

www.forumhistoriae.sk



This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>)



© 2022 The Author(s)
© 2022 Institute of History,
Slovak Academy of Sciences

The Fight for the “Modern Peculiar Character.” The Nationalist Narrative Within the Concept of Applied Art Modernization Reform in 1920’s Slovakia

Silvia Seneši Lutherová

Keywords

modernization reform, national applied art, Czechoslovakia 1918–1938, Josef Vydra, Antonín Hořejš

DOI

10.31577/forhist.2022.16.1.3

Author

Silvia Seneši Lutherová
Katedra teórie a dejín umenia, Vysoká školaýtvarných umení v Bratislave
Hviezdoslavovo nám. 18,
Bratislava
Slovakia
Email: senesi.lutherova@vsvu.sk

Cite

SENEŠI LUTHEROVÁ, Silvia. The Fight for the “Modern Peculiar Character.” The Nationalist Narrative Within the Concept of Applied Art Modernization Reform in 1920’s Slovakia. In *Forum Historiae*, 2022, vol. 16, no. 1, pp. 32–51, doi: 10.31577/forhist.2022.16.1.3

Abstract

SENEŠI LUTHEROVÁ, Silvia. The Fight for the “Modern Peculiar Character.” The Nationalist Narrative Within the Concept of Applied Art Modernization Reform in 1920’s Slovakia.

A significant portion of the theoretical discourse on modernization reform of applied art and design in Slovakia led by the cultural and political elite in the 1920s was based on the ideological framework of “national culture.” In journal articles, leading proponents of the reform, Josef Vydra and Antonín Hořejš, constructed the concept of “modern national applied art,” which they defined based on an objective, perceived quality: “national specificity” or a “character of national culture,” which they eventually came to label “modern peculiar character” (Vydra). This article explores the ideological framework behind the modernization reform of applied art in Slovakia as a manifestation of the formation of the nationalist discourse within culture, first in terms of the cultural confirmation of the Slovak nation and later, the Czechoslovak nation. The “national character” of modern applied art is analysed as a period-specific ideological construct, which the authors created by re-interpreting the “national culture” using modernist discourse and therefore, in opposition to the school of folk’s understanding of peculiar character. “Modern national applied art” was construed as a representation of the modern urban culture of the Slovak nation (Hořejš), and also as a synthesis of the “spirit of the nation” and the “spirit of modern times” in terms of artistic innovation (Vydra). In the last third of the 1920’s, the concept was re-defined based on the ideological framework of the Czechoslovakist discourse to become a “modern Czechoslovak peculiar character” (Vydra), which rendered the contributions to reform of applied art in Slovakia now universal for the entire nation. Nationalistic arguments on the concept of modernization reform of applied art impacted the development of culture, which was applied as a way to assert the socio-political acceptance of aesthetic reform implying the principles of avant-garde art schools.

After the coup [creation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918], the situation is ambiguous: One group accepts folk art as the Slovak style, they protect it and pass it on unchanged into the circles of Slovak intelligentsia, into towns, promote it as the Slovak Peculiar Character, declare it untouchable and protect it from all change and growth. It is the hypersensitive national aspect that froze folk applied art and turned it into objects only present in local museums, vitrines and Slovak rooms. The second group of progressive and present-oriented individuals, who are well aware of the status quo and have a good knowledge of the people’s manufacturing technologies and taste are attempting to elevate and train [folk art] to become a fine craft serving the current times. To retain its Slovak character grounded in the colours, soft lines and richness of rhythm, to attempt to upgrade it by training manufacturers to achieve the quality and tastes of the ruling Slovak nation, to lend it a worldly character and form that is now called for. However, by doing so, art and craft stops being folk art but it can and will remain Slovak.¹

Josef Vydra

1 VYDRA, Josef. Umelecko-priemyselná výchova na Slovensku. In *Slovenská Grafia*, 1929, vol. 1, no. 5, p. 2.

Vydra's critique of Slovak applied art was delivered at a time when an intense, years-long endeavour to advance material culture of housing and applied art in Slovakia was beginning to bear tangible results.² However as the quote implies, during the first decade of Czechoslovakia, opinions on the character of Slovak applied art varied and choosing a preference was to pre-determine the overall cultural direction of the new state and nation. It is obvious that Vydra leaned towards the so-called progressive direction that was characteristic of opinions within the circles of culture, economy and education in the second half of the 1920s. The aim was to assert an idea of applied art modernization reform to further the position of Slovakia as a developed country and strengthen its economic and cultural standing, within Czechoslovakia as well as internationally. When Vydra's text was published, the aforementioned concept had already been embedded within a clear programme with protagonists proclaiming it the modernization “movement for quality” and testing it in practice through newly founded organizations, institutions and manufacturers.³ However, that was preceded by years of effort by Vydra and other public figures who strove to frame the demands placed on the applied arts of the “new era” and to assert a similar approach within all related spheres of culture.⁴ Such a school of thought was based on the premise that there was a need to modernise the environment and build a “national culture” within the new state through modern national applied art production. As Vydra's words imply, the newly defined approach could be realized only if other dimensions of thinking, which stressed the importance of folk tradition, were settled.

The idea of modernizing applied arts had resonated in Czechoslovakia since the state was established and was especially well received by state organizations and institutions located in Prague, the country's political and cultural centre. The Union of Czechoslovak Art (Svaz Československého díla, SČSD) organization was responsible for the principal support to advance applied

2 From the beginning of the 1920s, Josef Vydra (1884 – 1959) was one of the personalities who actively strove to advance modern applied art and applied art production in Slovakia. Among other things, he was a board member of the Svaz československého díla (Union of Czechoslovak Art, SČSD), responsible for the Bratislava branch, founder of *Náš směr*, a magazine on art education (1910) and editor for several progressive Czechoslovak periodicals (*Výtvarná práce*, *Výtvarné snahy*, *Drobné umění*, *Slovenská Grafia*). He also initiated the *Memorandum on the Protection of Folk Art in Slovakia* (Memorandum o ochrane ľudového umenia na Slovensku, 1920), founded the Society for Applied Art (Spoločnosť umeleckého priemyslu, 1920) and was the founder and director of the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava (*Škola umeleckých remesiel*, 1928) and later the School of Applied Arts in Brno (*Škola uměleckých řemesel*). For more, see: BÉREŠOVÁ, Simona – PREŠNAJDEROVÁ, Klára – DE PUINEUF, Sonia (eds.) ŠUR. *Škola umeleckých remesiel v Bratislave 1928–1939*; Bratislava: Slovenské centrum dizajnu, 2021;

3 HOŘEJŠ, Antonín. Nové snahy v užitkové tvorbě. In HOFMAN, Ješek – HOŘEJŠ, Antonín (eds.) *Sborník moderní tvorby užitkové*. Bratislava : Svaz československého díla, 1931, pp. 7–19.

