

An Introduction to Prague

Dr Iva Rosario, Fellow, School of Art History, Cinema, Classics and Archaeology, The University of Melbourne

This article has been published by *Australians Studying Abroad* in a number of tour handbooks.

According to Cosmas, the earliest Bohemian chronicler, the legendary seer, Libuse, stood on the rocky spur overlooking the river Vltava and prophesied that on the banks of that river would stand a city whose fame would reach the stars. The name of this city was to be Praha - or Prague - the capital of the Lands of the Czech Crown. Given that Prague welcomed about sixty million visitors in 1994-5 and that the city has become a 'must' on most European tourist itineraries, it could be postulated that Libuse's prophecy has been fulfilled.

Prague is the capital city of three regions called Bohemia (Cechy), Moravia (Morava) and a part of Silesia (Slezko) which since 1993 have been called the Czech Republic. The historic core of the city is situated on and between two large, rocky spurs on either side of a bend in the Vltava River. On the north-western spur (that is, on the left bank of the Vltava) is found Prague Castle with the cathedral of St Vitus. These dominate the city skyline and can be seen from virtually every location in Prague. Before 1784, when the city of Prague became a single entity, the city was organised into four autonomous areas. Although there is now no man-made barrier between these areas, they still exist as specific precincts of Prague. Thus, on the left bank, sharing the upper part of the spur with the castle and its cathedral, is the area called Hradcany. Just below the castle, in a broad sweep towards the Vltava, is the Lesser Town (Malá Strana). Across the river on the eastern bank is Prague Old Town (Staré Mesto). These three areas sprang up in the Middle Ages without any specific urban planning. The fourth region, Prague New Town (Nové Mesto), on the other hand, which stretches alongside Prague old town towards the south-eastern spur of Vysehrad, was the result of deliberate planning by Emperor Charles IV in the fourteenth century.

Although it is divided into four sections, the central city is compact and easy to navigate, being dominated by such distinctive monuments as the Tyn Church, with its distinctive Gothic spires, the Town Hall, the Clementinum, the Lesser Town Lower Square and Upper Square (divided by the church of St Nicholas), and the Castle and cathedral. These monuments signify 'nodal points' in the city which are of historic significance as well as physical importance to the city.

Prague has always drawn a substantial number of visitors from the West, and there were many such visitors even before the 1989 'velvet' revolution. What are the reasons for Prague's attraction for so many people? Undoubtedly, the most significant interest is the city's architectural splendour. In contrast to so many other Central European cities, Prague was virtually untouched by aerial bombing of World War II, and therefore remains one of the few European capitals which allows the visitor to experience a city largely unaffected by the architectural incursions of the post-war period. The modern visitor to old Prague still walks the same streets as the renowned Protestant revolutionary of the early fifteenth century, Jan Hus, and sees much the same streetscapes as Mozart would have viewed during his visit to the city in the eighteenth century.

Prague is also an excellent city for those who are interested in the historical development of one of the most interesting parts of Central Europe. Because the lands which make up the Czech Republic are geographically positioned in the very heart of Europe, from early times they were open to almost every major European influence from both East and West. Due to this small country's strategic position and wealth in the Medieval period (Kutná Hora silver mines) the Czech lands were coveted not only by the Bohemian Premyslid dynasty but also by foreign rulers from lands such as Germany, Poland, Hungary, Luxembourg and Austria.

Iva Rosario

Through a study of the city's architecture and artefacts, it is possible to observe the impact of virtually every major historical period not only in Czech lands but in Central Europe as well. Thus, the discerning traveller can vicariously experience the lustre of Emperor Charles IV's Gothic Prague as the fourteenth-century capital of the Holy Roman Empire, the iconoclastic effects of the fifteenth-century Hussite Protestant revolt, the impact of Renaissance ideas during the extraordinary reigns of Ferdinand I and Emperor Rudolf II, the influence of the Counter-Reformation under the Hapsburg dynasty's rule (which resulted in a great flowering of Baroque churches and palaces), the monumental expressions of ardent nationalism after 1848, the languid and romantic impact of Art Nouveau in *fin de siècle* Prague and finally, in Prague New Town, the effects of twentieth-century ideas reflected by cubist and 'social realist' principles.

Perhaps it is the small scale, compactness, and visual unity of the city which entrances even those who are not concerned with the history of its monuments. What could be more delightful than to indulge in a local version of the Venetian *far niente* and randomly wander through the many parks or gardens, the streets of the old city and be enchanted by the ever changing ambience of narrow, cobbled, twisting roads, by small, crumbling squares, by the endless colourful facades of burghers' houses, or by breathtaking views of what seem to be hundreds of spires and domes? When weariness overcomes even the most enthusiastic walker, there are always opportunities to sit and drink a coffee or large glass of the renowned Plzeňské pivo (pilsner beer) in an open air cafe and observe the changing mood of the streets or squares created by the mysterious play of light and shadow on the facades of the buildings. 'Ambience' is a function of the perception of space and form and Prague's spaces create a perfect setting for its absorption.

