
Theses of the past: Charles University's 2014 Calendar

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For the official 2014 Charles University Calendar (sadly not on sale to the general public or students); it was decided to accompany the dates with beautifully designed high quality prints taken from theses and dissertations submitted by students of the university from centuries ago.

The theses come from the collections of Charles University and National Library of Czech Republic; the National Library collection of theses originating from Faculty of Arts of CU being the biggest collection of its kind of university theses (526 in total) attached to a single educational establishment. The prints in the calendar date from the university's "Baroque Age" (roughly the mid-17th to mid-18th centuries), when Charles University was known as Charles-Ferdinand University, and were used as frontispieces for various dissertations and theses, or as illustrations for the text. Exquisitely detailed and beautifully made by prominent engravers, many of them are based on models by leading artists of the time. They acted as fantastical glorifications of the work of the students, and their patrons, who had financed their studies.

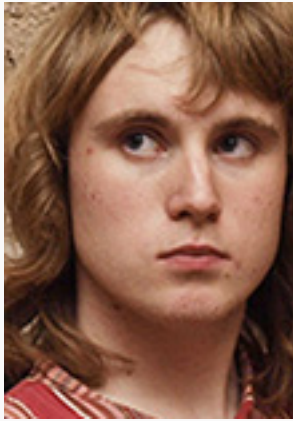
These theses and dissertations were printed in the Academic Printing Office (also known as the *impression*), located in the Clementinum. At the time, degrees were awarded to those who could successfully defend their theses, leading to often pompous speeches by the students, filled with flowery and eloquent language; their bombastic nature matching that of the prints in their dissertations/theses. At this time, the professors were also accorded a special status, their names appearing in the title pages of theses, and they were even considered co-authors.

The prints feature figures and objects related to the theses or dissertations that they came from (such as optical instruments, physics instruments, drawings of the pelvic bones and the spine), and also religious figures, such as the Virgin Mary and Jesus, or Saint Catherine of Alexandria, the patron saint of philosophers, preachers and also the Faculty of Arts of Charles University (what appears alongside her is a wheel, a reference to how she died, as she was tied to a spiked wheel and then beheaded by the Romans). The images of religious nature are a link to the university's history, when it was run by the Jesuit Order (graduates and professors were even required to take an oath in which they affirmed the Immaculate Conception of the Virgin Mary). The university was given to them by the Holy Roman Emperor (and Czech king in the same person) Ferdinand III as part of the Re-Catholicisation of Bohemia following a rebellion there that ran from 1618-1620 (of which the promotion of Baroque art also played a part).

The image for August, taken from *Anacrisis medico-historico diaetia seu Dissertationes quadripartitae de cafee en chocolatae, nec non de herbathee ac nicotinae*, written and defended in 1720 by one G. F. Medicus of Mainz (though it's highly doubtful that was his real name), is particularly interesting. As you can probably guess from the title, it features plants whose products we are now long-familiar with; but back then were still exotic and rare, and were just becoming fashionable for culinary and other bodily purposes.

Another image which harks back in this way is the image for May, taken from a theses dating back from 1760. The image shows a European merchant and missionary ship arriving amongst Native American people; a reminder that there was a time when the Americas constituted a largely, for Europeans, unexplored land, populated by people who seemed quite alien.

It is an understatement to say that all in all, these prints represent an era which for students at Charles University was very different to what it is today; also the covers featured in this calendar put the covers of today's theses/dissertations, with their simple, bland, banal minimalistic computer made covers to shame. Maybe we should return to a time of beautifully designed prints, which are works of arts in themselves?



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