



**PUBLIC PRESENTATION OF NON-EUROPEAN CULTURES AT THE
TURN OF THE 19th AND 20th CENTURIES.
PART 1: AN ANALYSIS OF THE COLLECTION OF VRÁZ'S GLASS
SLIDES IN THE PHOTOGRAPHIC COLLECTIONS OF THE
NÁPRSTEK MUSEUM¹**

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ABSTRACT: The way in which the Czech public in the late 19th and early 20th centuries learned about exotic lands was primarily dependent on travellers' abilities to present their findings in literature or to mediate their experiences directly, by means of lectures. From the 1890s onwards, lectures were accompanied by slideshows. The Náprstek Museum contains an extensive collection of glass slides from the estate of Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860–1932), and an analysis of this collection forms the basis of this contribution. The slides with which Vráz accompanied his lectures can be divided into three types: slides produced from Vráz's own negatives, slides created from other sources and slides from educational series, manufactured and sold by professional companies.

KEY WORDS: Travelling – lectures – glass slides – Enrique Stanko Vráz – types of pictorial material

The second half of the 19th century and the early 20th century was the heyday of the famous Czech travellers, such as Emil Holub, Josef Kořenský, Enrique Stanko Vráz and Alberto Vojtěch Frič. Their travels to distant, often unexplored lands, whether motivated by a simple desire for adventure or a noble desire to educate and inform, always bore fruit in the form of literature (books of travel writing, and articles in newspapers and magazines, sometimes very long) or in the form of lecture activity.

The most effective way of presenting non-European ethnic groups and their way of life and cultures seems to have been lectures.

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In the 19th century a large part of the public was thirsty for knowledge, keen to expand its knowledge of languages and to learn anything new. Lectures by travellers were an integral part of the social and cultural life of the time – an incredibly popular and sought-after part. Immediate contact between the traveller and listener enabled lively and flexible discussion, and made all the information imparted more interesting.

Very soon travellers started to supplement their lectures using “light pictures”, as glass slides were called at the time – either coloured, or black and white. One of the first travellers to use slides in his lectures was Enrique Stanko Vráz (1860–1932).

Vráz’s life and his activities have already received a fair amount of specialist attention, although we still do not know his real name, date and place of birth (Todorovová 2006).

Enrique Stanko Vráz first came into the public consciousness in 1891, when he sent a letter from Venezuela to Vojta Náprstek. Although it was a private letter, it was printed in the newspaper *Národní listy* (Vrázová 1937: 82-84). Vráz did not come to Prague until 1894. He met Vojta Náprstek, and held an exhibition of ethnographical objects in his house, followed by an exhibition of live animals in an exhibition room on Na Perštýně.

Vráz gave his first public lecture in the Czech lands at the urging of his friends from the Natural History Club on the Žofín Island on 26 November 1894. It was, apparently, the only lecture for which he ever prepared in writing. In the end, however, he did not use his notes but spoke off the top of his head, enthusiastically and evocatively. He had a charismatic personality of great charm, and his lecture enraptured his Prague audience, gaining him the admiration and recognition of natural scientists and Náprstek’s circle.

Vráz’s lecture activity developed rapidly and highly successfully. The general enthusiasm with which his first lectures were received brought Vráz further invitations and offers to lecture in various places around Bohemia and Moravia. The aim of his lectures was twofold. The first, in today’s language, was ethnographic, and the lectures were peppered with his own, frequently humorous, insights. The second was related to natural science – he described the flora and fauna of exotic countries, with a description of hunting incidents.

The fees that he received for his lectures were Vráz’s main source of finance for his travels. During his first stint in 1894–1895 he gave 75 lectures, which brought him just under 5,000 guilders.

Vráz’s second lecture tour in 1898–1899 was even more successful than his first, judging by the reactions in the press of the time. Not only did he expand his subject-matter to include new knowledge gained on his further journey, but he also expanded his lectures to include “light pictures.” Newspapers announced his lectures in advance, and afterwards they reviewed them, describing their rich impressions.

