

The Princes of Liechtenstein in Northern Moravia

The Silesian Museum in Opava, the oldest in Czech lands, presents the historic connections
by Ondřej Haničák



During the 20th century, the importance of Opava as a regional centre, formerly the administrative and political centre of the Austro-Hungarian Crown land of Austrian Silesia, was overshadowed by the rapidly developing nearby city of Ostrava. The previously peripheral North Moravian location thus became a prominent centre of a wider industrial agglomeration and is now the third-largest city of the Czech Republic. However, the activities of some traditional institutions, continued to be linked to Opava, which undoubtedly included the Silesian Museum*. The institution prides itself on being the oldest museum in the Czech Republic as well as managing the third-largest collection fund in the context of the entire country. This museum, reconstituted in its current form after World War II, has undergone a rather complicated development in the more than two hundred years of its existence. The current structure of the institution and its collections follow on from the activities of a number of formerly independent museum and gallery institutions, of which there was a surprisingly large number in the Austro-Hungarian and later Czechoslovak regional capital of Opava. One of them included the Silesian Museum of Art and Industry, founded in 1882, which, in the spirit of the programme of other European art and industry museums, focused on documenting the historical development of arts and crafts. The collections were intended not only to

*1st - 1814 Silesian Museum, Opava

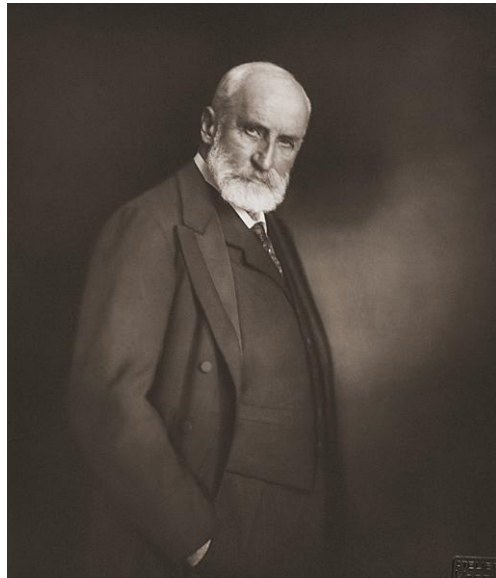
2nd - 1816 Moravian Museum, Brno

3rd - 1818 National Museum, Prague

educate the general public, but also to represent a certain range of prototypes or forms for the contemporary production of historicising applied arts. In this context, it is not surprising that the founder of this museum was the Opava Chamber of Commerce and Trade. The Liechtenstein family enters the story in the 1890s when the need to provide suitable facilities for the dynamically developing museum arose. It was then that it was decided to put up a new building for museum use. On the basis of an architectural competition, the design by two Viennese architects Johann Scheiringer and Franz Kachler was selected. Prince Johann II von Liechtenstein contributed a significant amount of money to the actual construction of the magnificent Neo-Renaissance building, which, in its interior arrangement, owes much to the design of the exhibition building of the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna. He also donated the land on which the new building was built in the period from 1893 to 1895. These were lucrative plots of land on the edge of the city centre, which adjoined the city park and where the recently demolished Liechtenstein Castle stood.

The castle, which served the Liechtenstein princely administration for centuries, had to give way to the rapid urbanisation and development of the town at the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries. The austere Neoclassical façade gave no clue that the core of the building contained a medieval feudal castle of the Dukes of the Principality of Opava. This fact suggests that the Liechtensteins' relationship with the region goes much deeper into the past.

The actual history of the Liechtenstein family began to be written already in the Middle Ages.



Prince Johann II von Liechtenstein, 1840-1929

Hugo von Liechtenstein, whose name is first encountered before the middle of the 12th century, was the first known member of the family. He derived his family name from the castle of the same name near the Lower Austrian village of Mödling. Hugo's offspring Heinrich acquired Mikulov in Moravia less than a hundred years later from the Margrave of Moravia, later King of Bohemia, Přemysl Otakar II. For generations to come, the oldest history of the family was thus firmly connected with the Moravian-Austrian border. The opportunity for fundamental territorial and property expansion came only at the end of the 16th century and on the restless eve of the Thirty Years' War. Karl von Liechtenstein, not only due to a well-thought-out marriage strategy, but mainly because of his prudent conversion to the Roman Catholic faith, expanded the family dominion to include other Moravian estates, and, above all, increased the prestige of the family thanks to the acquisition of the princely title, which was granted to him in 1608 by Matthias von Habsburg, at that time already King of Hungary and the successor of Rudolph II on the Throne of Bohemia, with the consent of the Czech Estates. The prestigious position of the family and the elevation of Karl I among the Silesian princes was confirmed by the acquisition of the Principality of Opava, which Emperor Matthias had already granted him as a fief at the beginning of 1614. The power expansion was then further confirmed by the gain of the Principality of Krnov, which was acquired by Karl I in 1623 at the instigation of Emperor Ferdinand II. Although the Liechtensteins did not gain permanent control over the Těšín region, the principalities of Opava and Krnov provided a long-term contribution to their economic and political



