

# The Africa Collection and Socialist Anticolonial Struggle in Náprstek Museum Exhibitions, 1948–1989

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This paper focuses on exhibitions of African culture at the Náprstek Museum between 1948 and 1989. During this decolonisation period, Czechoslovakia maintained strong ties with Africa. This fact had a significant impact on the country's cultural sphere, inspiring numerous projects related to African themes. The Náprstek Museum in Prague was a unique institution within Czechoslovakia. It had all the prerequisites to serve as a showcase of the communist regime, demonstrating its relationship with the non-European world. This study examines exhibitions held from 1948 to 1989 in the context of the socialist approach to decolonisation—specifically, the extent to which the exhibitions dedicated to Africa were used as a tool for presenting official political positions. It also explores how African art was interpreted within the contemporary context and how it was presented to the Czechoslovak public. The main part of the research is based on previously unpublished archival materials from the Náprstek Museum.

*Keywords:* decolonisation, colonialism, Africa, Náprstek Museum, Czechoslovakia, exhibitions.

## Introduction

The political struggle between the two blocs reached virtually every part of our planet. As a result of the decolonisation process that started after World War II, the Cold War extended into the countries of the Global South. Both East and West sought to gain as much influence as possible in the newly formed states. This struggle for influence was often motivated not only by the desire to secure new allies, but also by the pursuit of economic gain. Within the Eastern Bloc, this activity involved not only the Soviet Union but also its allies in Eastern Europe. Alongside Asia and Latin America, Africa also became a significant arena of Cold War competition. The decolonisation process in Africa created several opportunities not only for gaining political influence but also for economic engagement. As a Soviet ally, Czechoslovakia was among the most active countries that promoted itself in the region.

Engagement with the newly independent countries spanned many fields. In addition to economic cooperation, these newly established relationships were reflected in military aid, science, education, and culture. Cultural exchange represented an important aspect of diplomacy. Cultural activities were closely linked to educational efforts and also served as a means of self-promotion—both abroad and at home. Exhibitions also stood among the instruments of cultural cooperation. Czechoslovakia used this format in decolonised countries as a way to advertise its modernity and industrial achievements—and by extension, to promote the state itself. On the domestic scene, exhibitions mainly served to communicate the reasons and results of aid to African states. This form of communication helped shape a state discourse, which blended anti-colonial attitudes, socialist modernity, and the presentation of Czechoslovakia as a progressive state.

The paper is divided into four parts. The first explores the relationship between the Czech lands and Africa in general; the second focuses on the Náprstek Museum. Both sections serve as an introduction to a relatively little-known topic. The third section offers an overview of exhibitions and their broader context, while the final section examines the perspective on Africa that these exhibitions conveyed. Museum exhibitions, in this

context, occupied a space between official propaganda and education. As part of the National Museum, the Náprstek Museum was the only cultural institution in Czechoslovakia dedicated to non-European cultures. From this position, it served as a relatively useful tool for presenting attitudes towards decolonised countries. In addition to its permanent exhibitions, the museum organised temporary exhibitions and public lectures. It not only made use of its own collections but also hosted exhibitions borrowed from other countries under cultural cooperation agreements. This study will attempt to present the exhibitions held between 1948 and 1989 in the context of the socialist approach to decolonisation. It aims to assess the extent to which exhibitions dedicated to Africa were used to convey political messages. The study also seeks to understand how African art was approached in the contemporary context and how it was presented to the Czechoslovak public. The main body of this work is based on previously unpublished archival materials from the Náprstek Museum.

### Czechoslovakia and Africa

Czechoslovak—or, more precisely, Czech—exploration of Africa began to intensify in the 19th century. Until then, travelling to Africa or collecting African art had been privileges reserved for a small elite. The colonial “Scramble for Africa” in the 1880s opened new opportunities for travellers and adventurers, many of whom looked to figures like David Livingstone or Henry Stanley as role models. Among the most prominent Czech travellers inspired by these explorers was Emil Holub (1847–1902),<sup>1</sup> who undertook two trips to southern Africa between 1872 and 1887. His activities resulted in an extensive body of published work and the organisation of exhibitions. Holub also brought back large quantities of ethnographic material from his travels. These objects were later dispersed across Europe, with significant collections held by the Weltmuseum in Vienna and the Náprstek Museum in Prague. Holub’s activity had a major impact on Czech public opinion at the time. His expeditions received considerable media attention, which contributed to the popularity of his exhibitions. In addition, he published his travelogues and other books in Czech, allowing them to reach a broad

1 Martin Šámal, *Emil Holub: cestovatel, etnograf, sběratel* [Emil Holub: Traveller, Ethnographer, Collector] (Vyšehrad / Národní muzeum, 2013), 85–131, 259–324.

audience.<sup>2</sup> In this way, Holub played a key role in shaping Czech perceptions of the African continent. His legacy was later widely commemorated by the communist regime.

Holub became an influential figure in the Czech lands. His publications inspired many other Czech travellers and even businessmen to journey to Africa. One such figure was Bedřich Machulka (1875–1954), who first travelled to Africa before the First World War. In the interwar period, he started to build his business organising hunting expeditions—initially in Sudan and later in Kenya.<sup>3</sup> His travels also took him to the Belgian Congo, Tanganyika, and Uganda. After World War II, his memoirs were published in the 1950s. Despite the official anti-colonial discourse of the time, Machulka, like Holub, admired British colonialism and adopted an uncritical attitude toward it.<sup>4</sup> In addition to these adventurers, Africa also attracted members of the nobility living in the Czech lands. Some even purchased property there and spent significant portions of their life on the continent. One such example is Adolf Schwarzenberg, who acquired the Mpala farm in Kenya.<sup>5</sup> After the Second World War, Africa once again captured the public imagination thanks to the travels of Jiří Hanzelka (1920–2003) and Miroslav Zikmund (1919–2021) in 1947–1950. Their travelogues and lectures were extremely popular.<sup>6</sup>

Political and trade relations between Africa and Czechoslovakia began to develop, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. During this period, Czechoslovakia built an extensive network of consulates and honorary consulates in the former colonies, which enabled more effective communication with these regions.<sup>7</sup> However, trade relations were limited by the colonial powers, which often adopted highly protectionist policies in their

2 Ibid., 239–46.

3 Ondřej Crhák, ed., *Bedřich Machulka: naposledy v Africe* [Bedřich Machulka: The Last Time in Africa] (National Museum, 2022), 26–28.

