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Helena Koenigsmarková: A living profession in the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague

Helena Koenigsmarková – właściwa osoba na właściwym stanowisku w Muzeum Sztuki Dekoracyjnej w Pradze

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Abstract

Helena Koenigsmarková was a director of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague (Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze; UPM) for more than thirty years, since 1991. This exceptional woman was instrumental in providing the institution with a new vision that has proven to be of great significance for the institution and for conservation practices.¹ Upon achieving an understanding of the context, history, and material nature of the works of art, objects of art, craft and design, specific methodologies for conservation were introduced, including those associated with care, study and display. This paper will build upon the efforts already made in this field, with a view to introducing a new perspective of the object's conservation history that reflects the professional situation and the hierarchical structure of object conservation in the Czech Lands.

The present study is based on a series of conversations conducted over the past several months. We agreed on three main areas that had transformed the museum: 1) Where (collection management and preservation); 2) What (the material nature of the collection objects); 3) Who (reorganization of the museum hierarchy). In instances where further elaboration is required, the museum's available and important strategic and archival documents, annual reports and selected media sources, are quoted and analysed. This period in the history of conservation demonstrates how museum management influenced the rearrangement of preservation activities. This signalled a pivotal moment in the development of conservation practices within a museum setting, paving the way for new forms of collaboration. This paradigm shift is being addressed through the framework of a newly introduced academic programme at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague.

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¹ For the purposes of this contribution I use English terminology 'conservation', 'conservation studios/laboratories', 'conservator'. In Czech terminology we rather apply terms: 'conservation-restoration', 'conservation-restoration studios/laboratories', 'conservator-restorer'.

Keywords

conservation, history, management, art, crafts, design

Abstrakt

Helena Koenigsmarková była dyrektorką Muzeum Sztuki Użytkowej w Pradze (Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze – UPM) przez ponad 30 lat, począwszy od 1991 roku. Ta wyjątkowa kobieta odegrała kluczową rolę we wprowadzeniu tej instytucji na nowe tory. Wizja Koenigsmarkovej okazała się niezwykle istotna zarówno dla samego muzeum, jak i dla praktyk konserwatorskich. Za jej kadencji położono nacisk na zrozumienie kontekstu, historii oraz materialnego charakteru dzieł sztuki, obiektów rzemiosła i designu i wprowadzono określone metody konserwacji, obejmujące troskę o obiekt, jego badania oraz odpowiednie sposoby prezentacji. Niniejszy artykuł nawiązuje do dotychczasowych działań prowadzonych w tym obszarze i zmierza do ukazania historii konserwacji obiektów z nowej perspektywy, uwzględniającej sytuację zawodową konserwatorów oraz hierarchiczność w dziedzinie konserwacji zabytków w Czechach.

Artykuł powstał na podstawie serii rozmów przeprowadzonych w ciągu ostatnich kilku miesięcy. Udało się ustalić trzy główne obszary, które wpłynęły na transformację muzeum: 1) miejsce (gdzie?) – zarządzanie kolekcją i jej ochrona; 2) przedmiot (co?) – materialna natura obiektów z kolekcji; 3) podmiot odpowiedzialny (kto?) – reorganizacja struktury muzealnej. W kwestiach wymagających szerszego omówienia cytowane i analizowane są dostępne istotne dokumenty strategiczne oraz archiwalne dotyczące muzeum, sprawozdania roczne oraz wybrane materiały z mediów.

Opisany okres w historii konserwacji pokazuje, w jaki sposób zarządzanie muzeum wpłynęło na modyfikację działań z zakresu ochrony zbiorów. Był to przełomowy moment w rozwoju praktyk konserwatorskich w środowisku muzealnym, torujący drogę nowym formom współpracy. Ta zmiana paradygmatu jest obecnie widoczna w nowo wprowadzonym programie akademickim na Akademii Sztuk Pięknych, Architektury i Designu w Pradze.

Słowa kluczowe

konserwacja, historia, zarządzanie, sztuka, rzemiosło, design

TRACING THE DEVELOPMENT OF ANY PROFESSION IS ALWAYS CHALLENGING. IN THE COMPLEX FIELD of conservation, the history of object conservation and its practitioners has been impacted by the evolution of conservation practices, philosophical approaches to the care of collections, and the specific methodologies employed for treatment and study. Different political, philosophical, and scientific tendencies, resulting from cultural and political situations, are fundamental to understanding the status of conservators of decorative objects and applied arts within museums and society. Decisions taken to eliminate the deterioration of objects and applied arts are linked to particular objects, sets of objects, or artefacts, and their values. In our Western society, these could generally refer to questions such as, ‘Why do we take care of these objects?’, and ‘Why do we keep them?’² When answering these questions, we must not only consider a list of values (as defined by Alois Riegl in his work *The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin*,³ published at the beginning of the twentieth century, which formed the basis of our monument preservation theory, practice and legislation), we inevitably have to examine the content of partial specific activities from different angles. These could be based on various methodological approaches to theory and practice. Including an interpretation based on female protagonists is certainly welcome, as supplementing the history of ‘great men’ with the history of (great) women opens up new perspectives on the status of conservators and conservation practice.

² L. Giombini, ‘Artworks and Their Conservation. A (Tentative) Philosophical Introduction’, *Aesthetica Edizioni/Preprint/* 2019, pp. 13–25.