Národní listy, 10 May 1898

Lectures by E. St. Vráz. In order to avoid misunderstanding among our readership, we should add that there will be three lectures, forming a cycle. Each will be accompanied by different pictures. The first takes place under the aegis of the geographical society on 11 May at 7 o’clock in the Rudolfinum. The second, for the benefit of the Central Education Committee, is organised by the Ladies’ Society of Prague on 14 May at half past seven, in the hall of the crop exchange. Finally, on 17 May the ladies of Vinohrady will hold a lecture in the courtyard of the Vinohrady meeting hall, again with a new programme. Tickets for the lecture in the Rudolfinum may be



Fig. 1 E. St. Vráz in his study in Chicago, before 1920 (Vr I 145)

obtained, besides in the bookshops listed on posters, at Jan Kotík's shop in Smíchov, Rud. Storch's shop in Karlín and Frant. Horálek's shop in Vinohrady.
(ANpM, scrap-book 264, p. 117)

Národní listy, 3 June 1898

The lecture of Mr. E. St. Vráz in Kladno will take place on 9 June in the Sokol hall. The lecture will be accompanied by pictures projected on the wall using a skiopticon.
(ANpM, scrap-book 264, p. 124)

When Vráz returned for a third time to the Czech lands in 1901–1903, his new lectures were impatiently awaited. The press of the period once again carried enthusiastic reports.

Mělnické listy, 6 November 1901

The traveller E. St. Vráz in Mělník, where those who attended his first lecture six years ago still remember it vividly. This time Vráz's lecture was doubly interesting because, in addition to his breathtaking description of his journey, he took us vividly on his travels around China, mostly Peking, by means of around 100 wonderful and charming photographs, which he took in China himself...
(ANpM, scrap-book 264, p. 190)

Osvěta lidu, Pardubice, 5 January 1902

from Vysoké Mýto

The lecture by Mr. E. St. Vráz ended for the organisers in great success. No one can remember such a great number of visitors, both from the town and from the surroundings. The lecturer's light and easy manner of speaking entertained the audience, which listened to the lecture with real understanding and rewarded the traveller with long-lasting applause. It is clear that our community has a keenness for beautiful things, as long as it is given an opportunity...
(ANpM, scrap-book 264, p. 197)

Vráz's last stay before the First World War broke out was already marked by the unfavourable political and economic situation. He was forced to return to America mainly by his difficult financial situation – no one in Prague was able to find him work, although there was talk of his administering the natural science collections of the National Museum or administering the Náprstek Museum. It did not work out in the end, and after celebrating his fiftieth birthday Vráz left in spring 1910 for Chicago.

He spent the First World War in the United States, largely engaged in political activity.

After the creation of independent Czechoslovakia Vráz returned to his home country for good in 1921. He did not undertake any more journeys around the world, since old age was making itself felt. His state of health had declined as a result of the tropical diseases he had contracted. The proceedings from his travel lectures and newspaper articles had become his only source of income.

Vráz's lecture activity was to have culminated in an extensive compilation, "Orbis pictus", which would have given readers, in a popular form, an encyclopaedic geographical, natural science and ethnographic picture of the whole world. He was one of the most qualified people to undertake such a project. However, he had spent too much energy on smaller projects, and the work unfortunately remained unfinished. The illustrations that were prepared for the work were the slides and negatives that Vráz had collected over the years from all over the world, which he used for his lectures and a major part of which has been preserved in the Náprstek Museum.

Vráz's collection in the Náprstek Museum consists of almost eight thousand negatives and slides. They were given to the museum in 1948 by Vráz's daughter Vlasta (1902–1989), before she was forced to leave Czechoslovakia in the wake of the communist putsch. The huge collection was registered as a single acquisition. Later an inventory was made, but for reasons now unclear it was only made for part of the collection. An attempt was made at simple classification on geographical lines, but from the point of view of material type no difference was drawn between slides and negatives. Over the years the collection was moved around, divided up, part was taken for processing in the newly-created independent photographic collection in the 1960s, part was transferred from the library to what at the time was the ethnographic department in 2003–2004, and other parts were not processed at all.