4 Bedřich Machulka, *V Africe na stezkách zvěře* [In Africa on the Game Trails] (Orbis, 1955), 24, 129, 171.

5 See Markéta Slabová and Martin Slaba, *Poslední ráj Adolfa Schwarzenberga* [The Last Paradise of Adolf Schwarzenberg] (Národní zemědělské muzeum, 2014).

6 Marta Edith Holečková, “Biafra viděná z Prahy: několik poznámek k africkým studentům v Praze šedesátých let” [Biafra Seen from Prague: Some Notes on African Students in Prague in the 1960s], *Paměť a dějiny* 3 (2020): 17.

7 Petr Zidek, *Československo a francouzská Afrika, 1948–68* [Czechoslovakia and French Africa, 1948–1968], (Libri, 2006), 18.

overseas markets. It is worth noting that during this period, Tomáš Baťa managed to significantly expand his footwear business in Africa. His company opened stores in most African countries and even started production on the continent. This trend continued into the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>8</sup>

After World War II, however, contacts with Africa began to decline. Even the Communist Party's rise to power in 1948 did not change anything. During the leadership of Joseph Stalin, the Soviet Union—and, by extension, the entire Eastern Bloc—had no policy towards the countries of the Global South. At that time, Soviet priorities remained focused mainly on Europe, and activities outside the continent were rare and largely exceptional.<sup>9</sup> A shift occurred when Nikita Khrushchev became the head of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union. Consequent changes in policy towards Africa began as early as 1955.<sup>10</sup> Issues regarding colonialism and national liberation movements were also discussed at the 20th Congress of the CPSU, which marked a turning point in Soviet policy towards decolonisation.<sup>11</sup> From that moment on, Soviet activities in Africa began to intensify, and this shift was also reflected in the policies of its Eastern European allies.

Until the onset of de-Stalinization, the foreign policies of Eastern Bloc countries were directly influenced by Moscow, and they largely acted as true Soviet satellites. However, with Khrushchev's rise to power, conditions began to ease in this area as well. Countries such as Czechoslovakia achieved a relatively large degree of autonomy in shaping their relations with African nations.<sup>12</sup> While Soviet policy remained the overarching framework for their activities, many states also pursued their own goals. Among the Eastern Bloc countries, Czechoslovakia was particularly well-positioned for cooperation with Africa. It retained a relatively strong network of diplomatic and commercial contacts from the interwar period, and compared to other socialist states, it had the most advanced industrial base—giving it a huge potential for further economic expansion.<sup>13</sup>

8 See "Baťův svět" [Baťa's World], accessed March 19, 2023, <http://svet.tomasbata.org/>.

9 Zidek, *Československo a francouzská Afrika, 1948–68*, 13.

10 Jan Záhořík, "Czechoslovakia and Congo/Zaire under Mobutu, 1965–1980," *Canadian Journal of History* 52, no. 2: 292.

11 Russian State Archive of Contemporary History, fond 1, op. 5, rol. 1003.

12 Zidek, *Československo a francouzská Afrika, 1948–68*, 13.

13 Jan Koura and Mikuláš Pešta, "Československo a studená válka v Africe" [Czechoslovakia and the Cold War in Africa], *Paměť a dějiny* 3 (2020), 6.

During the 1950s, Czechoslovak activity focused mainly on North Africa. Prague played a notably active role in supplying arms to Egypt and Algeria. The new Soviet stance on Africa further motivated Czechoslovakia to take greater initiative in this area. The arms deliveries to Nasser's Egypt, for example, were the result of Prague's efforts.<sup>14</sup> The wave of decolonisation in the early 1960s provided a fresh impulse. Czechoslovakia began to extend its influence into sub-Saharan Africa and further south on the continent. It was precisely in sub-Saharan Africa that Czechoslovakia held a strong and even unique position, one that was more independent of Moscow than it might appear. Although Prague coordinated its actions with the Soviet Union, it still retained significant room for autonomous engagement.<sup>15</sup> After the Soviet Union, Czechoslovakia represented the most active socialist country in Africa during the 1960s.<sup>16</sup> The motivation behind its cooperation with African countries were primarily pragmatic and economic. In addition to seeking new markets for its products, an important incentive was that trade with former colonies generated a substantial inflow of Western currencies into the Czechoslovak state treasury.<sup>17</sup>

Alongside trade, economic aid in the form of financial loans, investment projects, and the deployment of experts formed the basis of Czechoslovakia's cooperation with African countries.<sup>18</sup> These relations were further supported by scientific and educational cooperation. Students from African countries had the opportunity to study in Czechoslovakia, most notably at the University of the 17th November in Prague, which was established specifically for students from developing countries. In addition to language training—intended to prepare students to for further study at other Czechoslovak universities—the university also offered special study programs tailored to their needs.<sup>19</sup> In parallel to these civilian activities,

14 Natalia Telepnava, *Cold War Liberation: The Soviet Union and the Collapse of the Portuguese Empire in Africa, 1961–1975* (University of North Carolina Press, 2022), 15; Zidek, *Československo a francouzská Afrika, 1948–68*, 78.