4 In practice, modernization was understood to comprise innovation of the production programme and technology, formulation of new creative principles in regards to the emerging discipline of design, and adoption of current style tendencies from foreign art centres; the reform of art education, implementation of modern educational and production methods.

art.⁵ Between 1921 and 1926, the association regularly organized exhibitions of modern applied art and even though portrayed officially as a “Czechoslovak” organization, its activities only marginally reflected and supported Slovak production, which began to be perceived as an obstacle in the advancement of applied art and a political issue as well. Therefore in 1924, based on pressure from Vydra, a branch of the SČSD opened in Bratislava, which was meant to cope with the situation in Slovakia.⁶ To fulfil its mission, the local office organized exhibitions of applied art in Slovakia, the first in Bratislava in 1927 and in the following years, Košice, Spišská Nová Ves and Banská Bystrica. The branch in Bratislava and its events were frequented by representatives—predominantly of Czech origin—from a variety of institutions and companies who supported the claims to modernize applied art in Slovakia and also actively asserted it in practice.⁷ Vydra and others, mainly Antonín Hořejš, penned contributions published in exhibition catalogues and anthologies, in which they criticized the state of art culture and production in Slovakia, called for change and presented reform concepts.⁸

I consider these writings and articles published during the 1920s in Czechoslovak journals on architecture and applied art an important platform which was used to develop the ideological framework of “modern national applied art”

-
- 5 The organization originally known as Union of Czech Art (Svaz českého díla) was founded in 1914 by Jan Kotěra as the first Czech institution focused on advancing and promoting Czech applied art and design. After the First World War, the Union of Czechoslovak Art was the official organization to anchor applied art as a new discipline in Czechoslovakia. For more, see also: PEČINKOVÁ, Pavla. Věci a slova. Ve stínu utopií. In HUBATOVÁ-VACKOVÁ, Lada – PACHMANOVÁ, Martina – PEČINKOVÁ, Pavla (eds.) *Věci a slova: Umělecký průmysl, užité umění a design v české teorii a kritice 1870–1970*. Praha: VŠUP, 2014, pp. 202, 207.
- 6 For more details on the foundation of the Bratislava branch under the name Union of Czechoslovak Art (Svaz Československého diela) see: SENEŠI LUTHEROVÁ, Silvia. Hlas novej doby. Od umeleckého priemyslu ku kvalitnej výrobe na Slovensku v období prvej Československej republiky. In BÉREŠOVÁ, Simona – PREŠNAJDEROVÁ, Klára – DE PUINEUF, Sonia (eds.) *ŠUR. Škola umeleckých remesiel v Bratislave 1928–1939*. Bratislava: Slovenské centrum dizajnu, 2021, pp. 238–239; and PREŠNAJDEROVÁ, Klára. Nové umeleckopriemyselné hnutie na Slovensku v kontexte aktivít Antonína Hořejša. In BÉREŠOVÁ – PREŠNAJDEROVÁ – DE PUINEUF 2021, pp. 286–289.
- 7 The following people participated as members of exhibition committees, juries, and organizers: Jan Liška, general secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Bratislava, chairman of SČSD and MP for the Trade Party (Živnostenská strana); Karel Herain, high commissioner of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague; František X. Jiřík, director of the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague; K. Knopp, director of association Detva; Pavel Janák, headmaster of the School of Decorative Arts in Prague; J. Horn, director of Slovenská Grafia printing house; Egon Bondy, chairman of the Country Group of the Union of Industrialists and founder of the Gummon plant; Zdeněk Wirth, section director at the Ministry of Education; Alois Pižl, section head at the Ministry of Education and National Edification; architects Václav Ložek, Dušan Jurkovič, Alois Balán, Jiří Grossmann, Jindřich Halabala, artists Ladislav Sutnar, František Malý, Ludovít Fulla, Josef Rybák etc.
- 8 Antonín Hořejš (1901–1967), born in Prague, was very active in supporting the reform and modernization of applied art production in Slovakia as an executive for applied art in the Chamber of Commerce and Industry, officer at the SČSD in Bratislava, co-organizer of exhibitions on housing culture and applied art in Slovakia and editor in journals *Slovenská Grafia* and *nová bratislava*, co-founder of the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava and a member of the board of directors of several manufacturing companies. For more see: BÉREŠOVÁ – PREŠNAJDEROVÁ – DE PUINEUF 2021.

and to communicate the goals of the reform to a wider audience.⁹ The aim of this paper is to explore the ideological context of the reform project and also the arguments used in its favour as expressed by the works of leading reform initiators Antonín Hořejš and particularly, Josef Vydra. I believe that the national perspective that resonated in the texts of both critics became significant for the concept of modern applied art. In particular, this article explores the reasons why both of these authors applied the nationalist argumentation to the reform concept and the methods they used to do so.

An essay entitled *Applied Art and Slovakia* published by Antonín Hořejš for the first SČSD exhibition in Bratislava, 1927, is an example of explicitly expressed claim for the reform within the context of national ideology. He wrote:

So far, one can talk about applied art in Slovakia only to a limited extent [...] there is no centre and no individual, who would define a specific purely Slovak type of character for the applied art in Slovakia [...] and what we find are mostly the residuals from applied art cultures of other nations [...]. Nowadays, every nation is primarily evaluated by its urban culture [...] Slovaks have barely had any urban culture in Slovakia. [...] they developed rural culture—folk art.¹⁰

Hořejš's bitter statement exposes the central problem of the discourse: the definition of the “national character” of applied art production of the time and the creation of an environment conducive to its development. In this context, he very openly described the issue of the culture of Slovaks within the multicultural Slovak territory (former northern region of the Kingdom of Hungary, commonly called Upper Hungary) in the past only to circle back and emphasize the importance of the current efforts of the SČSD—supporting “artistic circles of the nation” to advance modern production in Slovakia. The nation should culturally identify in such a manner he said, referring to the Slovak nation.¹¹

This opens a number of questions. What did the term “national attribute” and/or “character” of applied art mean to the protagonists of the reform efforts and what motivated them to define it? How did they project such a definition of “specificity” into the reform concepts of applied art and how was it implemented in the context of the “modernization” doctrine? What was the ideological connection between the concept of “modern applied art” and the process of building a “national cultural tradition?” And finally, what social function was “modern national applied art” supposed to fulfil?

The methodology I use to answer these questions is based on some of the newer approaches used in social sciences which anchor the concept of “modern national applied art” in the cultural environment. I apply the social constructivist

9 Within the terminology of criticism and theory of the interwar period, the term “applied art” precedes “design,” which did not yet appear in texts of the time. However, the term “applied art” also did not have a fixed meaning, as evidenced by the fact that individual authors explain and refine the expression repeatedly.

10 HOŘEJŠ, Antonín. Umelecký priemysel a Slovensko. In HOŘEJŠ, Antonín (ed.) *Výstava moderného umeleckého priemyslu*. Exhibition catalogue. Bratislava : SČSD – Umelecká beseda slovenská Bratislava, 1927, pp. 31–32.

11 HOŘEJŠ 1927, p. 34.

analytical method, which enables to explore the “modern national character” as an ideological construct related to a certain time and as an interpretational framework formed and maintained by the cultural and political elites within the discourse on the modernization reform of applied art in Slovakia in the 1920s.¹² I explore the ideological framework of the modernization reform of applied art production developed by Vydra and Hořejš as related to the development of national ideology in the cultural sphere, while also assuming that the authors approached “national specificity” from an essentialist and materialistic perspective.¹³ László Vörös considers the theory of social representation an effective tool to study “socially shared meaning, which establishes the idea of an objective reality of social categories.”¹⁴ In this case, the theory enables to study the representation of national culture within the discourse on “modern national applied art.”

