

## PURCHASED FROM QUARITCH: BOOK DESIGN OF THE CZECH AVANT-GARDE

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**I**N 1927, KAREL TEIGE, a leading figure in the Czech avant-garde during the interwar period, and the theorist and spokesperson for the Devětsil group, criticized the book beautiful movement in his essay “Modern Typography.” He found the extravagance of art nouveau archaic and prone to academicism, and its decorativeness eccentric, illogical, and fantastic. All the elements of fine book design associated with Czech modernism led to “the danger of excessive bibliophilia and collectors’ snobbism.” He was reiterating the sentiment of Devětsil, whose original fourteen members, including Teige, declared upon the group’s founding in 1920 that ‘the era has split in two. The old times lie behind us, condemned to rot in libraries, while before us a new day glitters.’

Evidently, Devětsil’s creative program relegated the library and limited, fine-art editions into the realm of the old. Its representatives turned away from the book as a work of art towards conceiving it as a visual creation, wherein the textual component would be integrated into the design. Furthermore, they

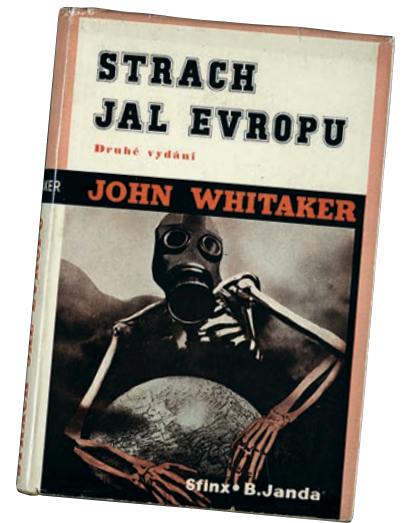
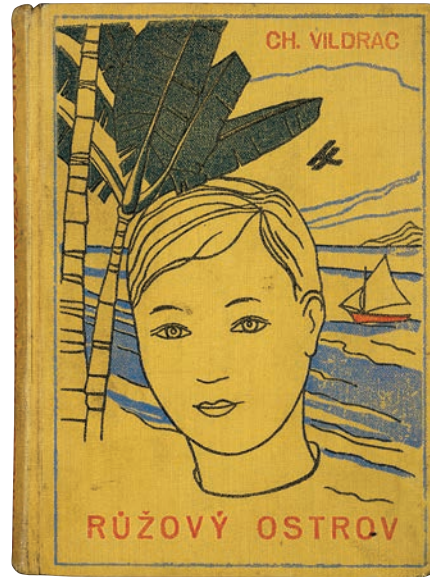
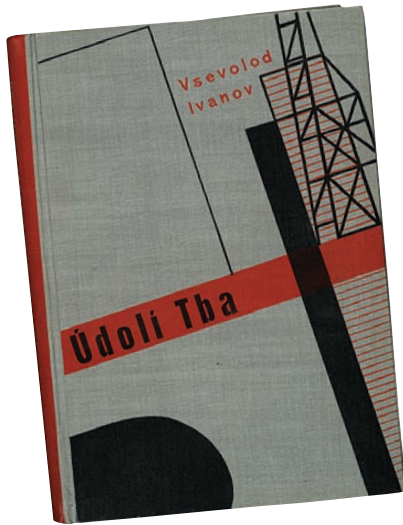
emphasized the social function of the book, its usefulness, its reliance on technology, and the collaboration of graphic artists with the printers. Their books were meant for a mass-market audience, to be in the hands of readers and not bibliophiles, or, apparently, librarians.

It is thus with some irony, but no contradiction, that the Thomas Fisher Rare Book Library acquired a remarkable private collection of Czech avant-garde books, thus adding to its strong core collection of some three hundred titles. This new collection of about seventy-five books was purchased from the London-based book dealer Bernard Quaritch in November 2012, with funds from the Josef F. Scheybal Czech Collection Fund. The works, all with decorative cloth covers and/or dust jackets, many of which include eye-catching graphic details and inspiring illustrations, represent, if not the most recognizable, then some of the more unusual examples of book design in Czechoslovakia during the 1920s and 1930s. Their design is characterized by the use of a variety of colours and types; flat, abstract,

geometrical shapes; and photomontage. And, despite Teige’s condemnation of bibliophile editions, many were issued in limited, numbered copies.

