

# MUO DUTCH ANGLE

## DUTCH AND CZECHOSLOVAK AVANT-GARDE

ŠIKMÝ ÚHEL  
HOLANDSKÁ  
A ČESKOSLOVENSKÁ  
AVANTGARDA

### HUBERT VAN DEN BERG SOME NOTES ON THE EXHIBITION IN THE OLOMOUC MUSEUM OF ART

→ Moravia might not have been a “centre” of the avant-garde of a stature compatible with Paris or Berlin and might be seen in a broader European perspective rather periphery and province. Yet, that doesn’t say anything in the history of modern art. As the case of Vincent van Gogh, Paul Gauguin and Paul Cézanne or of – another arbitrary, but still major case – Edvard Munch as early pioneers of the modern breakthrough and modern art in the late nineteenth century signal: it was not per se Paris, Vienna or Prague as European cultural capitals in those years, also the rather small and quite provincial Norwegian town Kristiania, now known as Oslo, and the literally provincial Provence were both definitely peripheral, but still hotspots of artistic innovation. Moravia is not the Provence and Brno not Oslo, but Moravia was still a major region and Brno a major node in the network of

the European avant-garde in the period between the two World Wars. A small indication here: Brno was named next to Paris, Vienna, and Warsaw in 1925 on the cover of the Dutch magazine *De Stijl*, a major platform of European constructivism connected with names like Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg, as one of the centres of constructivism in the mid-1920s.

→ The focus of the exhibition is slightly later – the 1930s, when the “pure” and primarily painterly constructivism à la Mondrian had been succeeded by still constructivist, but meanwhile more functional, functionalist approaches, often identified with the Bauhaus (also located in the rather provincial towns of Weimar and Dessau), but with the Bauhaus as just one, though surely pivotal centre and meeting point, where innovative artists, designers and architects met from all parts of Europe with a similar programme in different disciplines, working on what they called New Architecture (or International

Style), New Typography and New Advertising Design, New Photography as well as avant-garde cinema, represented in Czechia by names like Karel Teige, Ladislav Sutnar, Jaromír Funke, Zdeněk Rossmann, František Kalivoda and Alexander Hackenschmied (Hammid) – to name such some. Iconic here is the Villa Tugendhat in Brno (maybe less known, but from the same school: the Villa Seidler and Villa Nakládal in Olomouc) and a major Moravian motor and promotor of functionalism: Baťa from Zlín.

→ In this context, as the historical anchor of the exhibition, the leading Dutch functionalist graphic designer, photographer and film maker Paul Schuitema came to Brno in his Christmas holiday in 1935–36 on invitation of František Kalivoda to give presentations on New Photography and the use of photography in graphic design as well as on Dutch avant-garde cinema. He brought five Dutch films, among others by the then already internationally renowned director Joris Ivens as well as a rough pre-version of a film by himself. Schuitema's trip to Brno (he went to Prague as well – as all tourists to Czechia tend to do, but his main destination was Brno) was a return visit. In early 1934, František Kalivoda had toured arthouse cinemas and local sections of the Dutch Film Liga, an organisation promoting avant-garde film, in several towns in the Netherlands in the first place to promote the just released movie *Zem spieva* by the Slovak director Karol Plicka (1933), but also to screen a dozen Czech experimental shorts as part of the side programme. In Holland, Schuitema had hosted Kalivoda in Rotterdam. When Kalivoda returned to Brno, he invited Schuitema to come over, when he saw possibility, also to present Dutch films in Brno.

→ Accounts in the Dutch press noted the congeniality between these movies and cinematic experiments from Holland, among others in the case of “scientific” films made by the Brno biologist Vladimír Úlehla on the movement of plants and

similar films made by the Dutch filmmaker J.C. Mol. As Lidové noviny reported in January 1936 on the screening of the Dutch films in the Masaryk University, organised by the Brno section of the Československá společnost pro vědeckou kinematografii Vit led by Úlehla, in particular Mol's film *From the Realm of Crystals* met enormous enthusiasm. This movie – in a rare colour version from a period when films were generally black and white – and other films shown in Brno by Schuitema and by Kalivoda in Holland are a core element of the exhibition.

