Abstract

Classical mythology has been one of the main sources of inspiration for European artists for centuries. It also remained current during the 20th century. From the 1920s, one can see increasing interest in classical myths; it becomes a source of inspiration even for artists of avant-garde art movements.

The 20th century artist approach themes from classical mythology from a position of newly acquired artistic freedom. Release of iconographic conventions and academic rules, emphasis on psychology and individuality of a modern man brings specific forms of reception and reinterpretation of classical myths. In many cases, classical mythology carries allegorical meanings in a relation to contemporary political and social events, often in a very critical tone. But it also represents a tool for one’s personal coping with reality. The thirties and early forties of the 20th century with dark atmosphere affected by war conflicts represent the culmination period of classical myths in visual arts. The tendency can be observed both in the art of European and Czech origin. Antiquity and classical mythology become the symbols of a return to the roots of European culture and civilization, symbols of the common European humanistic heritage.

The collection of nearly 180 works of modern Czech art inspired by classical mythology is attached. It focuses on the first half of the 20th century and provides an overview of reception and interpretation of classical mythology among modern Czech visual artists. Classical mythology becomes literally defining programme of their lives and artistic production of some of them.

This study presents works of art in the context of both Czech and European art, and thus indicates the base lines of uses of classical myths as a traditional source of thematic inspiration during the first half of the 20th century. Classical iconography leaves classicist and academic forms and enters into the field of modern artistic movements including for example Cubism, Surrealism and even Abstraction.