

The names of Czech photographers have only very recently begun to find their way into Western European and American publications on the history of photography. With the current prominence of photography in contemporary art and the emergence of the Bohemian lands from decades of political isolation, the world marvels at the prodigious numbers of supremely talented and original photographers emanating from so small a people. So far only very few have attracted international attention, among them Josef Sudek, František Drtikol, Jaromír Funke, Josef Koudelka and Jan Saudek, while the work of many other Czech photographers is known to specialists alone. The work of German and Austrian photographers in Czechoslovakia and the years of Socialist Realism under the Communist regime have yet to be researched in greater depth.

Deeply rooted in 19th-century Central Europe, Czech photography did not develop in a vacuum – neither during the period of the Austro-Hungarian monarchy nor in the democratic republic of Czechoslovakia of the interwar years, when the country was one of the centres of European Modernism. During the Second World War and the four decades of Communist rule that followed it many works could not be published. Photography went under cover but continued to go from strength to strength. It was influenced by the French, German and Russian avant-garde as well as by American, British and German journalistic and documentary photography and the prevailing international trends. Throughout the 20th century Czech photographers never ceased to create a wealth of independent original works that constitute a specifically Czech contribution to the history of photography.

1 1900–1918 **Pictorialism**

By the beginning of the 20th century photography had established itself as a recognised profession. Numerous studios prospered and met with wide-spread acclaim. However, the bulk of studio production conformed to an ossified routine academicism. Czech photography did not reach international standards until the end of the 19th century, the period of Impressionist and Secessionist Pictorialism which enjoyed a particularly strong and expressive following in Austria and Germany. During this period the celebrated Czech painter and illustrator Alphonse Mucha turned to photography, producing outstanding portraits and nudes in preparation of his paintings.

As in other European countries, amateur photographers began to emerge as a driving force of innovation. They explored alternative techniques of print finishing, for example bromoil processes, gum bichromate printing and oil pigment processes, that allowed them to manipulate the photographic image after exposure. The resulting prints are unique artists' originals, as each print differs from the next in some minute detail.

Recognised today as the first Czech photographer of international significance, František Drtikol was one of the key figures of that new generation of professional photographers with artistic ambitions. Of great significance for the development of Czech photography was the work of the Czech-American Drahomír Josef Růžička. Inspired by Alfred Stieglitz and Clarence Hudson White, his purist images continued to exert a profound influence until well into the post-war period.

2 1900–1918 **Documentary Photography and Photo Reportage**

The development of the hand-held camera at the turn of the century liberated photographers from cumbersome tripods and allowed for a greater degree of spontaneity that was to become a driving force in the development of snapshot photography. Moreover, advances in reproduction and printing techniques allowed for the publication of high-quality photographs in newspapers, magazines and on postcards. In turn, the rise of illustrated magazines spurred the development of documentary photography and photo reportage.

The founding father of photo reportage in the Bohemian lands was Rudolf Bruner-Dvořák who is widely hailed as the best photo chronicler of his time. The immediacy of many of his pictures is reminiscent of Jacques-Henri Lartigue. Bruner-Dvořák also took pictures for advertising purposes, documenting industrial plants and products.

Leading exponents of topographical photography and photo reportage were Alphonse Mucha and František Krátký. Jaroslav Feyfar captured the everyday life of the small town of Jilemnice over a period of many years. Zikmund Reach documented historical monuments, street scenes and the diversity of Prague's population. He was keenly aware of the power of photography to preserve and shape the collective visual memory. Jaroslav Bruner-Dvořák, brother of the better-known Rudolf, documented a dramatic event of historical importance – the assassination of Franz Ferdinand of Austria, heir to the Austro-Hungarian throne, in Sarajevo in 1914.

Although images of the horrors of the First World War rarely made it into the contemporary Czech press, they were captured in their thousands by countless amateur photographers in the trenches and battlefields of Europe.

3 1918 – 1939 **From Pictorialism to Modern Photography**

The end of the First World War gave rise to an independent Czechoslovakia and, with it, to dramatic social changes that left their mark even on photography. Several well-known champions of Pictorialism turned towards modern photography, without, however, necessarily embracing the ideas of the photographic avant-garde.