15 Philip Muehlenbeck, *Czechoslovakia in Africa, 1945–1968* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 4.

16 Záhořík, "Czechoslovakia and Congo/Zaire under Mobutu, 1965–1980," 290.

17 Koura and Pešta, "Československo a studená válka v Africe," 6.

18 For example, Czechoslovakia invested in a hydro project in Ghana, sending a large number of engineers and other specialists. See Jakub Mazanec, "Československý Hydroprojekt v Africe" [Czechoslovak Hydroprojekt in Africa], *Paměť a dějiny* 3 (2020): 33–41.

19 Holečková, "Biafra viděná z Prahy," 18.



1. Opening of the exhibition *Afrika se osvobozuje* (Africa Liberates Itself). The event was attended by numerous diplomats from African countries, June 23, 1961, Archive of Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav III* (Exhibition Documentation), unnumbered

Parodos *Afrika se osvobozuje* (Afrika išsilaisvina) atidarymas, 1961 m. birželio 23 d., Náprsteko muziejaus archyvas

military assistance also expanded considerably. In addition to supplying weapons and other military equipment, Czechoslovakia provided training and education—not only to the regular armies of newly independent states, but also to various insurgent groups through its intelligence services. One notable example is the local MPLA,<sup>20</sup> which received substantial support from Prague during the civil war in Angola.<sup>21</sup> Czechoslovakia also provided humanitarian and medical aid. Alongside technical experts working on industrial and infrastructure projects, doctors and other medical personnel were dispatched to African countries. Humanitarian aid also included

20 People's Movement for the Liberation of Angola (*Movimento Popular de Libertação de Angola*).

21 Tomáš Machalík, "Czechoslovakia on the Battlefield of the Cold War. Angolan Civil War and the 'Namibian Czechs,'" in *Viva Africa* (University of West Bohemia in Pilsen, 2007), 207.

accepting refugees. For example, in 1985, several dozen children from West Africa were admitted to Czechoslovakia, where they received education.<sup>22</sup>

Cultural cooperation formed a significant chapter of Czechoslovakia's engagement with Africa. This cooperation was formalised through bilateral culture agreements aimed at promoting mutual exchange between the partner countries. Cultural cooperation was generally perceived as an effective tool for indoctrination. Art, dance, and music were seen as means to bridge divides. At the same time, such initiatives provided a platform for the exchange of mutual respect.<sup>23</sup> Within the framework of cultural contacts, one can trace a clear motive on the Czechoslovak side: self-promotion. Through cultural cooperation, Prague sought to present Czechoslovakia as a modern country with an advanced industrial sector. This effort—advertising, or propaganda, depending on one's perspective—was intended to support its economic activities. In 1957, Czechoslovak Radio began broadcasting in Arabic to the Middle East and North Africa under the name *Rádio Praha* [Radio Prague].<sup>24</sup> At the same time, propaganda magazines began to be published in English and French, designed to present Czechoslovakia as a developed country willing to assist others. Students returning home after completing their studies in Czechoslovakia were also expected to help shape its positive image abroad.<sup>25</sup> Travelling exhibitions—typically composed of photographic panels with explanatory text—served as another medium of self-presentation. These exhibitions were often translated into several languages and presented in various parts of the world. Their content usually highlighted achievements in industry or healthcare.<sup>26</sup> This method of international self-presentation was rare within the socialist bloc. The Soviet Union, which prepared similar travelling exhibitions primarily

22 Ibid., 210.

23 Paul Betts and Radina Vučetić, "Culture," in *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation*, ed. James Mark and Paul Betts (Oxford University Press, 2022), 150, 154.

24 Zidek, *Československo a francouzská Afrika, 1948–68*, 65.

25 Koura and Pešta, "Československo a studená válka v Africe," 8.

26 For example, the Czechoslovak exhibition *Péče o matku a dítě* [Mother and Child Care] was presented in various Third World countries, especially in Asia. The exhibition promoted the establishment of new institutions focused on maternal and child care. Archive of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Czech Republic, TO–Vietnam 1955–59, box 2.



2. Exhibition panel *The Socialist System and Africa*, Archive of Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav III* (Exhibition Documentation), unnumbered

Parodos stendas *Socialistinė sistema ir Afrika*, Náprsteko muziejaus archyvas

to showcase technological progress,<sup>27</sup> was an exception. According to official data from 1967, the Soviet Union organised around sixteen thousand such exhibitions. A large number of Soviet artists and art ensembles also visited newly decolonised countries during this period.<sup>28</sup>

Czechoslovak activities in Africa reached their peak during the 1960s—a decade that marked a broader surge of interest in African art and history across the Eastern Bloc. In response to this interest, an African Studies department was founded at the Faculty of Arts of Charles University in Prague, intended to train experts for further engagement in the region. However, during the 1970s, interest in Africa and developing countries

27 Yale Richmond, *Cultural Exchange and the Cold War* (Pennsylvania State University Press, 2003), 133.

28 Betts and Vučetić, “Culture,” 148, 150.

began to wane. This decline culminated in the closure of the University of the 17th November in 1974.<sup>29</sup> Nevertheless, commercial exchange and military aid continued to varying degrees until 1989.