Discourse on “National Applied Art”

As mentioned previously, Hořejš's essay from 1927 and Vydra's article from 1929 exposed discrepancies in the definition of the “Slovak character” of applied art. Current research confirms that at least since the end of the 19th century, nationalist concerns in the discourse and practice of applied art intensified and were concentrated into attempts to comprehend the concept of “national culture.” There was a “clash” of two schools of thought, which became symptomatic of the modernization processes of the first third of the 20th century, not only within what is nowadays known as Slovakia, but also in other European countries.¹⁵

One perspective focused on defining a new style of applied art by referring to the “national cultural tradition” and the “national character” of art. During the turbulent period spanning from the last third of the 19th century until the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic, the Slovak national cultural tradition was constructed primarily on the basis of folk art and craft. The synthesis of folk craft and home production with the new means of industrial production became the foundation of folk applied art with a decorative “national style”—also known as the “Peculiar Character” (*Svojráz*). The beginnings of applied art as a distinctive type of visual art focused on the production of everyday practical objects in Slovakia were based on a reinterpretation of the traditions of folk production. This “peculiar” artistic method was still considered decisive in the first decade of the republic, even though opinions critical to such an understanding of the values of applied art began to surface.

12 VÖRÖS, László. *Analytická historiografia versus národné dejiny. „Národ“ ako sociálna interpretácia*. Pisa : Pisa University Press, 2010.

13 Based on Vörös' claim that nationalist political, cultural and other elites of the 19th and 20th centuries formed national ideologies, which they asserted as “emancipation programmes of assumed ‘nations’ to later become realities that condition the politics, culture and social life of society.” For more, see: VÖRÖS 2010, p. 2.

14 VÖRÖS 2010, p. 5.

15 For more, see: VYBÍRAL, Jindřich. *Národ, identita, styl. Konstruování národní identity na příkladu české architektury 19. století*. In HNÍDKOVÁ, Vendula. *Národní styl. Kultura a politika*. Praha : VŠUP, 2013, pp. 17–49; HUBATOVÁ-VACKOVÁ, Lada – PACHMANNOVÁ, Martina – PEČINKOVÁ, Pavla (eds.) *Věci a slova*. Praha : VŠUP, 2014.

Towards the end of the 1920s, the impact of anti-historicism and anti-decorativism tendencies grew and eventually led to a re-evaluation of the principles of applied art. This relates to the second school of thought that developed in the circles of modernization reform proponents who rejected this notion of “national” character of culture and art based on an artificially constructed folk tradition. These critics and artists contemplated the national specificity of applied art production in the context of “modern life” as it related to innovation and progress. They called for a national art that would not emulate history or folk art.¹⁶ They constructed the essence of applied art production of the “new era” by reinterpreting the “peculiar character” around modernist principles of European avant-garde movements, which spread to Slovakia as a result of more intense cultural relationships between modern European cultural centres in Germany, France, the Netherlands, and the United Kingdom. Changing economic conditions enabled more extensive developments in industrial production, urban growth and the advancement of urban culture as well as technological progress. However, the fundamental redefinition of the “national character” was determined primarily through the prism of Czechoslovak nationalist discourse.

Both schools of thought embodied broad concepts with complex socio-political contexts. The roots of the notion of national culture can possibly be traced to Romanticism and the national resurgence movements of the first half of the 19th century. It impacted the cultural and political situation of the whole Central Europe, became a key foundation for constituting modern society and played a role in the creation of modern art while significantly impacting how the style of the “new era” was defined in relation to architecture and applied art. Czech art historian Jindřich Vybíral explored how the process of construing the notion of a collective national identity of the Czech nation related to modern nationalism as a worldview and a political movement, referring to the work of Jean-Jacques Rousseau and Johann G. Herder for philosophical foundations.¹⁷ Art historian Lada Hubatová-Vacková also mentioned the impact of John Ruskin and William Morris and their socialist thinking on the resurgence of folk art at the end of the 19th century.¹⁸

At the turn of the 20th century, it was characteristic for central European countries, especially those in the multi-ethnic Austro-Hungarian monarchy, to put emphasis on the specific character of life and culture of the local people. Hubatová-Vacková found several different approaches in the work of prominent

16 This aforementioned approach can be seen in the work of artists, architects and teachers close to the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava (ŠUR) during the 1930's. See also: FILIPOVÁ, Marta. Hledání lidovosti: lidové umění a umění lidu v meziválečném Československu. In BARTLOVÁ, Milena et al. (eds.) *Co bylo Československo? Kulturní konstrukce státní identity*. Praha : UMPRUM, 2017, pp. 20–21.

17 VYBÍRAL, 2013, p. 21; according to Herder, each nation has its own character—a distinctive spirit of the people (*das Volk*), which is based on climate, country, language, cultural tradition and education. For more, see HUBATOVÁ-VACKOVÁ, Lada. Krása věcí, průmysl a moderní společnost 1870–1918. In HUBATOVÁ-VACKOVÁ, Lada – PACHMANNOVÁ, Martina – PEČINKOVÁ, Pavla (eds.) *Věci a slova*. Praha : VŠUP, 2014, p. 54.

18 Hubatová-Vacková mentions Morris' *Die Kunst des Volkes* from 1893, which was available in translation in Czech libraries at that time. HUBATOVÁ-VACKOVÁ 2014, p. 54.

Czech theorists to the “national character of art” or the “natural style” of national culture, which lead to defining the “Czech Peculiar Character” in decorative art.¹⁹ Czech and Slovak nationalist discourse often deliberately emphasized the idea of a “Slavic identity,” which was also adopted by architects and artists.²⁰

According to Slovak art historian Iva Mojžišová, the folk art and material culture from the territory of modern-day Slovakia represented the only continuous tradition that the Slovak intelligentsia of the end of the 19th century could draw upon to build a national art consciousness.²¹ Within the theoretical framework of social representation, it can be said that until the First World War, this was the only production tradition from the region that nationalist elites interpreted as Slovak, which therefore provided an acceptable foundation for the difficult beginnings of a local applied art movement. Patriotic creators and theoreticians selected specific artistic and production elements from traditional folk art, particularly folk architecture and craft, and reinterpreted them as a manifestation of the centuries-old culture of the Slovak nation—the “essence of the nation’s soul.”²² It can then be said that they also approached “Slovak Peculiar Character” as a “natural style” of the national culture, or as suggested by Vybíral in the Czech context, legitimized the “national style” by projecting a national artistic tradition in the sense of some “invented past.”²³ Therefore, “peculiar character” can be understood as an ideological and aesthetic construct of the time, which carried political content and played a role in the fight for national demands. Such a definition of a national cultural tradition supported the national resurgence and the national movement during the Magyarization period and was considered the foundation of art and the culture of the Slovak nation, even after the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918.

The school of national “peculiar character” as a domestic culture was personified by a variety of organizations with the aim to organize, extend and commercially manage folk art production. For instance, the following associations were established in 1910: Skalica—a cooperative for the monetization of folk applied art, and Lipa—a folk applied art joint-stock company with a seat in Martin for the promotion of Slovak folk art values. The aesthetic opinion applied to the nationalist programme of the societies led to an emphasis on the “national spirit” in the production of folk art, i.e. stressing the “domestic character of the products” and preventing “foreign” influence, or in other words,

19 The “national character” of art was described by Otakar Hostinský (1869), the term “natural style” was defined by Jan Koula (1893). For more, see also: HUBATOVÁ-VACKOVÁ 2014, pp. 54–55.

20 HUBATOVÁ-VACKOVÁ 2014, pp. 54–55.

21 MOJŽIŠOVÁ, Iva. *Škola moderného myslenia. Bratislavská ŠUR 1928–1939*. Bratislava : SCD; Artforum, 2013, p. 20.

22 Significant proponents of the idea of the “national style” in Slovakia included the architect Blažej Bulla and folk art collector Pavel Socháň.