³ A. Riegl, ‘The Modern Cult of Monuments: Its Character and Its Origin’, trans. K.W. Forster, D. Ghirardo, *Oppositions* 1982, N. 25, pp. 21–50.

1 Helena Koenigsmarková on the construction site. Photo: Ondřej Kocourek, UPM

Helena Koenigsmarková na placu budowy. Fot. Ondřej Kocourek, UPM



I would like to take this opportunity to introduce the conservation history of decorative objects and applied arts from the perspective of an extraordinary woman who has represented the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague for more than thirty years. I will present the approach of Helena Koenigsmarková, now emeritus director of the museum, to the development of the conservation of objects within the museum's hierarchy. Therefore, this study will focus on the conservation of objects in this important national cultural institution, as the work of Helena Koenigsmarková may serve as a valuable starting point for reflecting on the role of conservation theory and education – especially in light of the growing disconnect between the formal frameworks of conservation practice and the practical needs of cultural institutions and society.

The accreditation in the field of applied arts conservation (February 2025), is a significant stimulus for the development of the conservation profession; it introduces a Master's programme in applied arts conservation at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. This is a turning point in our conservation history. Due to cultural and political situations, object conservation was never introduced at an academic level in Czechoslovakia (nor later in the Czech Republic). After almost 80 years, the idea of Jaromír Pečírka, the former head of the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, to establish an arts and crafts restoration school or department,⁴ has been given the opportunity to be implemented.⁵ The coming years will bring great responsibility for educators and students alike. How will we rise to the challenge?

⁴ Z. Bauerová, 'Prečo UMPRUM nemá UMPRUM katedru reštaurovania? Ako sa nepresadil model dvoch konzervátorských-restaurátorských akademických pracovísk v Československu v rokoch 1945–1948', in: *Umění a revoluce. Pro Milenu Bartlovou*, ed. J. Lomová, J. Vybíral, Prague 2018, pp. 450–473.

⁵ Although the decorative arts, arts and crafts and object's conservation programmes were introduced within some Czech universities (e.g. Silesian University Opava, University of Pardubice, University of Chemistry and Technology Prague and Masaryk University in Brno), their curriculums either cover only some materials, or are not introduced as artistic and humanistic academic disciplines within the higher education system.

Education should reflect professional situations and hierarchal structures. Ideally, the new educational curriculum should reflect the professional situation in this and other public cultural institutions. Historically, the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague and the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague have been closely related since their very beginnings. In an interview, Lada Hubatová-Vacková stated that the museum and the school were historically created in direct cooperation, and therefore she sees great potential for close inter-institutional cooperation in the future.⁶ This mutual support is already inspirational in terms of defining the possibilities and limits of applied arts conservation practice, and its methodological approaches, and will be even more so in the future. Furthermore, I believe it has the potential to establish a shared platform and a creative incubator for new conservation and monument preservation practices.⁷ This is very similar to what Jorge Otero Pailos introduces in his 'Experimental Monument Care Platform' at Columbia University's Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. He presents the act of creativity as the starting point for creative reflection on the needs of contemporary society. Accordingly, active monument care based on artistic principles 'explores the intersection of art, architecture, and preservation, by collaborating on the creative restoration and interpretation of landmark sites'.⁸ Such an experimental approach can only be realized through close cooperation between academic and cultural institutions.

Therefore, it is very important (not only for the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague) to examine the influences and developments of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, as closely associated public institutions. However, due to the patchy records of the early history, overall responsibilities and day-to-day routines of the first restorers at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, it is difficult to reconstruct these aspects. It is not yet possible to make comparisons with other museum institutions or regions. The development of conservation practices at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague since its opening in 1901 has been greatly influenced by the scholarly interests of its earliest directors, craftsmen, and curators.⁹ However, to uncover more details requires closer investigation. From this perspective, it is very important to document the historical circumstances directly from those who participated in them.

Consequently, this study is primarily based on interviews I conducted with the emeritus director Helena Koenigsmarková over the past few months. Also included are some important strategic and archival documents from museums, annual reports, and a selection of media sources. These were, however, re-evaluated in relation to the situation in object conservation at the museum. Helena Koenigsmarková (born in 1947) headed the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague for more than thirty years, since 1991. After completing her studies in 1971, she joined the museum as a curator of the furniture, metals and other materials collection. As director, she successfully expanded the museum's collection, re-defined its personnel and organizational structure, oversaw the construction of a new Central Repository in Prague's Stodůlky administrative district, and the reconstruction of the historical museum building in the city centre, among many other achievements. Thanks to this, she legitimately ranks among the 'great women of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague', to whom the museum owes its reputation: these include Dagmar

The MA programme at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague represents a model of conservation-restoration education covering a wide range of applied arts materials.

⁶ T. Bíbová, *Odborníci hodnotí éru Heleny Koenigsmarkové v UPM i volbu nového ředitele. Co se největší sbírkotvorné instituci v ČR podařilo, a co naopak nepovedlo?*, Czech Design, 27/09/2023, [czechdesign.cz, tinyurl.com/bdz7rtpn](https://czechdesign.cz/tinyurl.com/bdz7rtpn) (accessed 16/02/2025).

⁷ In this close collaboration and common sharing practical and theoretical demands and outcomes within the two institution, I see the opportunity to develop new, modern and forward-thinking conservation education in the Czech Republic.

