

## Uherčice, the Restoration of Collalto Empire Furniture

by Barbara Peacock

One of the fascinating aspects of visiting the Czech Republic in recent years is to see how dramatically attitudes have changed in the presentation of country house interiors. As a result of confiscation of German property in 1945 following the Beneš Decrees and the appropriation of all private property in 1948 after the Communists seized power, the state became the owner of literally hundreds of great palaces, country houses and smaller manor houses, many of the first importance in terms of architectural quality and contents. About 100 were retained as country house museums open to the public whilst the rest became institutions such as offices, hospitals, care homes, agricultural institutions, farms, and prisons. They were stripped of their furnishings which were often sold or stolen in the chaos of those early Communist years. However, fortunately subsequently in many cases careful inventories of a château's contents were made by the authorities before individual pieces were either redistributed amongst the state owned châteaux open to the public, or put in store. These inventories are a valuable tool in tracing the origins of individual pieces today when there is much greater concern amongst curators and conservationists to return pieces where possible to their original location.

Château interiors all over Europe generally have many layers of history, their decoration and contents reflecting the taste of successive generations of owners. However, in the Communist years, it was important to disassociate a house from the family who once lived there - a policy which resulted in the creation of a museum rather than a home. For example, if the house in question was Empire period, it would be filled with Empire furniture from a number of different châteaux, if a Gothic Revival house, it would be given appropriate Gothic Revival furniture and so on. Thus until relatively recently a guided tour round a historic house in the Czech Republic could be a disappointing experience as one was led through 'dead' interiors and shown a miscellaneous collection of objects that bore no relation to the house or to the family who once lived there.

All this is changing now. Curators are going to great lengths to present houses more accurately. Where possible they locate photographs which

show the rooms in their pre-war appearance and with the aid of the inventory numbers they can often track down furniture in store or on display in another house, and reinstate individual pieces where they once belonged. This new approach has been carried out successfully at an increasing number of houses; photos display the original appearance of rooms, and the history of the individual family is now given great prominence, an approach which has proved very successful with the visiting public. The houses gain in atmosphere and in historic authenticity. Moreover research is being carried out to assess how the sequence of rooms was originally used, which is of great importance in the understanding of the house and the way it is interpreted to visitors. Unfortunately lack of family archives, many of which were lost or destroyed after 1945, makes this a very difficult and sometimes impossible task.

For many years, The Friends charity has been concerned with the long-term restoration of Uherčice, a magical sleeping-beauty house that is gradually being awakened. Situated in Moravia, close to the Austrian border, Uherčice has had a long and chequered history, having been owned by successive families, each of whom has contributed to its architecture and interior decoration. A vast Renaissance courtyard house, set in a landscaped park, it also has important Baroque and Neo-classical interiors. Used as a barracks for border guards, and as a women's reformatory, it was in a devastated state and nearly demolished before it was taken under the wing of the NPÚ in Brno in 1995. Until recently lack of finance has meant restoration has been a slow process. The Friends charity has helped fund a number of projects, the most significant of which has been the partial restoration of the fine early 19<sup>th</sup> -century painted Neo-classical ballroom, where we contributed to the repair of the ceiling, whilst charity concerts, such as the ones generously given by the Czech opera singer, Pavlína Seníć, have enabled the renewal of the windows.

*Aerial view of the Château of Uherčice*



However, in 2018 the château received a massive injection of funds from the EU for a 5-year restoration project. This will dramatically accelerate the long-term restoration programme. Funding will focus on the most endangered areas and will concentrate particularly on the ballroom and the adjacent areas on the north side of the house. The ballroom will be used as a concert hall, and for social and cultural events. The current restoration plan is concentrating on the conservation of the illusionistic *trompe l'oeil* paintings which decorate the walls, and on relaying the fine wooden floor. The adjacent rooms will be restored as service rooms – cloakrooms, changing rooms, bar facilities etc. for the public and performers. The view to the wider landscape beyond is also included in the scheme. From the restored *sala terrena* visitors will be able to look across the park to the Gothic tower, a folly which will also be restored. The restoration of the east suite of rooms with their fine Neo-classical painted decoration and Baroque ceilings, partially already successfully restored by the NPÚ, will continue in another phase of the on-going programme.

An important part of the character of a building which was once a family home is, of course, the furnishing. And at Uherčice very little original furniture survives due to the unfortunate history of the château since its confiscation in 1945. However, the NPÚ has successfully identified a few important surviving pieces in store. They are in poor condition and need careful restoration. The Friends charity has undertaken £800 to pay a contribution of towards the repair of two Empire pieces - a matching console table and mirror, *see page 9*.

These pieces belong to the important early 19<sup>th</sup> century phase in the history of Uherčice. In 1768 Uherčice passed into the possession of Tomáš Vinciguerra, the Earl of Collalto and San Salvatore, Lord of Brtnice (1747-1833). The Collaltos are one of the oldest aristocratic families, named after their ancient seats, the castles of Collalto and San Salvatore which they have held in Lombardy since 1191.<sup>1</sup> In 1621, Count Rambaldo XIII of Collalto, a commander in the Imperial army was awarded land in Moravia by Emperor Ferdinand II in recognition of his services in the imperial army and he acquired the confiscated estate of Brtnice. In 1768 the Collaltos added the Uherčice estate to their Moravian possessions.



*Renaissance arcades, fast decaying; seen here in 1973 when the château complex was in use as accommodation for border guards. The Iron Curtain was nearby*

The most important member of the family in this period was Oduardo III (1747-1833), a bibliophile and lover of art and music. In 1822 he achieved the title of prince (the most prestigious title of the Austrian nobility). In the late 18<sup>th</sup> century he renovated the family palace in Vienna, where he housed much of his collection of paintings, cameos, china, ivories and manuscripts; others were displayed at Brtnice and Uherčice. Around 1800 he began the redecoration of the rooms in the east wing of Uherčice in the style of Romantic Classicism, with romantic landscapes and decoration influenced by the recent excavations at Pompeii. In 1802-4 the Banqueting Hall was created with its illusionistic *trompe l'oeil* classical figures. Oduardo was also responsible for laying out the landscape park with its various follies.

During his period he must have commissioned the Empire-style furniture now under restoration with the help of The Friends. A handsome Empire-style console table and matching mirror show the vogue for the Egyptian style which became fashionable in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century after Napoleon's campaigns in the Nile and the publication of Vivant Denon's book *Voyage dans la basse et la haute Egypte* (1802). Monopodia in the form of mythical birds form the supports to the table as on much ancient Egyptian furniture, whilst goddesses with Egyptian headdresses flank the mirror. The classical relief on the upper part of the mirror is probably inspired by Greek vase painting. Both pieces would have been the height of fashionable taste in the early 1800s.

It is fortunate that these and few other original pieces of Collalto furniture survive, and will be displayed in rooms that Oduardo decorated, thus giving further authenticity to the remarkable interiors that he created.

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<sup>1</sup> The family still own the vast mediaeval castle of San Salvatore, near Treviso

## **Uherčice, the Restoration of Collalto Empire Furniture**

*Colour images on following page*



## Uherčice, the Restoration of Collalto Empire Furniture

*Article by Barbara Peacock on page 6*

*Clockwise from above, the cantilevered table, overall frontal view; a detail of the mirror, pilaster crown; the mirror, overall frontal view of upper decorative frame, partly with gilded relief made from pressed glue-chalk mass*