23 In his study, Vybíral interpreted Eric Hobsbawm’s notion of the “invented tradition.” VYBÍRAL 2013, p. 49; See also HOBBSAWM, Eric – RANGER, Terence (eds.) *The Invention of Tradition*. Cambridge : Cambridge University Press, 2012.

forming an opposition to the culture of “oppressor nations.”²⁴ However, at the beginning of the new century, impulses to change the style of living and of art grew stronger due to, among other things, more active contact with economic and cultural centres like Vienna, Budapest and Prague, which resonated in this environment as well. There were increasing attempts by individuals, societies and institutes to gain support for applied art to “modernize” the environment, to search for a “modern” style applicable to objects of daily use and “modern” means of production reflected in the application of folk elements to a “modern” spirit, i.e. by applying elements of traditional folk visual culture (traditional techniques, forms and patterns) to new types of products with new uses, though, in a typical decorative style.

Architect Dušan S. Jurkovič was a significant figure active in the Skalica association. He strongly supported the notion of seeking a “national style” by interweaving “folk” with “national” characteristics as a direction for modern architecture and applied art of the “Slavic tribe,” whereby he expressed an inclination towards the emancipation efforts of the representatives of the Slovak and Czech national movement at the end of the 19th century.²⁵ At the beginning of the 20th century, and even after the creation of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918, Jurkovič began to divert from the ethnographic approach and developed a specific authorial style, which synthesized the elements of folk architecture and craft with current style tendencies, primarily the Secession style. According to art historian Dana Bořutová, this approach allowed him to update traditional forms, which led foreign publications to refer to him at the beginning of the 20th century as a representative of “regionally oriented Modernism.”²⁶

After the establishment of Czechoslovakia, cultural developments and advances in applied art production as well as art education in Slovakia opened fully to the influence of the Czech scene. It can be said that the second school of thought mentioned above was directly related to these activities of Czech figures in Slovakia and developed systematically in the late 1920s when the SČSD expanded its operations to Bratislava.²⁷ Vydra and Hořejš, the faces of the theoretical movement, introduced Slovakia to opinions that were critical to the “national peculiar character” and inspired by the international avant-garde (the art tendencies of Purism, Constructivism and Functionalism) based the creation of new goals for applied arts on the needs of modern—urban

24 In the Hungarian part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, it was mainly a confrontation with the nationalistic concept of culture and art of the Hungarian people. For more on the context of the creation of the national architecture program in the Czech lands at the turn of the 20th century, see VYBÍRAL 2013.

25 For more on D. Jurkovič, see: BOŘUTOVÁ, Dana. *Dušan Samo Jurkovič. Osobnosť a dielo*. Bratislava : Slovart, 2010.

26 Dana Bořutová mentioned the reflections on Jurkovič's work, e.g., in MUTHESIUS, Hermann. *Das moderne Landhaus*. München : F. Bruckmann, 1905; and in LEVETUS, A. S. *Austrian Architecture and Decoration*. In *The Studio year-book of decorative art*. London; Paris; New York : “The Studio” Ltd., 1911, pp. 211–262; and also in journals *Volné směry*, vol. 6. (1902) and *Der Architekt* (1902). For more details, see: BOŘUTOVÁ 2010, pp. 41, 58, note no. 18 on p. 351.

27 Lada Hubatová-Vacková explores the re-evaluation of the opinions on the definition of national applied art production in texts by Czech critics even before the war. See also: HUBATOVÁ-VACKOVÁ 2014, p. 53.

and industrial—society.²⁸ A growing number of Czechoslovak journals called for “Less traditionalism, more rationalism!”²⁹ These were publications that provided space for passionate discussions on the direction of architecture, production of daily use products or on the general lifestyle of the “new era.”³⁰

The circumstances within which such a critical approach was applied to were far-reaching—on the one hand, the contexts related to the ground-breaking socio-political processes connected to the creation of Czechoslovakia, and on the other hand, the contexts reflected the current climate that embraced innovation and progress. The monarchy and spirit of the past cultural era disappeared from critic’s statements who were already projecting a concept of the “new era” dictated by the modern way of life. Intellectuals and the artistic avant-garde attributed the status of “achievement and privilege” to modernization introduced progress.³¹ Modernization was also part of the state political demands officially declared by the later president of Czechoslovakia Tomáš G. Masaryk in the *Washington Declaration* in 1918.³² Czechoslovakia was to become a progressive state and a space for social and economic reforms.

Historian Lubomír Lipták believes that modernization, besides the First World War, was the strongest influence that driven the politics and social values after 1918 in Slovakia.³³ The creation of the republic was supposed to be an opportunity to solve issues that the country carried with it from the previous era; primarily, to complete the industrialization process, develop the economy and improve social conditions, the standard of living and cultural standards of the citizens, but also to establish educational and cultural institutions that were necessary for the development of numerous vocational sectors.³⁴ Modernization was also considered a solution for common daily issues, among others, the unequal standard of living and urban and rural housing quality, which opened the question of the changing life demands of the “modern individual.” Expert discussions began to emphasize the impact of architecture and objects of daily use on the citizens’ standard of living and their cultural values. Such thinking resulted in a concept of modernization reform of architecture

28 Authors publishing critical reflections on the “national style” in the Czech lands include Josef Čapek, Karel Teige, and Bohumil Markalous. See also: PEČINKOVÁ 2014, pp. 205–210.

29 VANĚK, Jan. Tradicionalizmus a priemyselný vývoj. In *Bytová kultura. Sborník průmyslového umění. 1924–1925*, vol. 1. Brno : Jan Vaněk, pp. 26–28.

30 In 1920s, e. g., the following journals: *Výtvarné snahy, Výtvarná práce, Stavitel, Horizont, Bytová kultura, Život*.

31 For more, see also: TEIGE, Karel. Foto, kino, film. In *Život*, 1922, vol. 2., no. 2. Praha : Výtvarný odbor Umělecké Besedy, pp. 153–154.

32 For more, see also: MAŇASOVÁ HRADSKÁ, Helena. Moc snů První republiky: vztah reklamy a modernity. In BARTLOVÁ Milena et al. (eds.) *Co bylo Československo? Kulturní konstrukce státní identity*. Praha : UMPRUM, 2017, pp. 118–120; see also: PEROUTKA Ferdinand: *Budování státu I*. Praha : Lidové noviny, 1991; BARTLOVÁ Milena – VYBÍRAL, Jindřich et al. *Budování státu. Reprezentace Československa v umění, architektuře a designu*. Praha : UMPRUM, 2015.

33 LIPTÁK, Lubomír. Život na Slovensku v medzivojnovom období. In ZEMKO, Milan – BYSTRICKÝ, Valerián (eds.) *Slovensko v Československu 1918–1939*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2004.

34 For more on the economy and the industrial development of the country after the creation of Czechoslovakia, see: HALLON, Ludovít. Príčiny, priebeh a dôsledky štrukturálnych zmien v hospodárstve medzivojnového Slovenska. In ZEMKO, Milan – BYSTRICKÝ, Valerián (eds.) *Slovensko v Československu 1918–1939*. Bratislava : VEDA, 2004, pp. 293–297.

and applied art which aimed to produce more democratic housing, improve the general standard of living, improve the functionality of housing, refine the environment, stimulate production and revive the market.³⁵

Published articles show that after the creation of Czechoslovakia, the nationalist position remained important, though influenced by the new socio-political context. The rhetoric used by art critics contextualized the construction of national culture with the social and economic benefits of the reform of applied art. The communicated “national”—at that point “Czechoslovak”—character of applied art carried new meanings. It was embedded within the ideological framework of constituting the “Czechoslovak nation” and it was based on a different interpretation of the “national tradition,” contrary to the definition devised by the proponents of the folk “peculiar character.” The intensifying pressure of the modernizing tendencies of anti-traditionalism, anti-historicism and anti-decorativism generated a rejection of folklorism and an artificial application of the principles of folk art to industry. The “national specificity” of applied art was then construed within the context of the narrative on modern culture.