⁸ J. Otero-Pailos, 'Experimentální památková péče', in: *Živá památka*, ed. P. Melková, Prague 2022, pp. 12–31. Presentation of the Faculty: Columbia GSAPP, Jorge Otero-Pailos, arch.columbia.edu, tinyurl.com/4vxp97xc (accessed 16/02/2025).

⁹ More information about the museum's history in the exhibition catalogue: *110 let UPM v Praze – více prostoru sbírkám*, Prague 1995.

Hejdová (the first female director 1973–1988), Jiřina Vydrová, Jarmila Blažková, Milena Zemínová, Alena Adlerová, Olga Herbenová, Dagmar Tučná, Jarmila Brožová, Libuše Urešová, Věra Vokáčová, Olga Drahotová, Milena Lamarová, Anna Fárová, and Jana Kybalová.¹⁰ Although she is an art historian by profession, she has made a significant contribution to the current character of the decorative objects and applied arts conservation profession, as well as to the hierarchical structures in place within this cultural institution. Therefore, I truly believe that transcribing our conversations will help to achieve the goal of this issue of *Ochrona Zabytków*.¹¹

Our meetings took place at a significant moment in Helena Koenigsmarková's career: she was closing the final chapter of her three-decade tenure as a museum manager. This enables her to reflect on the various political, social and cultural situations that greatly impacted her decisions to realize her vision of a museum as an institution of national and international importance. We decided to conduct our conversations with unfolding ideas rather than adhere to strict outlines. I encouraged her to share her personal view of the transformation of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague into 'a place for innovative education that conveys an understanding of applied art and design in relation to architecture and the visual arts.'¹² I was interested in how the conservation profession of decorative objects and applied arts has changed within this framework, and how it has contributed to the conviction she mentioned in 2018: 'Everything that affects lifestyle in a changing world contributes positively to improving quality of life and preserving creativity in an increasingly uniform, digitized environment.'¹³

We agreed that the answers to this set of questions revolve around three 'Ws' (where, what and who) representing three main areas: 1) Where: Collection management and preservation; 2) What: The material nature of the collection objects; and 3) Who: Reorganization of the museum structure. In retrospect, Koenigsmarková identifies these three areas, together with the collection, as her priorities during her more than thirty years in the position.

Where: Collection management and preservation

The Central Repository and the reconstructed historical building of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague – a dignified and representative space, suitable for collections and people

The Museum was finally established in 1885 by the Chamber of Commerce, which managed it until 1948. This was proof of the current wave of interest in handicrafts and artistic work in opposition to machine production. At the end of the nineteenth century, the Rudolfinum House of Art (1876–1881) opened to the public in 1885, today's Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague (1885) and the Museum building, designed by Josef Schulz in 1897, were constructed on the modernized and regulated bank of the Vltava River, now known as Palach Square in the centre of the city. At the beginning of the 1930s, the square was completed with the construction of the Faculty of Arts of Charles University. The Rudolfinum building, which was commissioned by Česká spořitelna (Czech Savings Bank) to celebrate its 50th anniversary in 1885, offered exhibition space there to the Chamber of Commerce and Trade, which is how the museum's activities began. It subsequently opened its first permanent exhibition in 1886, followed by a library with a study room the following year. Upon completion of the building's construction by the company Schlaffer

¹⁰ UPM, *O muzeu*, upm.cz, tinyurl.com/ku5damr9 (accessed 16/02/2025)

¹¹ I am aware of the positive and enthusiastic feedback that has been expressed, the outcomes of the oral history, and the main methodology applied in this contribution. The development of conservation practice at the museum has been greatly influenced by the interests of its directors and therefore the last one should not be excluded. Furthermore, I admit to taking advantage of the situation when the main protagonist closed her professional career at the museum. I am aware of the limitations of the statements and perspectives presented. I would therefore ask you to consider the matter further and provide additional questions and interpretations.

¹² *Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze. Koncepce rozvoje organizace 2018–2023*, Prague 2018, p. 3, upm.cz, tinyurl.com/4xeeww5z (accessed 16/02/2025).

¹³ Ibid.

and Hubschmann in 1898, and the subsequent furnishing of the interiors in 1900, the museum was opened to the public. In 1901 it presented objects from the 1900 Jubilee Exhibition in Paris. The museum sought to build an administrative building, but these plans were thwarted several times during the twentieth century. An attempt in 1941 failed to establish the Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia; the post-war situation resolved problems resulting from forced acquisitions and confiscations, and in 1949 the museum was nationalized. Consequently, in 1970, after a ten-year period during which the museum was connected to the National Gallery, both politically and administratively, the permanent exhibition was cancelled.¹⁴ At that time, partial reconstruction began in the basement of the building, with spaces being created for collections, a library and workshops. Just 17 years later, to mark the 100th anniversary of the museum's establishment, a new permanent exhibition opened in the historic building in 1985. However, the political situation did not support the museum's development and spatial plans. As Koenigsmarková wrote in the document entitled 'More space for collections! Chances for the Museum of Arts and Crafts in 2009': 'The overcrowded building was literally bursting at the seams, and after the subway was put into operation in the 1970s, its statics were definitively threatened.'¹⁵

Following the political changes of 1989 and Koenigsmarková's appointment as director, resolving this unfortunate situation became the main priority of the institution's new management.¹⁶ An honest and detailed examination of the situation in the late-nineteenth and twentieth centuries reveals the difficulties that would be encountered in implementing her vision for the development of the museum.