→ As for these films as part of the avant-garde exchange in the 1930s, but also as documents of an obvious congeniality and stylistic kinship, an indication for the multi-faceted circulation of concepts and ideas between Holland and Czechoslovakia then is the music score of the short *Rain* with filmic impressions of a rainy day in Amsterdam, directed by Mannus Franken and Joris Ivens in 1929. Today, the film is mostly screened with a composition by Hanns Eisler, *Fourteen Ways to Describe Rain* from 1941, the exhibition shows the film with the original soundtrack of 1933 with a composition by the Surinamese-Dutch writer and composer Lou Lichtveld based on the music-theoretical conceptions of the Czech composer Alois Hába.

→ The Czech-English title of the exposition may surprise some by the seeming incongruence between Czech *Šikmý úhel* and Dutch *angle* as the English match. The title might be read indeed as double title with divergent meanings in Czech and English: Dutch *angle* referring to the Dutch dimension of the exhibition and *Šikmý úhel*, *oblique angle*, to the not all too common framing and presentation of Czech and Dutch historical avant-garde as two cognate and congenial branches of a strongly interwoven Central-European avant-garde in the 1930s and not as somehow related, but distant manifestations of avant-garde from two different hemispheres, an Eastern (or

Eastern-Central) and a Western avant-garde, as still common in the standard master narrative of the historical avant-garde, as it was established in the period of the Cold War and the East-West divide by the Iron Curtain. Though the Iron Curtain disappeared more than three decades ago, its impact, among others, on the anachronistic way European avant-garde history (and more general: cultural history) in the period before the Second World War and Cold War is in many respects still not overcome as it should be in the present-day united Europe.

→ Despite the seeming incongruence between Czech *Šikmý úhel* and English Dutch angle, *šikmý úhel* is actually – as technical term in cinematography and photography – the Czech translation of what in English can be called: Dutch angle, Dutch tilt, tilted or oblique angle, referring to the technical “trick” of canting the camera and, thus, tilting the horizon, that appears – as a consequence – not as horizontal as it normally is, but rather in a tilted, diagonal way. In explanation, why this angle was labelled “Dutch” in English can be found in the small publication that accompanies the exhibition. Since a tilted angle and the diagonal were eye-catching features and – in a way – basic elements of a shared visual syntax of Czech and Dutch avant-garde cinema, photography and graphic design of a functionalist provenance being the focus of the exhibition, *Šikmý úhel*/Dutch angle names in its semantic ambiguities exactly what the exhibition aims to show: the cognate character of Dutch and Czech avant-garde in the 1930s.

→ The fact that the artistic production of Czech (or Czechoslovak or Moravian) and Dutch constructive functionalism was highly cognate and akin, not just stylistically, but also in its motifs and subjects, should not conceal, though, that they emerged and were elaborated in different landscapes, both literary – as far as Czechia is landlocked and Holland as flat as countryside can be without

any mountains that deserve to be called mountains – and metaphorically, with – most striking here in Olomouc – all Baroque opulence opposed to the sobriety and modesty, typical for Dutch Calvinism, mirroring the flat, straight, geometrical character of the almost proverbial type of Dutch landscape, in particular in the west of the Netherlands, in Holland proper: the so-called polder.

→ A larger contrast than between the Holy Trinity Column (*Sloup Nejsvětější Trojice*) as UNESCO world heritage site here in Olomouc and the Beemster Polder as UNESCO world heritage in the Dutch province North-Holland is almost impossible. Fun fact: in a very early description of the polder on the backside of the map from 1633 shown in the exhibition, the former lake and then polder Beemster is also referred to as “Bohemster”, as it were as another Bohemia, not “a desert country at the sea”, but a wetland under sea level, just a few kilometres from the North Sea. Contrasts and differences like these also left their traces and can be observed in the films, photography, and graphic design in the exhibition, yet rather in detail than in the shared oblique angle and diagonals as stylistic markers of shared ambitions in the European avant-garde a century ago, be it in Holland, be it in Czechia, Czechoslovakia, or Moravia.