Studio portraiture has always been one of the most popular photographic genres. Numerous professional studios specialised in this field during the interwar years and many were quick to respond directly to current trends. The foremost Prague studio was that of František Drtikol.

When the ranks of amateur photographer clubs swelled with young members after the foundation of the republic in 1918, the rift between the generations became inevitable. Many of the young members had experienced the horrors of the First World War and had little sympathy for sentimental mood pictures. The work of Drahomír Josef Růžička exerted a decisive influence on these young Czech photographers who, following his lead, began to favour simple silver bromide processes over more elaborate earlier techniques.

While landscape subjects continued to be popular, the city with its myriad street scenes, places of work and social issues rose to unprecedented prominence. Key exponents of modern photography in the wake of Růžička were Arnošt Pikart and Jan Lausmann. The latter was even quicker to respond to avant-garde trends, particularly to Constructivism and New Objectivity, than Růžička himself.

4 1918–1939

Poetism and the Beginnings of Abstract Photography

There can be no doubt that the emergence of Czechoslovakia as an independent state in October 1918 had a major impact on the subsequent development of Czech avant-garde art. Czechs and Slovaks studied at the enormously influential Bauhaus in Dessau. After Hitler's rise to power many left-wing artists from Germany and Austria found refuge in Czechoslovakia. And the Czech avant-garde looked further west towards France, embracing the latest French trends and establishing close contacts with their French colleagues. Left-wing Czech artists also sought to emulate the Soviet model. Similarly influential were Italian Futurism, Dutch Neo-Plasticism and the avant-gardes of Central and Eastern Europe.

Photography also played an important role in the so-called 'picture poems' of 1923 to 1927. Steering clear not only of the planned chaos and absurd combinations of unrelated fragments that characterised Dadaist collages but also of the tight composition of Constructivist photo montages, Czech picture poems formed some sort of a bridge across the divide between Dadaism and Constructivism on the one side and Surrealism on the other.

Czech photographers were quick to respond to abstract art. Among the internationally significant pioneers of abstract photography was Jaroslav Rössler. As early as 1923 he worked with long exposure times and deliberately out-of-focus lenses, taking pictures of light bouncing off moving reflectors. He was one of the first photographers to focus on light as a subject in its own right.

5 1918–1939

New Photography – Constructivism, Functionalism and New Objectivity

The years 1923/24 saw the rise of the crisp aesthetic of New Photography. Its proponents insisted on strict adherence to formal rules proposed by the American school of Straight Photography which counted Paul Strand among its chief exponents. However, equally influenced by Russian Constructivism and Bauhaus Functionalism, Czech photographers also explored the potential of dynamic diagonals, unusual perspectives such as worm's-eye or bird's-eye views and unorthodox compositions. Photographers employed the stylistic devices of New Objectivity to emphasise the extreme crispness of focus and great tonal depth of photography, drawing attention to details and changes of scale and insisting on precision in the depiction of objects. They turned their back on the romanticism and artificiality of Pictorialism. However, precision of depiction did not necessarily preclude metaphorical meaning or symbolic allusion.

The earliest Czech Constructivist photographs are by Jaroslav Rössler. Many of Jaromir Funke's pictures of the first half of the 1920s are among the most radical interpretations of the principles of New Objectivity and Constructivism, not just in Czechoslovakia but internationally as well. Eugen Wiškovský, on the other hand, produced some of the most original pictures of Czech New Photography. His compositions distil striking pictorial forms from iron bars, turbines, tubes, insulators and gramophone records and often reveal layers of hidden symbolic meaning. Unconventional compositions and an emphasis on enlarged details are also characteristic of social photography and the work of photo journalists.

New Photography also gained a firm foothold in Czech advertising of the interwar years. Josef Sudek focused primarily on items made of glass, porcelain and metal. In Paris, Jaroslav Rössler also specialised in commercial and advertising photography.

