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Connected Central European Worlds: Material Entanglements, 1500–1700: Introduction

European History Quarterly

2026, Vol. 56(3) 309–331

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DOI: 10.1177/02656914261458982

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Evropa recens descripta (Europe newly described Figure 1) is one of the 594 maps in Joan Blaeu's 11-volume *Atlas maior* (Amsterdam 1662–1665) that collectively present the state of geographic knowledge of the world in mid-seventeenth century Europe.¹ The map is enlivened with a border of nine town views at the top and ten vignettes of couples representing major European nations, five on each side. Prominently displayed in the middle of the colour version of the map at the National Library of Scotland (NLS) reproduced here are three Central European polities: the Holy Roman Empire (washed in pink), Poland-Lithuania (in turquoise), and Hungary (in yellow). Copies of the *Atlas maior* were custom coloured for an additional fee; the the National Library of Scotland (NLS) copy likely reflects the geopolitical imagination of a specific customer who seems to have grouped the peoples referenced in the side vignettes into territorial states according to a personal vision rather than closely following the geopolitics of the time.² Hungary appears together with other European possessions of the Ottoman Empire – Romanian, Serbian, and Bulgarian lands – even though in the seventeenth century Hungary was divided and large parts were Habsburg domains.³ The Holy Roman Empire, including Bohemia, is accurately depicted as transnational, while

¹ On the *Atlas maior*, see Cornelis Koeman, *Joan Blaeu and His Grand Atlas* (Amsterdam 1970).

² On the National Library of Scotland copy, see 'Blaeu Atlas Maior, 1662–5', <https://maps.nls.uk/atlas/blaeu-maior/>

³ Compare with Paul Robert Magocsi, *Historical Atlas of Central Europe*, third revised and expanded edition (Toronto 2018), 57–66.

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Figure 1. Willem Janszoon Blaeu and Joan Blaeu, *Evropa recens descripta*, from the *Atlas maior*, vol. I (Amsterdam, 1665). Hand-coloured engraved map, 41.5 × 55.5 cm (sheet approx. 52 × 61 cm). Reproduced with the permission of the National Library of Scotland under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution (CC-BY) licence. <https://maps.nls.uk/view/103831329>

Poland-Lithuania inaccurately encompasses Prussia, which had already become sovereign in 1657.

Although the *Atlas maior* was published in Amsterdam, we do not know the original owner of the NLS copy: the Latin edition was acquired by patrons all across the continent.⁴ Whoever commissioned the colouring divided the continent into territorial states of roughly the same size, avoiding the present-day tendency to prioritize the west and marginalize the east.⁵ The absence of an east-west binary is also evident in the design itself, as Prague, the capital of Bohemia, is depicted in the top border alongside Constantinople and several Western European cities. The right-hand border highlights four Central European nations – Germans, Hungarians, Bohemians, and Poles (from top to bottom) – constituting 40 per cent of the peoples represented on the map. Notably, the depicted figures' ethnicity is defined by the material characteristics of the attire they wear, demonstrating how early modern

⁴ See Jerry Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps* (London 2012), 285–6.

⁵ For a compelling argument on why the history of Europe is incomplete without including its eastern half, see Jacob Mikanowski, *Goodbye, Eastern Europe: An Intimate History of a Divided Land* (New York 2023).

costume held the power to shape and define the social body (a broad community of wearers), and to forge a cultural bond that reinforced national identities. Costumed bodies in cartographic vignettes and costume books assigned specific types of attire to particular national, regional, and civic communities. In doing so, these works essentialized culture, localizing it in fashion as a visual embodiment of belonging.⁶ While the Germans and Bohemians do not differ greatly in costume from the Western Europeans on the left, the Hungarians and Poles resemble the Greeks depicted at bottom right – figures representing Christian populations living under Ottoman rule. Blaeu's Central European fashions occupy a visual middle ground between Western European dress and forms of alterity only partially acknowledged at the map's margins. Through the material language of fashion, the map constructs comparisons among selected peoples, leaving others structurally outside its representational frame; in doing so *Evropa recens descripta* articulates Central Europe's historical entanglements (and disentanglements) through both geography and material culture.

On the map, territory is presented as the organizing principle through which culture is made legible. The fashions shown in the vignettes are meant to correspond to the colour-demarcated territorial states, even though the styles themselves are notably outdated. The Blaeu workshop often reused earlier prints to save costs, and the 1662 map of Europe is in fact a reprint of a map published by Joan's father Willem Janszoon Blaeu in his first world atlas, *Atlantis appendix*, from 1630.⁷ This creates a vision of Central Europe as in concertina time, where layers of history fold into one another, some becoming more pronounced or lingering longer, resulting in a perception of history that stretches out or condenses based on individual viewpoints. Although the NLS map and its colouring lack precision and present Europe as an arbitrary amalgamation of land and costume in anachronic mode, *Evropa recens descripta* effectively illustrates the variations in social geography – how 'Europeans' differed across space – through recognizable material features: the different cuts and designs of garments.

Just as Blaeu's map points to the region's indispensability in the conceptualization of early modern Europe, this special issue examines the interconnected worlds of Central

⁶ Margreta De Grazia, Maureen Quilligan, and Peter Stallybrass, eds, *Subject and Object in Renaissance Culture* (Cambridge 1996), 5; Valerie Traub, 'Mapping the Global Body', in Peter Erickson and Clark Hulse, eds, *Early Modern Visual Culture: Representation, Race, and Empire in Renaissance England* (Philadelphia, PA 2000), 44–97; Giulia Calvi, *The World in Dress: Costume Books across Italy, Europe, and the East* (Cambridge 2022); Anne Rosalind Jones, 'Habits, Holdings, Heterologies: Populations in Print in a 1562 Costume Book', *Yale French Studies*, No. 110 (2006), 94.

⁷ Cornelis Koeman, Günter Schilder, Marco van Egmond, and Peter van der Krogt, 'Commercial Cartography and Map Production in the Low Countries, 1500–ca. 1672', in David Woodward, ed., *The History of Cartography*, vol. 3: *Cartography in the European Renaissance, 1323–1330* (Chicago, IL 2007), 1296–1383, 1326; Brotton, *A History of the World in Twelve Maps*, 287. On the specifics of Blaeu's business operation, see Peter van der Krogt, 'The Atlas Maior of Joan Blaeu', in Joan Blaeu, *Atlas Maior of 1665: The Greatest and Finest Atlas Ever Published* (Cologne 2005), 24–34; Koeman et al., 'Commercial Cartography and Map Production in the Low Countries', 1328–30.

Europe and the crucial role of material culture in facilitating these connections. Situated at the intersection of Western Europe, the Ottoman Empire, and Muscovy, this vast region with its diverse peoples and histories offers a distinctive perspective on the period's trans-cultural dynamics. Here, early modern Central Europe is broadly defined as a region marked by ethnic and linguistic variety, political fragmentation, and multiple religious traditions that stretched from the Danube and the Rhine to the Dnipro, and from the Black Sea to the Baltic coast. Geopolitically, this included the Holy Roman Empire, Poland-Lithuania, and the divided Hungarian monarchy. Central Europe's strategic position in the middle of the European continent, as evident in Blaeu's map, fostered connectivity via the Baltic, Mediterranean, and Black Seas supported by a vast network of land routes and river-ways.⁸ While the exploitation of New World resources from the sixteenth century altered Central Europe's position in the European economy, the region's importance persisted.⁹ Remaining a hub of resource extraction, commerce, and settlement, Central Europe was sustained by dense networks of riverine and overland trade, artisanal production, scholarly exchange, confessional mobility, and long-distance migration.¹⁰ What distinguishes the region within global and transcultural histories is precisely this concentration of land-based connections linking multiple borderlands, communities, and empires. It was this density of movement, extraction, and encounter that positioned Central Europe not as a boundary but as one of the continent's organizing centres: a zone in which material flows, political realignments, and cultural translations actively structured early modern life.

Our focus on early modern Central Europe, in its broadest geographical and 'material' sense, overlaps with but also departs from previous definitions, particularly those ideologically motivated to divide Europe into 'East' and 'West'. Scholars have repeatedly repositioned the region, whether east or west, north or south, driven by individual agendas and often shaped by national and ideological commitments.¹¹ At times, Central Europe has been considered inclusive of Germany; at other times they have been perceived as distinct. It is important to note that Central Europe as a concept was only invented in the nineteenth century and continues to hold different meanings for different

⁸ Michael North, *The Baltic: A History*, Kenneth Kronenberg, trans. (Cambridge 2015); Alina Alexandra Payne, ed., *The Land between Two Seas: Art on the Move in the Mediterranean and the Black Sea, 1300–1700* (Leiden 2022).