### The Náprstek Museum and its collections

The Náprstek Museum was established in 1874 by Vojta Náprstek as a private industrial museum. It aimed to promote modern tools and innovation as a means of advancing the emancipation of the Czech nation. Among other things, Náprstek was a generous patron who supported individuals interested in non-European regions. In addition to granting access to his library, he often provided financial assistance. As a result of these contacts, the museum began to develop significant ethnographic collections. Many items were donated to Náprstek or purchased directly from travellers. This practice continued after his death in 1894, when the museum was managed by his wife, Josefa Náprstková.<sup>30</sup>

The museum's African collection began to take shape in the second half of the 19th century. Its contributors were mostly various collectors and individuals associated with travel. Among the most important was Emil Holub, who collected a considerable amount of ethnographic and natural science material during his expeditions to the northern regions of South Africa. His collection includes objects from, for example, the Lozi or the Northern Ndebele peoples. While primarily composed of everyday items, it also includes pieces of artistic significance. A total of 434 objects were added to the museum.<sup>31</sup> Holub acquired them through purchases, gifts, and exchanges. The majority of these artefacts consist of everyday tools, although one notable exception is a rock carving created by the San people, which Holub forcibly removed from its original site—an act that drew criticism even in his own time.<sup>32</sup> Another important figure is Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860–1932), best known for his travels to South America but also active in West Africa during the 1880s. In this region, he travelled through

29 Holečková, "Biafra viděná z Prahy," 19.

30 Zdeněk Šolle, *Vojta Náprstek a jeho doba* [Vojta Náprstek and His Time] (Felis, 1994), 175–216.

31 Josef Kandert, *Personalities of African Collecting in the Czech Lands in the Times of the Habsburg Monarchy (16th Century–1918)* (National Museum, 2008), 112–15.

32 Tomáš Winter, "Jihoafrické výstavy" [South African Exhibitions], in *Emil Holub*, ed. Tomáš Winter (Národní muzeum / Artefactum, 2023), 135.

present-day Gambia, Ghana, Togo, and Benin. A third important contributor was Martin B. Lány (1876–1941), a missionary who worked in the Kilimanjaro region of Tanzania. His collection, which includes several hundred objects related to the cultures of the Jaga, Arusha, Kahe, Laikipiak, and Maasai people,<sup>33</sup> was purchased for the museum by Josefa Náprstková.

During the 20th century, the practice of acquiring collections from private collectors continued. However, a major change occurred in 1932, when the Náprstek Museum was nationalised and placed under the supervision of the National Museum. In 1943, it became an integral part of that institution. A significant contributor from this period was Bedřich Machulka, who, together with his friend Richard Štorch (1877–1927), gradually enriched the museum's African collection with 375 objects from the regions of Sudan, Kenya, Uganda, and the Congo.<sup>34</sup> Another notable figure who contributed to the museum's collections in the mid-20th century was Joe Hloucha (1881–1957), whose collection comprises over 200 artefacts, mostly from Northern Africa, Mali, Congo, Benin, and the Ivory Coast.<sup>35</sup>

During the second half of the 20th century, the Náprstek Museum primarily acquired its collections from small-scale collectors, many of whom were experts sent to assist African countries. The museum itself did not conduct large-scale collecting expeditions, although its staff engaged in scientific activities in Africa. For example, museum employee Milan Stuchlík made several trips to Mali and Morocco, where he acquired several objects.<sup>36</sup> Some artefacts were also obtained through cultural agreements between Czechoslovakia and the African countries.<sup>37</sup> Another source of objects came from private collections confiscated after 1945 and 1948, which were assigned to the Náprstek Museum. The full history of the museum's African collection during the 20th century remains under-researched

33 Kandert, *Personalities of African Collecting*, 122.

34 Ibid., 125.

35 Josef Kandert and Matěj Stahl, "Africká sbírka" [The African Collection of the Náprstek Museum during the 20th Century], in *Dějiny Náprstkova muzea II*. [History of the Náprstek Museum II], ed. Pavel Onderka, Adéla Tůmová, and Klára Woitschová (Národní muzeum, 2025), 358–59.

36 Ibid.

37 Adéla Jůnová Macková, "Uvolnění a naděje: Náprstkovo muzeum v 60. letech 20. století" [Unleashing and Hope: The Náprstek Museum in the 1960s], in *Dějiny Náprstkova muzea I*. [History of the Náprstek Museum I], ed. Klára Woitschová (Národní muzeum, 2023), 240.

and unpublished.<sup>38</sup> In total, the African collection now contains more than 15,000 objects. In addition to its extensive material holdings, the museum also maintains a large photographic archive dating back to the 19th century. These photographs have often been used as supplementary material in exhibitions.

During the 1960s, the Náprstek Museum played an important role among institutions involved in scientific and cultural cooperation with former colonies. In addition to interstate cultural agreements that shaped the museum's exhibition planning, in 1961 it was tasked with expanding contacts with countries in Africa, Latin America, and non-socialist Asian nations. The museum also emerged as a key institution responsible for the care and study of non-European countries and their cultures. Since 1964, it has participated in the national research plan for developing countries alongside purely scientific institutions.<sup>39</sup>

Thanks to its focus and collections, the Náprstek Museum was a unique institution within Czechoslovakia. The museum had all the prerequisites to serve as a showcase for the communist regime's relationship with the non-European world. From 1948 to 1989, it participated in a total of 62 exhibitions of various scales on the topic of Africa. Some of these focused on ancient Egypt and, due to their content, fall outside the scope of this study. The remaining exhibitions can be divided into four categories. The largest was a permanent exhibition dedicated to the entire continent, opened in the late 1960s. This was complemented by short-term exhibitions on various subjects related to art and ethnography. In addition, the museum organised small monthly exhibitions in the form of several showcases, each devoted to specific themes. The final category encompasses travelling exhibitions and shows organised in cooperation with the Náprstek Museum. As already mentioned, the museum also held exhibitions based on international agreements. These typically marked significant anniversaries, such as the 15th anniversary of the Democratic Republic of Vietnam in 1960. These exhibitions often relied primarily on photographic materials, supplemented by a limited number of objects from the museum's collection. Travelling

38 The last brief overview was prepared by Professor Josef Kandert. See Josef Kandert, "Short History of the African Collections and African Exhibitions in the Náprstek Museum, Prague," *Annals of the Náprstek Museum*, no. 20 (1999): 119–38.