→ Another fun fact – to use this present-day term – or small vista of the manifold and sometimes unexpected Czech-Dutch avant-garde connections: among the iconic photographs by Paul Schuitema is an abstract-minimalist modern still life, a light bulb on a newspaper – on show in the exhibition, reproduced on the middle of the accompanying publication.

On the diagonally photographed newspaper page an advertising line for a common Dutch coffee, tea, and tobacco brand in those days, not just on sale in Holland, but also exported to other countries, J. & A.C. van Rossem,

pronounced and sometimes spelled as well: Rossum. It might be accidental, but it could well have been a subtle allusion by Schuitema to the firm name in the title of Karel Čapek's famous theatre play R.U.R. – Rossum's Universal Robots (1920), also given the electric lightbulb, probably one from Philips, for whom Schuitema designed publicity, among others for – then still quite futurist – Philips car radios in the 1930s.

Not only the lightbulb, but many other Philips products, like loudspeakers, sound recorders, transmission systems, radio's, x-ray machines, first experimental television, gases, and synthetics belonged to the same modern-times range, to which Čapek's robots did belong as well, on the photo symbolically represented by the silver shining lightbulb). Like Čapek's R.U.R., Philips was more than just a factory (as in the case of R.U.R. a family-led enterprise). Next to sound studios, where e.g., Lichtveld's composition for the soundtrack of *Rain* was recorded, Philips had since 1914 its own quite formidable laboratory for fundamental research into electronics, physics and chemistry, Philips Physics Laboratory (NatLab). Philips might not have been the only corporation in the electronics branch with such a laboratory but might well have been an inspiration for Čapek's R.U.R. as an enterprise with its own "physiological and research divisions". In many ways, the real Philips and the fictional R.U.R. were quite proxy.

It might be a common, maybe also the most plausible, elucidating, and prolific interpretation of Čapek's "Rossum" to read the name as a reference to the Czech word *rozum*, only spelled in a slightly different, alienated way. And there needs to be no doubt whatsoever that Čapek surely had *rozum* in mind when he chose the name Rossum for the company portrayed in his play. However, as many photos with Čapek posing with small cigars and cigarettes document, Čapek was a passionate and heavy smoker. His preference were clearly small cigars, but

as a habitual smoker, it is quite likely that he knew the Dutch trademark Van Rossem, established as a tobacco company already in 1750 (in other words as old as the Holy Trinity Column completed in 1754) and at least part of Van Rossem's wide assortment of rolling and pipe tobacco, be it from the merchandize in some Prague tobacconist's store or maybe as a gift from Holland.

During the First World War, overseas, "colonial" consumption goods like tea, coffee and tobacco had been in short supply and become very expensive in Central Europe, due to the "iron ring" that encapsulated the German and Austrian-Hungarian Empires with transport routes to other continents being cut off by sea blockades. Not only during the war, but also in the first years after the war, tea, coffee, and tobacco from Holland were, therefore, highly coveted, and much appreciated gifts. Though Čapek clearly preferred cigars, he might have resorted, as many habitual smokers did, to rolling tobacco occasionally when need arose, maybe and not unlikely supplied by Czech acquaintances from Holland – a quite practice in those days (maybe even from Emil Filla, not only a painter like Čapek's brother Josef, but also like Čapek someone close to Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and as such in 1918 the first official envoy of the new Czechoslovakian Republic in Holland – another avant-garde connection). Which type of tobacco from Van Rossem's assortment, Čapek knew or smoked himself?

Maybe the answer can be found in his archive in some correspondence, but there can be little doubt that he did not know the brand name as he used it in his play. At least a decade later, among the images in his *Obrázky z Holandska* (1932) a pipe-smoking man in traditional Dutch dress could have stepped out of some Van Rossem's tobacco package, maybe Van Rossem's *Matrozenshag* or *Schipperstabak* (Sailor's rolling and Skipper's pipe tobacco). Ahoj!