The last part to be discovered, the part which is now being processed, consists of over 3,000 negatives and slides from Asia, Africa, Australia and Oceania, America and Europe. Of these, almost 1900 are glass slides.

In view of these unfavourable circumstances it is no longer possible today to reconstruct Vráz's original lecture series or the number of them, let alone the order of pictures in the series. Many negatives and slides have preserved their numbers, but the numbers have been rewritten and crossed out, meaning that not even these are much help. We also have several original wooden cases in which the lecture slides were kept, but not even these contain lists of pictures or other texts that might help to identify them.

That Vráz really did have several lecture series prepared, with a large number of slides, is indicated by a mention in a book by Vlasta Vrázová: "*Before he went to South America in 1903 he left in the Czech lands several lecture series, to be used, with written texts and several hundred coloured slides...*" (Vrázová 1937: 233). Unfortunately, further details of these series remain unknown – we do not know whether they were seven different



Fig. 2 A case in which Vráz carried the glass slides for his lectures (photo Jíří Vaněk)

series, or whether they were all the same, or whether there were some doubles. However, the number of these series may provide a possible explanation as to why there are frequent duplicates and multiplicates in Vráz's collection.

The only text of these lecture series to have survived seems to be two notebooks with the same lecture, entitled "How people live and dress, from the lands of eternal ice to the blazing lands of the equator. Accompanied by 103 pictures.", in the Archive of the Náprstek Museum (ANpM, Vráz collection, box. 8, item 1). The person who wrote down the lecture refers to Vráz in the third person, and begins with an introduction in which he presents Vráz's project "Orbis pictus", part of which consisted of these lectures, and to which Vlasta Vrázová was referring in the quotation above. The text also contains notes stating when each picture should be shown, with a brief description, such as "Egyptian women (veiled)", "The bodyguards of the Javanese sultan", "Korean children having breakfast", "The remains of rock houses in Arizona" and so on. It might be possible to find the relevant slides for these descriptions – maybe not the actual ones that were used, but thematically the same.

However, by evaluating the individual items in the collection it is possible, in most cases, to determine at least the origin of the slides that Vráz used in his lectures. They may be divided into three types:

1. Slides made from Vráz's own negatives
2. Slides made by photographing models from other sources
3. Slides from educational series, produced and sold by professional companies

1. Slides made from Vráz's negatives

Enrique Stanko Vráz was one of the first travellers to make use of photography as a means of documentation. In some areas, Vráz was the first person to have gone there with a camera (for the kingdom of Abetifi, on the territory of present-day Ghana, or in the Hattam foothills in inland New Guinea). The first of Vráz's pictures come from 1885, when he was recovering from malaria on the Gold Coast, modern-day Ghana. He was staying in the settlement of the Christiansborg fortress near Accra, which was the headquarters of the Basel Mission. One day a parcel from Germany arrived at the mission containing a camera, but its recipient – one of the missionaries – had died. Vráz bought the camera. It was a wooden model, called the field camera, which was very heavy, made by the Liesegang company from Düsseldorf. It rested on a tripod and took glass sheets 13 by 18 cm in size and weighing 125 g. A painted canvas background was also supplied with the camera.

Vráz had never photographed before, and he tried to initiate himself into the art, even though he had a lack of suitable material from which to learn. Photography became Vráz's hobby and a new source of income. From then on, his camera accompanied him on all his journeys. In time he acquired several cameras, including a stereoscopic one (on his journey to New Guinea in 1896, for example, he had two cameras – one landscape and one stereoscopic).

Vráz's photographs have considerable documentary value, given the place and period at which they were made, and the fact that Vráz was a highly observant person who wanted, by means of photography, to inform people as best as possible about remote exotic lands and the life of their inhabitants.