6 1918 – 1939

Photo Journalism, Documentary and Social Photography

The First World War sharpened the general appetite for comprehensive and up-to-date information. In many countries the 1920s saw a steep rise in photo journalism, which went hand in hand with the development of better printing processes. Cameras gradually became the tool of first resort for anyone wishing to document political, cultural or sporting events. This gave rise to a specific pictorial language and the emergence of picture essays. Early Czech photo journalism found inspiration above all in German illustrated magazines, for example the left-wing *Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung* and *Der Arbeiter Fotograf*. Karel Hájek rose to fame for his excellent reportages, portraits and spontaneous snapshots.

As early as the 1920s photographers such as Josef Sudek, Jaromír Funke, Adolf Schneeberger, Arnošt Pikart or Václav Jirů had turned to motifs associated with social causes, exploiting them primarily for their picturesque possibilities rather than as a form of social critique. Much harsher and more unforgiving were the pictures taken in the proletarian quarters of Prague by Géza Včelička and Přemysl Koblíček. Jiří Kroha's collages are among the best Czech examples for the use of collage and for the successful fusion of a social agenda with avant-garde art.

Photography was also central to the ethnographic research of Karol Plicka who recorded Slovak folklore and peasant traditions. His somewhat idealised pictures bolstered the nascent sense of national identity and pride and paved the way for photography as a tool of cultural anthropology.

7 1918 – 1939

Imaginative and Surrealist Photography and Collage

The Czech avant-garde was fairly late to adopt Surrealism, because the proponents of Czech Poetism – Karel Teige, Jindřich Štyrský, Toyen and others – initially rejected the psychoanalytical, neo-romantic, mythological or literary content of many Surrealist works. On the other hand, many of the activities of the members of *Devětsil* in the 1920s, for example the Poetist poems or their interest in film and photography, bore decidedly Surrealist traits.

From the mid-1930s Prague was one of the centres of Surrealism, and Czech Surrealists maintained close contacts with their colleagues abroad. Jaromír Funke was the first Czech photographer to respond to the work of French photographer Eugène Atget whom the Surrealists admired.

The Group of Surrealists in the Czechoslovak Republic was founded on 21 March 1934. Its members hoped to revolutionise society through the study of dreams, the subconscious, eroticism and psychic automatism. Politically, the group identified with the programme of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia, but insisted on their independence to adopt 'experimental methods'.

Among the most original works of Czech Surrealism is Jindřich Štyrský's publication *Emilie přichází ke mně ve snu* (Emilie Comes to Me in a Dream) with poems by Štyrský and ten daring erotic collages.

10 1939–1948

Photography as Art

After the German invasion the better part of Czech avant-garde art was denounced as 'degenerate'.

Riven by internal conflicts, the Group of Surrealists in the Czechoslovak Republic had begun to disintegrate even before the German occupation. Jindřich Heisler, one of its members, went into hiding during the war and produced highly original photographs of arrangements of small two and three-dimensional objects, some of which were illegally published. Václav Zykmond, figurehead of the *Ra* group, devoted himself to playful Surrealist experiments that anticipated the happenings and works that were to become the mainstay of Body Art.

The depressing atmosphere of the occupation also had an impact on the development and the character of other genres of artistic photography. The emergence of a distinctly national school of photography can be attributed to two reasons: the desire on the part of Czech photographers to distance themselves from German elements and the need to record important sites that were threatened by the war. This led to an era of ostensibly neutral subjects: landscapes, architectural monuments, genre scenes and ethnographic studies.

11 1948–1968

Documentary and Reportage Photography

The Communist coup in February of 1948 affected Czech photography profoundly. Printing and publishing companies were nationalised, private photo studios were forced to close, numerous archives of negatives were destroyed and political censorship was introduced. The thematic scope of pictures for publication was subjected to tight restrictions, the authentic depiction of reality replaced by stereotypical arrangements of a contented population rejoicing in building Socialism.

Formally the new photography tied in with the interwar work of left-wing photographers such as Vladimír Hipman.

The deaths of Stalin and Gottwald in 1953 ushered in a modicum of liberalisation that made it possible to voice some criticism of the cultural politics of the past years. In the second half of the 1950s the pathos of great social themes made way for the unassuming poetry of the everyday.