⁹ John U. Nef, 'Silver Production in Central Europe, 1450–1618', in Arturo Giráldez, *Metals and Monies in an Emerging Global Economy* (London 1997) for a reappraisal of Adolf Soetbeer, *Materialien zur Erläuterung und Beurteilung der wirtschaftlichen Edelmetallverhältnisse und der Währungsfrage* (1885). See also Domenic Hofmann, Harald Kleinberger-Pierer, and Peter Paul Marckhgott, 'Administration of Mining, Science, and Technology in Europe in the Age of American Silver (1550–1700)', in Veronika Hyden-Hanscho and Werner Stangl, eds, *Formative Modernities in the Early Modern Atlantic and Beyond: Identities, Politics and Glocal Economies* (New York 2023), 245–71. Cf. Jawad Daheur, 'Extractive Peripheries in Europe: Quest for Resources and Changing Environments (Fifteenth–Twentieth Centuries)', *Global Environment*, Vol. 15 (2022), 7–31.

¹⁰ Piotr S. Wandycz, *The Price of Freedom: A History of East Central Europe from the Middle Ages to the Present* (London 1992); Lonnie Johnson, *Central Europe: Enemies, Neighbors, Friends* (Oxford 1996).

¹¹ Ivan Kalmar, *White but Not Quite: Central Europe's Illiberal Revolt* (Bristol 2022).

thinkers.¹² During the First World War, Friedrich Naumann (1860–1919) proposed the term ‘*Mitteuropa*’, envisioning the region united under the Central Powers.¹³ The idea was discredited after the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian and German empires, but some (East-) Central European intellectuals in the interwar and post-Second World War periods – especially the Moravian philosopher-turned-first president of Czechoslovakia Tomáš Masaryk (1850–1937) and the Polish historian Oskar Halecki (1891–1973) – still believed that Central Europe was a distinct geopolitical formation; they saw it as separate from Germany and Austria, though not necessarily from German-speaking peoples.¹⁴ In the 1980s, the idea of East-Central Europe gained traction among dissident circles in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, which sought ‘reunification’ with the West.¹⁵ Today, some distinguish between Central Europe (Germany, Austria, and Switzerland) and East-Central Europe (Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Slovenia, and Croatia).¹⁶

As early modernists, we find this division unhelpful. Historical evidence suggests that before the turn to nationalism in the nineteenth century, there were enough convergences

¹² The concept of grouping this region has a long history, dating back to the Napoleonic era when the German geographer and statistician Georg Hassel (1770–1829) conceptualized it as *Mitteuropa* (Middle Europe), a part of Europe that was neither France nor Russia, situated in the middle of the subcontinent and needing closer integration because – as the argument went – Europe’s freedom rested on its survival: Georg Hassel, *Statistischer Umriss der sämtlichen europäischen Staaten: in Hinsicht ihrer Grösse, Bevölkerung, Kulturverhältnisse, Handlung, Finanz- und Militärverfassung und ihrer aussereuropäischen Besitzungen* (Braunschweig 1805). The idea of *Mitteuropa* underwent several reconceptualizations in the nineteenth century, envisioning different kinds of confederations under Prussian or Austrian leadership, with Slavic and Magyar peoples playing subsidiary roles. Jacques Droz, *L’Europe centrale: Évolution historique de l’idée de ‘Mitteleuropa’* (Paris 1960); Edward Timms, ‘National Memory and the “Austrian Idea” from Metternich to Waldheim’, *The Modern Language Review*, Vol. 86, No. 4 (1991), 898–910.

¹³ Friedrich Naumann, *Mitteuropa* (Berlin 1915).

¹⁴ Thomas G. Masaryk, *The New Europe: The Slav Standpoint* (London 1918); Oskar Halecki, *Borderlands of Western Civilization: A History of East Central Europe* (New York 1952).

¹⁵ In the 1980s, the idea of Central Europe gained traction among anti-communist dissident circles in Poland, Hungary, and Czechoslovakia, where writers like Milan Kundera (1929–2023), Václav Havel (1936–2011), Czesław Miłosz (1911–2004), and György Konrád (1933–2019) argued that their countries did not culturally belong to Eastern Europe and should be reunited with the West. A good introduction to this debate is George Schopflin and Nancy Wood, eds, *In Search of Central Europe* (London 1989).

¹⁶ Hans-Georg Betz, ‘Mitteleuropa and Post-Modern European Identity’, *New German Critique*, no. 50 (1990), 173–92; contributions by Timothy Garton Ash, Tony Judt, and Jacques Rupnik to the issue ‘Eastern Europe... Central Europe... Europe’, *Daedalus*, Vol. 119, No. 1 (1990); Robin Okey, ‘Central Europe/Eastern Europe: Behind the Definitions’, *Past & Present*, No. 137 (1992), 102–33; R. J. W. Evans, ‘Essay and Reflection: Frontiers and National Identities in Central Europe’, *The International History Review*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (1992), 480–502; Kristian Gerner, ‘A Moveable Place with a Moveable Past: Perspectives on Central Europe’, *Australian Journal of Politics and History*, Vol. 45, No. 1 (1999), 3–19; László Péter, ‘Central Europe and its Reading into the Past’, *European Review of History*, Vol. 6, No. 1 (1999), 101–11; Jacques Le Rider, ‘Mitteleuropa, Zentraleuropa, Mitteleuropa: A Mental Map of Central Europe’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2008), 155–69; Ksenija Vidmar-Horvat and Gerard Delanty, ‘Mitteleuropa and the European Heritage’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, Vol. 11, No. 2 (2008), 203–18; Katarzyna Murawska-Muthesius, *Imaging and Mapping Eastern Europe: Sarmatia Europea to Post-Communist Bloc* (New York 2021).

and similarities among the Holy Roman Empire, Poland-Lithuania, and Hungary to consider them collectively as Central Europe (while we acknowledge that this is by no means the only possible definition of the region).¹⁷ Martyn Rady has recently referred to these historical polities as ‘Middle Kingdoms’, highlighting their relative difference and distinctiveness from Western Europe and their relative unfamiliarity to Western Europeans, particularly in the Anglosphere.¹⁸

Whereas older narratives focused on ‘clashing civilizations’ between East and West, more recent work has examined the transcultural dynamics of Central Europe and tried to situate it within global perspectives.¹⁹ Yet the region still remains largely absent from the synthetic narratives that have emerged as part of the twenty-first-century global turn in historical studies, where the European continent is viewed as a cluster of interlocking and intersecting geographic macro-regions, such as the Mediterranean, the Atlantic, the Baltic, and the Black Sea.²⁰ These accounts tend to focus heavily on Western Europe’s interactions with the rest of the world, overlooking intra-European connections. Aaron Hyman recently observed that the global turn in early modern art history relies on imperial networks for the transfer of objects, materials, and people across the globe, and that an art historian’s archive often depends on these material infrastructures.²¹ While the Americas, parts of Asia, and to a lesser extent Africa, are gradually being given more

¹⁷ Adam Kozuchowski, *Unintended Affinities: Nineteenth-Century German and Polish Historians on the Holy Roman Empire and the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth* (Pittsburgh, PA 2019); Elizabeth Dillenburg, Howard Louthan, and Drew B. Thomas, eds, *Print Culture at the Crossroads: The Book and Central Europe* (Leiden 2021).

¹⁸ Martyn Rady, *The Middle Kingdoms: A New History of Central Europe* (New York 2023).

¹⁹ Samuel P. Huntington, *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (New York 1996); for a rebuke of Huntington’s claims, see Samuel P. Huntington et al., *The Clash of Civilizations? The Debate* (New York 1996). Recent attempts to grapple with this binary between East and West include Beáta Hock and Anu Allas, eds, *Globalizing East European Art Histories: Past and Present* (London 2018); Tomasz Grusiecki and Robyn D. Radway, eds, ‘Globalising Early Modern Central and Eastern European Art: A Discussion Forum’, *Art East Central*, Vol. 2, No. 2 (2022), 11–47; Jutta Wimmeler and Klaus Weber, eds, *Globalized Peripheries: Central Europe and the Atlantic World, 1680–1860* (Woodbridge 2020); Veronika Čápská, ed., *Early Modern East-Central Europe from Transcultural Perspectives* (Leiden forthcoming); Bolaji Balogun, *Race and the Colour-Line: The Boundaries of Europeanness in Poland* (London 2024).

²⁰ For example, Fernand Braudel, *The Mediterranean and the Mediterranean World in the Age of Philip II*, Sian Reynolds, trans. (New York 1972); Monique O’Connell and Eric Dursteler, *The Mediterranean World: From the Fall of Rome to the Rise of Napoleon* (Baltimore, MD 2016); Ivana Čapeta Rakić and Giuseppe Capriotti, eds, *Images in the Borderlands: The Mediterranean between Christian and Muslim Worlds in the Early Modern Period* (Turnhout 2022); Peter C. Mancall and Daniela Bleichmar, eds, *Collecting across Cultures: Material Exchanges in the Early Modern Atlantic World* (Philadelphia, PA 2011); Caroline Williams, ed., *Bridging the Early Modern Atlantic World: People, Products, and Practices on the Move* (London 2016); Justyna Wubs-Mrozewicz and Stuart Jenks, eds, *The Hanse in Medieval and Early Modern Europe* (Leiden 2013); Arkadiusz Błaszczuk, Robert Born, and Florian Riedler, eds, *Transottoman Matters: Objects Moving through Time, Space, and Meaning* (Göttingen 2022).

