

Villa Bílek

Galerie hlavního města Prahy
Bílkova vila
Mickiewiczova 233/1
Praha 6

Villa Bílek, closed since last fall to allow preparations of a new permanent exhibition, has reopened to the public shortly before the summer holidays. This remarkable building from 1910–1911 was designed by the sculptor František Bílek (1872–1941) – one of the most original Czech artists of the turn of the 19th and the 20th centuries. The building has been managed by the Prague City Gallery since 1963.

Bílek's Prague villa is situated in an extraordinary position above the former Chotek Road in the area of Baroque fortifications around Prague Castle, which was being developed at the time. The self-confident artist deliberately chose the largest and most exposed plot of land, in the center of which he placed his magnificent house evoking an ancient temple. Its original ideal form of an Egypt ruin with its collapsed masonry and columns had to be re-designed after objections from the building authority in order to be approved. Thus the building was moved from the center of the garden to Mickiewicz Street and acquired its block-like compact character, probably inspired by the nearby Zátorka estate, which Bílek had previously sought to buy.

Although it is one of the first family houses in this country with a flat roof, its exterior is a reflection of Bílek's deep religiosity. The atypical ground plan of the building, which has the shape of a segment of an oval formed by a reaping scythe, stems from the elaborate symbolism. The center of the imaginary circle, which now hosts the Comenius monument, was originally occupied by a statue of Moses, the Old Testament husbandman and prefigurement of Christ, with whom Bílek identified himself. The ideas of spiritual ploughing, sowing, ripening and harvesting represent the central allegories of Bílek's spirituality. The Egyptian columns in the form of ears of grain bound in sheaves, which contrast with the dark brickwork of the building, have a similar meaning.

The essence of Bílek's mysticism, permeating his entire diverse oeuvre, consisted of a specific syncretism of themes and ideas stemming from Christianity, ancient civilizations, Eastern religions and eventually the Hussite movement. Bílek stylized himself as a priest: he perceived and depicted his workshop as a temple, referring to his works as prayers. During Bílek's lifetime, the distinctly religious character of his work caused a lot of controversy, numerous misunderstandings and criticism.

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The southern part of Villa Bílek consists of a high ceiling studio, while the northern half is reserved for the two-story apartment of the artist's family. None of the rooms is rectangular; by cutting off their corners, a labyrinth of smaller communicating spaces and intimate corners is created inside. The authentic atmosphere of the living quarters is complemented by the original furniture, designed and partly carved by Bílek, and numerous symbolic details, conceived in a wide range of materials. There are individual reliefs, door and window jambs, interior consoles and lanterns in stone or stucco. The doors are decorated with wood carvings consisting of biblical and cosmological figural themes and natural or purely symbolic motifs accompanied by significant and difficult-to-read inscriptions. However, Bílek also designed interior elements in metal, as evidenced above all by the original chandeliers and door handles of mostly natural shapes. The unique character of this complexly shaped house with a studio of this original mystic artist is enhanced by the exhibited works, representing the most valuable items of Bílek's extensive sculptural and graphic oeuvre.

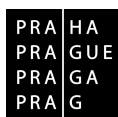
The aim of the new permanent exhibition was to remove disturbing and incongruous elements created during the previous installation and to take a more sensitive approach to the interiors of Villa Bílek. The works exhibited there form clearer thematic units. Unlike the Chýnov house, which features Bílek's late works and those with Hussite themes, the exhibition in the Prague villa presents mainly his exalted early works, charged with intense mysticism.

The former spacious workshop features monumental sculptures and figural compositions characterized by their organic forms, expressive vertical silhouettes and pathetic gestures. The space is dominated by the dark-stained figures of *Wonder* (1907), *Moses* (1904) and a colossal design for the *Jan Hus Monument* in Prague (1901). The most impressive are Bílek's works in wood, the material that most suited his nature. Bílek's prints and ceramics are also remarkable, complementing the sculptures placed in the family dining room, Bílek's study and other rooms, which thematically showcase his early works, designs of monuments and portraits. The largest room on the first floor is dedicated to a remarkable model of the *Jan Žižka Monument* (1912–1925). The exhibition space in the attic, where an exhibition commemorating František Bílek's friendship and collaboration with Otokar Březina is now opening, will subsequently present and thematize Bílek's original *National Monument* (1908).