39 Adéla Júnová Macková, "Uvolnění a naděje," 223, 228.



3, 4. A view of the exhibition *Afrika se osvobozuje* (Africa Liberates Itself). The image shows the use of not only ethnographic objects but also artifacts from the Egyptology collection, Archive of Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav III*, unnumbered

*Parodos Afrika se osvobozuje* (Afrika išsilaisvina) vaizdas, Náprstekio muziejaus archyvas

exhibitions followed a similar format. It was also common for the museum to lend objects to displays in libraries, airlines, and shops.<sup>40</sup>

In terms of content, exhibitions can be divided into ethnographic and art-historical categories. For example, exhibitions such as *Núbie: lid a kultúra* [Nubia: People and Culture] (1970), *Nigerijská keramika* [Nigerian Ceramics] (1971), *Co a jak se kouří v Zambii* [What and How They Smoke in Zambia] (1972), *Rytmy Afriky* [Rhythms of Africa] (1979), and *Kultúry Nigérie* [Cultures of Nigeria] (1985) can be understood as purely ethnographic. Exhibitions related to art can be further divided into those dedicated to art history and those focusing on contemporary artists. The latter category includes *Malíři z Poto-Poto* [Painters from Poto-Poto] (1961), *Moderní africké umění 60. let* [Modern African Art of the 1960s] (1972), and *Ebenové sny* [Ebony Dreams] (1975), which featured loans from private collections. In contrast, exhibitions devoted to historical art were largely drawn from the museum's own holdings. These include: *Umění Afriky* [Art of Africa] (1950), *Fine Art of African Nations* (1961), *Umění Konga* [Art of the Congo] (1962), *Nigérie: výstava prací ošogbonských umělců* [Nigeria: Exhibition of Works by Artists from Osogbo] (1965), *Umění Pobřeží slonoviny, Libérie a Toga* [Art of the Ivory Coast, Liberia, and Togo] (1981), and *Africké umění v Československu* [African Art in Czechoslovakia] (1983). A combination of both approaches is found in permanent exhibitions or thematic shows such as *Afrika se osvobozuje* [Africa Is Liberated] (1961). A more specific category is represented by exhibitions like *Cestou Hanzelky a Zikmunda* [Hanzelka and Zikmund's Journey] (1951) and *Kolonie* [Colonies] (1953). In both cases, Africa primarily served as a backdrop for telling a particular story—the former presenting the journeys of Hanzelka and Zikmund and essentially serving as their narration.<sup>41</sup>

Judging from the exhibition titles and their dates, a certain connection emerges between political events in Africa and the activities of the museum. In the 1950s, exhibitions generally emphasised critique of colonialism, with the presentation of cultures playing a more secondary role. The large-scale decolonisation of Africa in the 1960s was a major catalyst that resonated within Czechoslovak society as well. Several exhibitions were

40 Jünová Macková, "Uvolnění a naděje," 239.

41 Archive of the Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav*, boxes 2–31.

produced as an immediate response to the Year of Africa. These exhibitions were mostly developed internally by the museum and remained free from external interference. While the Communist Party organisation in the National Museum may have imposed certain demands—such as opening exhibitions to coincide with political occasions—it appears that given the distance from the non-European world, the Náprstek Museum enjoyed a relatively high degree of autonomy in its work.

### Exhibitions about Africa and colonialism

Decolonisation during that period did not represent the postcolonial critique as we know it today. Current approaches address colonialism on multiple levels. They particularly focus on issues related to the acquisition of collections and the potential repatriation of objects to their countries of origin. Additionally, there is a critical awareness of how collections are intertwined with colonial ideologies. Museums engage with these issues in diverse ways, exploring the provenance of objects, displaying them more sensitively, and presenting them in new contexts. This often involves collaboration with indigenous curators from museums in former colonies or work with ethnic minority communities.<sup>42</sup>

Socialist museum institutions presented the theme of colonialism mainly in political terms, emphasising the national liberation struggle. Within the discourse of decolonisation, these museums did not engage in provenance research nor attempt to critically examine the connection between the Czech lands and global colonialism. Therefore, the exhibitions themselves generally avoided problematising the origins of the collections or the history of the Czech relationship to colonialism. Furthermore, most of these exhibitions were conceived from a Eurocentric perspective.<sup>43</sup>

The correlation between political issues and museum exhibitions was already evident in the 1950s. The travelling exhibition about Hanzelka and Zikmund's expeditions conveyed criticism of the colonial system and

42 Ondřej Crhák, "Postkoloniální obrat v muzejnictví" [The Postcolonial Turn in Museums], *Museum: muzejní a vlastivědná práce* 61, no. 2 (2023): 3–12.

43 For example, the 1977 exhibition *Argonauts of the Four Worlds* focused on seafaring and was conceived with an emphasis on Europe. The theme of colonialism is barely mentioned, even in relation to Africa. See Josef Kandert, *Argonauti čtyř světových stran: průvodce výstavou* [Argonauts of the Four Worlds: An Exhibition Guide], (Náprstkovo muzeum, 1977), 43–44.