²¹ Aaron M. Hyman, ‘The Mimetics and Discontents of Empire’, in Stephen J. Campbell and Stephanie Porras, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Global Renaissance Art* (New York 2024), 225–32. See also Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, ‘Art History and the Global: Deconstructing the Latest Canonical Narrative’, *Journal of Global History*, Vol. 14, No. 3 (2019), 413–35.

prominence in historical narratives (partly due to their former imperial links), Europe's coverage often remains limited to Italy, the Low Countries, France, and Germany, with Spain and Portugal as recent additions. Primarily centred on Western European encounters with non-European entities, for example the Ottoman lands around the Mediterranean, these studies have left a great lacuna.²² Here we attempt to integrate Central Europe as a macro-region with a distinct story to tell within these connected histories.

Our approach to understanding how the diverse and dynamic worlds of Central Europe were connected within and beyond the region is grounded in the study of material culture. Objects have long served as valuable lenses for analysing global and connected histories.²³ By tracing the biographies of objects and the natural resources from which they were made, historians have examined the interplay of different actors, histories, and routes of exchange.²⁴ The study of material culture offers new evidence of cultural entanglements and reveals meanings produced through varied forms of interaction. Transcultural objects materialize processes of cultural convergence and transformation, as societies adopt and adapt new forms into everyday life.²⁵ The scale of these transformations across early modern Central Europe makes the region a key site for understanding how Europe as a whole was undergoing significant shifts at the time in its connectivity with the wider world.

Focusing on material culture to investigate these changes is particularly well suited to our pan-European agenda, as it challenges the prevailing text-dominated methods that have shaped nation-centred histories of the region. A line of inquiry placing images and objects at its centre permits taking a material approach capable of registering

²² On the Ottoman lands, for example, Charlotte Jirousek, *Ottoman Dress and Design in the West: A Visual History of Cultural Exchange* (Bloomington, IN 2019); Michał Wasiucionek, *The Ottomans and Eastern Europe: Borders and Political Patronage in the Early Modern World* (London 2019); Géza Pálffy, *Hungary between Two Empires, 1526–1711*, David Robert Evans, trans. (Bloomington, IN 2021); Gábor Ágoston, *The Last Muslim Conquest: The Ottoman Empire and Its Wars in Europe* (Princeton, NJ 2021).

²³ For a comprehensive understanding of the material turn in early modern history and art history, see James Symonds, ed., *A Cultural History of Objects in the Renaissance* (London 2024); Michelle O'Malley and Evelyn S. Welch, *The Material Renaissance* (Manchester 2010); Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, *Writing Material Culture History* (London 2015); Ulinka Rublack, 'Matter in the Material Renaissance', *Past and Present*, No. 219 (2013), 41–85.

²⁴ Katherine Wilson and Leah R. Clark, eds, *Mobility of Objects Across Boundaries 1000–1700* (Liverpool 2022); Daniela Bleichmar and Meredith Martin, eds, *Objects in Motion in the Early Modern World* (Chichester 2016); Christy Anderson, Anne Dunlop, and Pamela H. Smith, eds, *The Matter of Art: Materials, Practices, Cultural Logics, c. 1250–1750* (Manchester 2015); Pamela H. Smith, ed., *Entangled Itineraries: Materials, Practices, and Knowledges across Eurasia* (Pittsburgh 2019); Grażyna Jurkowlaniec, Ika Matyjaszkiewicz, and Zuzanna Sarnecka, eds, *The Agency of Things in Medieval and Early Modern Art: Materials, Power and Manipulation* (New York 2018); Paula Findlen, ed., *Early Modern Things: Objects and Their Histories, 1500–1800* (Abingdon 2013); Anne Gerritsen and Giorgio Riello, eds, *The Global Lives of Things: The Material Culture of Connections in the Early Modern World* (London 2016).

²⁵ Our understanding of transculturation is inspired by Fernando Ortiz, *Cuban Counterpoint: Tobacco and Sugar* (Durham, NC 1995). See also Anna Grasskamp and Monica Juneja, eds, *EurAsian Matters: China, Europe, and the Transcultural Object, 1600–1800* (Cham 2018).

entanglements across multiple cultural strands while remaining attentive to how these images and objects were produced. As a polycentric and multiethnic region dependent on external trade, Central Europe became a zone of arrival as well as exchange. Persecuted groups sought temporary refuge there, often bringing with them artisanal skills and technical knowledge that reshaped local economies and visual cultures. The Haban communities (German: Habaner; Czech/Slovak: Habáni) in Moravia and Upper Hungary (present-day Slovakia), who were renowned for their ceramics; the Mennonites in the Vistula delta, who engineered dykes to reclaim agricultural land; and the Antitrinitarians, whose embrace of print culture fostered its expansion in Poland-Lithuania, all exemplify this pattern.²⁶ Permanent diasporic communities – Jews in Germany, Bohemia, and Poland-Lithuania; Armenians in Red Ruthenia (present-day western Ukraine) – were equally integral to the region's fabric.²⁷ Germans settled widely: Saxons in Transylvania introduced goldsmithing techniques; Baltic Germans in Prussia and Livonia linked the region to wider Baltic circuits; and German printers established the first presses in Cracow.²⁸

This special issue brings together five case studies grounded in material culture to examine interactions among multiethnic communities within and beyond Central Europe. Together, these studies show how such encounters took shape in objects, practices, and the textures of everyday life. Zuzanna Sarnecka considers tin-glazed ceramics produced by Anabaptist settlers from Faenza who fled persecution to arrive in Moravia in the 1530s. Transplanting technical knowledge and workshop practice, these communities established the ceramic production of what became known as Haban ware, which circulated far beyond Anabaptist circles. Agata Paluch turns to the paper amulets of itinerant Ashkenazi Jewish artisans and healers such as Hillel Ba'al Shem (active in the 1730s and 1740s), tracing how they moved through multilingual and multiconfessional environments, fashioning social identities through material practice. Grażyna Jurkowlaniec examines religious sculpture and its literary afterlives, focusing on Seweryn Lubomlczyk (1532–1612), a convert from Liuboml in Volhynia, who recorded a vision in which an alabaster figure of the Virgin Mary appeared to St. Hyacinth of Poland, helping to stabilize the saint's iconography. Katalin Pataki explores the eighteenth-century gardens and herbaria of Červený Kláštor (in present-day Slovakia), where vernacular

²⁶ Alena Kalinová, *Anabaptist, Haban and Post-Haban Faience in the Moravian Museum, 1600–1765* (Brno 2017); Jana Kybalová and Jarmila Novotná, *Habánská fajáns 1590–1730*, exh. cat (Prague 1981); Kat Hill, *Baptism, Brotherhood, and Belief in Reformation Germany: Anabaptism and Lutheranism, 1525–1585* (Oxford 2015); Carol E. Mayer, 'Central European Haban Ware', in Carol E. Mayer, *A Discerning Eye: The Walter C. Koerner Collection of European Ceramics* (Vancouver 2015), 47–71; Zbigniew Ogonowski, 'Antitrinitarians in Poland before Socinus: A Historical Outline', *Roczniki Filozoficzne*, Vol. 70, No. 4 (2022), 87–141.

²⁷ Ilia M. Rodov, *The Torah Ark in Renaissance Poland: A Jewish Revival of Classical Antiquity* (Leiden 2013); Antony Polonsky, *The Jews in Poland and Russia, Vol. 1: 1350 to 1881* (Oxford 2010); Waldemar Deluga, *Art of the Armenian Diaspora* (Warsaw 2020); Michał Kopczyński and Wojciech Tygielski, eds, *Under a Common Sky: Ethnic Groups of the Commonwealth of Poland and Lithuania* (New York 2017).

²⁸ Charles W. Ingrao and Franz A. J. Szabo, eds, *The Germans and the East* (West Lafayette, IN 2008); Karin Friedrich, *The Other Prussia: Royal Prussia, Poland and Liberty, 1569–1772* (Cambridge 2000).

and learned knowledge met across porous borders. Robyn D. Radway investigates hand-coloured maps of Europe (1570) commissioned from the Abraham Ortelius workshop in Antwerp, showing how geopolitical imagination was materially enacted through pigment, illumination, and the visual marking of borders. Across these studies, material culture does not merely reflect interaction but rather structures it. Objects became sites where ethnic, linguistic, and confessional differences were negotiated, rendered visible, and lived.

Through this collection of articles, we outline three methodological reorientations. First, we demonstrate how a material approach can illuminate Central Europe's interconnected histories. Second, we argue for the necessity of a fully trans-imperial archive and analytical framework capable of challenging the nation-centric paradigms long applied to the eastern parts of Central Europe. Third, we show how European history can be retold by returning a region long perceived as peripheral to analytical centrality.

