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Mucha Mecca

A pilgrimage to south Moravia reveals the master painter's masterwork

By Katy Frank
For *The Prague Post*
(November 27, 2003)

Muslims go to Mecca. Catholics go to Lourdes. Disciples of Czech art go to Moravsky Krumlov.

Pilgrims trek to this out-of-the-way town in south Moravia to pay homage to the *Slav Epic*, a series of 20 fantastic historical murals by Art Nouveau master Alfons Mucha.

And a trek it is. Our bleary-eyed threesome set out on a cold October Saturday at dawn to catch a bus to Brno, the takeoff point for Moravsky Krumlov. We figured it would be quicker than the train, and my compatriots and I wanted to reach the old chateau where Mucha's masterpiece is kept by 1 p.m., when it reopens after lunch.

Mucha gave 16 years of his life to these canvases, which dramatize key events spanning 1,000 years of Slavic history. From the Slavs' tribal beginnings to the Hussite revolution to the emancipation of the Russian serfs, the enormous murals -- some as large as 8 meters by 10 meters (26 feet by 33 feet) -- commemorate epic battles, defeats, celebrations and Slavic leaders.

Completed between 1919 and 1926, various canvases from the series were shown in Prague, Paris, Chicago and New York, where more than 200,000 visitors attended the exhibition. In 1928, Mucha and the project's American benefactor, Charles Crane, presented the series as a gift to the city of Prague, where it was exhibited in various places, according to John Mucha, the artist's grandson. In 1939, the paintings were placed in storage to protect them from German occupation forces.

After the war, the communists rejected the



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JOSEF KRISTIAN/The Prague Post

In this castle at Moravsky Krumlov, determined visitors find Alfons Mucha's *Slav Epic*, a series of massive, detailed paintings full of history and mysticism.



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JOSEF KRISTIAN/The Prague Post

The *Slav Epic* series has been through some

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paintings because of Mucha's bourgeois status and the Christian motifs that some of the paintings contained. ups and downs itself.

In 1950, 11 years after Mucha's death, the epic was transferred to Moravsky Krumlov, near his hometown of Ivancice. In 1963, after nearly 30 years out of sight, the first nine paintings in the series were exhibited. John Mucha said Prague representatives were invited, but none appeared. Finally, in 1967, the entire *Slovanska epopej* returned to public exhibition.

Buried treasure

It's not the same as being stashed in storage, but the epic's location does keep it relatively hidden from the masses. Getting to it requires some tenacity. From Brno we shoved our way onto a local bus for the 45-minute ride to the village of Polanka. From there we had to walk 4 kilometers (2.5 miles) along a deserted road, after having banded together with a young lost Italian named Fabio and a trio of Czech ladies.

Along the way, a Skoda dispatched from their pension picked up the Czechs; we cursed ourselves for not having booked a room. We finally waddled into Moravsky Krumlov's main square for lunch at the Hotel Epopej. The typical pub fare was hit-and-miss, but the prices reasonable and the staff very accommodating. Rooms with shared bath go for 400 Kc (\$14.80).

Refreshed from the road by beer and *smazeny syr* (fried cheese), we were ready for art by 1 p.m. As we approached the chateau, the flaking yellow paint and leaf-laden courtyard called up images of Miss Havisham's decaying mansion in Dickens' *Great Expectations*. Only a sign in one corner directed Mucha fans indoors to the ticket counter, where we paid the 50 Kc entry fee and clambered up the creaking, narrow staircase to the first paintings in the cycle.

Our very first peek at Mucha's gargantuan canvases rewarded our trekking: Taut, muscular heroes both mythical and historical, with courageous posture and piercing eyes, are framed by soft landscapes and smoky battles in brilliant extremes of color and light. Legendary figures such as Jan Hus and the one-eyed warrior Jan Zizka spring to life in



SEEKING THE EPIC

Zamek Moravsky Krumlov/Slovanska epopej

Open 9 a.m.-noon and 1-4 p.m.,
April-October. Tel. 515 322 789

Moravsky Krumlov information: Tel.
515 321 064,
www.mkrumlov.cz

Places to stay:

Hotel Epopej, Moravsky Krumlov: Tel.

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settings of astonishing detail. Deviating from Mucha's decorative Art Nouveau style, the epic's dynamic fusion of historical painting and mysticism serves not only as testament to his skill as an artist, but also his esteem for the character of Slavic peoples. "If he had done nothing more," writes Ronald F. Lipp in the anthology *Alphonse Mucha*, "this work would forever free him of the accusation of being a mere poster painter."