This notion of “modern national applied art” will be clarified in more detail through an analysis of the writings of Vydra and Hořejš published from the first half of the 1920s to the end of the decade.

“Hopeless State of Applied Art in Slovakia”

Vydra published a particularly noteworthy article addressing the direction of national applied art production with the telling title *Hopeless State of Applied Art in Slovakia*.³⁶ It stands as an open critique to the “peculiar character” in the folk art industry, which, among other things, is interesting for being published in 1924, i.e. at a time before the modernization reform programme was established in Slovakia. Vydra’s opening statement was sharp:

I am not sure whether to submit a report on the state of applied art or folk applied art in Slovakia here. It is a pun distinctive to our country. Elsewhere, folk and applied art are not distinguished as separate; they transform the folk applied art solely into applied art. [However,] in Slovakia we can only talk about folk applied art so far.³⁷

He described the wide range of folk applied art as a typical indicator of Slovak culture and simultaneously as a critical point in the modernization process, emphasizing that the standard of living was changing due to the spread of western cultures and because of increasing demands placed on products by

35 For more on the interior architecture and applied art discourse, see: SENEŠI LUTHEROVÁ, Silvia. Hnutie za kvalitu. Umelecký priemysel ako stredobod modernizačnej reformy v období prvej ČSR. In PAŠTEKOVÁ, Michaela – BREZŇAN, Peter (eds.) *Estetika centra a periférie – centrum a periféria estetiky*. Bratislava : Slovenská asociácia pre estetiku, 2020, pp. 43–54; SENEŠI LUTHEROVÁ 2021, pp. 235–253; SENEŠI LUTHEROVÁ, Silvia. Byt novej doby. In PEKÁROVÁ, Adriena – KOLESÁR, Zdeno (eds.) *K dejinám dizajnu na Slovensku*. Bratislava : Slovenské centrum dizajnu, 2013, pp. 94–110.

36 VYDRA, Josef. Bezútešný stav Slovenského umeleckého priemyslu. In *Výtvarná práce*, 1924, vol. 3, no. 2–3. Praha : Jan Štenc, pp. 78–80.

37 VYDRA 1924, p. 78.

urban society and the common people who were mimicking nobility. He believed that individuals and cooperatives attempted to satisfy urban consumption by transforming and making use of Slovak folk applied art products, however, he took issue with how they approached this process.

Vydra judged the first method as an “utter decline to the most extensive and abhorrent extent.” He referred to the folk production commissioned—in his own words—by private entrepreneurs, individuals and exploiters, who are abusing the technical skills of the people for “anything imaginable without any order, whether stylish or tacky, in other words, for anything that is in demand.”³⁸ He believed that the decline of folk applied art absorbs the worst manifestations of urban tastes. Vydra was convinced that such businesses will destroy Slovak production and flood the Czechoslovak and foreign markets with “Slovak kitsch,” which people will avoid in the same way as they avoid similar cheap and tacky products from Japan, China or Turkey.

He connected the second, so-called ethnographic method with cooperatives and societies and praised it for such economically noble aims and efforts to maintain the production of folk applied art whole and intact. It can be assumed from context that he was referring to Skalica, Živena or Lipa. However, Vydra did not consider this way correct either: “They make people keep producing what they had been producing without respect to changed needs. They preserve old patterns and forms and force people to continue copying such old things.”³⁹

Vydra accused both groups of manufacturers of degrading Slovak products in the eyes of consumers. He labelled the national character of the products—a “national brand” of sorts—with the term “peculiar character,” though not with the proud patriotic connotations that it used to carry within the nationally oriented discourse, but pejoratively: “The terms ‘peculiar character’ and Slovak character have almost become a deterrent, whether in business or for the audience, and it is synonymous with something common and cheap instead of denoting something truly good and representatively our own.”⁴⁰

However, Vydra did not only scold the mainstream production but offered a solution that began to construe reform of applied art production:

If we consider that the second and better group of entrepreneurs, cooperatives and societies work without artists, who are the only ones who could understand the process of recreation, i.e. understand the spirit of Slovak art and also the spirit of the times and the modern, it leaves us only with a third possibility which could truly save Slovak folk art, and that is to take the technical skills and taste of the Slovak people and transform their work into applied art production and first class art and craft.⁴¹

Vydra created a production model that considered true applied art production, i.e. applied art that corresponds to the current times while also fully

38 VYDRA 1924, p. 78.

39 VYDRA 1924, p. 78.

40 VYDRA 1924, p. 80.

41 VYDRA 1924, p. 79.

employing folk production traditions. He proposed that only modern creations of “new patterns” by trained artists can reflect and transform the folk tradition properly for the times. In this respect, he particularly emphasized the role of professional artists—basically designers—as the only people ready and able to detach from deep-rooted cultural and artistic stereotypes and adapt to new production means authentically. Using the notion of modern applied art that reflects the intellectual, material and social circumstances of its times, he understood the modernity in relation to the theory of the “spirit of the time,” which was also used by the pioneers of Modernism to legitimize the innovation of forms and to reject historicism and decorativism.⁴²

It is not a coincidence that Vydra published the article in *Výtvarná práce*, a periodical connected to the Czech applied art cooperative Artěl.⁴³ At the beginning of the 1920s, he considered Artěl to be a model for the initiative of a new organized applied art that would be made up of trained artists. He believed that such a vision could be realized by establishing an organization based on the understanding of “Slovak national art” or applied art. With this aim, he established the Society of Applied Art (Spoločnosť umeleckého priemyslu, SUP) back in 1920, with a programme to organize and unify applied art production in Slovakia.⁴⁴ Production facilities and companies established within the SUP were meant to provide a space for developing quality art based on new designs, and folk creators were meant to be included in the production as well.⁴⁵

In 1922, the SUP and Artěl cooperated on a prestigious contract to furnish 30 rooms of the state spa Hotel Hviezdoslav at Štrbské Pleso in the Tatra Mountains. As reported in *Drobné umění*, the contract awarded by the ministry in Bratislava was a subject of long negotiations before it became the “first case of the public administration supporting the new Czechoslovak art,” so it could be said that the programme of both companies received political acceptance.⁴⁶ In an article dedicated to the interior of the hotel, art historian Maroš Semančík pointed out that the style the hotel was furnished in at that time represented the official Czechoslovak national visual expression.⁴⁷ Even

42 Hermann Muthesius applied the “spirit of the time” (*Der Zeitgeist*) theory to the concept of applied art production. His texts were published in Czech journals before the First World War: MUTHESIUS, Hermann: Die Bedeutung des Kunstgewerbe. In *Dekorative Kunst*, 1907, no. 10, pp. 177–192.

43 At the beginning of the 1920s, Vydra published articles in the journals *Náš směr* and *Drobné umění* and later in *Výtvarné snahy* (1926); for more on the Artěl, see FROŇEK, Jiří: *Artěl. Umění pro všední den 1908–1935*. Praha : UPM; Arbor Vitae, 2009.