5. Travelling exhibition *Kolonie* (Colonies) in Brno, February 1954, Archive of Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav III*, unnumbered

Keliaujanti paroda *Kolonie* (Kolonijos) Brno, 1954 m. vasaris, Náprstekio muziejaus archyvas

imperialism.<sup>44</sup> Its catalogue contains a short preface dedicated to colonial critique, using language that refers to Africans as “coloured people” and describing how colonial powers portrayed them as barbaric human beings.<sup>45</sup> In 1953, a travelling exhibition titled *Kolonie* [Colonies] opened, focusing on colonialism on a global scale, with Africa presented as a distinct chapter. The exhibition broadly critiqued colonial conditions through a Marxist lens, emphasising the exploitation of African nations. It also responded to contemporary events, such as the Mau Mau uprising in Kenya. The core of the exhibition consisted mainly of text and image panels, with ethnographic objects serving merely as decorative elements to attract visitors. This travelling exhibition toured throughout Czechoslovakia. According to the official assessment, its poor attendance was attributed to a lack of enthusiasm from

44 Archive of the Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav*, box 4.

45 *Cestou inženýrů Hanzelky a Zikmunda* [The Path of Hanzelka and Zikmund] (Národní muzeum, 1953), 5.

local party officials responsible for promoting it. In this exhibition, Africa functioned primarily as a tool or framework for critiquing the colonial system.<sup>46</sup>

In addition to the themes of national liberation, the exhibitions also featured tributes to famous figures from former colonies, such as Rabín-dranáth Thákur, commemorated in Czechoslovakia in 1961. The Year of Africa naturally served as a major impetus, leading to a marked increase in exhibitions on African themes during the 1960s. The exhibition *Afrika se osvobozuje* [Africa Is Becoming Liberated] (1961), which opened in Bratislava in direct response to the Year of Africa, followed a similar approach to earlier exhibitions. It was inaugurated on the Days of Friendship between the Czechoslovak and African peoples. The exhibition's content focused on the national liberation struggle across Africa and presented a history of colonialism. It also highlighted the modernisation of these countries, made possible by decolonisation. Another prominent motif was the emphasis on world peace, framed through the ideological perspective of the Eastern Bloc, which portrayed imperialism as a threat to peace.<sup>47</sup> The travelling exhibition *Výtvarné umění afrických národů* [Art of African Nations], which opened in Jihlava the same year, also referenced the Year of Africa. While primarily an art exhibition, its texts included phrases pointing to the "struggle against colonial oppression."<sup>48</sup> Another example of an exhibition responding to current events was *Ebenové sny* [Ebony Dreams] (1975). Dedicated to the modern art of the Makonde people, it was opened on the occasion of the Declaration of Independence of Mozambique. The exhibition texts logically focused on the local national liberation struggle and criticised the Portuguese government.<sup>49</sup>

Alongside the critique of the colonial system, however, there was no reflection on the origins of the objects in the collection or on collecting practices in general. Although exhibition catalogues occasionally included information about the history of the Náprstek Museum's collections, this was often presented uncritically. For instance, the catalogue for the 1966 exhibition *African Masks* even suggested that the Czech lands were, due to

46 Archive of the Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav*, box 7.

47 Ibid., box 15.

48 We do not have a list of where the exhibition was held. Ibid.

49 Ibid., box 24.

the absence of a sovereign state in the past, at a disadvantage compared to other countries regarding collections from Africa.<sup>50</sup>

Anti-colonial motifs in other exhibitions tend to appear mainly in introductions or as part of contextual texts. Notably, by the 1980s, critique of colonialism and support for decolonisation gradually disappeared. The 1983 exhibition *Africké umění v Československu* [African Art in Czechoslovakia] offers a telling reflection on this shift. While it refers to colonialism as “one-sided plunder,” the exhibition aimed to present the high artistic quality of African art. It critiqued earlier European approaches to African material culture, which were rooted in “cultural and ultimately racial superiority” and resulted in the denigration of non-European cultures. Opened on the occasion of the World Assembly for Peace and Life Against Nuclear War, the exhibition framed African decolonisation as part of the broader peace movement. The exhibition texts also emphasised that Czechoslovakia was never a colonial power and the collections related to Africa within its territory were not formed through expansionist policies.<sup>51</sup> The exhibition catalogue also includes a brief history of the African collection in the Náprstek Museum. In the section on Emil Holub, it mentions the rock engravings that he removed; however, rather than critiquing this act, Holub is celebrated as their saviour. The text states that if Holub had not taken the engravings, they would have been destroyed by future mining activities.<sup>52</sup>

Emil Holub was a rather interesting figure in terms of how he was presented during the socialist era. On the one hand, he retained the nationalist aura of a heroic adventurer, enhanced by a narrative of fighting injustice. The regime portrayed Holub as an anti-colonial hero resisting oppression.<sup>53</sup> The reality, however, was more complex. Holub was very much a product of 19th-century thinking. He held a paternalistic view of Africans and expressed an almost admiring stance toward colonialism. In his writings, he repeatedly framed the subjugation and colonisation of peoples as a necessary extension of civilisation.<sup>54</sup>

50 Erich Herold, *Africké masky: katalog výstavy* [African Masks: Exhibition Catalogue] (Náprstkovo muzeum, 1966), 1.

51 Archive of the Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav*, box 28.

52 Václav Formánek, *Africké umění v Československu* [African Art in Czechoslovakia] (Náprstkovo muzeum, 1983), 20.

53 Tomáš Winter, *Emil Holub* (Národní muzeum, Artefactum, 2023), 14.

54 Ondřej Crhák, “Rakousko-Uhersko a kolonialismus” [Austria-Hungary and Colonialism], in *Emil Holub*, ed. Tomáš Winter (Národní muzeum / Artefactum, 2023), 81–91.