The Material Approach

Already acknowledging the coherence of Central Europe's distinctive artistic production, Eberhard Hempel's *Baroque Art and Architecture in Central Europe: Germany, Austria, Switzerland, Hungary, Czechoslovakia, Poland* (1965), Jan Białostocki's *The Art of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe: Hungary, Bohemia, Poland* (1976), and Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann's indispensable *Court, Cloister and City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe, 1450–1800* (1995) covering present-day Germany, Poland, Czechia, Slovakia, Hungary, Austria, Ukraine, Lithuania, and Belarus, have argued for the region as a generative locale for specific artistic styles and for engagement with artistic ideas on new terms in the context of a divided yet interconnected political landscape.²⁹ Kaufmann, in particular, deserves credit for raising the region's profile among Anglo-American art historians, a contribution he reflects upon in a postscript to this special issue.³⁰

Historians of material culture have more recently demonstrated Central Europe's participation in early modern globalization. Nicolai Kölmel, for instance, has shown how a Transylvanian sword could be the product of intricate connections involving Saxon, Ottoman, and Japanese elements; Laura Lisy-Wagner has shed light on Haban ceramics, revealing their role as nodes encompassing Anabaptist, Counter-Reformation, and

²⁹ Eberhard Hempel, *Baroque Art and Architecture in Central Europe*, Nikolaus Pevsner, ed. (London 1965); Jan Białostocki, *The Art of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe: Hungary, Bohemia, Poland* (London 1976); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Court, Cloister and City: The Art and Culture of Central Europe, 1450–1800* (London 1995). For a recent endorsement of the concept, see Kristoffer Neville, *The Art and Culture of Scandinavian Central Europe, 1550–1720* (University Park, PA 2021). The fact that Hempel's textbook was the first to appear in English is problematic, given his ties to the German tradition of *Ostforschung*, now discredited due to its links to National Socialism. See Beate Störckuhl, 'Historia sztuki w służbie "niemieckich badań wschodnich" (*Ostforschung*)', *Rocznik Historii Sztuki*, Vol. 26 (2001), 31–43 (particularly 38).

³⁰ See, for example, Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *The School of Prague: Painting at the Court of Rudolf II* (Chicago, IL 1988); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *The Mastery of Nature: Aspects of Art, Science, and Humanism in the Renaissance* (Princeton, IL 1993); Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, *Toward a Geography of Art* (Chicago, IL 2004).

Islamic thinking on art, and blending techniques from Italy, Anatolia, and Central Europe; Robert Born and his co-curators of the exhibition *The Sultan's World* have explored the impact of Ottoman culture on Central European cultural expressions.³¹ Art historical and historical studies offer examples of objects produced not within imperial contexts boasting ready-made networks and infrastructure but across imperial formations where cultural entanglements manifest among communities under different jurisdictions.

Building on these foundations, the essays follow objects across shifting political and confessional boundaries in Central Europe, revealing a landscape of artistic production that was dispersed rather than centralized, multifocal rather than emanating from a single centre.³² Taking a broad view of material culture, from earthenware to amulets of paper, the contributions show how objects were assembled through chains of labour that linked distant places as well as multiple sources of expertise and resources. Sarnecka's study of Anabaptist potters in Moravia offers a clear example. Techniques developed in northern Italy were transplanted into new workshop environments, while materials, designs, and clients extended well beyond Anabaptist settlements. A dispute in 1585 between a Venetian potter and his Cracow patron shows how producing a single vessel required the coordination of varied skills, various suppliers, and multiple forms of expertise across long distances. Craft was locally grounded but not self-contained, depending on sustained connections among mobile artisans, patrons, and markets. Throughout this volume, material culture reveals how Central European artistic production operated across numerous regional centres of production and exchange rather than within or among only dominant metropolitan ones. Objects make visible the practical mechanisms – movement, negotiation, and reliance on both local and distant resources – that structured transcultural interactions during the early modern period.

Second, the decentred system of government characteristic of Central Europe resulted in political and cultural fluidity, creating a need for many artisanal workshops and centres of higher learning to cater to rulers, nobles, and urban elites – and to their political aspirations.³³ This environment enabled freedom of experimentation in material and intellectual production with sometimes surprising results. Sarnecka, for example, points to Moravian porphyry-imitation vessels, whose rough, dimpled surfaces departed from established ceramic ideals to cultivate a rustic aesthetic that appealed to noble patrons invested in regional centres of production. Innovation here emerged within local

³¹ Nicolai Kölmel, 'A Transylvanian Samurai Sword, Saxon Turks and Other Entanglements', in Tina Asmussen et al., eds, *Materialized Histories. Eine Festschrift 2.0* (2021), <https://mhstories.hypotheses.org/?p=5493>; Laura Lisy-Wagner, *Islam, Christianity and the Making of Czech Identity, 1453–1683* (Farnham 2013); Robert Born, Michał Dziewulski, and Guido Messling, eds, *The Sultan's World: The Ottoman Orient in Renaissance Art*, exh. cat. (Brussels 2015). For one of the earliest studies, see Carina L. Johnson, *Cultural Hierarchy in Sixteenth-Century Europe: The Ottomans and Aztecs* (Cambridge 2011).

³² For a succinct overview, see Edward S. Cooke, *Global Objects: Toward a Connected Art History* (Princeton, NJ 2022), 8–9.

³³ On the affordance of such an intellectual environment, see Howard Hotson, *Commonplace Learning: Ramism and its German Ramifications, 1543–1630* (Oxford 2007).

workshops but in response to shifting patronage across neighbouring territories. This landscape of dispersed political authority also shaped intellectual production. Paluch's analysis of Ashkenazi compiler Hillel Ba'al Shem shows how knowledge circulated through carefully managed manuscript practices rather than print, allowing expertise to move selectively across jurisdictions and communities. In a landscape marked by war and intercommunal tension, the ability to navigate linguistic, religious, and cultural boundaries – whether through objects or texts – became central to how material culture was produced and used.

Third, objects from Central Europe often mediate cultural connections that unfolded nonsequentially, as the region experienced rapid change and layered encounters over time. Objects circulated, each accumulating distinct histories, while even stationary things acquired new meanings as political, religious, and social contexts shifted. The afterlives of objects—shaped by later historical events as well as archival and museological practices, including wartime losses – play a crucial role in how early modern material culture is understood today.³⁴ This stratigraphic accumulation of meanings, together with the survival of material culture and the recovery of provenance, shapes both present interpretation and historical reconstruction. Approaching objects through extended biographies – from pre-life to afterlife – allows for a fuller account of the overlapping forces that shaped Central European experiences. As Jurkowlaniec shows, an alabaster statue produced in the Low Countries and active in the confessional life of people in Lesser Poland became embedded in the hagiography of St. Hyacinth, contributing to his canonization in Rome. Material form here enters into devotional narrative, binding together multiple regions, religious cultures, and histories of production. Hagiography, fashioned to secure patronage and devotion, was inseparable from the movement of objects across political and cultural boundaries. Pataki similarly traces how geopolitical transformation reshaped material knowledge. Her study of the herbarium associated with Červený Kláštor monastery situates its production within the shifting status of the Spiš region, which moved from contested borderland to interior territory following the Habsburg annexation of southern Poland in 1772. These changes prompted intensified surveying of land and its economic value, fostering closer attention to and systematic recording of local flora. Radway's analysis of hand-coloured maps further underscores the instability of political space in the period. Map owners coloured borders according to their own priorities, producing divergent visions of Europe that linked territorial imagination to political identity and affiliation.

The fluid ways in which material culture has been connected to place, origin, and historical belonging can also be seen in artefacts' past and present collecting contexts, as well as in how they are displayed, catalogued, and accessed by researchers today. So-called Transylvanian and Polish carpets were once believed to have been produced

³⁴ Matthew Rampley, *Heritage, Ideology, and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: Contested Pasts, Contested Presents* (Woodbridge 2012), 11; Monika A. Murzyn, 'Heritage Transformation in Central and Eastern Europe', in Brian Graham and Peter Howards, eds, *The Ashgate Research Companion to Heritage and Identity* (Farnham 2008), 316.

in those regions, though we now know they were woven on Anatolian and Persian looms, respectively.³⁵ An opal glass beaker in the British Museum (WB.56) was long attributed to Venice but has since been reassigned, through scientific analysis and iconographical research, to a workshop on the estate of Count Buquoy in Bohemia.³⁶ The entanglement of national narratives with shifting political borders, linguistic communities, and imperial histories remains a daily challenge for state-funded museums across the region. Present-day territorial frameworks did not exist in the early modern period, yet material culture is often organized and interpreted along these modern lines, complicating efforts to reconstruct accurate historical trajectories. Scientific techniques of material and elemental analysis further unsettle assumptions about geographic origin. Aleksandra Lipińska's work on alabaster, for instance, shows that workshops did not simply draw from nearby quarries, but selected stone prized for its material qualities, even when it had to be sourced at a considerable distance.³⁷ Museum and heritage scholarship has traced how these complexities were institutionalized from the nineteenth century onward. Matthew Rampley and Monika Murzyn have shown how museums across Central Europe were shaped by overlapping imperial, national, and ethnic claims. Institutions such as the Kunsthistorisches Museum in Vienna, founded in 1891 to house Habsburg collections and later reconfigured as Austria's leading art museum, exemplify these layered histories of collection and display.³⁸ In Rampley's characterization, 'heritage artefacts may have multiple meanings, and [...] may belong equally to the past of different groups and nations'; thus 'Central Europe provides the most striking instances of [...] polycultural and layered sites of memory'.³⁹

Approaching Central Europe through material culture re-centres the region as an interconnected macro-region, but the contributions to this volume also highlight the practical challenges of working with the area's surviving archives and collections. Collaborative, interdisciplinary research is required for working through dispersed object corpora and fragmented documentation. Transcultural inquiry in particular necessitates sustained archival labour to recover the histories of illuminators, kabbalistic healers, herbalist-monks, Haban communities, and other actors whose traces are often partial or obscured. In Central Europe, these difficulties are inseparable from the destructive layers of modern history – from the Reformation and

³⁵ Stefano Ionescu, ed., *Antique Ottoman Rugs in Transylvania* (Rome 2005); Tomasz Grusiecki, 'Doublethink: Polish Carpets in Transcultural Contexts', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 104, No. 3 (2022), 29–54.

