

SUDEK PROJECT

Josef Sudek: The Topography of Ruins. Prague 1945
15. 3. – 5. 5. 2019

Immediately after the end of the Second World War in 1945, Josef Sudek (1896–1976) took to the streets of Prague to document the damage sustained by the city. This endeavor produced a unique series of almost four hundred photographs, both documentary and artistic in nature, depicting the ravaged buildings, dismantled statues and air raid and fire precautions of the time. The photographs reveal the city's painful past – a past that is invisible today – through the perceptive eye of a photographer with emotional ties to “his” city and thus capable of capturing its hidden poetic beauty.

Throughout almost all of the war Prague was spared destruction from air raids which did not strike Prague until 1945. Sudek's photographs mainly reflect two historical events of that year. The first of these took place on 14 February 1945, when Allied aircraft mistakenly bombed Prague, causing the destruction of historical monuments chiefly to the south of the historical city center (the Prague neighborhoods of the New Town and Vinohrady). Here Sudek focused mainly on the area around the Emmaus Monastery, which suffered particularly heavy damage. In Sudek's photographs, the interior of the ruined monastery reveals a strange poetry among the rubble and remains, with light entering through the fallen ceilings. The second of these events, the so-called Prague Uprising of May 5–9, 1945, ushered in the era of peace and liberation, but at the price of the fatal destruction of the historic Old Town Hall. Of the historical monuments which were destroyed, Sudek focused mainly on documenting the area around Old Town Square as it returned to life after the war.

The third major theme of Sudek's cycle of war-related photographs was the depot of confiscated statues and bells at Maniny, where he photographed statues which had been dismantled from Prague monuments and church bells piled into accidental assemblages. The collection of photographs also includes images of the empty pedestals in public spaces from which the statues had been removed, as well as the fire-fighting reservoirs that changed the face of Prague's squares for many years during the war.

Although the photographs in this exhibition were apparently taken on commission for the Prague-based publisher Václav Poláček, many of them possess traits that are characteristic for Sudek's earlier and contemporaneous fine art photographs – for instance, the motif of a changing window (specifically, the set of twelve photographs of Old Town Hall's “large window”), the rays of light entering the church of Emmaus Monastery and the corridor of the monastery ambit, or the hidden beauty of rubble and disorder. Some of the photographs mix the horror of the tragic events with a wild and surreally “convulsive” beauty, while others are monumental in a melancholy sort of way. Václav Poláček used the photographs to illustrate a 1946 weekly calendar subtitled “Prague's Cultural Losses 1939–1945” that included an accompanying text by preservationist and art historian Zdeněk Wirth. These images have never been exhibited as a whole, and Sudek himself only used them for isolated requests for reproductions, primarily as documentary material.

Josef Sudek (1896–1976), a legend of Czech photography, is known especially for his visual romanticism and ability to capture the lyrical atmosphere of various places. His favorite photographic motifs included still-lives, windows, gardens (including imaginative staged images), scenes of Prague, or landscapes, including the primeval forest of the Beskids Mountains and the industrial landscape of northern Bohemia. Besides creating his own artistic photography, from the 1920s to the 1940s he also ran a commercial studio. His body of work consisting of tens of thousands of photographs can be found in private and public collections throughout the world.

Old Town Square and Town Hall

The symbol of the Prague Uprising in May 1945 was the fighting around Old Town Square and the damage to the strategic municipal building, the historic Old Town Hall, which was targeted by the German military and burnt down on 8 May. The most-damaged part of the building was the neo-Gothic northern wing finished in 1848 and used as the municipal archive, where most of the city's rare documents burnt. This part of the building had to be demolished after the war.

Maniny – Scrapyard for Requisitioned Metal

In the Prague neighborhood of Maniny near Libeň Bridge in the Holešovice docklands, a large storage facility was established during the war for the storage of requisitioned metal – primarily bells from churches throughout the Protectorate, but also monuments, memorial plaques, and metal components of buildings. Over the course of 1942, ships transported nearly 10,000 bells weighing more than one and a half million tons to be melted down for the war industry, mostly in the foundries of northern Germany. The metal objects in the photographs managed to survive the war.

Emmaus – the Benedictine Monastery

On 14 February 1945, three incendiary bombs fell on ancient Emmaus Monastery, founded in 1347 by Charles IV for the Benedictine order of Slavonic liturgy. Josef Sudek took as many as 150 large-format photographs in the heavily damaged buildings. Amidst the ruins of the monastery church and the rubble-strewn interiors of the monastery's cloister, Sudek was captivated by the atmosphere of emptiness and chaos and by the light passing through the collapsed ceilings. The monastery buildings and church were reconstructed after the war.

Other Damaged Locations in Prague

For the 1946 Prague Calendar published by Václav Poláček with the subtitle "Prague's Cultural Losses, 1939–1946," Josef Sudek documented dozens of places throughout the greater city center. Besides buildings damaged during the February air raid or during the May Uprising, the photographs also show the fire-fighting water reservoirs build during the war, protective walls built around monuments, and the remnants of a barricade from the Prague Uprising.

Museum of Architecture in Wrocław

Bernardyńska 5, 50-156 Wrocław

<http://www.ma.wroc.pl>, <http://warsaw.czechcentres.cz>, <http://sudekproject.cz>

Organized by: Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, Czech Centre in Warszawa, Museum of Architecture in Wrocław

Photographs by: Josef Sudek

Curators: Mariana Kubištová, Vojtěch Lahoda, Katarína Mašterová

Enlargements: Vlado Bohdan

Video: Adéla Kremplová

Architectural Design: Barbara Zedková and Lenka Mrzílková (Studio Miaow)

Mounting of Photographs: Tereza Cíglerová, Kateřina Doležalová, Barbara Gajewská, Petra Šemíková

Graphic Design: Martin Groch and Tim+Tim

Production: Tereza Koucká, Katarína Mašterová, Martin Pavlis, Adéla Kremplová, Jolanta Gromadzka

Acknowledgements: Adam Havlík, Markéta Janotová, Jitka Zámorská, Taťjana Langášková

Translation into English: Stephan von Pohl

OPENING

14 March 2019 at 5 pm – will be attended by Adéla Kremplová and Martin Pavlis from the Institut of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences.

Exhibition is open until 5 May 2019.

GUIDED TOUR

15 March 2019 at 12 pm – curatorial guided tour with Adéla Kremplová and Martin Pavlis (in English). Free entry

The exhibition is an output of the project “Josef Sudek and Photographic Documentation of Works of Art: From a Private Art Archive to Representing a Cultural Heritage” (shortly Sudek Project) supported in 2016–2020 by the Ministry of Culture of the Czech Republic as part of the Program Applied Research and Development of National and Cultural identity (NAKI II), ID number DG16P02M002. www.sudekproject.cz/en



Muzeum Architektury
we Wrocławiu
Museum of Architecture
in Wrocław



INSTITUTE OF ART HISTORY
THE CZECH ACADEMY
OF SCIENCES



MINISTRY OF CULTURE
CZECH REPUBLIC



CZESKIE CENTRUM
ČESKÉ CENTRUM