Well represented in this collection are experimental works by the art group Devětsil: poet Konstantin Biebl (*Nebo peklo ráj*, 1931); prose writers Karel Konrád (*Rinaldo*, 1927), Karel Schulz (*Sever, Východ, Západ*, 1923), Vladislav Vančura (*Pekař Jan Marboul*, 1929); artists Adolf Hoffmeister (*Piš jak slyšíš*, 1931), Josef Síma (L. Delluc, *Lidé z baru*, 1925), Karel Teige (V. Ivanov, *Údolí TBA*, 1931), Toyen (C. Vildrac, *Růžový ostrov*, 1930), among others. A number of the books were collaborative ventures, with the text, typography, and cover design involving two to three or more different members of Devětsil. One book is even devoted to an honorary member of the group, Charles Chaplin, and includes a book cover design by Teige and Otakar Mrkvička, and three caricatures by the French artist Fernand Léger (L. Delluc, *Chaplin*, 1924). Chaplin’s membership, as well as that of Douglas Fairbanks and

**OPENING PAGE:** An illustration by Toyen from C. Vildrac, *Růžový ostrov*, 1930. **BELOW, CLOCKWISE FROM LEFT:** V. Ivanov, *Údolí Tba*, 1931; C. Vildrac, *Růžový ostrov*, 1930; Czech translation of John T. Whitaker's *Fear came on Europe*, 1937; Václav Mašek's illustration from the first Czech translation of Aleksandr Blok's *Dvenadtsat* (The Twelve).



Harold Lloyd, was mostly symbolic. Still, it was indicative of the far ranging interests of the leftist-oriented group which influenced all areas of the arts—film, theatre, literature, painting, music, architecture, typography, art theory, and criticism.

This artistic association existed for about ten years, until, 1931, when it was dissolved. Its members, during the next decades, explored and experimented with other styles, variously incorporating elements of Constructivism, Surrealism, and Socialist Realism. Two of the more influential members of the Devětsil avant-garde, Jindřich Štyrský and Toyen



(pseudonym of Marie Čermínová, coined from the French word for citizen “citoyen”), while living together in Paris from 1925 to 1929, went on to develop Artificialism. This style was connected with the synthesis of picture and poem, or “picture poems,” and emphasized the abstract visualization of reminiscences. Later, in 1934, having returned to Prague, the two were founding members of the Czech Group of Surrealists. Among the purchased items in the collection are ten works with book cover designs or illustrations by these two artists. Štyrský’s designs made use of photomontages, such as the covers for the Czech translations of Dhan Gopal Mukerji’s novel *Caste and Outcast* (1932), and John T. Whitaker’s book *Fear came on Europe* (1937). The former depicts a Buddha floating over American skyscrapers; the latter shows a gas-masked skeleton clutching the globe. Toyen’s illustrations are characterized by usually simple, realistic and precise ink drawings, such as those included in the Czech translation of Charles Vildrac’s *L’île rose* (1930). Štyrský analyzing Toyen’s illustrations likened them to an ice cube melted by the sun: “They vanish, becoming invisible as *objects*, so that they might reappear transformed as arabesques and provocative interconnected points, lines, and surfaces.”

Many examples of book covers by František Muzika and graphic designs by Ladislav Sutnar are also present in the collection, as are collaborative designs for translations of works by French and Russian writers.

For Czechoslovakia, situated between the West and the East, Paris and Moscow were important sources of inspiration, and had a fundamental impact on Czech art of the interwar period. By way of the Soviet Union, Czech intellectuals familiarized themselves with post-revolutionary movements. Roman Jakobson served as press attaché at the Soviet Embassy in Prague, and the likes of Ilia ěhrenburg, Vladimir Mayakovsky, Iurii Tynianov, and others lectured there. To the collections of Fisher Library has been added a number of Czech editions of Mayakovsky’s works, including the translation of his propaganda-art poem *150,000,000* (1945), with illustrations by Václav Mašek. The poem, first published in 1921, is an allegory of a battle between millions of Soviet workers against evil capitalists led by President Woodrow Wilson. Lenin dismissed it as “incomprehensible rubbish.” Mašek also illustrated the first Czech translation of Aleksandr Blok’s *Dvenadtsat* (The Twelve). Blok’s poem, completed in January 1918, describes the march of twelve Bolshevik soldiers just months after the October coup through the streets of Petrograd during a harsh winter’s night.

This wonderful collection of Czech avant-garde books will be properly cared for at the Fisher Library. All are welcome to read, handle, and study the volumes. Many will be on view in an exhibition planned for September 2015 on modern Czech book design.