In an effort to overcome the predictability of the Stalinist-era cut and dried photo reportage, the weekly paper *Junge Welt* gave ample room to new photography. In 1958 the young press photographer Stanislav Tereba won the World Press Photo Award for his picture of a goalkeeper in the pouring rain. The picture also won him first prize in the sports photography category.

One of the crowning achievements of Czech documentary photography of the 1960s is the

work of Josef Koudelka whose famous *Cikáni* ('gypsies') cycle documents the life of Roma in Slovakia.

12 1948–1968

Photography as Art and Staged Photography

With the start of the Communist regime in February 1948, many photographs were denounced as incomprehensible to the masses and incompatible with social and ideological requirements. Nudes, experimental photographs and still lifes were no longer allowed to be published. The pre-coup era was dismissed as decadent and bourgeois, and with it the work of artists such as František Drtikol, Jaromír Funke, Jindřich Štyrský or František Vobecký. Financial constraints forced many photographers to resort to neutral subjects or to continue their work outside official lines. Among those who chose the latter path were Jiří Kolář, Vilém Reichmann and Emila Medková.

The gradual political thaw between 1958 and 1968 facilitated a slow and reluctant rehabilitation of the interwar avant-garde. After the long hiatus new creative groups began to form. Under the influence of the latest trends many of their members developed styles inspired by Pop Art or Op Art. The most popular trends in Czech photography of the time, however, were a number of imaginative and abstract styles. The long period of political and cultural isolation made it difficult for Czech photographers to catch up with international developments. But catch up they did. By the mid-60s the nude had returned triumphantly to Czech photography and in 1968/69 Miloslav Stibor published his pioneering series *15 Photographs for Henry Miller*.

13 1968–1989

Documentary and Reportage Photography

The dramatic events of the occupation of Czechoslovakia in August of 1968 were recorded by the foreign press, but also by countless Czech photographers, both professional and amateur. Not one equalled the gripping immediacy and universal significance of Josef Koudelka who had had little previous experience as a photo reporter.

When Gustáv Husák replaced the more liberal Alexander Dubček as the head of the Communist Party of Czechoslovakia in April 1969 his regime acted quickly to 'normalise' the country's political situation. The chief objectives of this 'normalisation' was the restoration of Communist totalitarianism. Once again, Czech photo journalists and reporters faced a difficult and uncertain future. All documentary photographs that fell short of official guidelines were censored out of existence. Soon good results could only be achieved in sports photography.

Documentary photographers had more creative freedom than photo journalists, and some used it for ironic pictures that captured the absurdity of mass events and the melancholy drabness of Socialism. Another important trend was sociologically orientated documentary photography which contrasted starkly with the lyricism of everyday poetry and the optimism of the humanistic photo journalism of the preceding decades.

Although the totalitarian regime seemed to have loosened up a bit, the early 1980s were marked by a number of heavy-handed intimidation attempts. The best-known of these were the proceedings against Jindřich Štreit, whose participation in various art-related activities

was seen as seditious and whose photographs of the relentlessly dreary reality of life in the rural hinterland were believed to foment dissent.

14 1969 – 1989

Happening, Land Art, Conceptual Art and Body Art

In the 1950s several professional photographers responded to the doctrine of Socialist Realism with a return to traditional themes – the beauty of the Czech homeland or children – which allowed them to survive tough times.

Czech conceptual photography was given a new lease of life by Jiří Valoch who had begun, in the late 1960s, to investigate the intrinsic character of photography on the basis of a number of photo sequences. Similarly sober was Jiří H. Kocman's approach. Jaroslav Anděl explored the correlations between an idea and the medium of photography.

In his work of the 1960s and 70s Jiří Toman developed completely new artistic and photographic methods. Provocative and inspirational, Milan Knížák began documenting happenings, installations and other art-related activities in the first half of the 1960s. He later used this secondary material to create collages and assemblages. Karel Miler's attitude towards photography was similarly idiosyncratic in that he treated his scant photographic interventions as a purely conceptual process.

The most distinguished proponent of Czech Body Art in the 1970s was Petr Štembera whose numerous and often physically gruelling performances included some that addressed the subject of the mass media. Jan Mlčoch staged a series of radical performances between 1974 and 1977.