The night also brings a special enchantment and excitement to the city and no visitor should leave Prague without at least one excursion after dark. The most important of the streets are well lighted and the significant squares and monuments are now bathed in spot lighting which gives Prague a fairy tale atmosphere, an effect remarked upon by a number of authors. The streets are enlivened with Praguers and visitors hurrying to some church, palace or concert venue to hear a musical performance. As one of the great musical centres of Europe, Prague has a long and important musical tradition (Stamitz, Dvorák, Smetana, Janáček, Martinu) which is fostered and cherished by the local citizens. Therefore, on most nights of the week, innumerable concerts of classical music are offered, often in beautiful historic venues. The musical developments of the twentieth century, however, are not neglected, as may be witnessed by the many bars and restaurants which resound to the music of jazz bands or folk groups, while buskers and other performers entertain the pedestrians in the streets. This gives credence to the old Czech saying, 'every Czech is a musician'.

Historical Background to Prague and Significant Sites

There is evidence of settlement on the left bank of the Vltava already in the Palaeolithic period. By the seventh century AD the first Slav settlement occurred. The areas of the left bank continued to be populated and by the ninth century Hradčany became the fortified seat of the powerful Premyslid dynasty. With the martyrdom and canonisation of the Christian Premyslid duke, Wenceslas, in the

An Introduction to Prague

Iva Rosario

early tenth century, Prague became a city of pilgrimage and international renown. Because of the miracles associated with St Wenceslas, Prague was raised to a bishopric in 973AD and the St Vitus rotunda - founded by St Wenceslas - became Bohemia's first cathedral.

The city of Prague continued to grow in the Middle Ages particularly because of the influx of German immigrants. The Premyslid kings of the thirteenth century encouraged the settlement of German colonists because they brought with them more sophisticated administrative and commercial skills which were beneficial to Prague and the Bohemian kingdom during that time. Gradually, German burghers came to dominate the areas of Hradcany, the Lesser Quarter and the Old town.

Some evidence of this early history may still be discerned in the city. There are the tenth Romanesque basilica of St George within the castle precincts, the archaeological excavations under the present Gothic cathedral of St Vitus and sections of the Royal castle.

The 'golden age' of Prague occurred during the reign of Emperor Charles IV Luxembourg (1346-1378) when he enthusiastically pursued a monumental cultural program in order to make Prague worthy of being the new capital of the Holy Roman Empire. Among many achievements, he founded the present St Vitus' cathedral, raised the city to the status of archbishopric, founded the first university north of the Alps, took an active interest in the decoration of the cathedral, many churches and castles in Bohemia, patronised a host of artists including the architect-sculptor Peter Parler and the Italian painter, Tomasso da Modena, and extended the boundaries of Prague by the founding and patronage of the New Town. Much of his cultural patronage was directed towards legitimising and aggrandising the Luxembourg dynasty and giving it a solid and dominant power base in Central Europe.

The physical evidence of Charles IV's splendid achievement is to be found in St Vitus Cathedral, in particular the breathtaking St Wenceslas Chapel, in which the walls are encrusted with gold and precious stones to evoke the 'heavenly Jerusalem'. The Great South Door with its mosaic of the Last Judgement commissioned by Charles IV is also important because it is the only example of mosaic in Medieval Bohemia.

In the National Gallery are to be found examples of panel painting and sculpture from this period, notably the Votive Picture of Jan Ocko, full of Caroline political ideology, and the beautiful altar-piece cycle by the Vissi Brod Master.

From the Caroline period is also the great Charles Bridge, named after its founder, with its unique Bridge Gate and the magnificent range of statues of saints (from the Baroque period) lining each side. These statues are believed to be inspired by Bernini's great bridge in Rome. The Gate and Bridge were an important part of the Royal Coronation Journey between Vysehrad and St Vitus Cathedral. From the Bridge are perhaps the most memorable views of the Castle complex. When the visitor stands looking up toward Hradcany on the hill, laid out before him is a veritable compendium of architectural styles. The eye traces the outlines of clustering Gothic and Romanesque towers, envelopes the massive volumes of Baroque domes and sweeps upwards to the imposing Neo-Classical facade of the castle. Above, the Renaissance spire of St Vitus Cathedral triumphantly pierces the sky. Other sites exemplifying the Gothic period in Prague can be seen in the Old Town Square with its fifteenth-century Astrological Clock

Iva Rosario

(orloj) and Our Lady Before Tyn church, in the Emaus Monastery in the New Town, in many of the facades of Burghers' houses, quaint streets, the St Agnes Convent, and in the five synagogues in Prague's Jewish Quarter.

