

ART COLLECTIONS OF THE CENTRAL-EUROPEAN ARISTOCRACY, 1795-1939

A COMPARATIVE STUDY

The subject of the research, carried out in cooperation with the Slovenian Academy of Sciences in Ljubljana and Masaryk University in Brno, are artistic collections, i.e. picture galleries, collections of sculptures, applied arts and classical antiquities, established by representatives of the Central European aristocracy in the 19th and first decades of the 20th century. The study covers the area of the Habsburg Monarchy and the former Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth.

For the aristocracy, understood here as the highest stratum of nobility, distinguished by the hereditary title of prince, count or baron, the long 19th century was a period of great challenges prompted by profound political, social and cultural changes. We argue that the Central European aristocracy used the traditional instrument of artistic collections to redefine and consolidate its elite position and role in the rapidly modernising, bureaucratising and democratising states and societies of this part of the continent.

To substantiate this claim, we raise the following four main issues: 1) Aristocratic collections in the face of the growing nationalist and democratic tendencies, 2) Aristocratic collections in the reborn and newly established states: the interwar period, 3) The old “aristocracy of blood” and the new “aristocracy of money”: the democratisation of collecting, 4) Aristocratic collecting during “the museum age”.

The novelty of the project results primarily from its comparative nature. Here, a group of researchers from three scientific centres, representing five nationalities analyse the fascinating and complex phenomenon of aristocratic art collecting in relation to a vast area of Europe, situating it in a broad political, social and cultural context. It is essential that, in addition to the comparative-synchronous perspective, a diachronic perspective is also adopted: particular attention is paid to the dynamics of changes in aristocratic collecting.

The research results will not only significantly enrich the knowledge of the history of collecting but will constitute a valuable contribution to studies on, on the one hand, the history of Central Europe and, on the other hand, the culture of European aristocracy at the threshold of modernity.