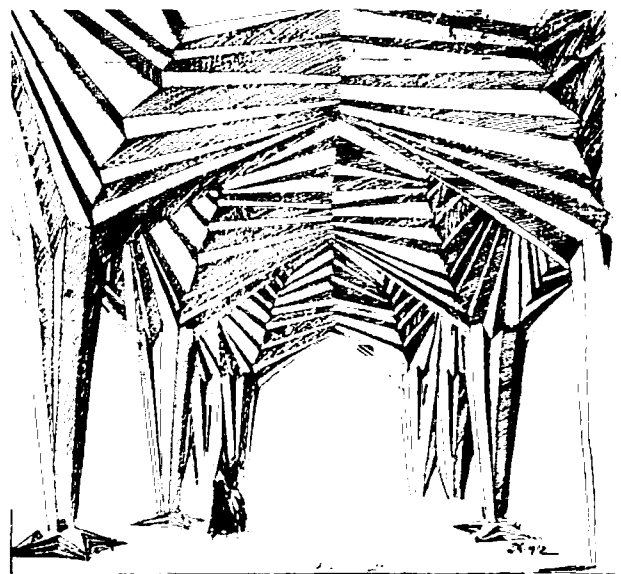


Fig. 8. Pavel Janák. Monumental interior. 1912.

Bohemian styles and to stay abreast of modern technological society set a polarity in the themes of the new age. The opposing forces came together in Czech Functionalist architecture that strove, at its best, to encompass both utilitarian objectiveness and poetic subjectivity.

While cubist architecture grew out of a psychological restlessness that was intensified by the simultaneous newness of modern society, the Functionalists, born into this time, directed some of their attention away from the individual subject and toward society as a whole. It is here that the seemingly disparate goals could best be united, especially in the arena of social housing.

By the mid-1930s, however, the political climate in Europe was again changing, and suggestions of war clouded relations once again. Despite the gains made in Czech strength, they were no match for the military powers of their established neighbors. A last opportunity for the Czechs to view their accomplishments as a nation came at a Prague exhibition entitled "For New Architecture": an architecture that – for the time being – would be placed on hold. The dizzying pace of the Czech avant-garde, born in the late 1890's, would not see its 40th birthday. In September of 1938, on the eve of World War II, the Munich Agreement divided the young Republic, and six months later the Nazi occupation of Czechoslovakia began. Art and architecture that reminded the Czechs of both their ethnic traditions and their part in the modern movement rejuvenated feelings of national pride but were seen as decadent by the German Empire. The Czechs' theoretic and artistic fervor would be squelched by the Germans (and then the Russians) for another 30 years. The Prague Spring of 1968 gave the world a glimpse of Czech potential, but the door was once again closed until 1989 when the Czech people, again allowing their art to run into their politics, finally legitimized the quest for national identity and re-initiated the leap into modern society that began a century earlier.

## CONCLUSION

Despite the rigorousness of their theories and the depth of their passion, none of the three architectural movements that consumed Czech architects in the early 20th century solved their struggle between identity and modernity. Art Nouveau could not completely make the leap away from past styles; Cubism failed in penetrating the interior, and Functionalism became more of an expression of use than a methodology that could better human life. Thus, the resolution of subjective and objective forces was never achieved, and the stability the Czechs sought was never found.

The abrupt halt of artistic freedom in 1938 provided, if nothing else, an opportunity to finally pause and reflect on the advancements of the previous decades. After this frantic time

had ended, what was it that the Czechs' took with them? Maybe it was a notion of movement: the idea that to create motion, either phenomenally or physically, was a chance to express thoughts and ideas. Or maybe it was simply the knowledge that, in a few decades of freedom, they had caught up with the world. In some cases, the Czechs even outdid it.

Perhaps if this 40-year window of artistic and political freedom were open longer, or if an extensive study on new Czech architecture since the 1989 revolution was undertaken, more concrete conclusions might be drawn. Perhaps, at that time, it would be determined that the qualities that are considered "Czech" are not found in a style, but in the dynamism and vitality of motion itself.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Ivan Margolius, *Cubism in Architecture and the Applied Arts: Bohemia and France, 1910-1914* (Newton Abbott; North Pomfret, Vt.: David & Charles, 1979), 9.

<sup>2</sup> Jaroslav Anđel and others, curators, *Czech Modernism, 1900-1945*. (Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts; London: Bulfinch Press, 1989), 19.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup> Petr Wittlich, *Prague: Fin de Siecle* (Saint-Amand-Montrond, France: Imprimerie Clerc S.A., 1992), 12.

<sup>5</sup> Anđel, 55.

<sup>6</sup> Milena Lamarová, "Texts and Contexts, 1910-1914," in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*, ed. Alexander von Vegesack (New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 11.

<sup>7</sup> Vladimír Šlapeta, "Cubism in Architecture," in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*, ed. Alexander von Vegesack (New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 40.