³⁶ Dora Thornton, Andrew Meek, and William Gudenrath, 'Opal Glass in The British Museum Attributed to the Buquoy Glasshouse', *Journal of Glass Studies*, Vol. 57 (2015), 167–82.

³⁷ Aleksandra Lipińska, *Moving Sculptures: Southern Netherlandish Alabasters from the 16th to 17th Centuries in Central and Northern Europe*, Jessica Taylor-Kucia, trans. (Leiden 2015).

³⁸ Matthew Rampley, Markian Prokopovych, and Nóra Veszprémi, *The Museum Age in Austria-Hungary: Art and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century* (University Park, PA 2021), 2–4. See also Monika A. Murzyn, 'Heritage Transformation', Peter Aronsson, and Gabriella Elgenius, eds, *Building National Museums in Europe 1750–2010: Conference Proceedings* (Linköping 2011); and Emily Hanscam and James Koranyi, eds, *Digging Politics: The Ancient Past and Contested Present in East-Central Europe* (Berlin 2023).

³⁹ Matthew Rampley, *Heritage, Ideology, and Identity in Central and Eastern Europe: Contested Pasts, Contested Presents* (Woodbridge 2012), 16–17.

the Josephine reforms to Nazi and Soviet confiscations and losses – which have reshaped collections and determined what remains of early modern material culture.⁴⁰ Close attention to archival formation and to the histories of collecting in the region is therefore essential if objects are to serve as historical evidence. At the same time, these conditions create opportunities for new forms of collaboration across national, linguistic, and disciplinary boundaries.

Dialogic Scholarship

Central Europe is marked by places shaped through overlapping cultural and political histories.⁴¹ Jurkowlaniec, for instance, traces how devotional myth-making emerged from competing claims tied to similar place names: the Latinized *Vissogradum* referred both to Vyshhorod near Kyiv and to Wyszogród near Warsaw, enabling each to claim St. Hyacinth's miracles and develop into sites of pilgrimage. Paluch similarly shows how multilingual skill operated as a form of social leverage. Her study of an eighteenth-century Ashkenazi Jewish connoisseur of written material reveals how he navigated linguistic and cultural boundaries to secure authority within specialized knowledge circles. The site of Červený Kláštor, central to Pataki's contribution, likewise sat under shifting political jurisdictions in the late eighteenth century, shaping how knowledge of the landscape was produced and recorded. Many places across the region carry comparable layers of historical affiliation – Transylvania across Romanian, Hungarian, and Saxon German traditions; Lviv across Polish and Ukrainian ones; Prague across Czech, German, and Jewish communities; and Danzig (Polish: Gdańsk) across German and Polish histories.⁴²

What were once arenas of conflict shaped by clashing nation-centred narratives are thus increasingly becoming sites of methodological innovation acting to transform the region into a model of dialogic practice that seeks to engage diverse historical experiences and mediate their meanings in contemporary contexts. We propose the term *dialogic scholarship* to describe this approach, drawing inspiration from the Socratic mode of inquiry as well as from Mikhail Bakhtin's literary concepts of dialogism (the recognition of manifold perspectives), polyphony (the infusion of multiple voices into historical narratives), and heteroglossia (the disruption of dominant discourse through the inclusion of diverse viewpoints).⁴³

⁴⁰ Cf. Timothy Snyder, *Bloodlands: Europe between Hitler and Stalin* (New York 2012).

⁴¹ For a critical analysis, see Marcin Moskalewicz and Wojciech Przybylski, eds, *Understanding Central Europe* (London 2018). A notable study underlining this phenomenon is Norman Davies and Roger Moorhouse's *Microcosm: Portrait of a Central European City* (London 2002), esp. xvii.

⁴² For example, Maria Alessia Rossi and Isabella Alice Sullivan, eds, *Eclecticism in Late Medieval Visual Culture at the Crossroads of the Latin, Greek, and Slavic Traditions* (Berlin 2022); Tomasz Grusiecki, Maria Alessia Rossi, and Isabella Alice Sullivan, eds, *Ukraine Matters: Studies in Medieval and Early Modern History and Art* (Washington, DC forthcoming).

⁴³ For a lucid introduction to Bakhtin's narratological concepts, see Andrew Robinson, 'Bakhtin: Dialogism, Polyphony and Heteroglossia', *Ceasefire*, 29 July 201, <https://ceasefiremagazine.co.uk/in-theory-bakhtin-1/>.

A pluralist approach – often termed *histoire croisée* (intersectional history) in French and ‘entangled’ or ‘connected’ history in English – has since the 1980s been challenging nationalist assumptions about cultural distinctiveness, pointing instead to the ongoing phenomena of adaptation and re-appropriation of forms, media, and practices.⁴⁴ By opening themselves to colleagues from other historiographic traditions, Central European historians, together with scholars in Western Europe and North America working on the region, acknowledge the validity of multiple perspectives. No single position can monopolize interpretive authority (polyphony); scholarship is continually shaped through engagement with other voices and viewpoints (dialogism); and familiar frameworks can be productively defamiliarized to challenge ethnonationalism (heteroglossia). As Thomas Elsaesser aptly observes: ‘There is no European, of course, who is not already diasporic in relation to some marker of difference—be it ethnic, regional, religious, or linguistic—and whose identity is not always already hyphenated or doubly occupied’.⁴⁵ To be a historian in Central Europe today is, for many, to engage in dialogue. And dialogue, by definition, does not come to an end. Nor does it occur between fixed positions or subjects; rather, it has the capacity to transform those who participate in it. As Central Europeanists, we are reinvigorated by recent efforts to foreground multiple communities, overlapping affiliations, and objects that reflect the region’s diverse traditions and material cultures.⁴⁶

Part of dialogic scholarship’s appeal for study of the region is that memory politics remains deeply embedded in how material culture is used to represent national

⁴⁴ Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, ‘Deutsch-französischer Kulturtransfer als Forschungsgegenstand: Eine Problemskizze’, in Michel Espagne and Michael Werner, eds, *Transferts: Les relations interculturelles dans l’espace franco-allemand, XVIIIe et XIXe siècle* (Paris 1988), 11–34; Michel Espagne, *L’histoire de l’art comme transfert culturel: L’itinéraire d’Anton Springer* (Paris 2009); Michel Espagne, ‘Cultural Transfers in Art History’, in Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, Catherine Dossin, and Béatrice Joyeux-Prunel, eds, *Circulations in the Global History of Art* (Farnham 2015), 97–112; Michael Werner and Bénédicte Zimmermann, ‘Beyond Comparison: Histoire Croisée and the Challenge of Reflexivity’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 45 (2006), 30–50; Sanjay Subrahmanyam, ‘Connected Histories: Notes towards a Reconfiguration of Early Modern Eurasia’, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 3 (1997), 735–62.

⁴⁵ Thomas Elsaesser, *European Cinema: Face to Face with Hollywood* (Amsterdam 2005), 108. See also Peter Thaler, ‘Fluid Identities in Central European Borderlands’, *European History Quarterly*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (2001), 519–48.

⁴⁶ Grażyna Jurkowlanec et al., eds, ‘East Meets West’, *Ikonotheke*, Vol. 22 (2009); Waldemar J. Deluga and Daniela Rywiková, eds, *Art in Medieval and Early Modern Central Europe* (Ostrava 2019); Ivan Gerát, ed., ‘Special Issue: The Borders in the Art History of Central Europe’, *Arts: Journal of the Institute of Art History of the Slovak Academy of Sciences*, Vol. 40, No. 2 (2007); Dušan Buran und Markus Hörsch, eds, *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kunst in Ostmitteleuropa, Vol 4: ‘Von der Spätgotik zur Renaissance (1470–1570)’* (Berlin forthcoming); Agnieszka Gąsior and Marius Winzele, eds, *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kunst in Ostmitteleuropa, Vol 5: ‘Von der Renaissance zum Barock (1570–1670)’* (Berlin 2025); and Robert Born and Werner Telesko, eds, *Handbuch zur Geschichte der Kunst in Ostmitteleuropa, Vol 6: ‘Vom Barock zum Frühklassizismus (1670–1770)’* (Berlin forthcoming); Joachim Bahlcke, Beate Störkuhl, and Matthias Weber, eds, *The Luther Effect in Eastern Europe: History, Culture, Memory*, Sarah Patey, trans. (Berlin 2017); Ivan Foletti, Ondřej Jakubec, and Radka Miltová, eds, *Central Europe as a Meeting Point of Visual Cultures: Circulation of Persons, Artifacts, and Ideas* (Brno 2021).