The history of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague was written predominantly by its directors, as was common practice throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. The directors were associated with the institution, as were some other professionals who were familiar with artists' materials and, to a certain extent, their preservation. Later, from the 1930s onwards, material studies became fundamental to the development of scientific methods that allowed for measurements according to objective criteria. These approaches had a striking impact on the treatment of objects and the limits of interventions. The museum's early directors participated in the study and preservation of the collection's materials. However, this involvement was probably an outcome of their particular backgrounds and the more intimate nature of the museum.¹⁷ While the role of science had increased significantly over the years, applied arts conservation practice suffered from an incongruous training situation in Czechoslovakia. Further research is required to establish the methodology behind the building of the first conservation networks. However, there were insufficient premises for collections and conservation studios in the historical building, which led to further concerns regarding chemical, physical and biological deterioration. The situation was hindering the institution's ability to develop further.

Koenigsmarková's initial plans, which included the preservation of the garden and the construction of underground garages, (fortunately in the light of subsequent events), were cancelled by the flood in 2002. It demonstrated the limits of regulation on the banks of the Vltava River, a fact that the architect Schulz was probably aware of during the nineteenth century. Consequently, the use of underground spaces was deemed unfeasible. The building, located in the vicinity of the Old Jewish Cemetery in Prague's Jewish Town, remained overcrowded with collection items, offering inadequate conditions for exhibitions, repositories, and a substandard workplace for museum

¹⁴ H. Koenigsmarková, 'Úvod', in: E. Matyášová (ed.): *Uměleckoprůmyslové museum v Praze. Průvodce*, Prague 2005, pp. 4–5. More information available: op. cit. 10.

¹⁵ H. Koenigsmarková, *Více prostoru sbírkám! Šance pro Uměleckoprůmyslové museum*, Prague 2009, cz-museums.cz, tinyurl.com/426pvxf3 (accessed 16/02/2025). More on the topic: E. Nosková: 'Ředitelka UPM Helena Koenigsmarková vypráví o změnách muzea v uplynulých 30 letech', in: *Dům a zahrada*, 22/11/2024, dumazahrada.cz, tinyurl.com/es82fuua (accessed 16/02/2025).

¹⁶ P. Wittlich, 'Úvod', in: Centrum dokumentace sbírek UPM, *Výroční zpráva 1998* (Annual report 1998).

¹⁷ This practice was common in the museums, compare e.g. with: L. Becker, D. Schorsch, 'The Practice of Objects Conservation in the Metropolitan Museum of Art (1870–1942)', in: *Metropolitan Museum Studies in Art, Science, and Technology* 2010, N. 1, pp. 11–12.

2

UPM building by Josef Schulz. Photo: Jindřich Eckert, 1901. Source: *110 let UPM v Praze – více prostoru sbírkám*, Prague 1995

Budynek Muzeum Sztuki Dekoracyjnej w Pradze projektu Josefa Schulza. Fot. Jindřich Eckert, 1901. Źródło: *110 let UPM v Praze – více prostoru sbírkám*, Praha 1995



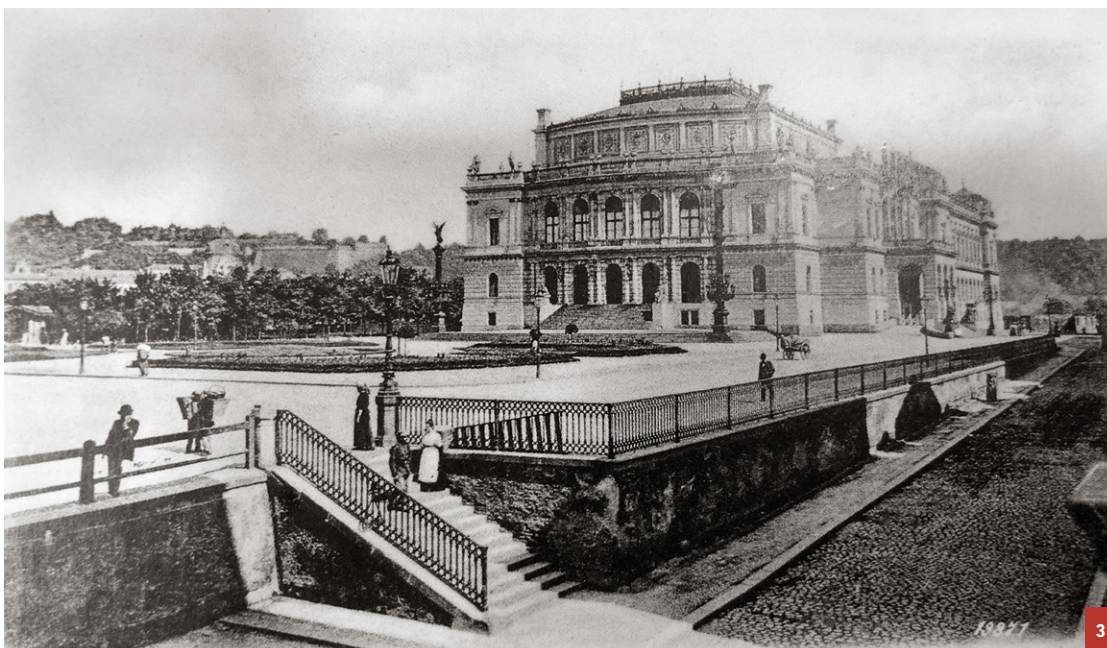
staff. Despite numerous plans to build a repository outside the main building and outside Prague (including a former brewery in Brandýs nad Labem or the Kamenice nad Lipou Chateau since 1998), or leased premises (such as those in Chlumín, Chvatěruby Chateaus and other locations), these endeavours did not resolve the problem.

