

**J.A.C. Comenius in the cultures of commemoration. Science and Art Gallery,  
Academy of Sciences of the Czech Republic, Národní třída 3, Prague 1,  
September 8 – October 21, 2020**

An exceptional exhibition with exceptional bad luck. That can be a characteristic of an exhibition held in the exhibition hall of the Presidium of Czech Academy of Sciences, at the opening ceremony of which I managed to take part. All in all, last year's celebrations to commemorate the 350<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Comenius' death on November 15, 1670 in Amsterdam, failed to score success. Exhibitions in Naarden and Rome (to which the author of this review also contributed) managed to open in time, but other accompanying ventures, conferences, symposia and numerous lectures scheduled for November (and not only in the mentioned towns) either did not take place or were postponed. But back to the merit of this review, e.g. to the assessment of the Comenius in the Cultures of Commemoration exhibition. The superordinated title alone, J.A.K., disclosed in a witty way the aim of the curators – HOW (JAK in Czech) had Comenius been looked at by the past times, not only within ideological and political changes of Czech historical rigmaroles, but also by creative and artistic renditions of his fate and work. First a bit of factual account: although the exhibition was put together by a number of institutions, museums, libraries and art galleries, special thanks go to Vladimír Urbánek and Lenka Řezníková, who had a lion's share in its remarkable concept. Textual background was created by the above mentioned comeniologists of the middle and young generations, together with Lukáš Havelka, Helena Kovářová and Kateřina Horníčková. The list of persons who had worked on the exhibition is much longer, let' mention here artistically successful and uncluttered presentation (curator Johana Studničková, architect Libor Křišťůfek and graphic artist Milan Křišťůfek). Also the English mutation of Czech originals was perfectly managed.

A reviewer can hardly present the pictorial richness of an exhibition by words, as without pictures its impact, be it as good as possible, would be in vain. The initial section of the exhibition, called The Memory, was devoted to a phenomenon which accompanies all significant personalities, including Comenius, who had gradually become parts of Czech national Pantheon. The changes of the period paradigms and ideological clichés could be clearly traced in the presentation of Comenius' work and legacy – from the time of the 19<sup>th</sup> century National Revival movement over to the interwar Czechoslovakia and then to a politically distorted picture of him during the times of socialism,

especially in the 1950s. Remarkable, too, was a unique collection of 3D devotionalia and memorabilia, as well as patriotic colour prints and postcards. Another part, entitled Portraits, presented breathtaking reproductions of historical pictures of Comenius, including romantic images, paintings and drawings presented many times in their original look (for instance a carton by famous painter Mikoláš Aleš for a sgraffitti in Pilsen). The sector called Literature was a harder nut to crack. The authors of the exhibition gave up a presentation of professional literature, and instead they concentrated on historical editions of Comenius' works and on reflections of Jan Amos in Czech fiction. The Topography of memory section was extremely dense, showing selected places linked to Comenius' life and work in Moravia and abroad (especially the chapel in Naarden). As Comenius proceeded to become an iconic personality of Czech culture, the picture of him as a "national giant" changed accordingly, as it is shown in the sectors called Canons and Celebrations and musealisation. I was specially captured by the section Theatre and film, mostly because this form of the reflection of the picture of Comenius (for instance puppet theatre) is not widely known. I was sad not to be able to see film productions depicting in an artistic way Comenius' life. Visitors could watch colour feature films, for instance Vávra's Wandering of Jan Amos with Ladislav Chudík in the title role, or Light from the Darkness directed by Jiří Bělka, featuring actor Zdeněk Řehoř. Amidst the great amount of theatre performances (in retrospective since the 19th century), I was pleased by the presentation of amiable humour of the Jára Cimrman Theatre and its performance of my favourite play entitled Czech Heaven, where both protagonists, Zdeněk Svěrák and late Ladislav Smoljak, had – in a good sense of the word – a field day depicting, in alternation, the personality of Comenius.

It's a real pity, that the exhibition was stricken by ill fate. The exerted efforts would have deserved a bigger visitors' response. Maybe it will be installed directly in Comenius' Moravia, say, in Uherský Brod?

Jan Kumpera