traditions.⁴⁷ Apart from Germany, Hungary, and Austria, most countries in this part of Europe gained (or regained) independence only after the First World War (1914–1918). As a result, differentiating themselves from the imperial metropole through material culture became a vital strategy for art historians and museum professionals prior to independence and during the interbellum period.⁴⁸ Following 1945, art history across Central Europe became even more nationalist. A once highly heterogeneous region became one of Europe's most homogeneous post-1945. Scholars' narratives adapted to reflect this new reality, emphasizing what was typical and local to claim it for the nation. For example, amber – for centuries a Prussian material – became typically Polish, and a type of Italianate gable parapet widespread in the decoration of the region's house façades became known as a 'Polish' or 'Silesian' attic.⁴⁹ This approach unwittingly echoed the *Blut und Boden* ideology of the imperial German and Nazi eras with respect to the claim that particular artistic materials and solutions were of unique local derivation. It was not until after 1989, especially with the eastern half of the region joining the European Union in 2004, that less ethnonationalist histories began to emerge.⁵⁰ Yet the enduring impact of modern nativism still influences how objects have been collected, often along nation-centric lines. These practices present a challenge, particularly for archival and museum data management, since objects are still largely collected, categorized, and stored within national silos that reproduce modern political boundaries rather than early modern realities.

To navigate this new history requires a fully trans-imperial archive and approach. Across the special issue, contributors show that their objects refuse to remain within the boundaries of any single nation-state. Following them demands movement among archives and collections in different countries, work across multiple languages, and engagement with distinct historiographical traditions. Dialogue with local curators

⁴⁷ In writing a connected history of Central Europe, we consequently must acknowledge the region's history of being influenced by German, Austrian, and Russian imperial projects. See Matthew Rampley, *The Vienna School of Art History: Scholarship and the Politics of Empire, 1847–1918* (University Park, PA 2013); Matthew Rampley, Markian Prokopovych, and Nóra Veszprémi, *Liberalism, Nationalism and Design Reform in the Habsburg Empire: Museums of Design, Industry and the Applied Arts* (New York 2020); Matthew Rampley, Markian Prokopovych, and Nóra Veszprémi, *The Museum Age in Austria-Hungary: Art and Empire in the Long Nineteenth Century* (University Park, PA 2021); Julia Allerstorfer, Karolina Majewska-Güde and Monika Leisch-Kiesl, eds, *East Central European Art Histories and Austria: Imperial Pasts, Neoliberal Presences, Decolonial Futures* (Bielefeld 2024).

⁴⁸ See Thierry Lenain et al., eds, *Art History and Visual Studies in Europe: Transnational Discourses and National Frameworks* (Leiden 2012); Jerzy Malinowski, ed., *History of Art History in Central, Eastern and South-Eastern Europe*, 2 volumes (Toruń 2012).

⁴⁹ Janina Grabowska, *Polish Amber*, Emma Harris, trans. (Warsaw 1983); Jan Białostocki, *The Art of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe: Hungary, Bohemia, Poland* (London 1976), 62–9; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'Review of *The Art of the Renaissance in Eastern Europe*, by Jan Białostocki', *The Art Bulletin*, Vol. 60, No. 1 (1978), 164–9.

⁵⁰ Jiří Fajt, Markus Hörsch, and Susanne Jaeger, eds, *Europa Jagellonica, 1386–1572: Art and Culture in Central Europe under the Jagiellonian Dynasty*, exhibition guide (Kutná Hora 2012); Małgorzata Omilanowska, Tomasz Torbus, and Anda Rottenberg, eds, *Tür an Tür: Polen – Deutschland, 1000 Jahre Kunst und Geschichte*, exhibition cat. (Berlin 2011).

– who grapple with these same issues in museum practice – is equally vital. This polyglot, mobile historian's toolkit is not simply desirable but necessary for Central Europe, and it is on full display here. Sarnecka's study of ceramics, for instance, reveals that while local scholarship has amassed rich evidence for production across the region, this material remains fragmented without a trans-European frame capable of situating it within broader histories of exchange linking Western Europe, Africa, and Asia. Jurkowlaniec traces the material life of a legend in which a Polish saint rescues a Marian statue from the Mongol raid on Kyiv in 1240, binding together Poland, Rus', and the Eurasian steppe. Paluch follows members of the Ashkenazi diaspora as they moved among majority communities, requiring an inquiry that crosses religious, social, and political worlds. Pataki reconstructs the life of a border monastery through Hungarian, Slovak, and Polish sources. And Radway's cartographic research ranges across European and North American libraries, shaped by the legacies of Habsburg–Ottoman diplomacy and the dispersed afterlives of atlases themselves. Only by working across languages, collections, and geographies can the region's dense material and human entanglements come more fully into view.

Reframing the History of Europe

Dipesh Chakrabarty's and other scholars' calls to provincialize Europe – to unsettle its status as the benchmark against which other histories are measured – continue to gather force, steering scholarship away from narratives refracted through Western European experience alone.⁵¹ By treating Europe's internal diversity and its long-standing entanglements with the wider world as a foundational heuristic rather than an add-on to established narratives, a different vision of early modern history begins to take shape. We agree that the continent must continue to be dehomogenized, beginning from within Europe itself rather than only through its former colonies. Yet decentring Europe requires more than critique; it demands a constructive account of what a decentred Europe looks like in practice. Central Europe offers a compelling point of entry by demonstrating that European history can be rethought not only from and for the margins but in ways that recalibrate our understanding of the continent as a whole.⁵² A decentred Europe is not a space of fragmentation or cultural incoherence. Rather, it is a complex cultural geography that acknowledges a plurality of historical experiences and situates each region in dynamic relation to the others – and to the wider world.

⁵¹ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ 2000). See also Kenneth Pomeranz, *The Great Divergence: China, Europe, and the Making of the Modern World Economy* (Princeton, NJ 2000); Anna Lowenhaupt Tsing, *Friction: An Ethnography of Global Connection* (Princeton, NJ 2005); Jürgen Osterhammel, *The Transformation of the World: A Global History of the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton, NJ 2014); Sebastian Conrad, *What Is Global History?* (Princeton, NJ 2016).

⁵² For a modernist example, see Piotr Piotrowski, 'On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History', *Umění*, Vol. 56 (2008), 378–83; Piotr Piotrowski, 'How to Write a History of Central-East European Art?', *Third Text*, Vol. 23, No. 1 (2009), 5–14.

The first step is recognizing Central Europe's place within Europe as a whole and its role within wider geographical entanglements. Though often imagined as distant from the continent's maritime commercial hubs in the west, the region was in fact a highly significant resource landscape during the early modern period. Recent global-historical narratives have rightly foregrounded the influx of extra-European materials as a transforming force within Europe's economies and cultures. In the study of artistic and artisanal production, particular attention has been paid to featherwork, ivory, porcelain, lacquer, shells, and textiles flowing into Western European metropolises from Asia, Africa, and the Americas.⁵³ Yet alongside these global currents, resources in substantial quantities continued to be extracted from Central Europe. The area's residents not only repurposed imported materials such as furs, silks, and spices but also supplied essential raw resources – oak, amber, silver, and precious stones – that underpinned European production more broadly.⁵⁴ Revisiting these flows requires rethinking European material culture itself, which has too often been written through a predominantly Western lens. Mines such as Banská Štiavnica in present-day Slovakia, for instance, remained major centres of silver and gold production into the nineteenth century, employing increasingly intensive forms of extraction.⁵⁵ A similar corrective is needed in the history of gemstones. While early modern scholarship has stressed the importance of newly global trade networks in

⁵³ Alessandra Russo, Gerhard Wolf, and Diana Fane, eds, *Images Take Flight: Feather Art in Mexico and Europe, 1400–1700* (Munich 2015); Stephanie Porras, *The First Viral Images: Maerten de Vos, Antwerp Print, and the Early Modern Globe* (University Park, PA 2023); Teresa Canepa, *Silk, Porcelain and Lacquer: China and Japan and Their Trade with Western Europe and the New World, 1500–1644* (London 2016); Anne Gerritsen, *The City of Blue and White: Chinese Porcelain and the Early Modern World* (Cambridge 2020); Amanda Phillips, *Sea Change: Ottoman Textiles between the Mediterranean and the Indian Ocean* (Oakland, CA 2021).