2. Slides made by photographing models from other sources

Although Vráz enjoyed taking photographs and took many of them, his own photographs were not enough to fill whole lectures, which tended to be illustrated with between 70 and 150 slides. As a result, he used negatives from other travellers (such as Bedřich Machulka from Eastern Africa) or by photographing other photos. These slides include ones made from large-format albumen photographs brought back by the traveller Josef Kořenský from his two journeys around the world (1893–1894 and 1900–1901), as well as from postcards and stereographic pictures (such as those produced by the company C. H. Graves³ or Underwood & Underwood).

3. Slides from educational series, produced and sold by professional companies.

The popularity of lectures and cultural events accompanied by the projection of slides encouraged photo studios around the world to start making such slides. The original slides were taken by photographers who worked directly for the company, or companies would buy sets of negatives from other authors.

In Vráz's collection we find slides branded by other companies: in the Czech lands, for example, slides were produced by František J. Trojan, Praha II, Trojanova 4; in Germany by a company that also made cameras, A. G. Vormals R. Hüttig & Sohn,

³ Carlton Harlow Graves was one of the first producers of stereoscopic images. The company was founded in 1880 in Philadelphia. In 1910 the company sold its production to the company Underwood & Underwood.



Fig. 3 Vráz's guides (a Malayan and two Papuans) around Vráz's camera in the Hattam foothills in New Guinea, 1896. Vráz's description: How I took photographs in the Hattam mountains. I had two machines. This landscape one, and a stereoscope (AO II 2093)

Dresden,⁴ or the very well-known company of Carl Simon & Co., Düsseldorf 57⁵ and others.

The slides that Vráz acquired in the United States are labelled, for example, Moore, Bond & Co., Chicago; Moore, Hubbell & Co., 159 N. State St., Chicago; Stereopticon & Film Exchange-Chicago – all these were renowned sellers and suppliers of educational slides. He also used educational series issued by the National Geographic Society, Washington, D. C., and others.

⁴ The company Hüttig & Sohn, a factory producing photographic instruments, also made stereoscopes and issued catalogues of them. It was active in 1862–1909, moving to Dresden in 1887 from Berlin.

⁵ The company for making slides was founded by Carl Simon (1873–1952) in 1907. Among other things, he sold photographic and projection equipment. His main activity, however, was the sale and loan of slides. According to a catalogue from 1935 the company had ten series of educational slides with various subjects. The company existed until 2008.

There was an interesting situation regarding the use of series produced by the company Underwood & Underwood.⁶ This is because the author of many of the photographs from which Underwood & Underwood made their educational and lecture series was none other than E. St. Vráz himself. When he was in financial trouble he sold the company his negatives – such as those from his time among the Hopi Indians from Arizona in 1900. The conditions under which he sold them were very unfavourable, as can be seen from this correspondence from his wife:

“...I am still corresponding endlessly with Underwood. I am sending you their latest reply with this letter. You made a mistake in not having listened to Vladimír then and not having made a better contract. Also, if we’d have known how it would end up with Mr. Krátký, it would have been much better to have let the boy be. Losing even more because of him. It’s such a pity...”
(ANpM, archive, Vráz Collection, carton 1, item 5)

The series used by Vráz, whatever their origin, were often labelled by the maker (at the customer’s request): Collection E. St. Vráz – Prague-Chicago. Unfortunately not even this labelling is consistent, but it relates mainly to slides of later date. The slides that have been preserved are glass, black and white and coloured, with dimensions mostly of 10 by 8 cm, or in some cases 8.5 cm by 8.5 cm (with 8 by 8 cm being another variation) or stereoscopic slides with dimensions of 17 by 8.5 cm. The slides made from Vráz’s own photographs, if they have surviving captions, are sometimes labelled “photo Vráz”. The slides that are not by Vráz are often labelled “property of Vráz”.

The study of the most recently-discovered parts of Vráz’s collection of slides and negatives in the Náprstek Museum gives us a glimpse into the ideas of the traveller, into his efforts to describe to his listeners and readers, as well as he could, entirely different cultures, unknown to them, of far-off lands, to bring these cultures closer to them and to try and explain them. His interpretations of foreign reality understandably reflected his own opinion as a traveller, shaped by the period and by the culture in which he had been raised. Vráz tried in his lectures and books to be objective and precise in regard to his information – which can also be seen in his selection of photographs for his lectures and travel writing – but also understanding and generous. His own comments in the text, humorous and often ironic, are clearly distinguishable, but they do not provide many clues to the pictorial accompaniment of the lectures. The fact remains that the information conveyed by Vráz’s lectures had a considerable influence on the way in which broad strata of Czech society viewed the life and culture of non-European areas.

