

Comenius 1592 – 1670. Time Between Reason and Madness. Jan Amos Comenius and his world. Prague, Prague Castle Riding school

In the ending exhibition season big Prague projects were considerably afflicted by the corona virus pandemic. Besides international exhibitions organized by Prague National Gallery, presenting Rembrandt and Toyen, and the exposition in National Museum “Sun Kings” with unrepeatable loans from Egypt, a jubilee exhibition on Comenius in the Library of Czech Academy of Sciences on Národní třída was also hit heavily. Not in the Czech Republic alone it is usual that big jubilees connected with the birth or death of personalities with domestic and international acclaim are reminded by exhibitions. Such prestigious presentations often need rich financial sources from the state coffers. That was also the case of jubilee exhibitions on Comenius. As a witness and co-author I can randomly name a huge exhibition in Uherský Brod in 1992 or an exhibition in Naarden in 2007 (both have turned into permanent expositions). The same goes for modern permanent expositions in Přerov, Fulnek and mainly Comenius National Pedagogical Museum in Prague. Understandably, „Comenius at the Castle“ cannot have such an ambition. I don't dare to estimate expenditures on the exhibition in the Riding school, but it must have been a multimillion sum, which will evaporate without a longer effect. It must have been crucial to persuade the “state treasurers” about the significance of the venture and obtain a grant as big as possible.

The exhibition is really exceptional, breathtaking by showing the latest computer graphics and using the newest technologies (moving pictures and maps on huge screens, self-turning pages in scanned books etc.). Sometimes it seems, though, that the display of “actual exhibition modernity” distracts visitors' attention to the detriment of the content, that is Comenius' legacy as such. Offered are Jan Amos's selected quotes (mostly well known), all in a perfect bilingual form. The quotes refer to the cited sources, but their understandable interpretation regarding the context of Comenius' life is lacking. Thus we read about the burning down of Leszno by Polish peasants, but we learn nothing about Comenius' controversial work Praise on Karl Gustav, the Swedish king. The same holds true about Comenius' relation to the English revolution and Cromwell, or about the discrepancy between Comenius' efforts to achieve peace (“peace in freedom” in his concept) and his support for Swedish war plans (including subsidies from the weaponry-producing de Geers family). Because of foreign visitors the Czech texts were accompanied by unnecessarily long mutations, although linguistically perfect. This must have

been reflected in expenditures. But during my two-hour visit I didn't notice any foreigner (with all the respect, Comenius is not Rembrandt). Prevailing were retired people having difficulties with reading small letters, and school groups, impatient and in a hurry. Foreign visitors should have learned more about Comenius' actual legacy for today's world. Fore and foremost about his pansophical project stressing the fact that this most original Czech thinker building on the legacy of Czech reformation and the Unity of Brethren, is the ideological originator of world and European unification efforts based on the respect for freedom – both religious and national. In addition to hundreds of artefacts, a whole section is devoted to „Comenius as an icon and memorial“, showing depictions of Comenius in Czech fine arts of the 19th and 20th centuries. In contrast to a smaller-scale exhibition in the Academy of Sciences a bigger stress on and explanation of the personality of Comenius is lacking here, especially as part of the Czech pantheon at the time of national revival movement and emancipation efforts striving for independence. On the other hand, the curators had gathered many original items, otherwise hardly accessible. Painters are represented by Brožík and Sýkora, sculptors by Bílek, Horejc, Makovský, Schnirch, Štursa.

The exhibition is rather a paramount artistic-historical project with breathtaking usage of electronical visual effects, supported by a clever architectonic solution and astonishing design. But the luxurious catalogue with colour reproductions and extensive texts, which costs 1500 Czk (probably also subsidized) is not likely to be easily saleable. Lacking here is a cheaper and well arranged publication! The exhibition is the result of the concept and realization elaborated by art historians Vít Vlnas and Lenka Stolárová. Stressed on the information panel as well as in the catalogue is the heuristic share of the Department of comeniology and intellectual history of early modern age of the Philosophical Institute of Czech Academy of Sciences. The catalogue also contains references, but from the viewpoint of professional comeniological literature quite selective. Not enough reflected is older comeniological research (Polišenský, Válka, Čapková), or the work of Comenius Museum in Uherský Brod (*Studia Comeniana et historica*) whose symposia have become a traditional platform of scientific investigation. Artistic-historical accent of the exhibition has moved the historiographical knowledge on a side track (as a surprise comes the fact that not even most significant contemporary historians, specializing in the 16th and 17th centuries, including the thirty years war, are mentioned on the list of collaborators).