⁵⁴ Stephan Conermann, Albrecht Fuess, and Stefan Rohdewald, eds, *Transottomanica – Osteuropäisch-osmanisch-persische Mobilitätsdynamiken: Perspektiven und Forschungsstand* (Göttingen 2019); Tomasz Wazny, 'Baltic Timber in Western Europe: An Exciting Dendrochronological Question', *Dendrochronologia*, Vol. 20, No. 3 (2002), 313–20; Rachel King, *Amber: From Antiquity to Eternity* (London 2022); Jeffrey Chipps Smith, *The Art of the Goldsmith in Late Fifteenth-Century Germany: The Kimbell Virgin and Her Bishop* (Fort Worth, TX 2006); Petr Vorel, *From the Silver Czech Tolar to a Worldwide Dollar: The Birth of the Dollar and Its Journey of Monetary Circulation in Europe and the World from the 16th to the 20th Century* (New York 2013); Jeannette Graulau, *Underground Wealth of Nations: On the Capitalist Origins of Silver Mining, A.D. 1150–1450* (New Haven, CT 2020). While the materials considered 'typical' for Central Europe are addressed in existing literature, they often lack prominence and recognition in the broader field of early modern studies. For reasons why, see Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'National Stereotypes, Prejudice, and Aesthetic Judgment in the Historiography of Art', in Michael Ann Holly and Keith P. F. Moxey, eds, *Art History, Aesthetics, Visual Studies* (Williamstown, MA 2002), 71–84; Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann, 'The Challenge of Central Europe to the Historiography of Art', *Maske und Kothurn*, Vol. 48 (2002), 19–27; Matthew Rampley, 'Networks, Horizons, Centres and Hierarchies: On the Challenges of Writing on Modernism in Central Europe', *Umění*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (2021), 145–62.

⁵⁵ For mining history, see Tina Asmussen and Pamela O. Long, 'Introduction: The Cultural and Material Worlds of Mining in Early Modern Europe', *Renaissance Studies*, Vol. 34., No. 1 (2020), 8–30; Helmut Schröcke, 'Mining and Settlement in Slovakia: An Historical Summary', *Geo-Journal*, Vol. 32, No. 2 (1994), 127–35; Peter L. Siems, 'A History of the Schemnitz (Banská Štiavnica) Silver-Gold Mines', *Mining History News*, Vol. 15 (2008).

luxury stones – noting, for example, the rising prestige of turquoise among early modern elites – inventories of Prague burghers point to alternative regional sources for stones described by local populations as ‘turkus’.⁵⁶ In this volume, Sarnecka shows that the Italian metallurgist Vannoccio Biringuccio (c. 1480–1539), often regarded as the father of the foundry industry, identified tin-producing sites in the region even as he sidestepped their ‘complex’ names in favour of Western locations. Drawing on new scientific analyses, she demonstrates that local tin production in the Krušné Hory/Erzgebirge (the Ore Mountains that lie along the border between Bohemia and Saxony) was far more significant than previously assumed. Studies of turquoise and garnets likewise lay the groundwork for future research into the scale and circulation of Central European raw materials in the early modern world.⁵⁷

Shifting our focus eastward also changes our perspective on canonical chronologies and periodizations. While the ‘Renaissance’ and ‘Reformation’ – along with significant events like the Treaty of Augsburg (1555), the Edict of Nantes (1598), the Treaty of Westphalia (1648), and the Treaty of Utrecht (1715) – form the backbone of the prevailing European early modern history, Central Europe reveals other significant markers. For instance, a parallel chronology might underline the fall of the Byzantine Empire (1453), which cemented the Ottomans as a regional power; the Battle of Mohács (1526), which brought Hungary under Ottoman rule; the Union of Lublin (1569), which established the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth; the Warsaw Confederation (1573), which enshrined religious freedom in Poland-Lithuania; the Union of Brest (1596), which delegatized Orthodoxy within the Commonwealth and created the Greek Catholic Church under the authority of the papacy; the Battle of White Mountain (1620), which ushered in irreversible Habsburg and Catholic dominance in Bohemia; and the Battle of Vienna (1683), which led to the Habsburgs regaining control of much of Ottoman Hungary. The region’s historians also use different periodization terminologies based on their national histories. For example, in Bulgarian and much Romanian art historical scholarship, the Renaissance is less emphasized, with the concept of Byzantine revival playing a more prominent role.⁵⁸ In Romanian history, ‘medieval’ tends to incorporate a longer period, including the seventeenth century, unbroken by the early Reformation.⁵⁹ Such

⁵⁶ Arash Khazeni, *Sky Blue Stone: The Turquoise Trade in World History* (Berkeley, CA 2014); Suzanna Ivanič, *Cosmos and Materiality in Early Modern Prague* (Oxford 2021), 63–4.

⁵⁷ Federico Carò, Deborah Schorsch, Louisa Smieska, and Brunella Santarelli, ‘Non-invasive XRF Analysis of Ancient Egyptian and Near Eastern Turquoise: A Pilot Study’, *Journal of Archaeological Science: Reports*, Vol. 36 (2021). On garnets, see Sue Brunning, ‘Sri Lanka to Suffolk: Sutton Hoo and the Silk Roads’, <https://www.britishmuseum.org/exhibitions/silk-roads/sri-lanka-suffolk-sutton-hoo-and-silk-roads> [accessed 11 December 2025].

⁵⁸ Shona Kallestrup, Magdalena Kunińska, Mihnea Alexandru Mihail, Anna Adashinskaya, and Cosmin Minea, eds, *Periodization in the Art Historiographies of Central and Eastern Europe* (New York 2022), esp. 48–67 and 88–102. Cf. William A. Green, ‘Periodizing World History’, *History and Theory*, Vol. 34, No. 2 (1995), 99–111.

⁵⁹ Alice Isabella Sullivan, ‘Beyond Traditional Boundaries: Medieval Art and Architecture in Eastern Europe’, in Pamela A. Patton and Maria Alessia Rossi, eds, *Out of Bounds: Exploring the Limits of Medieval Art* (University Park, PA 2023), 185–210.

terminologies are reflected in gallery and museum displays and organization. We find 'the Renaissance' applied to a variety of Central European locales at different times. Hungary under Matthias Corvinus (1458–1490) experienced an early Central European 'Renaissance' indicating Buda's prime before the Ottoman conquest; the so-called golden and silver ages in Poland refer to the country's sixteenth- and early seventeenth-century 'Renaissance' and 'early Baroque' heyday; and Rudolfine Prague (1576–1612) refers to the late but expansive Renaissance moment when the city served as the Habsburg imperial capital under Rudolf II and enjoyed extensive connections beyond Europe.

Our contributions show how alternative chronologies transform perspectives on early modern Europe. Alongside conventional narratives of the Reformation, Jurkowlaniec's article foregrounds the region's dense and overlapping confessional worlds. Even as Luther's protestations unfolded in Wittenberg, the cult of St. Hyacinth was being actively shaped by Pope Clement VII in correspondence with Dominicans in Poland (1517–1527). The cult's late sixteenth-century incorporation into the Catholic landscape of Kyiv fed directly into efforts to expand Catholic influence in Rus', in tension with Orthodox traditions. These developments unfolded amid profound political realignments: Kyiv became part of the Kingdom of Poland through the Union of Lublin (1569); the Union of Brest (1596) sought – only partially successfully – to bring Orthodox believers under papal authority. The legend of St. Hyacinth, together with its material and visual expressions, was deeply embedded in these transformations, extending beyond the Protestant–Catholic framework that has long dominated accounts of the so-called European Reformations. A century later, confessional conflict continued to reshape the continent. Although the Thirty Years' War formally ended in 1648 with the Treaty of Westphalia, that same year Orthodox Cossacks under Bohdan Khmelnytsky rebelled against the Polish-Lithuanian Commonwealth in the southeastern 'borderlands' (Ukraine). The prolonged uprising weakened the Commonwealth and paved the way for the Swedish Deluge (1655–1660), ushering in a period of political instability and economic devastation. It is against the resulting fractured landscape that Paluch situates her study of Hillel Ba'al Shem in the early eighteenth century. The Deluge had destroyed many of Poland's paper mills, rendering paper a scarce and valuable commodity. Hillel's access to – and skilful manipulation of – this fragile resource enabled him to position himself at the centre of wide-ranging networks of knowledge and exchange, revealing how material conditions shaped religious practice and social authority in the aftermath of upheaval.

The region's long history of marginalization and orientalizing has often been framed as an obstacle to overcome. More productively, it can be understood as an opportunity: not a burdened periphery but a platform from which to decentre Europe itself. As Central Europeanists, we are acutely aware of the hierarchies that continue to structure historical writing, even amid efforts to 'globalize' the discipline. A commitment to provincializing Europe from within – and to rethinking artistic and cultural geographies – unsettles dominant narratives and deepens our understanding of the continent's plurality. Practising history from Central Europe means continually asking what Europe is and where it lies; how many Europes have existed; how the continent has defined itself in relation to other cultural worlds; and how those meanings have shifted over time. Early modern elites in the region actively mobilized ideas of 'eastness' to position themselves within European political and cultural life. Polish-Lithuanian and Hungarian nobles, for instance, cast their

lands as the bulwark of Christendom, essential to Western Europe's survival. The Polish court fashioned itself as a key conduit for prized Persian carpets, while members of the nobility entered the service of the Ottoman sultan.⁶⁰ Taken together, these strategies of self-positioning and cross-cultural engagement reveal that Western Europe was never the natural centre of European history but only one of many possible points of reference within a far more relational cultural landscape.

