

LA RONDE IN PRAGUE

by Diana Peel

Diana and her husband David have just returned from a three year posting to Prague, Czechoslovakia, which, as she says, "presents a living history of the development of the arts in central Europe". Now back in Ottawa, she has returned to her full time profession of real estate agent with Royal LePage plus is a docent at the Canada Council Art Bank.

Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance, Baroque and Rococco, Art Nouveau, Art Deco — all this is Prague, and discovering these and other architectural variations is very satisfying when one has two or three years to spend studying a country. Little has been improved upon in Prague. Much rests as is — churches, bridges, houses, palaces, even the streets are illustrations of architectural history.

Delving into the past pushes one back to the Goths and the Slavs and the tribes that roamed and settled central Europe before the tenth century and into the legends and myths that have survived until this day.

One of our first direct experiences with the history of the country was the closing of the fourteenth century Charles University building in which we were studying the Czech language. It was discovered that several Czech queens had been buried in the courtyard, and excavations were to begin to determine names and dates. Due to the huge winter coal pile in the courtyard, however, we were allowed to return to class.

One of the chief joys of being in Prague, beyond the architectural delights, is making

the rounds of the antiquariats or old book and graphics stores. And they are old! Persistence yields treasures, and one really needs two or three years of persistence. We found Daumiers and Goyas, old maps, even woodcuts of North America and Europe from the sixteenth century, and a seventeenth century Netherlands engraving. There are still so many treasures in private hands that we were really not concerned about fakes. Books from the sixteenth century are not uncommon.

Alfons Mucha, a Czech artist who worked in Paris and New York, has long been one of our favourites. One day, out of the blue, we were invited to meet the writer son of the famous Art Nouveau artist. In great anticipation we met the man who was to become a friend, visited his home, (itself dating from the Romanesque period), and were led on a tour of his fabulous museum of Art Nouveau paintings and objects. Families of other artists and musicians are often also interested in sharing their treasures and memories of the famous. The Czech lands are such a tightly-knit unit that people important in their cultural history still seem to be a part of the living community.

Glass art is the most important contemporary medium of expression in Czechoslovakia today, we think. This year there were five separate exhibitions dealing with this subject, from medieval and earlier glass found around a fourteenth century house in old Prague, to modern glass/crystal sculptures by the very strong artists of today, all with years of apprenticing behind them. This medium has only recently arrived in Ottawa at the Wells Gallery show of Canadian glass art.

We made many visits to painters and other artists, both officially and privately. Modern graphics can be quite interesting, perhaps more so than the oils, watercolours and sculptures, and there are some different techniques being explored in spite of the encouragement artists are given to conform philosophically.

The various buildings of the National Gallery in Prague house an important medieval collection, European collections with masterpieces from the fifteenth century to the Impressionists, many Picassos, a Netherlands collection, and an eighteenth and nineteenth century collection of eastern European painting. Great importance is placed on special exhibitions such as Gothic and Baroque, the latter while we were in Prague, the former scheduled for this fall.

Much of the important church art is located in the country around Prague, some in the still-active churches, and most divided



A street scene in Prague by Czechoslovak artist, Karel Kramule.

among the 2 500 castles and fortresses in Czechoslovakia. Many of these are open to the public from April to October.

The development of music parallels the development of art in Czechoslovakia, and comparisons can be made nightly during "the season" in Prague. A choice in concerts is wide-ranging, from styles and periods, to instruments and artists. Music, as art, is natural, normal, of the people, and the concerts and opera are quite affordable.

Although this may sound dull, we took every opportunity to visit factories, an activity that also became a learning experience. We chose mainly small factories outside Prague in Bohemia or Moravia, Slovakia being a little far for a one day return trip. We watched glass Christmas ornaments being blown and decorated one by one, crystal figures, flowers, fruit, vases, and other table decorations, either blown or molded, each in its own factory, some for glass and some for crystal. And the porcelain factory in Dubi, by the East German border, produces the blue and white pattern called "Blue Onion". The same clay is used in the manufacture of Meissen, Dresden, Rosenthal, and Herend. Most of the fine finishing work is done by apprenticed hand, whether for the modelling of clay roses or for the cobalt blue scroll and line painting.

Although I often felt considerable impatience with the way things are done, or not done, in Czechoslovakia, we certainly gained an appreciation of the artisan approach to creation, whether of practical use or for artistic exhibition. The round of visual and aural delights yields treasures for the curious. Prague presents a living history of the development of the arts in central Europe.



Prague street scene by Karel Kramule.