Nicolo Renieri (1590–1667), Allegory of Truth, around 1626, oil on canvas, gift to the collection of the Opava Art and Industry Museum by Prince Johann II of Liechtenstein

power. The emblems of both historical countries are still part of the coat of arms of Liechtenstein, whose main part is also formed by the symbol of the princely crown.

The ruling prince never permanently resided in any of the Silesian principalities, and he managed them through his own bureaucratic apparatus. He intervened in the political life of the region by means of the participation of his representatives both at the regional assembly of the Principality of Opava and at the Silesian Princely Assembly in Wrocław. The administration of both principalities was managed from buildings that traditionally belonged to the landowning territorial lords - Opava and Krnov Castles. Although never resident in the region, the ruling princes' presence was made permanent by a number of heraldic monuments connected to their possessions and patronage rights. The Liechtenstein coats of arms commemorated representatives of the family, both on economic institutions and municipal buildings as well as sacred monuments. The princes' patronage is thus permanently commemorated in a number of churches, which belong to the exceptional examples of the region's Baroque culture. Let us mention, first of all, the Jesuit Church of St George in the Lower Square in Opava, with the venerated image of the Virgin Mary of Opava, or the pilgrimage church in Cvilín near Krnov. Several examples of high-quality sculptural works are also connected with the art commissions made by the princely family, of which we should mention at least the Baroque Cenotaph of Karl I von Liechtenstein in the Provost Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Opava, which was created more than a hundred years after his death. From the beginning of their dominion in Silesia and northern Moravia, the Princes of Liechtenstein paid special attention to local economic activities. The income of the princely estate was represented not only by the regularly paid serf taxes but also, later, predominantly by the funds resulting from economic activities carried out on its properties, in particular metallurgy and extensive forestry in the Jeseníky foothills.

These profitable economic activities, which largely covered the expensive upkeep of princely residences in Valtice, Lednice, Vienna and other Lower Austrian castles, were performed in the region even after the reorganisation of the polity of the Austrian Empire following the revolution of 1848. From then on, the Liechtensteins remained only titular Dukes of Opava and Krnov, and their



The Jesuit Church of St George in the Lower Square in Opava

political power dwindled to a minimum. Despite this, they still belonged to the elite of European aristocracy due to the extent of the property owned, the offices held and their marriage ties. The exclusive relationship to the areas in question was manifested not only in the traditional support of the Roman Catholic Church through the rights of patronage, but also in the fostering of the activities of a nascent modern civil society, especially by supporting various associations and charitable activities. The end of World War I, the formation of the Czechoslovak Republic and the associated first land reform brought about a fundamental turning point in the management of princely estates in the region. The legal status of the confiscation of Liechtenstein property in Czechoslovakia by the state, based on the Beneš Decrees after World War II, is still the subject of lawsuits. However, the value of cultural heritage, represented not only by the better-known château architecture and landscape complexes on the Moravian-Austrian border, but also by monuments in the former Silesian principalities, is indisputable. They also include the numerous gifts of Prince Johann II von Liechtenstein to the Opava Museum collection. In 2017, on the occasion of the jubilee of the acquisition of the Principalities of Opava and Krnov by the Liechtensteins, the Silesian Museum staged an exhibition dedicated to the patronage of the Princes of Liechtenstein. The current exhibition aims to point out the not-too-often-mentioned ties of one of Europe's leading aristocratic families to its former Silesian dominions. The exhibition will be open to the public in Opava until 28th January 2024.

Ondřej Haničák is a historian and curator in the Silesian Museum, Opava. The exhibition *The Princes of Liechtenstein, Lords of the Land of Opava and Krnov runs until 28th January 2024, Silesian Museum, Komenského 419/10, 746 01 Opava. www.szm.cz*