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⁶ Underwood & Underwood was one of the first producers and distributors of stereoscopic and other photographic images, later becoming a pioneer in the field of the photographic news agency. The company was founded in 1882 in Ottawa, Kansas by two brothers, Elmer Underwood (1859–1947) and Bert Elias Underwoodem (1862–1943). In 1891 they moved to Baltimore and subsequently to New York. In 1920 the company sold most of its catalogue stereophotographs to the Keystone View Company. The company ended its activity in the 1940s.

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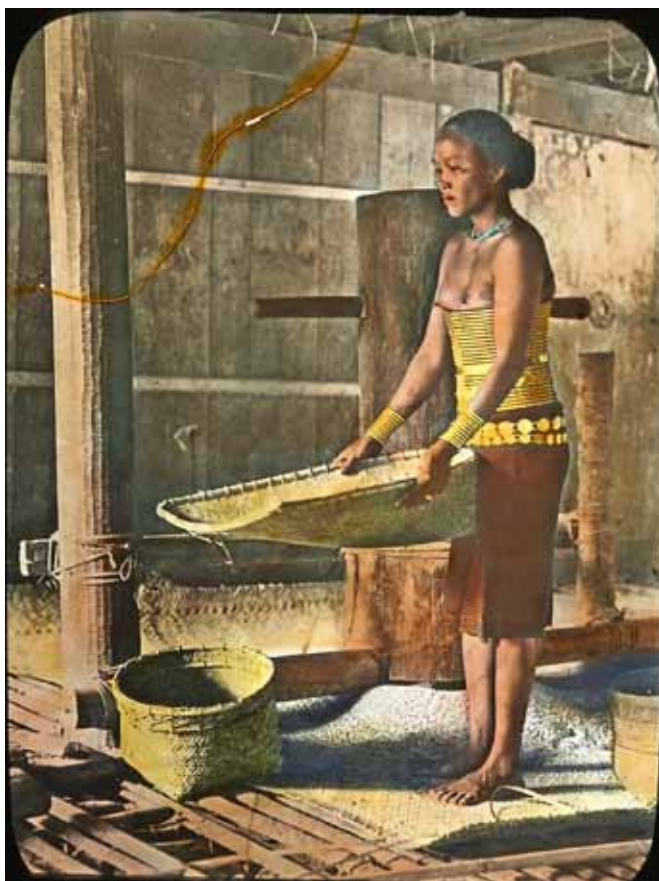


Fig. 4 A woman with a winnowing fan. Borneo (Kalimantan), Dayak, 1896. Vráz's description: Borneo (Sarawak). A Dayak woman from the foothills, the area of the Sadong river. She is winnowing rice, see brass strip (As II 3850)



Fig. 5 A Korean Christian woman with a child in her arms standing in front of a lean-to barn in the courtyard of a farm. Korea, Seoul, 1901 (As II 4044)



Fig. 6 A chief sitting in front of a parasol, with his entourage and drummers. Gold Coast (modern-day Ghana), Abetifi, 1885–1888 (Af II 2115)



Fig. 7 An old woman with a basket in her hand, peeling corn. USA, Arizona, Walpi, Hopi, 1900. Vráz's description: S. America, Arizona, Hopi Indians, the oldest Indian woman, certainly more than a hundred years old (Am II 4041)



Fig. 8 A man with a javelin and a woman with a child in her arms – Piaroa Indians from the Napo river, Venezuela, 1892–1893 (Am II 3649)

