

The Lively World of Prague Cafés

Paradise for bohemians and meeting places for twentieth-century democrats

THE CAFÉ TRADITION, at over 300 years old, has long been an integral part of the formation of society and cultural life in the Czech Lands. It was in the cafés that artistic movements were formed, as well as the ideas that influenced literature, theatre and politics. Cafés offered a meeting place where artists found allies against officialdom and public opinion.

The first documented café in the Czech Lands opened in Brno in 1702. Prague followed ten years later, but the liveliest and most famous café period started during the Viennese Secession, parallel with and similar to the Art Nouveau movement, at the end of the nineteenth century and lasting until World War Two.

By the last quarter of the nineteenth century cafés were already an integral part of Prague's intellectual milieu. The café became the salon, the stock exchange, a meeting room and a place of entertainment. During World War One cafés acquired yet another feature by functioning as a 'second home' for students and the economically weaker sections of society who could enjoy long hours in their heated interior as well as free newspapers. Prague cafés of the 1920s and -30s became popular, democratic clubs often resembling public reading rooms. The most famous and most frequented among them were the Union, Slavia and Národní.

Prague Café Slavia, interior today

Photo: Slavia café



The colourful nature and variety of Prague cafés was one of the defining elements of everyday life and atmosphere of the city. From small cafés, designed only for drinking coffee and reading, up to large, multifunctional establishments spreading over two floors, with rooms reserved for various activities, Prague successfully embraced influences from Paris, Vienna, Berlin and even America.

Before World War Two, Prague cafés fell into two categories: the independent, multi-purpose grand cafés on the one hand, and those attached to larger enterprises such as hotels, department stores or railway stations on the other. The grand cafés, with music, dancing, billiards and games rooms, were built in the busiest parts of the city - Na Příkopě Street, the avenue Národní třída and Wenceslas Square - and enjoyed huge

popularity. In 1916 Prague had 120 cafés, of which 80 were grand cafés. Most of them, including the small ones, had their own orchestras. In the years after World War One 'concert cafés' with a stage for the orchestra became a Prague phenomenon.

All cafés had their special clientèle, defining them further as entertainment, student, literary or other types of café, with their importance often measured by the number of newspapers and journals on offer. By the 1930s most of Wenceslas Square was literally lined with cafés.

The most famous literary café in Prague was the Café Union on the corner of Národní třída and Na Perštýně, a row of interconnected rooms situated on the second floor of a large corner house. Three generations of Czech artists and intellectuals made Union their home and it was there that Czech Cubism was born, later reaching the wider Bohemian public. Café Union opened its doors in 1875 and enjoyed its best and most influential period at the turn of the century. It almost closed in 1923 but the Prague intelligentsia protested, many petitions were written, Karel Čapek - a regular - started a campaign in the newspaper Lidové Noviny and the Café Union was saved. However, it did not survive World War Two and the building was torn down in 1949.

Opposite the Café Union, in Národní třída, the Grand Café Louvre opened in 1902 on the first floor of a large apartment and commercial building. Decorated in a neo-Rococo style, covered in mirrors, it had eleven billiard tables and a concert room. Before World War One it was a place where culture and society mixed. The actors from the National Theatre were regulars as well as Albert Einstein, Franz Werfel and the German Philosophical Circle. In 1925 Karel Čapek established the Czech Pen Club there and became its first president. Vilém Mathesius and Roman Jakobson founded the Prague Linguistics Circle at the Café Louvre in 1926.

Prague *Café Louvre, Národní 22, interior in 1910*

Photo : Café Louvre



Café Arco in Hybernská Street deserves a mention for its popularity and intellectually charged atmosphere. It opened in 1909 and competed with the Café Union. Designed by the founder of Czech modern architecture, Jan Kotěra, it became well known for the avant-garde cooperative of artists credited with the spread of Art Deco and Cubist design into everyday life. Arco has survived but the original style has been destroyed.