<sup>8</sup> Margolius, 7.

<sup>9</sup> Lamarová, 14.

<sup>10</sup> Petr Wittlich, "The Road to Cubism," in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*, ed. Alexander von Vegesack (New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992), 21.

<sup>11</sup> Šlapeta, 36-37.

<sup>12</sup> Margolius, 7.

<sup>13</sup> Anđel, 22.

<sup>14</sup> Margolius, 12.

<sup>15</sup> Kenneth Frampton, *Modern Architecture: A Critical History* (London: Thames and Hudson Ltd, 1985), 98.

<sup>16</sup> Šlapeta, 38-39.

<sup>17</sup> Lamarová, 16.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

<sup>21</sup> Margolius, 43.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

<sup>24</sup> Šlapeta, 45.

## REFERENCES/BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Barr, Alfred Hamilton. *Cubism and Abstract Art*. Cambridge: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1986, 1936.
- Czech Functionalism: 1918-1938*. London: Architectural Association, 1987.
- Andel, Jaroslav, and others, curators. *Czech Modernism, 1900-1945*. Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts; London: Bulfinch Press, 1989.
- Daix, Pierre. *Cubists and Cubism*. Geneva: Skira; New York: Rizzoli, 1982.
- Devětsil: Czech Avant-garde Art, Architecture and Design of the 1920's and 30's*. Oxford: Museum of Modern Art; London: Design Museum, 1990.
- Dostal, Oldřich, and others. *Moderní architektura v Československu*. Praha: Nakladatelství Československých Výtvarných Umělců, 1967.
- Frampton, Kenneth. *Modern Architecture: A Critical History*. London: Thames and Hudson Ltd., 1985.
- Giedion, Sigfried. *Space, Time and Architecture: The Growth of a New Tradition*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1967.
- Koxtun, George J., ed. *The Spirit of Thomas G. Masaryk (1850-1937)*. London: The Macmillan Press Ltd., 1990.
- Kral, Václav. *Lessons of History*. Moscow: Novosti Press Agency, 1978.
- Margolin, Ivan. *Cubism in Architecture and the Applied Arts: Bohemia and France, 1910-1914*. Newton Abbott; North Pomfret, VT: David & Charles, 1979.
- Nyrop, Richard F., ed. *Czechoslovakia: A Country Study*. Washington, D.C.: American University Press, 1982.
- Paul, David W. *Czechoslovakia: Profile of a Socialist Republic at the Crossroads of Europe*. Boulder, Colorado: West View Press, 1981.
- Stankova, Jaroslava, and others. *Prague: Eleven Centuries of Architecture*. Prague: Tiskarske Zavody, 1991.
- Tschechische Kunst der 20er + 30er Jahre: Avantgarde und Tradition: [Ausstellung]* Mathildenhöhe Darmstadt, 20. November, 1988 bis 29. Januar, 1989. Darmstadt: Mathildenhöhe, 1988.
- von Vegesack, Alexander, ed. *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*. New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.

Witlich, Petr. *Prague: Fin de Siecle*. Saint-Amand-Montrond, France: Imprimerie Clerc S.A., 1992.

## ILLUSTRATIONS

- Fig. 1. Picasso, Pablo. *The Poet*. Page 65 in *Cubists and Cubism*. Pierre Daix. Geneva: Skira; New York: Rizzoli, 1982.
- Fig. 2. Kubišta, Bohumil. *Hypnotist*. Severomoravská Galerie Výtvarného Umění v Ostravě. Page 23 in *Czech Modernism, 1900-1945*. Houston: The Museum of Fine Arts; London: Bulfinch Press, 1989.
- Fig. 3. Josef Gočár. Principal facade, Bohdaneč spa, 1911-1912, Pardubice County. Page 126 in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*. Ed. Alexander von Vegesack. New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
- Fig. 4. Josef Gočár. Interior hall, Bohdaneč spa, 1911-1912, Pardubice County. Page 126 in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*. Ed. Alexander von Vegesack. New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
- Fig. 5. Chochoř, Josef. Ground-floor plan, 1911-1912, Libušina Street no. 3/49, Prague-Vyšehrad. Page 116 in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*. Ed. Alexander von Vegesack. New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
- Fig. 6. Chochoř, Josef. Garden-side facade, 1911-1912, Libušina Street no. 3/49, Prague-Vyšehrad. Page 117 in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*. Ed. Alexander von Vegesack. New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
- Fig. 7. Janák, Pavel. Alternate design for a monument to Jan Žižka, 1913. Page 169 in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*. Ed. Alexander von Vegesack. New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.
- Fig. 8. Janák, Pavel. Design for a monumental interior, 1912. Page 165 in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts, 1910-1925*. Ed. Alexander von Vegesack. New York, N.Y.: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992.