The museum embarked on a new chapter in 1999. At that time, the museum management presented a project for the construction of a modern workplace and a repository outside the city centre, while respecting the requirement of efficiency and economy of the building and its equipment. That is to say, passive buildings (with easy maintenance, ensuring climatic conditions at the lowest possible energy costs and type of technology used). The museum was able to develop an investment plan and project thanks to the political support of the Ministry of Culture and its programme called ‘Care of the National Cultural Treasure (2001)’.¹⁸ This support enabled the museum to purchase a suitable investment plot in Prague’s Stodůlky district and to proceed with the development of two projects: ‘New Repository in Prague 2004–2007’ and ‘Reconstruction of the Main Building and Rehabilitation of its Space 2007–2010’. Despite the initial plans for the construction of a new repository¹⁹ and the reconstruction of the main historical building not being realized, the Central Repository was opened in 2016 (2014–2016).²⁰ Following a reconstruction and modernization project, the main building reopened to the public the following year (2014–2017).

¹⁸ Since the year 2003, UPM has been perceived as a state cultural institution of national importance. There were also attempts to incorporate ‘national’ into the name of the museum.

¹⁹ V. Jošková Štefanová, *UPM má nový Centrální depozitář. Základní kámen pochází z historické budovy staré víc než 100 let*, 5/04/2016, vltava.rozhlas.cz, tinyurl.com/338hj9zh (accessed 16/02/2025).

²⁰ *The Central Depository*, upm.cz, tinyurl.com/mstfn3mk (accessed 16/02/2025): ‘The central depository of the Museum is designed as a low-energy building with a unique circular ground plan, where its monolithic structure forms two underground floors and three above-ground floors. The depository itself, with its own mode of operation, is situated on an inscribed square-shaped ground plan. The total floor area of the premises amounts to 5,770 square metres.’



3

Regulated river bank in Prague, early 20th c. Source: Archive UPM

Uregulowany brzeg rzeki w Pradze, początek XX wieku. Źródło: Archiwum UPM

The museum collection was relocated from the main building (following a two-year storage period in crates) to new premises that are better suited to its needs. These new premises offer modern, well-equipped conservation laboratories, a collection register, dedicated research and curatorial areas, and modern facilities for the care of the collection. Following a century of operations, the historic building has expanded its exhibition spaces and made the attic available for administrative use by the museum.

Thus, the director's vision for the museum building's restoration to its original representative form, and the provision of professional care for all collection objects was realized. The creation of a dignified workspace for museum employees was also prioritized and fulfilled.²¹

What: The material nature of the collection

Collections, design, materials

Today, the Central Repository houses half a million items from antiquity to the present day. The museum's collections include glass, porcelain and ceramics, graphic art and photography, textiles, fashion and design, furniture, woodwork, clocks and watches, as well as a collection of precious metalwork, gold and jewellery, children's toys and a large amount of written and visual documentation. The centralized management and care of the collection ensures efficiency, while also facilitating access to items in the collections by curators, collection managers, conservators, photographers and documentation and recording staff.

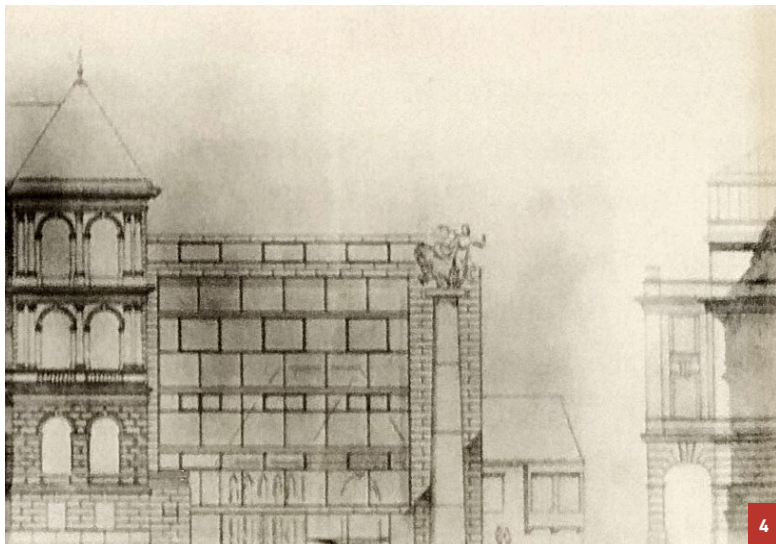
The Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, as a state-funded institution of the Ministry of Culture, had to deal with several systemic changes during the period of our interest. From the perspective of Koenigsmarková, the political museum transformations were used by the institution's leadership to manage the museum's core activities. The museum's collections have been registered in the Central Collection Register of the Ministry of Culture since 12 April 2002. The museum has used a registration system since that time, initially Demus, and subsequently Musaion

²¹ Op. cit. 12, p. 2.