Prague has a long and rich Jewish history which includes such figures as the 16th-century Rabbi Loew who created the fabled 'golem', and the twentieth-century author, Franz Kafka. Apart from the five synagogues, there is the Town Hall and the unique Jewish cemetery - the oldest in Europe - all crammed into one small area. During the Nazi occupation, Prague lost much of its Jewish population, but the Jewish district was preserved, being intended by Hitler to act as a museum of an 'extinct race'. For this reason, Prague has one of the few extant collections of Jewish architecture, art and culture in Europe.

Some of the most remarkable monuments in the late Gothic style were produced in the fifteenth century, largely at the behest of King Vladislav II Jagiello (1472-1526) who, like Charles IV, attempted to use art as a way of affirming the legitimacy of his claims to the Bohemian throne. The most notable are the various rooms in the Castle, in particular the Vladislav Hall built by Benedict Reid in the final decades of the fifteenth century. The ceiling vaulting was so intricate that one of the bays collapsed and had to be rebuilt. In the St Wenceslas Chapel of St Vitus Cathedral, is to be found the most important example of fresco from this period, the cycle of St Wenceslas by the master of the Litomerice Altar. Benedict Reid was responsible for bringing the Italian Renaissance to Prague. The Vladislav Hall facade proclaimed the advent of this new era in Bohemian art, with the date 1493 written boldly in its window.

However, the greatest developments in Renaissance architecture occurred during the reign of Ferdinand I, Hapsburg (1526-1564), culminating in the Mannerism of Rudolf II's reign (1576-1612). The most notable building is the delicate and harmonious Belvedere (or Royal Summer Palace: 1535-1564), the first construction of this style to be erected north of the Alps. It was built by Ferdinand I as a pleasure palace for his wife, who did not live to see it completed.

The flowering of a peculiar Bohemian Renaissance idiom was largely due to a group of Italian immigrant builders, masons and plasterers after whom one of the most interesting streets in the Lesser Quarter is named (Vlasská - Italian Street). With the destruction of a large part of the Lesser Quarter by fire in 1541, the opportunity came for the nobility to indulge in building many imposing new Renaissance palaces. Examples are to be found in Hradcany (eg Schwarzenberg-Lobkowitz Palace) and in the Lesser Quarter. One of the most interesting features used in the decoration of these palaces, not commonly seen elsewhere, is the use of 'sgraffito' on the facades of the buildings. This mural technique involved the engraving of decorative or figurative motifs into several layers of plaster to produce a remarkable visual effect.

With the death of Rudolf II and the disastrous outcome of the Thirty Years' War (1618-1648) the independence and political importance of the Lands of the Czech Crown declined. Referred to by some historians as the 'period of darkness', the Czech lands came under the uncompromising rule of the Hapsburg dynasty, whose main interest was to subjugate the Protestant elements in the kingdom and to use the wealth of the country to fund the development of Vienna as the new Imperial capital. The religious 're-education' of the people was entrusted to the Jesuit Order, which immediately harnessed the emotional aspects of Baroque art to help them return the population to Catholic orthodoxy. In the hands of architects

Iva Rosario

such as Santini-Aichel and the Dientzenhofers, Prague was transformed into a magnificent Baroque city of cupolas and stuccoed and colourful facades. And although the Czech writer Milan Kundera (*The Unbearable Lightness of Being*) has called the outburst of Baroque art in Prague 'the flower of evil', it has nevertheless made Prague into one of the most beautiful cities in the world.

Prime among the Baroque monuments of Prague is the church of St Nicholas in the Lesser Quarter (1703-1755). The church's vast cupola dominates the skyline of the left bank and its interior is an exuberant concoction of frescoed decoration, carved altars, sculptures, colour and gold leaf. There is also the exquisite Loreto complex at Hradcany (1721), its yellow and white facade swirling with angels and decorative motifs. From its bell tower twenty-seven bells joyously ring out a well-known Czech hymn to the Virgin on the hour.

Two other great Baroque complexes are the Clementinum, which was added to constantly by the Jesuits to become the centre of the Counter-Reformation in Bohemia, and the huge Strahov Monastery in Hradcany. In both, there are magnificent library reading rooms decorated with superb frescoes. These interiors, like those of the great Baroque churches of the city, exemplify one of the most important characteristics of the Baroque, the synthesis of the three arts - architecture, sculpture and painting - to create a visually emotive, often overpowering atmosphere. Their spatial rhetoric created a compelling visual underpinning for the religious orthodoxy of Counter-Reformation Catholicism and the secular autocracy of Hapsburg imperialism.