44 For more on the first public activities of the SUP, see: MARKALOUS, Bohumil. Umelecký priemysel na výstave bratislavskej. In *Drobné umění*, 1920, vol. 1, p. 88.

45 Vydra describes the goals of the SUP in detail: VYDRA, Jozef: Vznik a snahy Spoločnosti umeleckého priemyslu v Bratislave. In *Styl*, 1921–1922, vol. 2 (7), p. 49.

46 *Drobné umění*, 1922, vol. 3, no. 8, p. 127; Michalides mentions that the SUP also participated in the contract for furnishing the residence of President T. G. Masaryk, Chateau Topolčianky, from 1922 to 1924. For more, see: MICHALIDES 1978, p. 64.

47 SEMANČÍK, Maroš. Rondokubistický dizajn Hotela Hviezdoslav na Štrbskom plese. In *Designum*, 2009, vol. 15, no. 3, p. 46–51; Jindřich Vybíral described the style construed by Pavel Janák and Josef Gočár, and other artists, applied in the first half of the 1920’s as the “architectural representation of the young state nation.” However, Vybíral described the term “Rondocubism” used by Czech art theory to designate this “national style” as misleading. For more see VYBÍRAL 2013, pp. 47–48.

though the magazine reported that it was the sole example of state support for modern applied art studios at the time, research by Pavla Pečinková showed that artwork created at Artěl and other institutions with a seat in Prague (School of Decorative Arts, SČSD) was systematically advertised as the “national style,” and in public tenders and state contracts presented as a means of state representation.⁴⁸ Even though it was a short-term movement or project, it garnered a wide-reaching reaction, peaking with an official presentation at the Czechoslovak pavilion at the International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts in Paris in 1925. Karel Herain, the deputy chairman of SČSD who partook in the planning of the exhibition commented: “It was supposed to represent the image of Czechoslovak national life” and “speak the language of the Slavic tribe.”⁴⁹

It seems, however, that Vydra’s SUP project failed to reach an influential position on the Czechoslovak scene. Despite presenting at several exhibitions and fairs between 1920 and 1923, the SUP’s economic and business struggles grew steadily and by 1924 (the year Vydra’s article was published), it terminated all activities and merged with Detva.⁵⁰ Finally, Vydra himself admitted some complications that hindered the company from achieving its goals:

It encountered a serious lack of understanding and hard economic times and it cannot be reproached for the fact that all attempts to uplift production did not go as desired and as may had been expected. There is not enough capital and attempts at sophistication are always the most passive business of each company.⁵¹

He considered economic sustainability to be one of the major pitfalls the reform initiatives were faced with, not only in the case of the SUP, but also in relation to societies and cooperatives which he described as suffering from insufficient demand. In his eyes they cannot face the competition of “exploiters” who misuse Slovak folk art. Therefore, he considered state support for companies and particularly state protection via monopolies, privileges and state subsidies, to be one of the most important points of the reform programme proposed in the article.⁵² However, the question remains to what extent the support extended to applied art production in Slovakia and Vydra’s independent activities in state institutions and organizations with seats in Prague, which despite the Czechoslovak orientation manifested directly in their names, focused the vast majority of their activities on the Czech lands.

Vydra proposed to solve the economic efficiency problem of applied art production by integrating individuals with art education in the production process, which would increase the artistic and production quality of products and also competitiveness. He even demanded ensuring this by law.⁵³ Here,

48 PEČINKOVÁ 2014, pp. 205–206.

49 HERAIN, Karel. Medzinárodná výstava dekoratívnych umení v Paríži 1925. In *Drobné umění – Výtvarné snahy*, 1924, vol. 5, p. 88.

50 The Detva Production Cooperative, a Czechoslovak folk applied art, a participating company, was established in 1919 and was based in Bratislava.

51 VYDRA 1924, p. 79.

52 VYDRA 1924, p. 79.

53 VYDRA 1924, pp. 79–80.

Vydra's ambition to develop applied art education in Slovakia and create tools for integrating graduates in the production practice was fully manifested, which later led to the establishment of the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava (ŠUR). The Government Commissariat for the Protection of Monuments in Slovakia where Vydra was active from its foundation in 1919, was another institution that sought to increase the interest of trained artists in applied art by financially subsidising education in national schools in 1926.⁵⁴ Vydra most likely pursued such measures to strengthen the position of Slovak manufacturers against competition from the Czech market.

Vydra used his platform to communicate the key requirements needed for implementation of the modernization reform of applied art in Slovakia in practice. The article implies that he denounced conservatism and folklorism, considering them the fatal consequences of basing the “national character” on a national tradition which was intentionally constructed. Instead, he proposed a concept of autonomous qualified applied art that would represent a synthesis of the “spirit of the nation” and the “spirit of the times,” which he used to define the outlooks of social development in Slovakia. However, he failed to explain the specific meanings of his concept in more detail. We must seek explanation in other articles, particularly in one that gained the most traction within the Slovak environment. It was published in the catalogue of the aforementioned Exhibition of Applied Art in Bratislava in 1927 and in this essay, Vydra offered an even stronger critique on the “peculiar character.” He reopened the question of what determines the “national specificity”—declaring “war” on the folk “peculiar character,” while simultaneously marking the advent of a “modern peculiar character.”

“Modern Czechoslovak Peculiar Character”

“The term peculiar character is not trite! It has been deeply meaningful for our national life and culture,” are the opening words of Vydra's essay entitled *End of the Peculiar Character! Fight for the Peculiar Character in the New Environment*.⁵⁵ Vydra changed his rhetoric; he did not reject the “peculiar character” per se but proposed a new interpretation, and therefore, a new concept for applied art production.

He definitively rejected folk and home production and paraphrased the term itself as “anti-peculiar character:”

Because of the dilettantes of patriotic taste, because of businessmen with feelings for national peculiar character, the term is now a huge and sensitive word, but refers to trifle! [...] To search for those who have them made is often an indication of the end of patriotism!⁵⁶

54 The subsidy is mentioned by Michalides: MICHALIDES 1978, p. 66; see also: *Styl*, 1924–1925, vol. 5 (10), pp. 158 and 203.

55 VYDRA, Jozef. Koniec Svojrázu! Boj o svojráz nového prostredia. In HOŘEJŠ, Antonín (ed.) *Výstava moderného umeleckého priemyslu*. Exhibition catalogue. Bratislava : SČSD; Umelecká beseda slovenská Bratislava, 1927, p. 21.