4

Extension of UPM – competitive design by Pavel Smetana, 1941.
Source: *110 let UPM v Praze – více prostoru sbírkám*, Prague 1995

Rozbudowa Muzeum Sztuki Dekoracyjnej w Pradze – projekt konkursowy Pavla Smetany, 1941.
Źródło: *110 let UPM v Praze – více prostoru sbírkám*, Praha 1995

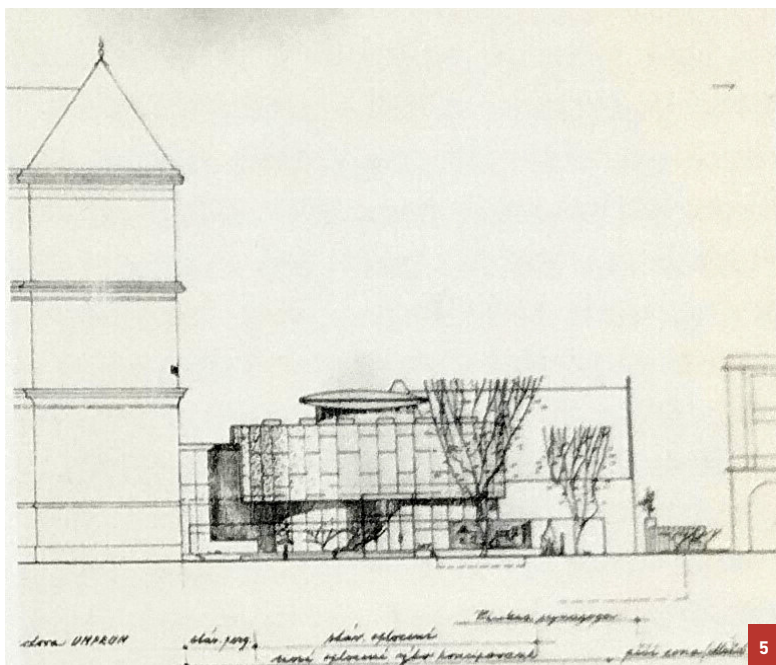


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František Štráchal, UPM extension study, variant B, 1969.
Source: *110 let UPM v Praze – více prostoru sbírkám*, Prague 1995

František Štráchal, studium rozbudowy Muzeum Sztuki Dekoracyjnej w Pradze, wariant B, 1969. Źródło: *110 let UPM v Praze – více prostoru sbírkám*, Praha 1995



5

(both commercial names). This administrative step made it possible to draw funds from the state budget through the s.c. ISO program in accordance with the applicable legislation (application of Act 122/2000 Coll.). Over the years, the museum has been successful in raising funds for the equipment of the repository, for acquisitions and professional conservation treatment of collection items (often as part of larger scientific and research projects). Following the implementation of the new legislation, the museum underwent organizational restructuring, which included the introduction of a new facility for the documentation and registration of collections, known as the Collections Documentation Centre, which is currently located within the building of the Central Repository.²²

According to Helena Koenigsmarková, until the beginning of the 1990s, the material of collection objects was perceived as a 'silent bearer'. After 1990, thanks to her coordination, it has gradually gained importance; the vision of building suitable spaces for collections and people

²² Centrum dokumentace sbírek UPM, *Annual report 2009*: 'The main task of the Collections Documentation Centre is the registration and documentation of the UPM collection fund, and the care of collection objects and documents stored in the department, as well as methodical supervision of Demus, maintenance of addition and inventory books.'

arising precisely from the need for suitable storage of collection items. In other words, with regard to their material nature and the efforts to restrict or slow down the processes of their degradation. It is perhaps for this reason that the museum has also maintained a chemical laboratory to this day. Unfortunately, the position of chemical analyst has not been filled since the retirement of chemical engineer Alena Samohylová a few years ago. A more detailed analysis is required to ascertain how museum conservators were able to carry out research in line with global practice. However, during Helena Koenigsmarková's tenure, there were significant advancements in the field of understanding and handling a variety of materials. These include acquisitions made of various materials, including novel materials such as nanomaterials. These include new experimental conservation materials, and innovative ways of preserving the collection of objects. That museum's decision to cooperate with the departments of the University of Chemistry and Technology, Prague²³ and other specialized workplaces was driven by the need to improve the operational efficiency of the museum and to optimize the preparation of the new repository project (Central Repository).²⁴

Thanks to various exhibition projects and its new interpretations, this shift towards materials has become much more visible in the museum's outward communication. The most notable of these was the permanent exhibition, which was installed in the still unreconstructed premises of the main building opened on 15 November, the 115th anniversary of the museum's foundation. This event was part of the 'Prague – European City of Culture 2000' project. The title, 'Stories of Materials', was chosen for a good reason.

As Helena Koenigsmarková writes in the introduction to the Guide to this permanent exposition: 'The basis of the new concept was based on the requirement to divide the exposition according to the collections. The aim was to create specific conditions for the display of individual materials.'²⁵ The preferred perception of the historical perspective (often presented chronologically) gradually changed to an interpretation of the historical development of the materials. The selection for exhibition was determined by the conditions of their degradation. The material of the collection object thus became a guide for understanding the imaginary life of the collection object and grasping its current and future care.