The period before World War One would be unthinkable without the notorious Café Cabaret Montmartre in Řetězová Street, re-opened today but without its original décor and the cabaret. A Parisian-style café, it opened in 1911 but was completely redesigned in 1919 by the architect Jiří Kroha in the avant-garde Futurist style. It attracted Prague bohemians who often came in late after the Café Union closed its doors. The first tango in Prague was danced at the Montmartre; Max Brod, Franz Kafka and Jaroslav Hašek, the author of *The Good Soldier Švejk*, who would often be refused entry because of his debts and for reading his improvised and outrageous lectures, were regular visitors. Today, museum collections of Café Montmartre posters represent some of the best graphic art produced by the Czech avant-garde.

Prague cafés were quick to reflect the art movements of their time and became well known for their modern décor and architecture. The first building in Prague to be built in Vienna Secession style was Café Corso, Na Příkopě, in 1897. It has not survived but any traveller to Prague wishing to see the splendour of the style should visit the impeccably restored Café de Paris situated at the Hotel Paříž (Paris), built in 1904. 'The Hotel Paris was so beautiful I almost dropped dead...' says Bohumil Hrabal's hero in his book *I Served the King of England*.

The late Secession/Art Nouveau period in Prague is best represented by the café in the Municipal House, Obecní dům, opened in 1912. Decorated by prominent Czech artists of the day, this was a new type of multifunctional establishment, popular after the founding of Czechoslovakia in 1918. It housed a café, a restaurant, an American bar, in addition to exhibition, concert and dance halls. The Lucerna in Wenceslas Square - one of its competitors and owned by the Havel brothers - even had a cinema.

The Café Slavia opened in 1881 on the corner of the embankment and the avenue Národní třída, opposite the National Theatre. It is firmly lodged in the national consciousness as it played host to guests whose names became synonymous with the cultural life of Prague and the nation. Bedřich Smetana, Jaroslav Seifert, Václav Havel and countless others sat at its tables. The Slavia was completely refurbished in 1932-33 and again after the Velvet Revolution but today it lacks the bohemian and creative atmosphere for which it became famous.

Prague *Interior, period picture, Grand Café Orient, Ovocný trh 19*

Photo: Grand Café Orient



An outstanding representation of the Cubist movement in Bohemia is the Café at the House of the Black Madonna, today Grand Café Orient, in Celetná Street. It was designed in 1911 by Josef Gočár, a regular visitor of the Café Union. When the café opened in 1912 it occupied the entire first floor of a new department store. Gočár created a large open space by dispensing with partition walls, instead using furniture and bringing in light by introducing large bay windows. The building, now completely restored, was the first Cubist house to be built in Bohemia. Apart from the café it now also houses a Cubist art gallery and a shop.

After 1928 and through the 1930s the left-leaning artists and architects moved into the 'white' spaces of Functionalist cafes that became a Czech speciality. In both Prague and Brno new cafes 'without intimacy' were opening. The simplicity of the space, filled with conversation rather than craft and materials, was the ideal. Critics were rejecting the cafés that did not follow the spirit of a 'plain' café, as originally designed by Adolf Loos in Vienna (Café Museum, 1899). Different rooms, even floors, were visually connected, including the kitchen to demonstrate top-quality hygiene and technical expertise.

The best architectural example, no longer in existence, was Café Juliš on Wenceslas Square. It was designed by Pavel Janák using an original steel construction, with large windows to create a line of sight between the floors and the street. The Café Bílá Labut', on the fifth floor of the like-named department store, was the last Functionalist café to be opened before World War Two.

The totalitarian regime saw cafés as a symbol of bourgeois life and nationalised them. Artists' groups were dismissed and new, easily controlled unions and clubs were established by the Ministry of Culture. Nonetheless, the tradition of cafés survived well during the first twenty years of communism, when the original owners often worked in them as waiters. It was mainly the last years of 'normalisation' after 1968 and state censorship that ruined café life.

Today most of the grand cafés of the early twentieth century have disappeared, but the Prague café scene is lively again, mostly in a smaller form. Café life and the artists have moved to the Prague 'Left Bank' in Letná, Holešovice and the streets close to the Academy of Creative Arts, continuing the long-established tradition. It remains quite clear that few types of architecture are as versatile or contemporary as that of the café.

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