56 VYDRA 1927, p. 22.

Building on arguments from his previous article, Vydra primarily criticized the production aspect, i.e. decentralized factory production, which utilises modern industrial advantages (meaning machinery, division of labour and workers) but at the same time, limits its production range to imitations of folk products. He considered such manufacturing needless and artificial, despite being labelled as the “art of the people,” he did not consider it folk art as the production principles are contrary. Vydra said that true folk art is created as a result of natural production conditions and need, and in that form, represents the “peculiar character of the rural people” not the “character of the town’s people.”⁵⁷ These arguments were used to express a new definition of the term “national peculiar character,” this time as the representation of the life of urban society of the modern era. He wrote:

Today we have different sensitivities, different housing needs, different approach to our requirements on taste, hygiene, functionality. The national peculiar form created over time is being continuously refined in the hands of its creators of the same generation, with the same sensitivities and from the same nation.⁵⁸

In this way, he arrived at the idea of the “modern peculiar character,” which he believed would fulfil its mission if based on natural local conditions and real needs of society, not “past” but modern.⁵⁹ Vydra urged:

The Czechoslovak peculiar character must become the high quality and value behind each product! Become the standard of national need and habits of our lives! High value and refined form of every product must become the best Czechoslovak peculiar character for foreign countries as well!”⁶⁰

Vydra’s understanding of “modern peculiar character” reinterpreted the national cultural tradition in favour of and simultaneously through modernization. He purposefully elaborated “national specificity” in relation to the ideals of modern production. Of particular interest, he described this new understanding of the national character as “Czechoslovak,” contrary to his text from 1924 in which he worked with the “Slovak spirit and culture.” Czechoslovakism as an ideology of Czechs and Slovaks was manifested as one of the nationalist variants in the rhetoric of the cultural and artistic elite during the 1920s.⁶¹ As mentioned, references to the Slavic tribe were already used to communicate “national style” in Artěl and within the circle of artists from the School of Decorative Arts in Prague in the first half of the 1920s, demanding

57 VYDRA 1927, pp. 22–23, 25; Vydra supported and explored authentic folk art in the long-term and systematically as the initiator of the Memorandum on the Protection of Folk Art in Slovakia (1920). During the 1920s and 1930s, Vydra published a plethora of articles on Slovak folk art. For example: VYDRA, Josef. Ako zachrániť a povzniesť ľudové umenie. In *Náš směr*, 1920, vol. 6, no. 7–8, p. 169.

58 VYDRA 1927, p. 23.

59 Antonín Hořejš defines the prerequisites of modern applied art production in a similar manner. See also: HOŘEJŠ 1927.

60 VYDRA 1927, p. 27.

61 HOLLÝ, Karol. Českoslovačistická argumentácia na prelome 19. a 20. storočia. In HUDEK, Adam – KOPEČEK, Michal – MERVART, Jan (eds.) *Čecho/slovakismus*. Praha : NLN; Ústav pro soudobé dějiny AV ČR, 2019, pp. 71–95; DUCHÁČEK, Milan. Českoslovakismus v prvním poločase ČSR: státoporný koncept nebo floskule? In HUDEK – KOPEČEK – MERVART 2019, pp. 149–181.

the position of the “Czechoslovak national expression.” However, Vydra was not interested in this variant of nationalist thinking in his 1924 article, despite frequenting these circles. Instead, he pointed to the specific historical context of Slovakia and repeatedly emphasized the “spirit of the Slovak nation.”

Setting applied art production within the circumstances of constructing the culture of the “Czechoslovak nation,” the 1927 article sets a new ideological context for Vydra’s reform intent, even though he did not use the terminology consistently—at points he reverted to language related to Slovak nationalistic ideology. To verify such context would require more detailed research, however, at this time the question can be asked whether Vydra’s changed rhetoric signified a targeted attempt to address the SČSD headquarters in Prague and other state institutions (the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Bratislava), which he expected to fundamentally support his reform activities. Publication of the essay was closely related to the foundation of the Bratislava branch of the SČSD, used by Vydra to intensify the pressure to deal with the situation of applied art in Slovakia which was clearly indicated by the manifest character of the text. At the same time, the upcoming 10th anniversary of the declaration of the republic was also a convenient opportunity to establish educational and awareness building institutions in Slovakia.⁶² Despite Vydra’s exclusive focus on the Slovak production environment, by using the idea of cultural and economic unity of the Czechoslovakist nationalist discourse, he applied the overall relevance of the reform to the whole state and nation. On that basis, I assume that by using the nationalist arguments in the reform project, Vydra attempted to establish modernized applied art from Slovakia within a socio-political context.

Vydra presented his reinterpreted “modern peculiar character” as the “objective” quality and identified it on the basis of “objective” factors, like geographical conditions, climate, resources or colours, which he approached as the determinants of the specific character of applied art of each individual nation:⁶³

Every object that is well manufactured using quality materials that might even be common and cheap but local will express our peculiar character [...]. The diversity of colour and the joy colours bring can remain part of our peculiar character just like other nations base their peculiar character on grey and colourlessness. Those who would take colour away from us, take a part of the joy of life and take a part of our peculiar character. We do not consider colour a fashion of the times but rather the peculiar character of our predispositions. The peculiar character will be in the functionality of the whole furnishing of our households that suit our life habits, our climate, and our needs will become manifested in the construction material, layout of the dwelling, the furniture, the entrance of air and light, in hygiene.⁶⁴

62 For more on the context of establishing cultural and educational institutions in Slovakia around 1928 see PREŠNAJDEROVÁ 2021, p. 290; and ŠIDLÍKOVÁ, Zuzana. Umelecko priemyselné múzeum na Slovensku v roku 1928? In *Designum*, 2010, vol. 16, no. 2, pp. 14–17.

63 This thinking approximates Vydra to the attitude of Czech theoretician Otakar Hostinský, cf. VYBÍRAL 2013, pp. 71–73.

64 VYDRA 1927, pp. 25–26.

At the same time, he assumed the existence of a specific “national taste” that is manifested in the aesthetic qualities of the products. He described the “peculiar character” as a production standard that is based on the values, tastes, daily habits and the needs of the nation.⁶⁵

Therefore, Vydra construed the “modern Czechoslovak peculiar character” not only as a cultural but also aesthetic project. At the same time, he was re-evaluating his aesthetic opinion when adapting the theoretical concepts of early Modernism under the influence of the purist principles of rational and applied production which resonated among the Czechoslovak art scene. More radical avant-garde opinions on the creation of style, not reflecting the “spirit of the times and the nation” but a spontaneous expression of the machine era that followed international style, were not expressed in this essay by Vydra—at this point, even the SČSD was officially leaning towards this idea.⁶⁶ This can also confirm the theory that application of the national ideology to the concept of reform in this article was intentional, with the aim to gain state support for implementing the changes into practice.

Primarily, Vydra needed political support to establish and ensure the sustainable activity of institutions which were meant to realize the reform. His SUP project did not succeed in the harsh years of the economic crisis, but he wrote *End of the Peculiar Character!* as a member of the SČSD board and head of the Bratislava branch of the SČSD and the introductory exhibition in Bratislava. The SČSD maintained a firm social and cultural position and was a functional model of institutional support for artists in the Czech lands with a link to the School of Decorative Arts in Prague and manufacturers that could provide the support for Vydra’s endeavours. It was an environment that also became a platform for his efforts to cooperate with other proponents of reform in Slovakia, primarily Antonín Hořejš. According to Vydra and Hořejš, institutional backing was a basic requirement for the development of modern applied art production. Vydra was convinced then that modern applied art production would become an authentic and truthful expression of the national culture only when created by Czech and Slovak and/or Czechoslovak educated artists, whom he considered the only people “able to explore and feel the forms bequeathed by their ancestors.” He understood that to create “something new, functional for a newer lifestyle” artists need companies to employ them and together they would build “our new Slovak environment.”⁶⁷ There were not many such collaborations by the end of the 1920s in Slovakia, something Vydra also noted. Fittingly, both critics viewed the role of the SČSD in Slovakia as paramount and compared its importance to the activities of the “Werkbunds” in European economic centres.⁶⁸ They believed that

65 VYDRA 1927, p. 21.

66 The concepts of universalism, cosmopolitanism and internationalism were manifested by Antonín Hořejš in 1931. For more, see: HOŘEJŠ, Antonín. *Nové snahy v užitékovej tvorbe*. In HOŘEJŠ Antonín – HOFMAN Ješek (eds.) *Sborník modernej tvorby užitékovej*. Bratislava : Sväz Československého diela v Bratislave; Slovenská Grafia, 1931.