This has led to new challenges for conservators in museums. In this context, the demand for labour costs (addressed to the Ministry of Culture) and for specialization, education and training of the museum's conservators has been identified. The amount and nature of professional conservation work increased. This gradually gained importance, which led to the profession of conservators being better recognized in the museum sector. As part of the museum's re-organization process (further details of which will be provided below), conservation has moved away from being viewed as a practical craft and is now being recognized as a field with its own decision-making processes for defining preservation and conservation interventions. Given the long-standing tradition of collaboration between art history and conservation in museums, this has often led to tensions between different professional groups. In the decades that followed, the rivalry between conservators and art historians has gradually waned.

Furthermore, the high level of specialization among conservators was fully utilized in the professional training of high school and university students in the years to come. The implementation of the inventory of the collection, its packing and moving during the reconstruction of the historical building and subsequent placement in the new premises of the Central Repository, has already been described.

²³ J. Kříž, *The University of Chemistry and Technology Prague*, vscht.cz, tinyurl.com/t7ysz8wv (accessed 16/02/2025).

²⁴ Helena Koenigsmarková mentioned an important cooperation with Joachim Huber and Karin von Lerber from the company Prevert (prevart.ch/wir) when designing and planning the new repository building.

²⁵ Op. cit. 14.

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Helena Koenigsmarková during the ceremony, foundation stone. Photo: Ondřej Kocourek, UPM

Helena Koenigsmarková podczas ceremonii wmurowania kamienia węgielnego. Fot. Ondřej Kocourek, UPM

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Opening of new Central Repository in 2016. Photo: Ondřej Kocourek, UPM, 2016

Otwarcie nowego magazynu centralnego w 2016 roku. Fot. Ondřej Kocourek, UPM



Who: Reorganization of the museum structure

Political requirements, international cooperation, inspiration, museum hierarchy

The professionalization of decorative objects and applied arts conservators would not have been possible without the fundamental and, in this context, the most significant change that took place in 1995. This was related to the essential reorganization of the institution. Within its framework, the director established the conservation studio as a separate sub-department of the museum. This change has had a significant impact on the existing structure of the museum.

Historically, conservators were based in studios connected to specific collections and art historians. They were employed in various collection sections, and also in the technical exhibition departments (craftsmen, joiners). This corresponded to the role of conservators of works of art in the second half of the twentieth century in Czechoslovakia. This was once again due to the prevailing social situation in the country. In the late 1940s, the restoration of paintings and sculptures (then considered 'high art') was recognized as an independent section within the educational system at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague.²⁶ As part of school reforms from the 1950s, only secondary schools and apprenticeship schools were designated for different fields of materials and arts and crafts.²⁷

²⁶ Z. Bauerová, *Proti času. Konzervovanie-reštaurovanie v Československu 1918–1971*, Prague 2015, pp. 181, 187–201.

²⁷ Op. cit. 4.

Following the establishment of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague as an independent entity from the National Gallery in 1970, there were periodic calls for the dedicated training of conservators specializing in decorative objects and applied arts.²⁸ However, we are not yet aware of any other activities that would elevate the profession within the institutional hierarchy. According to Helena Koenigsmarková, the conservation workshops functioned in conjunction with administrators and curators of collections, when these positions were mainly occupied by high and secondary art school graduates. The level of recognition they received from the museum was inconsistent. The focus was on personal relationships, and conservation and restoration works were frequently allocated among Prague's museums (for example: the National Museum and the Prague City Museum) due to the collaboration between the conservation workshops. It is also worth noting that the Centre for Arts and Crafts, which was a centralized, state-coordinated workshop, was granted full permission to intervene in the matter.²⁹ Their goal was to create conditions for the preservation and advancement of artistic craftsmanship, to ensure the maintenance of a 'correct ideological focus and high level of artistic work', to conduct research, documentation and development, including the enhancement of 'practical skills' among young people and students. This Centre was involved in the production and sale of arts and crafts artefacts. During the 1980s, 55 smelters, workshops and studios were operating within the Centre, employing over 700 masters and artisans. Part of their work was the preservation of the cultural and artistic legacy of the past, preserved in the territory of Czechoslovakia.³⁰ However, this aspect of our conservation history also merits further research.

According to Helena Koenigsmarková, some of the museum's conservation workshops functioned as centres of resistance against the state and its ideology. The curators were united by personal friendship and a shared desire to learn more about specific materials, which they then used in their curatorial work.

As part of the reorganization in 1995, the activities of the professional restorers previously working in individual collections were organizationally combined into a Conservation Department. This provided a broader structure of collection care than just the preservation of the relevant materials.³¹ The Conservation Department was established as a separate sub-department within the Section of Collection Care, alongside the Collection Presentation Department and the Collection Department and later the Central Records and Documentation of Collections. It had five studios (according to the material) and a chemical laboratory. Since that time, the section has been directly subordinated to the museum's director. In 1995, Alena Samohýlová, a conservator and chemical engineer, was appointed to the position of head of the newly established department. Since 1996, the wood conservator, Petr Špaček, held this position for many years.

The re-organization elevated the profession of conservators to a level on a par with that of museum curators, giving them independence and expanded competences. They were directly responsible for decision-making with regard to the care of the collection and its presentation. As previously mentioned, this social change was then fully utilized during the preparations for the new Central Repository project, especially during the collection's relocation after its completion.