15 1968–1989

Photography as Art and Staged Photography

In the 1970s Josef Sudek's work reached its final apogee. His late work – a synthesis of a wide range of references, influences and trends that remained receptive to inspirations from other forms of art – was later recognised as a precursor of Postmodernism.

The 1970s and 80s saw a revival of the predilection for minimalist motifs and the play of light and shadow first explored by Jaroslav Rössler and Jaromír Funke, the pioneers of Czech abstract photography. The period also witnessed the emergence of a sizable body of photographs of destroyed landscapes and cities.

One of the most forceful trends of Czech photography of the 1970s was staged photography. Picking up from Jan Saudek's early work, its proponents were inspired by Romanticism, Symbolism, Secessionist Art Nouveau, Expressionism and Surrealism, they looked to cinema, fashion photography, the hippie movement and the theatre of the absurd. The form was characterised by extreme stylisation, grainy stock and sharp contrasts. Jan Saudek began to hand-colour his prints, turning them into individual originals.

Postmodernism had a profound impact on the young generation of Czech photographers in the 1980s. They embraced the new eclecticism, the heady mix of styles and art forms and did not hesitate to reinterpret older works or to tinker with negatives and positives. Rather than

change the world, they sought to qualify their judgements, poke fun at clichés and to replace intellectual profundity with humour, irony and eroticism. Staged photography was the perfect vehicle for their concerns and made a triumphant comeback. Tono Stano, who had internalised the legacy of František Drtikol, occupied a central position among the proponents of the new staged photography.

One of the leading intermedia artists is Aleš Kuneš who as early as the 1980s combined photographs with photograms, created assemblages of large-scale transparent negatives and small three-dimensional objects and experimented with photographic presentations in public spaces.

16 1989–2000 Documentary and Reportage Photography

By the middle of 1989 it had become clear that the Communist regime of Czechoslovakia was not going to be able to hold on to power for much longer. The dramatic events – the brutally suppressed protests during that week in January 1989 that has since come to be known as ‘Palach week’, the mass exodus of tens of thousands of East Germans via Prague, the Velvet Revolution, the election of Václav Havel as president of the republic – were documented by countless photographers. Their pictures played an important role as a medium of information for citizens outside Prague who would otherwise have had to rely on the fragmentary and often misleading news broadcast by the official media.

The radical changes affecting state and society after the return to democracy also had a profound and immediate impact on Czech photography and its platforms. Czechoslovakia opened up to the world, and photographers experienced a freedom that but for a few years from 1945 to 1948 had been unknown for half a century. The ranks of Czech photographers were joined by many exiles whose works had not been published under the Communist regime: Josef Koudelka, Antonín Kratochvíl, Eva Fuková, Jaroslav Poncar, Vladimír Špaček and Tom Drahoš.

Counterbalancing the body of work dealing with social or sociological subjects were the different schools of subjective photography which enjoyed an even larger following in the 1990s than in the preceding decade. Proponents of subjective photography are less interested in recording the appearance of the external world than in interpretive images filtered by personal findings and experiences. Another distinguishing feature of the 1990s was the innovative and increasingly intense use of colour in documentary photography.

17 1989–2000 Photography and Fine Art

In the 1990s, after decades of political and cultural isolation, Czech photography took on an increasingly international character. Many photographers cultivated intense foreign contacts; foreign publications and the internet provided access to information about the latest trends.

The rise of digital processes brought about a new aesthetic as well as changes to the presentation of work. It was the dawn of the era of monumental picture formats. As in other countries, photography became a force to be reckoned with in the art world and began to push aside traditional painting in exhibitions and art academies.

Staged photography no longer occupied quite as privileged a position in the 1990s as it had in the preceding decade but continued to be one of the dominant themes.

Internationally, the 1990s witnessed a growing interest in portraiture, yet only very few outstanding portraits emerged from the Bohemian lands during this period. Among the most striking portraits of the 1990s are those by Dita Pepe and Jiří David.

With the exception of the work of Jan Pohribný, landscape photography was relegated to the background.

Of particular note are Michal Pěchouček's 'photo-novels'. Their technical flaws and cinematic shortcomings notwithstanding, they captivate the viewer by dint of their quirky imagination and tenderness.