67 VYDRA 1927, p. 23.

68 VYDRA 1927, p. 27.

the SČSD could facilitate contact between theoreticians and practising artists, modern producers and artists, scientists and consumers, ensuring that new products will circulate widely and spark the interest in “newly created needs” that would eventually lead to a “increase of the overall standard of living” and finally, benefit the national interest.⁶⁹

SČSD exhibitions at the end of the 1920s and beginning of the 1930s in Slovakia did open an expected reflection on the state and on the issues plaguing applied art and also successfully promoted creators and manufacturers who represented the movement of modern applied art locally and abroad (e.g., Sandrik production facility producing silver and metal products; glassworks Schreiber a synovia in Lednické Rovne and Katarínska Huta near Lučenec; Slovenská keramika, a joint-stock ceramics manufacturer in Modra; the Institute for refining folk production in Detva; Slovenská Grafia printing house and Slovenská Kníhtlačiareň in Bratislava). The Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Bratislava, where Hořejš was active, played a significant part in launching many initiatives while managing the establishment of the Bratislava branch of the SČSD. The efforts of Vydra and Hořejš supported by many other cultural, economic and political figures led to the establishment of two key institutions for the development of applied art production in Slovakia: The School of Applied Arts (1929–1939) and The Museum of Applied Arts (1929/1930–1933) in Bratislava.⁷⁰ Their vision to open a school that would “spread knowledge about modern progress and production” and “impact education and the source of taste” by utilizing progressive educational methods in line with current artistic trends represented the basic foundation of the reform programme.⁷¹ As Vydra stated in a 1929 article: “Only a school can prepare talented craftsmen who will seek and create new forms and elevate arts and crafts and modern applied art with their technically meticulous production and who will seek and create the ‘Slovak national taste.’”⁷²

The activity of these institutions was, however, impacted and eventually prematurely terminated due to unfavourable conditions related to the economic crisis at the beginning of the 1930s and the turbulent political situation at the end of the decade.⁷³ The applied art modernization movement came to an abrupt halt due to the expulsion of Vydra and Hořejš—and other teachers, architects and artists of Czech origin—from the territory of the newly founded Slovak Republic (1939–1945). Nevertheless, it can be concluded that the ideas and intentions of these leaders of reform in Slovakia during the intense period at the turn of the 1920s and 1930s were carried on by subsequent creators

69 See also: HOŘEJŠ, Antonín. Člověk a moderná výroba. In HOŘEJŠ, Antonín (ed.) *Výstava moderného umeleckého priemyslu československého Košice 1930*. Exhibition catalogue. Košice : SČSD, 1930; and HOŘEJŠ 1927, p. 35.

70 Prešnajderová mentions the contributions of Ján Liška, general secretary of the Chamber of Commerce and Industry in Bratislava and MP for the Živnostenská strana, political party in Bratislava, in the foundation and activities of the Bratislava branch of the SČSD. For more on the Museum of Applied Art in Bratislava, see: PREŠNAJDEROVÁ 2021, pp. 290–293.

71 VYDRA 1929, pp. 2–3; HOŘEJŠ 1927, p. 35.

72 VYDRA 1929, p. 2.

73 In 1933, the establishment process of the museum was terminated and the Slovak branch of the SČSD was closed. PREŠNAJDEROVÁ 2021, pp. 293–294.

and producers, and both truly contributed to ground-breaking innovations in urbanism and architecture, interior architecture and applied art. The movement they began initiated the development of art education, brought awareness, exhibitions and promotion, inspired art related journalism and criticism and last but not least, created the conditions for developing the applied art production—which we now refer to as design—as a discipline and vocation.⁷⁴

Conclusion

The purpose of the present article was to explore the ideological framework of the modernization reform of applied art in Slovakia in the 1920s in respect to the nationalist argumentation of the time. It drew on the observation that the initiators and creators of the reform—Josef Vydra and Antonín Hořejš—based a significant portion of their reasoning on the ideological context of the national culture. I approached the concept of the modernization reform of applied art defined in the writings of both authors by applying the theory of social representation, and interpreted it as a manifestation of the formation process of ideological discourse within culture, first in terms of a cultural confirmation of the Slovak—and subsequently of the Czechoslovak—nation. The task of defining the vision of “modern national applied art” was taken on by individuals—representatives of the cultural and political elites, that included visual artists and architects—as initially there were no institutions that would advocate the advancement of applied art. Even later, when necessary institutions had been established, programmes were still being formed. The ideal of the “national specificity,” “national character” or “peculiar character” was construed and used as a foundation for the modernization reform of applied art. The ideological construct of the “modern Czechoslovak Peculiar Character” formulated by Vydra in the second half of the 1920s played a prominent role in this discourse. Therefore, the reform of applied art with its patriotic connotations—particularly the concept of the “Czechoslovak Peculiar Character”—was a symbolic representation of the “national culture” project in the Czechoslovak Republic.

A special focus was placed on the purpose the nationalist ideology had in the concept of reform and also the method the actors used when developing the construct. Vydra continuously asked about the nature of the specificity of the “Slovak”—later the “Czechoslovak national applied art,” while Hořejš investigated possible approaches to the “character of the national culture” of Slovaks in applied art. Both authors based their definitions of “peculiar character” on interpretations of the “national culture,” which differed from concepts that emerged from the parallel school of thought, i.e. from the proponents of the folk “peculiar character.” Influenced by the modernist tendencies of anti-traditionalism, anti-historicism and anti-decorativism, they rejected folklorism as an artificial application of the principles of folk art

74 Between 1929 and 1933, Vydra and Hořejš significantly contributed to the journals *Slovenská Grafia* and *nová bratislava*. In 1930, the opening of the so-called house of applied art in Bratislava by the Spojené U. P. Závody z Brna resonated in commercial circles.

in production and construed the values of national applied art within the context of the modernist discourse. While in Hořejš's understanding, applied art was a representation of the modern “urban” culture of the Slovak nation, Vydra reinterpreted “national specificity” in favour of and simultaneously on the basis of modernization efforts.

Both authors emphasized the participation of professional Slovak/Czechoslovak artists—designers—in production, whom they considered to be the only persons authorized and able to break away from routine cultural and artistic stereotypes and respond to the new means of production authentically. For them, the concept of the “modern Czechoslovak peculiar character” had a significant part in forming culture and was simultaneously a manifestation of the aesthetic reform, which referenced principles of the avant-garde art styles, primarily Purism.

The authors themselves approached “national character” from an essentialist perspective, based on “objective” factors (geographical conditions, climate, resources, colours, purpose) considered unique to the environment of an individual nation. At the same time, the connection between the aesthetic qualities of products and the unique “national taste” (Vydra) or the “national spirit and character” (Hořejš) was emphasized.

Such an approach reveals that the social function of “modern national applied art” was to represent national culture and progress with clear social and economic benefits. Despite the fact that both representatives directed the reform towards Slovak industry by applying the concept of cultural and economic unity from Czechoslovak nationalist discourse, the overall importance was made universal for the whole state and nation. Based on research, it can be concluded that Vydra and Hořejš employed nationalist rhetoric in order to socio-politically assert their concept of modernization reform. Simultaneously, they identified a side benefit, i.e. successful implementation of the reform would assure a promising future for the “national industry” and the “national culture,” which, thanks to the Czechoslovakist discourse, did not apply solely to Slovak but also to the “Czechoslovak nation.”