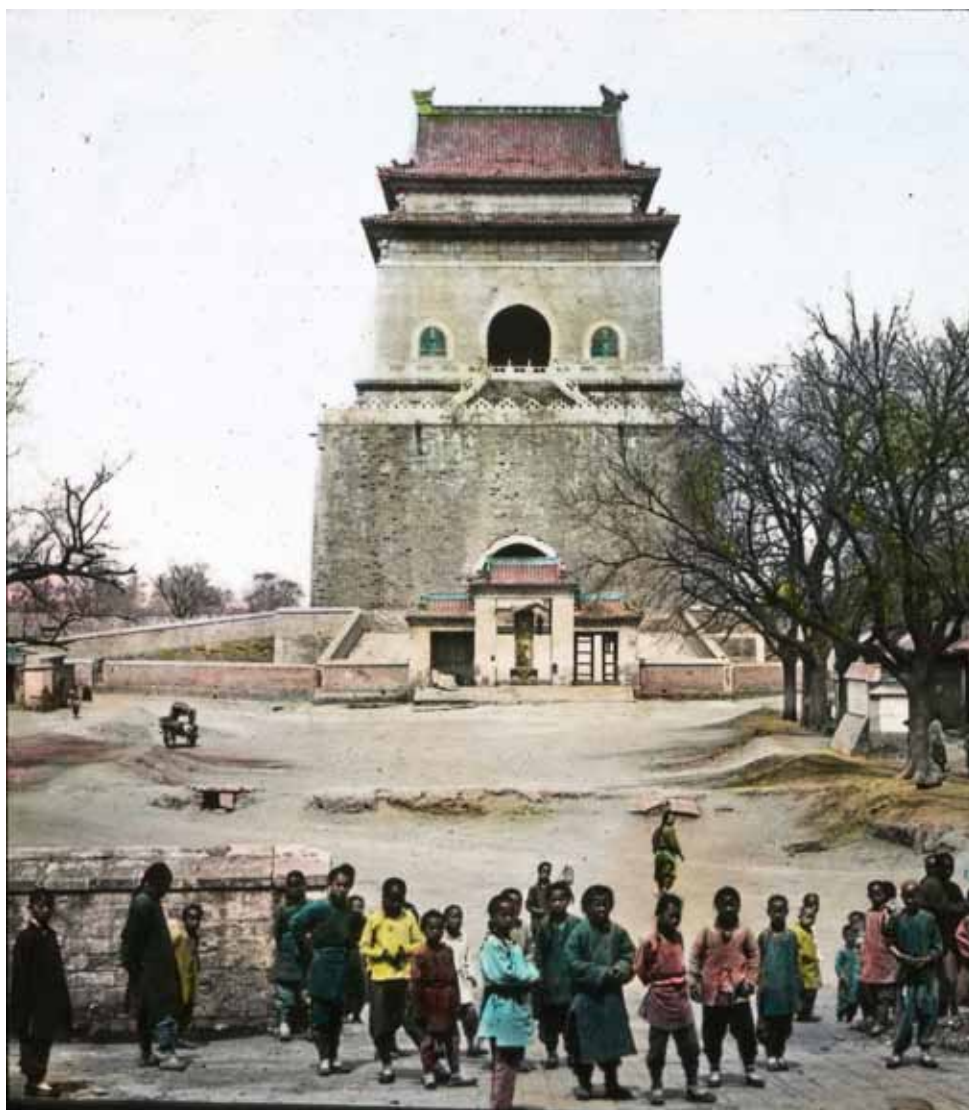


Fig. 9 A group of children in the area in front of the Drum Tower, China, Peking, 1901. Vráz's description: Peking, Čína. The Drum Tower, used to sound the alarm (As II 4252)



Fig. 10 An Inuit family sitting in front of a tent – husband, child and wife with a baby in a sling on her back. Greenland. Vráz's description: Natives of Greenland. Property of E. St. Vráz (Am II 4151)



Fig. 11 Arabian types from north Africa – a woman with a child on her back, and a woman selling prickly pear fruits. Property of E. St. Vráz (Af II 2142)



Fig. 12 A young man with a pigtail hairstyle, seen in profile, Kenya, Kikuyu people, photo Bedřich Machulka (Af II 2161)