Prague also boasts a number of Baroque palaces - many with beautiful formal gardens - which were built in Prague during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. Examples are the Wallenstein Palace, the Thun-Hohenstein Palace, the Morzin Palace, the Schonburn Palace and the Archbishop's Palace. Many of these palaces, like the Clementinum, were huge monumental complexes. Their vast masses heralded a subtle change in the city's fabric, from the multiplicity and intricacy of Gothic streetscapes to the uniformity and visual coherence of panoramic vistas.

The nineteenth century was the period of the so-called 'Czech Awakening'. As with many other nations in Europe, Czech aristocratic and intellectual patriots argued for the revival of the Czech language and a renewed emphasis upon history, and culture. The period spawned a host of historians, writers and sculptors and such well-known composers as Dvorák, Smetana and Janáček, whose music was unashamedly inspired by Bohemian local traditions. This was also a period when intense lobbying of the Austrian Diet was begun by a group of Czechs led by T.G. Masaryk, in an effort to regain Czech independence from the Hapsburg Empire. The effects of nationalism are to be seen combined with romantic historicism in the grandiose buildings of the National Theatre, the Rudolfinum and the National Museum. The decoration of all three emphasises the distinctiveness of Slavonic culture.

The close of the century heralded a move away from historicist art and architecture toward the more nebulous Art Nouveau. Alfons Mucha, the famous Czech exponent of the Art Nouveau style internationally, was responsible for many of the frescoed embellishments inside Prague's public buildings. Examples of his work are the large stained glass windows of St Vitus Cathedral and the murals inside the Municipal House. The latter, which marks the border of Old and New Prague, is one of the outstanding examples of Art Nouveau Prague.

Iva Rosario

Although Prague's fame rests largely upon its Medieval artistic achievements, it is often forgotten that Prague in the early twentieth century was heavily influenced by such foreign movements as Expressionism, Fauvism and, most particularly, Cubism. It is no coincidence that the National Gallery contains an excellent collection of French modern art bought during the years of the Czech First Republic and containing a particularly fine selection of works by Picasso and Braque. The Czechs were so deeply influenced by Cubist principles that, not content to limit these theories to painting, they used these principles to develop a distinctive and unique Czech style of Cubist architecture. The most famous example is the building called The House of the Black Mother of the Lord in Prague New Town. In fact, pre-World War II Prague appears to have been influenced by almost every architectural 'ism', and examples of Traditionalism, Constructivism, Monumentalism and Functionalism can quite easily be found in the city.

The Communist era (1948-1989) was another dark period for Czech culture and lifestyle. Largely isolated from the West and restricted by Communist ideology, Czechoslovakia ceased being a culturally vibrant, highly industrialised democracy, and became instead a stagnant backwater. Most tragically, the country lost much of its creative and intellectual talent either as it emigrated to the west (J. Kylván, B. Martinu, R. Kubelík, M. Kundera, etc.) or fell foul of the regime. The overt propaganda of the communist regime is no longer apparent. The statues of Communist heroes are gone, the Red Army tanks have been made into scrap metal, place names have returned to their original titles, the Communist star above the Bohemian emblem (the double-tailed lion) has been replaced by the lion's historic crown. A handful of years, however, have not been able to obliterate all evidence of the Communist past. You will, therefore, encounter some examples of drabness and neglect in the form of decaying buildings, unattractive 'social realist' art and architecture, cheerless shop displays and dreary shop interior decors.

Nevertheless, Prague is rapidly regaining its vibrancy and the richness, diversity and beauty of its cultural heritage. A massive restoration and renovation program is in progress and almost every week a newly restored architectural gem is unveiled to the delight of both locals and visitors. Arresting new monuments are appearing whose designs will once again place Prague at the forefront of architectural innovators. This is to be seen particularly in O'Gehry and Milunic's new 'Ginger and Fred Building'. The economic reforms have been so successful that Prague has been called 'the model child of capitalism'. The influx of tourism has also resulted in the opening of many new restaurants, cafes and bars. Laudably, many traditional customs have been revived. Thus Prague's new-found cosmopolitanism has been tempered by its uniquely Bohemian character.

Prague is more than the sum of its history. It is a city of charm, romance and nostalgia that can generate every emotion in the visitor, from exuberant joy to tears of sentiment at the loveliness of some of its sights. It can safely be said that virtually everybody who has visited the city has been amazed by what they have seen and unreservedly consider Prague one of the most bewitching and memorable cities in Europe.

© Iva Rosario