Helena Koenigsmarková, who drew on her experience from the 1990s, was responsible for the reorganization. During our discussions, she repeatedly emphasized that her expertise in museum

²⁸ Centrum dokumentace sbírek UPM, *Návrh k řešení výuky konservace a restaurace objektů uměleckého řemesla, užitého umění a uměleckoprůmyslových výrobků* (9/2/1972).

²⁹ The activity of the Centre for Arts and Crafts, based in Prague, as a professional organization of artistic and craft work was defined by Act No. 56/1957 Coll. about artistic craft work and folk-art production. It was established in conjunction with the Centre for Folk Art Production, and both were subordinated to the Ministry of Education and Culture. According to the law, it 'used professionally qualified workers for artistic and craft work', which this legislative norm defined as 'the manual execution of artistic works of visual, decorative and building arts by professional workers who create these works based on classical methods with master techniques directly or according to designs.'

³⁰ K. Augusta, 'Ústředí uměleckých řemesel a restaurování památek', *Staletá Praha* 1982, p. 35.

³¹ Centrum dokumentace sbírek UPM, *Annual report 1998*, p. 3.



8 UPM repository and collection
9 before reconstruction. Photo:
10 Lenka Sedláčková, UPM
11
12 Magazyn i zbiory muzealne
przed rekonstrukcją. Fot. Lenka
Sedláčková, UPM



and collection management was developed through close cooperation with Dutch institutions, including the Dutch Association of Museums and the consultancy firm Berenschot, based in Utrecht. She herself describes this cooperation, which the Czech institutions established with Dutch partners, immediately after 1990. According to Koenigsmarková, the Dutch cultural institutions encountered a similar problem concerning the new understanding and interpretation of collection preservation and museum administration. Consequently, it was a time the dynamic exchange of ideas on common trips, at workshops and conferences. The subsequent Matra project, initially



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13 UPM conservation studios in the
14 new Central Repository. Photo:
15 Ondřej Kocourek, UPM, 2024

Pracownie konserwatorskie
Muzeum Sztuki Dekoracyjnej
w Pradze w nowym magazynie
centralnym. Fot. Ondřej Kocourek,
UPM, 2024

sponsored by the Ministry of Culture and later by the Association of Museums and Galleries of the Czech Republic, continued until its conclusion in 1998. The project encompassed additional educational activities within our environment and primarily addressed the needs of smaller museums. All of these were essential for her and her further work at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague.

Following the museum's transformation and its shift in focus to materials and design, the institution was well-positioned to accept and initiate the newly introduced state funding (the ministerial subsidy programme) in 1996. It was agreed that grant schemes should be created to cover partial activities, scientific research and educational projects. All of these were essential for financing the subsequent major investments, namely the Central Repository and the Historical Main Building.

Conclusion

And with the Central Repository and Historical Main Building of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague, we return to the beginning of our conversations with Helena Koenigsmarková. The circle of three 'W' closes. It is evident that the implementation of the vision, which was introduced by the director when she assumed the position, has been successful. She leaves the institution of our ancestors to our followers, so they may develop it further.

This period in the history of conservation at the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague demonstrates how museum management influenced the rearrangement of preservation activities. This marked a significant milestone on the road to the professionalization of conservation services within a museum setting. Furthermore, the museum can offer a reputation as a unique place for people interested in learning about the care of works of art and their conservation to gain hands-on experience. In collaboration with the museum and the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague, the creative platform aims to enhance formal education through teaching, research and collaborative initiatives.

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Zuzana Bauerová, PhD

She completed her studies in art history and painting conservation at the Masaryk University Brno, where she was awarded a PhD in 2009. Since 2004 she has worked as a lecturer in art history, conservation of objects of art and design at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. She formerly held the position of Director of the Audiovisual Collections Section at the National Film Archive. She was also a researcher at the Czech Academy of Sciences in Prague, as well as Project advisor and coordinator at the Czech Ministry of Culture, and at other cultural institutions. She recently prepared the Master Programme in Conservation of Artworks at AAAD, which will be launched in September 2025. She is interested in the dynamic interplay between material properties and the social attributes of museum objects, and the effect on conservation and conservation decisions and methodologies.

dr Zuzana Bauerová

Ukończyła studia z historii sztuki i konserwacji malarstwa na Uniwersytecie Masaryka w Brnie, gdzie w 2009 roku uzyskała stopień doktora. Od 2004 roku pracuje jako wykładowczyni historii sztuki oraz konserwacji dzieł sztuki i designu na Akademii Sztuk Pięknych, Architektury i Designu w Pradze. W przeszłości pełniła funkcję dyrektorki Sekcji Zbiorów Audiowizualnych w Narodowym Archiwum Filmowym w Pradze. Była również badaczką w Czeskiej Akademii Nauk, a także doradczynią w sprawach projektów i koordynatorką w Ministerstwie Kultury Republiki Czeskiej oraz innych instytucjach kultury. Ostatnio przygotowała program magisterski z zakresu konserwacji dzieł sztuki na Akademii Sztuk Pięknych, Architektury i Designu w Pradze, którego uruchomienie planowane jest na wrzesień 2025 roku. Interesuje się dynamicznym związkiem między właściwościami materialnymi a społecznymi atrybutami obiektów muzealnych oraz ich wpływem na decyzje i metody konserwatorskie.

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