Because the subfield of Central European studies has long been treated as on the sidelines by Western European and North American – largely Anglophone – historians of culture, we are acutely aware of how readily binary and deterministic frameworks distort the field. We know first-hand how limiting – and how damaging to both scholarship on the region and the scholars who produce it – such framings can be. Any effort to foreground certain narratives inevitably casts others into shadow, yet this moment offers an opportunity to recalibrate the map. We therefore advocate for a decentring, reorienting, and qualifying of 'Europe', so that its western half is no longer presumed to be the sole epicentre of historical and art historical inquiry. For us, this means sustained attention to Central Europe and to how the region has long complicated – and continues to redefine – what it means to be European.

It is equally important to stress that this marginalization within Anglophone and Western European scholarship, and the associated perception of limited scholarly depth, do not characterize the study of early modern Central European art within the region itself. German, Polish, Czech, Slovak, Hungarian, and other Central European scholarly traditions have generated an exceptionally rich and sustained body of research. In Germany alone, endowed professorships devoted to Central and East-Central European art – such as those at the Humboldt University of Berlin – alongside major research institutes focused on the region's history and culture, including the GWZO (The Leibniz Institute for the History and Culture of Eastern Europe) in Leipzig, attest to the field's institutional depth and intellectual vitality. In Austria, institutions such as the Central European University and the University of Vienna offer strong programmes for the study of the region's art, while the University of Warsaw, the Jagiellonian University in Cracow, Charles University in Prague, and Masaryk University in Brno rank among the leading centres worldwide in this area. The paradox is therefore not one of scholarly absence but of uneven circulation and emphasis. Despite its centrality within the region, work on Central Europe has remained marginal within English-language art history. What this special issue seeks to do is not invent a field but rather make more visible a mature and sophisticated body of scholarship whose insights fundamentally reshape how Europe's artistic past can be understood: beyond nationalist frameworks and beyond a Western European default.

⁶⁰ Paul Srodecki, *Antemurale Christianitatis: Zur Genese der Bollwerksrhetorik im östlichen Mitteleuropa an der Schwelle vom Mittelalter zur Frühen Neuzeit* (Husum 2015); Tomasz Grusiecki, 'Sigismund III of Poland, Persian Carpets, and the Pitfalls of Provenience', in Campbell and Porras, eds, *The Routledge Companion to Global Renaissance Art*, 233–252; Hannah Neudecker, 'Wojciech Bobowski and his Turkish Grammar (1666): A Dragoman and Musician at the Court of Sultan Mehmed IV', *Dutch Studies*, Vol. 2 (1996), 169–92. Also compare Michael Bycroft, 'Boethius de Boodt and the emergence of the Oriental/Occidental Distinction in European Mineralogy', in Michael Bycroft and Sven Dupré, eds, *Gems in the Early Modern World: Materials, Knowledge and Global Trade, 1450–1800* (London 2019), 149–72.

Openings

The region has remained somewhat in the shadows of the global turn in art history and cultural history, not because of any lack of scholarly rigour or intellectual vitality among Central Europeanists, but because the global perspective has yet to fulfil its promise of truly decentring the field. Both disciplines remain institutionally anchored in nation-states, with US scholarship and publishing exerting disproportionate influence. As a result, what is framed as ‘global’ often aligns with US demographics – such as the inclusion of Latin America or the growing focus on West Africa and the transatlantic world – or with contemporary commercial interests, notably China. These are, of course, important and necessary directions of study, but they also reflect specific historical and institutional configurations. In Britain and France, scholarly attention continues to be shaped in part by the legacies of empire and colonialism, with Britain tending to prioritize India and France emphasizing North Africa. In Germany and Austria, far greater attention is devoted to Poland, Czechia, and Hungary as former imperial territories. In this way, nation-states – and, in many cases, their imperial pasts – continue to shape scholarly horizons.

Central Europe compels a fundamental rethinking of its transcultural past and, in turn, of the historiographical frameworks that continue to organize European – and indeed global – history. It has been argued that a genuinely global art history must be ‘polyphonic, multidimensional, and free of geographical hierarchies’, operating horizontally rather than vertically.⁶¹ Yet, as Matthew Rampley has recently observed, such aspirations often collide with academic realities, as scholars of Central Europe continue to speak from structurally subordinate positions. They may be encouraged to illuminate spaces deemed peripheral within mainstream art history, but this gesture alone rarely alters their status. A more profound shift in scholarly discourse would be required to dismantle entrenched hierarchies between centre and periphery.⁶² For this reason, our aim is not to proclaim early modern Central Europe as a new centre. The field is already vibrant and expanding, as recent publications attest, and for those who work within it, it has long been central.⁶³ Instead, we foreground a series of case studies that show how close attention to

⁶¹ Piotr Piotrowski, ‘On the Spatial Turn, or Horizontal Art History’, *Umění*, Vol. 56 (2008), 382.

⁶² Matthew Rampley, ‘Networks, Horizons, Centres and Hierarchies: On the Challenges of Writing on Modernism in Central Europe’, *Umění*, Vol. 69, No. 2 (2021), 145–62.

⁶³ Aleksandra Lipińska, *Moving Sculptures: Southern Netherlandish Alabasters from the 16th to 17th Centuries in Central and Northern Europe*, Jessica Taylor-Kucia, trans. (Leiden 2015); Aleksandra Koutny-Jones, *Visual Cultures of Death in Central Europe: Contemplation and Commemoration in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania* (Leiden 2015); Carolyn C. Guile, *Remarks on Architecture: The Vitruvian Tradition in Enlightenment Poland* (University Park, PA 2015); Franciszek Skibiński, *Willem van den Blocke: A Sculptor from the Low Countries in the Baltic Region* (Turnhout 2020); Suzanna Ivanič, *Cosmos and Materiality in Early Modern Prague* (Oxford 2021); Robyn D. Radway, *Portraits of Empires: Habsburg Albums from the German House in Ottoman Constantinople* (Bloomington, IN 2023); Tomasz Grusiecki, *Transcultural Things and the Spectre of Orientalism in Early Modern Poland-Lithuania* (Manchester 2023); Alice Isabella Sullivan, *The Eclectic Visual Culture of Medieval Moldavia* (Leiden 2023); Chassica Kirchoff, *The Thun-Hohenstein Album: Cultures of Remembrance in a Paper Armory* (Woodbridge 2023).

materiality reveals new forms of cultural entanglement across Europe – and how such insights gain force when pursued through genuinely dialogic scholarship.

We are at a pivotal moment in the rewriting of these histories. Nearly forty years after the legalization of the Solidarity movement in Poland and the fall of the Berlin Wall – two emblematic events in the collapse of communist authoritarianism in the region – the former Eastern Bloc (or, as some have termed it, the ‘lost West’) has undergone a gradual opening. Archival access has expanded, and new forms of scholarly exchange have emerged.⁶⁴ That exchange, however, remains uneven. Central European scholars are often far more conversant with Anglophone and Western European scholarship than the reverse. The economic advantages and global reach of Western academic institutions must be acknowledged, as must the persistent asymmetries they produce. Genuine dialogue requires more than inclusion; it demands moving beyond forms of ‘westsplainin’ that presume methodological superiority or privileged expertise.⁶⁵ The primary intellectual resources for the study of Central Europe remain located within the region itself. At the same time, the very fluidity that has long characterized Central Europe continues to generate physical and intellectual mobility. First- and second-generation scholars trained in the UK, Western Europe, and North America move among academic worlds, as do scholars displaced by renewed war on Europe’s eastern frontier since 2022. These movements reflect demographic change and, in the case of Ukraine, profound tragedy. Yet they also create possibilities for reshaping the field through deeper, more reciprocal engagement. As Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann observes in his concluding reflection, Central European histories are continually refracted through contemporary events: a reminder that historiography itself remains embedded in the shifting conditions of historically specific presents.

What emerges from this volume is the conviction that new voices, methods, and modes of inquiry – together with recent advances across the field – can help move us beyond the long-standing relegation of the region to the margins of the discipline. As access to collections broadens and as new technologies and scientific tools render objects more legible than ever, the possibilities for recovering overlooked histories continue to expand. The cultural fluidity that has long characterized Central Europe may complicate our efforts to write its histories, yet it also offers an extraordinary opportunity: to rethink how we narrate cultural encounters, connections, and exchanges on a continental scale. By nurturing genuinely dialogic scholarship, we propose an approach that resists the gravitational pull of national or imperial master narratives and instead re-centres the relational, the collaborative, and the material. To understand early modern Europe, we must neither impose the map of modern nation-states onto the past nor imagine the continent as a single, undifferentiated cultural entity. Central Europe, we suggest, serves as a critical vantage point from which Europe’s historical complexity comes into sharper focus.

⁶⁴ The early story of this was generously recounted by Thomas DaCosta Kaufmann at his keynote for the Connected Central European Worlds conference and forms the basis of his contribution to this special issue.

⁶⁵ Julia Buyskykh, ‘Old-New Colonial Tendencies in Social Anthropology: Empathy in Wartime’, *Ethnologia Polona*, Vol. 44 (2023), 55–85.

Acknowledgements

This work arises from the ‘Connected Central European Worlds, c. 1500–1700’ research project supported by the Arts and Humanities Research Council [grant number AH/V00848X/1], see <https://research.kent.ac.uk/emcentraleu/>.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The authors declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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