515 322 373

Penzion Mili, Moravsky Krumlov: Tel. 515 323 341, www.mili.penzion.com

Penzion U Urbanu, Ivancice: Tel. 546 452 285, www.uurbanu.cz

Urban renewal

With Fabio still in tow, we gawked at the canvases almost until the chateau's 4 p.m. closing time, hoping a taxi could get us from Moravsky Krumlov to Polanka for the Brno bus at half past. Our very kind waitress at the Epopej hailed us a cab, but on arrival in Polanka not even the Czech driver could decipher the schedule well enough to confirm the existence of a 4:30 bus to Brno. On the half-hour, a bus did round the corner -- and zoomed past without even slowing at the stop. We were chilly and abandoned, with no one in sight.

Getting there: The Prague-Brno train runs every two hours on weekends and twice as often on weekdays. Local buses connect Brno and the village of Polanka, and then it's a 4-kilometer (2.5-mile) walk to Zamek Moravsky Krumlov.

Luckily, before long a couple came by with their German shepherds, and Colleen, the best Czech-speaker in our group, boldly asked for a ride. They took pity on us and generously carted our troupe 5 kilometers down the road to Ivancice, where we began to call round for a place to stay.

We struck gold with U Urbanu, a delightful pension across a bridge from the main square. Radek Urban, the gregarious young proprietor, picked us up in his brand-new Skoda and then ushered us into swank, spotless double rooms (900 Kc) and delivered free beers. The pension's pub was lively, with cheerful, attentive service. After we finished our *svickova* (beef sirloin in cream sauce), Radek went over the train schedule for the following day and offered to drive us back to the station.

Ivancice is worth a stroll for its quaint, colorful town square and tribute to Mucha, which brought the tour full circle. Yes, our coats were covered in German shepherd drool and we were stranded without clean underwear. For all pilgrims, however, the key factor is faith, and keeping ours provided us with a rewarding exploration of a great Czech artist, as well as a couple of new friends.

The chateau is closed until spring, which might be just as well -- that 4-kilometer walk probably gets pretty cold in winter. So you have plenty of time to plan your own visit. I recommend bringing a toothbrush.

Katy Frank can be reached at news@praguepost.com

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Reader's Comments:

[23/04/2005] : I have also made the trek from Prague to Moravsky Krumlov to see the Alphonse Mucha masterpieces.

Although difficult (finding an information person in the bus station at Prague who could speak English was not easy; and the total trip from Prague to Moravsky Krumlov takes about 5 hours by bus, so plan ahead and get up early), it is easier than you implied. You either took the wrong bus or got off the bus too soon! Once you get to Brno, there is a bus that takes you to the Moravsky Krumlov town square (this bus leaves from the main Brno bus station which, unfortunately, is not where the Prague bus drops you off; I asked teenagers to help me find the station --- most teens speak some English and Czech teens are especially kind and helpful). Once you are in Moravsky Krumlov the only hike you have to make is just a few blocks to the monastery where the paintings are on display.

There, your efforts to get there will be richly rewarded by these magnificent paintings. I kept pinching myself the whole time --- I thought I must be dreaming! The staff has an informative printed English guide to the paintings available when you enter.

Don't pass up any chance you might have to see these great works.

William Stout
Pasadena, California

[07/03/2004] : Several years ago I made my first and only trip to the Czech Republic where I met some of my cousins and stayed in Ivancice where my English speaking cousin lived. My grandfather was from the nearby village of Oslavany. As part of showing my daughter and me some of the area, my cousin took us to an exhibition of A. Mucha's work in a castle of a village in the area. I had never heard of Mucha before that, but was very impressed by the Slavic Epic series. We were there on a beautiful June day and the Linden trees were in bloom outside the castle. Since then I have located books in the our local library system and learned more about A. Mucha. My curiosity has me wondering is some of my ancestors may have known some of A. Mucha's ancestors since they were from villages that are only a few kilometers apart.

Lissy Dolezal Currie
Maple Valley, WA, USA

[04/03/2004] : Couldn't agree more that the trip to Moravsky Krumlov is worth the effort. An elderly guide at the Mucha museum in Prague spoke about the works with

such praise that we felt missing them would be missing part of the Czech experience. Our trip was on a dark rainy day which only added to the mystery of the search. We drove past the castle several times, parked and walked around the grounds and not seeing any signs of a museum finally made an inquiry at a small galley, and were redirected back to where we had been. Even as we approached the door we weren't convinced it was the right place but once inside found the treasures. BJ

Barbara Jezek
Austin, Texas USA



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