But away from criticism, let's turn our attention now to unquestionable pros and merits of the exhibition. I'd like to praise the endeavours of the authorial team to obtain a vast amount of artefacts, be it pictures, sculptures, precious prints or maps (including an extraordinarily precious coloured original of the map of Moravia by Comenius from 1627). In addition to Czech art galleries, libraries, museums, chateau expositions and religious institutions, the curators also gained loans from abroad (among others from Germany, Poland, the Netherlands etc.). Besides selected Comenius' unique prints (early works Letters to Heaven, Thinking About Christian Perfection, The Gate of Languages Unlocked, Orbis Pictus, Labyrinth of the World and Paradise of the Heart, Persecution of Czech Church, The One Thing Needful and polemic tracts) and archivalia including Comenius' autograph, visitors can see works by authors who had influenced Comenius (Thomas More, Francis Bacon, Robert Fludd, Pierre Ramus and Tomasso Campanella, but also medical essays by Andrea Vesalius and Jan Jesenius with his own portrait). Displayed is also a book that caused long-lasting harm to Comenius: Bayle's Dictionnaire historique et critique from 1697. Another rare item here is an English book entitled John Amos Comenius: The Pattern of Universal Knowledge, with a precious author's portrait painted after the original by Václav Hollar. Remarkable is a collection of period portraits, mostly small-format graphic prints with portraits of people from Comenius' circle. I personally appreciated some portrait canvases - besides the original of standing Karel, the Elder from Žerotín also Bohemian ex-king Frederick of the Palatinate during his exile period, and for the first time in my life I could look in the eyes of Ladislav Velen of Žerotín, the leading figure of Czech exile after the lost battle of the White Mountain, whose original portrait I had not seen before. The triumph of the victorious Habsburg power is documented here by a large picture of the mass execution on the Old Town Square in 1621 from the collections of the chateau in Rychnov nad Kněžnou. Certainly, there is a gallery of other personalities here, too, Habsburgs, European kings, politicians, scholars and intellectuals from Comenius' time. My attention was attracted by a nice picture of Bohuslav Balbín, who, although a Jesuite, showed great respect for Comenius. Also displayed is the publication of Comenius' Janua by Prague Jesuites (1661) which is curious, yet there is no mention of the author. The captions don't mention the fact that it was entirely impossible to publish Comenius' works in Bohemia up to the end of the 18th century (Balbín's „tolerance“ had strict limits, his praise of Jan Amos saw the

light of the day a hundred years after it had been written). At the exhibition I had a feeling that a visitor must be overwhelmed by so many items. I don't understand why it seemed necessary to display so many goblets and similar art-and-craft exhibits. Part of the exhibition are other parallel expositions, Dutch war sceneries and landscapes (mostly domestic loans). Visitors are attracted by a famous canvas by Snayers depicting the battle of the White Mountain. A nice collection of weapons from the thirty years war is to be seen here, too. But that would need to visit the place one more time. It is up to the visitor to choose – either Comenius or art, it is not possible to grasp and digest both. By saying this I don't want to play down the “artistic impression” of the exhibition. It is unquestionably a unique deed (another Comenius' anniversary is not in the offing). The experienced authorial team whose members from National Gallery had compiled similar exhibitions from the times of the early modern age in the past decades (Wallenstein, Rudolf II, Baroque), offered a successful exhibition to the public, but in my opinion Comenius is overshadowed here by a costly artistic-historical presentation which turns to exhibitionism. As far as professional contribution to the 350th anniversary of Comenius' death (November 15, 1670) is concerned, I appreciate more an outstanding exhibition held under the auspices of the Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic on Národní třída last autumn, „J.A.K. Comenius in the cultures of commemoration“ (see review in BOH 2/2020, pg. 129/131), prepared by a team of Vladimír Urbánek, probably the best contemporary Czech comeniologist of the middle generation.

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