Martin Krummholz

Curator: Martin Krummholz

Graphic design: Anymade Studio



Prague City Gallery is one of the most important galleries in the Czech Republic, focusing its exhibition activities mainly on modern and contemporary art. It collects, preserves and professionally processes the art collections of the City of Prague. Currently, the GHMP exhibits in seven buildings: the Stone Bell House, the Municipal Library - 2nd floor, the Colloredo-Mansfeld Palace, the House of Photography, Bílek's Villa, the Troja Chateau and František Bílek's House in Chýnov.

František Bílek and Otokar Březina

Few artists have had such a strong relationship based on friendship and creative inspiration as the sculptor František Bílek (1872–1941) and the poet Otokar Březina (1868–1929). Both artists placed the emphasis on the spiritual mission of their work above formal aesthetic expression. Their mystical messages therefore became central for the main purpose of their Symbolist work, but despite the apparent harmony of their goals, each of them pursued his own distinctive path.

A letter from enthusiastic Bílek in 1899, responding to Březina's poetry collection *Temple Builders*, started a creative collaboration between the two future friends that lasted from the moment they met in 1900 for almost thirty years until Březina's death in 1929.

Before the two of them met in person in Nová Říše thanks to the initiative of the priests and writers Sigismund Bouška and Karel Dostál-Lutinov, Bílek had illustrated Březina's poem *Quiet Ocean* in the Catholic Modernist magazine *Nový život* and accompanied Březina's poetry collections *Mysterious Distances* and *Dawn in the West* by three lithographs.

One of the most interesting examples of their spiritual dialogue is the series of 8 mystical Symbolist drawings by Bílek illustrating Březina's last completed poetry collection, *Hands*. Fascinated by Březina, Bílek published the book at his own expense at the very beginning of their friendship in 1901, again using *Nový život* as his platform. The book was later published three more times in other editions.

The concept of this book is the most comprehensive example of the symbolic interconnection of word and image that was at the heart of the creative relationship between Bílek and Březina.

In the same year, *Nový život* also published Bílek's first book, *The Lord's Prayer*, with a foreword by Březina. The collection of 16 texts accompanied by reproductions of Bílek's drawings, lithographs and sculptures is linked together by Bílek's original inventiveness, which at that very time allowed for the most impressive artistic realizations.

In the following years, Bílek accompanied 13 editions of Březina's books with an extensive number of drawings and prints. At the same time, over the years, he also produced a number of portraits of his friend in wood and plaster and as prints and drawings. Březina's essay *Music of the Springs* (1903) also directly inspired Bílek's 1914 series of prints *Supreme Justice*. Bílek created many sculptures under the influence of Březina's work, such as *The Blind* (1901), inspired by the poem *Music of the Blind* from the collection

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Hands (1901), and *Future Conquerors* (1931–1937), influenced by Březina's essay *The Purpose of Struggle* (1907). One of them, the sculpture *The Artist and His Sister Pain* (1929), was chosen by Bílek to be placed on Březina's grave against the wishes of many, even Březina himself.

The small-scale exhibition at Villa Bílek in Prague features Bílek's key works inspired by Březina's poems and prose. The works from the collections of Prague City Gallery are complemented by works on loan from the Otokar Březina Museum in Jaroměřice nad Rokytnou and from the important collection of a private Prague collector.

Hana Larvová, Pavel Myslín

Curators: Hana Larvová, Pavel Myslín

Graphic design: Tomáš Trnobranský

Opening hours: Tue–Sun 10–18 h

Entrance fee: CZK 150 full (adults) / CZK 60 discounted (students) / CZK 20 seniors

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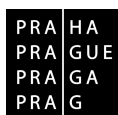
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