6. Travelling exhibition *Kolonie* (Colonies) in České Budějovice, September 1954, Archive of Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav III*, unnumbered

Keliaujanti paroda *Kolonie* (Kolonijos) Česke Budejovicuose, 1954 m. rugsėjis, Náprsteko muziejaus archyvas

Challenging traditional notions of African cultures as primitive and barbaric was the central aim of most art-focused exhibitions. The goal of highlighting the aesthetic qualities of African art often appears in the preparatory documents.<sup>55</sup> Exhibitions dedicated to contemporary art also connected their content to colonial criticism. For example, in 1961, the travelling exhibition *Malíři z Poto-Poto* [Painters from Poto-Poto] showcased paintings from the Republic of the Congo, drawn from a private collection. The exhibition emphasised the technical and aesthetic skills of the artists while situating their work within both historical and contemporary contexts. Interestingly, the exhibition often referred to Africans in general terms rather than specifying ethnic identities. The paintings themselves mostly addressed non-political themes, focusing instead on village life, nature, and

55 Archive of the Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav*, boxes 16, 20, and 28.

folk culture.<sup>56</sup> Similarly, the 1972 exhibition *Moderní africké umění 60. let* [Modern African Art of the 1960s] featured a collection of paintings by Ulli Beira, loaned from abroad and previously shown in Paris and Vienna. This exhibition was presented as a classic exposition of modern art, with anti-colonial critique naturally present.<sup>57</sup>

### Race and view of Africa

The issue of racism is a fundamental part of postcolonial critique. Confronting inherent racism is essential to the decolonisation of museum institutions. However, during the socialist era, this topic was approached somewhat differently.

In Czechoslovak society, many stereotypes about Africa and its peoples persisted—some of which were racist. These attitudes largely stemmed from European 19th-century perspectives that were transmitted into Czech society.<sup>58</sup> Yet, racist attitudes were rarely explicitly addressed within socialist society during the 20th century. Ideologically, racism was incompatible with socialism. However, this official stance did not translate into criticism of domestic racism. Instead, socialist countries focused their critiques on racism outside their borders or even the continent.<sup>59</sup> The regime generally ignored the existence of racism in Czechoslovakia.<sup>60</sup>

Eastern European countries articulated their position on this issue. On the one hand, they claimed a certain credit based on the lack of their involvement in colonial empires and their own experiences of imperialism, which helped construct an image of genuine solidarity with colonised peoples.<sup>61</sup> However, on the other hand, these states developed a paternalistic vision of a socialist civilising mission. While this superiority was defined culturally rather than racially, it nonetheless created an unequal relationship.<sup>62</sup>

56 Ibid., box 14.

57 Ibid., box 23; Erich Herold, *Moderní Africké umění šedesátých let – sbírka Ulli Beiera* [Modern African Art of the 1960s—Ulli Beier Collection] (Náprstkovo muzeum, 1972).

58 Filip Herza, *Imaginace jinakosti* [Imagination of Otherness] (Scriptorium, 2020), 145–67.

59 James Mark, “Race,” in *Socialism Goes Global: The Soviet Union and Eastern Europe in the Age of Decolonisation*, ed. James Mark and Paul Betts (Oxford University Press, 2022), 221.

60 Marta Edith Holečková, *Příběh zapomenuté univerzity* [The Story of the Forgotten University] (FF UK, 2019), 169.

61 Mark, “Race,” 222.

62 Ibid., 229.

Even the socialist understanding of equality in the countries of the Eastern Bloc did little to dismantle racial stereotypes. Official discourse consistently framed equality as a “brotherhood among nations.” However, equality was not understood as a universal human concept—where all individuals are equal—but rather as equality between distinct nations, or races. These groups were recognised as equal but clearly distinguished from one another. Using East Germany as an example, Quinn Slobodian describes this approach as a “racial rainbow.”<sup>63</sup> Slobodian further notes that socialist regimes used stereotypical depictions of other races and cultures in their propaganda.<sup>64</sup>

The events of the second half of the 20th century exposed these issues but offered no real solutions. Czechoslovak activities in Africa led to a significant presence of African students at Czechoslovak universities, creating one of the imaginary contact zones where Czechoslovak society could engage with foreign cultures.<sup>65</sup> However, these students soon encountered conflicts with Czech peers, which were often racially motivated.<sup>66</sup> Racism was not uncommon among official institutions either; well-documented cases reveal police bias against foreign students, who were sometimes punished despite evidence to the contrary.<sup>67</sup> Furthermore, Czechoslovak society understood Africa as a homogeneous entity, overlooking its cultural diversity, which likely contributed to various conflict situations.<sup>68</sup> The rise of racism in the 1970s and 1980s across the Eastern Bloc is closely linked to the growing number of foreign students and workers during this period.<sup>69</sup>

Museum exhibitions represented another contact zone between Czech and foreign cultures. While they addressed racism only in connection with colonial powers, their stated aim was to challenge existing stereotypes in Czechoslovakia. The main effort was to showcase African art’s

63 Quinn Slobodian, “Socialist Chromatism. Race, Racism, and the Racial Rainbow in East Germany,” in *Comrades of Colour: East Germany in the Cold War World*, ed. Quinn Slobodian (Berghahn Books, 2015), 23–39.

64 *Ibid.*, 25.

65 Mikuláš Pešta, *Mezi solidaritou, obchodem a politikou: vojenský výcvik Afričanů v Československu v šedesátých letech* [Between Solidarity, Trade and Politics: Military Training for Africans in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s], *Paměť a dějiny* 3 (2020): 24.

66 Holečková, *Příběh zapomenuté university*, 166.

67 *Ibid.*, 171.

68 Holečková, “Biafra viděná z Prahy,” 20.

69 Mark, “Race,” 223.

aesthetic qualities and to refute its characterisation as primitive. The exhibition *Africké umění v Československu* [African Art in Czechoslovakia]<sup>70</sup> even surprised Czechoslovak journalists by demonstrating that African art was far from primitive. Elements of the aforementioned socialist paternalist approach to development aid were evident in exhibitions with political connotations, as was the use of cultural stereotypes in representing other nations. For example, the catalogue covers for the 1953 *Colonies* exhibition included, in one version, the image of an Asian man wearing a horse-riding hat, and in another, an orientalist Middle Eastern scene featuring a mosque tent and a poor woman riding a buffalo cart.<sup>71</sup>

During the 1960s and 1970s, no clear conceptual proposals to address racism emerged. It was only with the concept proposed in 1980 that the Náprstek Museum began to define itself explicitly as an anti-colonial and anti-racist institution.<sup>72</sup> While official stances certainly influenced this shift, museum experts themselves played a significant role by trying to incorporate the deconstruction of stereotypes into permanent or short-term exhibitions. This change was a reaction to the rise in racially motivated attacks against Roma and Vietnamese communities in the late 1970s. Due to the lack of archival material, the precise motivations behind the museum's new concept remain unclear. Racism was a largely unspoken issue, and rigid censorship prevented such discussions or reports from appearing in the official press. However, the growing racial violence was also noted by Charter 77 and the Czechoslovak Helsinki Committee, who condemned it as incompatible with democratic values. These reactions suggest that at least some members of the intellectual and cultural elites were aware of the problem. Therefore, it is unsurprising that the Náprstek Museum sought to address this pressing issue.<sup>73</sup>

70 Archive of the Náprstek Museum, *Dokumentace výstav*, box 28.

71 *Kolónie – katalog výstavy* [Colonies—Exhibition Catalogue] (Náprstkovo muzeum, 1953); Jiří Hronek, *Boj národů proti koloniálnímu otroctví* [The Struggle of Nations Against Colonial Slavery] (Náprstkovo muzeum, 1953).

72 Archive of the National Museum, *Registratura NpM* [Registry of the Náprstek Museum], *Koncepce a úkoly NpM* [Concepts and Tasks of the Náprstek Museum], 1980, box 38; National Archive of the Czech Republic, *Ministerstvo kultury, Celková zpráva o výsledcích prověrek společenskovedních expozic a výstav v muzeích ČSSR* [Ministry of Culture, Overall Report on the Results of Examinations of Social Science Exhibitions in Museums of Czechoslovakia], box 271.

73 Mark, "Race," 286.

Unfortunately, the museum's efforts had limited impact on shaping public perceptions of Africa at the time. Several racist inscriptions appeared in the museum's visitor books. For example, in 1979, one visitor wrote: "Bylo to docela dobré, až na negry, Indiáni byli výborní a po negrech si musím u nich znovu spravit náladu a chu." ["It was pretty good, except for the negroes; the Indians were excellent, and after the negroes, I have to get my mood and taste back with them"].<sup>74</sup> It is notable that racist attitudes were particularly directed toward African cultures, while others, such as Native Americans, were perceived mostly positively—largely due to the popularity of Karl May's books. This particular entry coincides roughly with the period when the museum was developing its new anti-racist concept. While the entry itself likely did not prompt the change, it illustrates the prevailing Czech attitudes toward other cultures at the time.

### Conclusion

Czechoslovakia was among the most active socialist states engaging with the countries of the Global South, driven by pragmatic political and economic interests. Cultural policy formed an integral part of the new approach to the newly decolonised countries in Africa.

The decolonisation of Africa also brought an impulse to the cultural sphere in Czechoslovakia itself. The Náprstek Museum organised several exhibitions in response to political developments, where African art and ethnography functioned as tools to express anti-colonial and anti-imperialist attitudes. Africa itself served as a framework to demonstrate the perception of decolonisation and its support, as well as to present Czechoslovakia's contribution and positive impact in the region. African peoples were presented as fraternal, and their material culture played a role in challenging long-standing stereotypes in Czechoslovak society. The exhibitions aimed to present African material culture beyond the previous perception and to point out its aesthetic qualities. However, the question remains as to whether these efforts had a meaningful impact on society. Within the framework of international relations, the exhibitions themselves signalled not only Czechoslovakia's interest in Africa but also the regime's progressive stance

74 Archive of the Náprstek Museum, *Visitors Books*, 1979.

toward former colonies. Thus, the exhibitions formed part of a broader strategy to build a positive image of the Czechoslovak path to socialism.

The political framework based on official state ideology shaped the exhibitions in two ways: either it was incorporated from the very beginning or introduced later through official reviews.<sup>75</sup> Unfortunately, the internal processes within the National Museum, which would show what originated from museum staff initiative and what was a political directive, are difficult to reconstruct due to the lack of archival material. Nevertheless, it can be argued that the museum's anti-colonial approach to African art was largely genuine, grounded in the curators' education and their positive engagement with these cultures.

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75 Archive of the National Museum, *Registratura NpM* [Registry of the Náprstek Museum], *Zpráva o práci a o oponentském řízení scénáře politického vyústění expozice Asie do současnosti* [Report on the Work and on the Opponent Review of the Scenario of the political Termination of the Asia Exposition to the Present Time], box 35.

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Santrauka

## Afrikos kolekcija ir socialistinė antikolonijinė kova Náprsteko muziejaus parodose 1948–1989 m.

Ondřej Crhák

*Reikšminiai žodžiai:* dekolonizacija, kolonializmas, Afrika, Náprsteko muziejus, Čekoslovakija, parodos.

Straipsnyje apžvelgiamos 1948–1989 m. Náprsteko muziejuje surengtos Afrikos kultūros parodos, kurios pristatomos Čekoslovakijos socialistinio požiūrio į dekolonizaciją kontekste. Muziejus buvo tapęs platforma skleisti antikolonijinius ir prosocialistinius naratyvus, atspindinčius šalies pastangas daryti poveikį naujai dekolonizuotoms valstybėms Šaltojo karo metais. Šių parodų etnografiniai eksponatai dažnai perteikdavo politines žinutes, naudojant Afrikos meno ir kultūros pristatymą buvo siekiama stiprinti solidarumą ir pabrėžti Čekoslovakijos pramonės ir kultūros modernumą. Remiantis archyvine medžiaga, straipsnyje analizuojama, kaip šios parodos tarnavo visuomenės suvokimui formuoti ir režimo užsienio bei vidaus politikai remti.