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Celebrate Christmas the Czech way



Czechs and Slovaks all over the world are very fond of their Christmas customs. It is fun to join in the celebration and try it the Czech way. Christmas - in Czech "Vánoce" - is practically celebrated during the same time as in Canada but there are some differences.

For most Czechs, December 24 is the most enjoyable day of the Christmas holidays. All preparations culminate this very day. Czechs celebrate "name days" - every day of the year has a name assigned to it - and December 24 is Adam and Eva's name day. It is another symbol of the time that means "the beginning". Czechs, regardless of their personal attitude to religion, celebrate the birth of Jesus - "Ježíšek" on Christmas Eve.

The Czech name given to Christmas Eve literally means "Generous Day", (Štědrý den) probably for the wealth of food that has traditionally been served for Christmas dinner. Even poor families would make sure that their plates were full on this one day of the year. Carp was

the most affordable fish to put on the table in the past. That is the reason why it is the symbol of the Czech Christmas Eve evening dinner for centuries.

One pride of the Czech nation is that Czechs invented a way to raise Carp in artificial ponds to solve the fact that theirs is a landlocked country with only small streams as natural water sources due to the European water divide. In the Trebon region, production of Carp

dates back to the 15th and 16th centuries, when monks dug out huge numbers of artificial lakes for fish production. Strings of such lakes were built all over the region and provided such plentiful amount of Carp, that it was inexpensive and in the 16th century was already being exported to other lands. Until today it is still raised in these manmade ponds and then sold from large tubs placed on the streets and town squares a few days

before Christmas. You will not see this sight at any other time of the year. Some families keep their Carp in the bathtub for several days as a temporary pet for their children - but only until Christmas Eve, when they are killed and cooked as the main festive meal.

Czechs usually decorate their Christmas tree on the morning of

December 24th and families with little children will often keep the room with the Christmas tree locked to create the proper evening miracle for them. It is decorated with traditional Czech Christmas ornaments are made from natural materials like straw, poppy and wood. They like their decorations to be edible, so you can often find chocolate, apples, nuts and beautiful gingerbread cookies on the Christmas tree.

In many households, all preparations for the most festive dinner of the year - Christmas

Dinner - are made during the day. Dinner is served after sunset (traditionally, it should not be served until after the first star has come out) and consists of carp and potato salad, sometimes preceded by mushroom, sauerkraut or fish soup. Did you know that Carp can supposedly be prepared a hundred different ways? Over the centuries, Czechs collected very large number of recipes so the Christmas Carp can always be original. Dinner can be finished with dessert, such as apple strudel.

A traditional Christmas bread called "Vánočka" used to be a part of the Christmas dinner in the past but today it has lost its "only Christmas" connotation and is eaten year-round. Nonetheless, "Vánočka" is usually part of the celebrations - often

as special decoration in the form of a wreath with bows. After dinner, everyone around the table may sing Christmas carols before moving to the Christmas tree, which is all lit up and beautiful. By then, presents have been placed under the tree. Czech children

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The culture of our land: visual art part 1

by Ernie Zucker

Seeing I believing, as the saying goes. Czech visual art will impress, because it meets or even surpasses world standards. We wrote before that small countries get little exposure for most of their creative efforts, and this applies to the majority of world-class Czech painters and sculptors. Proof: A superb collection of medieval art, as part of the National Gallery in Prague, can be found at the Convent of St. Agnes of Bohemia.

The venue enhances the impact of this remarkable collection. And then there are the other major exhibits, namely the National Gallery's modern art collection (sculptures in the town of Zbraslav, visual art at the architecturally interesting Prague Trade Fair Palace).

The Gothic period

King Charles IV (1346 – 1378) was the first Czech ruler who was also the German king and the Roman emperor. He resided in Prague and the city prospered financially and culturally during his reign. Founding Charles university, building the Charles bridge and Karlštejn castle (his summer residence), enlarging St. Vitus cathedral were just some of his major projects. So one can say if you know Notre Dame in Paris, nowadays you should know St. Vitus in Prague. Similarly, if you know



Charles IV by Petr Parléř

example, the tombstones of the Přemyslids and dozens of other sculptural artifacts.

Many court painters were also retained, including the above-mentioned Master Theodorik, Nicholas Wurmser of Strasbourg and Master Oswald. Most of their work is somehow related to the Christian church. The Kaufman Crucifixion is considered one of the prime examples of the great art of the times.

The Renaissance period

The stormy days during the Hussite uprising (1419 – 1434), temporarily halted artistic development in the country. Many art treasures were destroyed. It was not till the latter part of the fifteenth century that a group of wood carvers emerged, decorating churches and reception rooms. High quality murals were produced, as those in St. Barbara's cathedral in Kutná Hora. Hand-painted book illustration flourished. The Codex of Jena from the early 16th century contains many miniatures on Hussite themes.

The Renaissance style was introduced to the country by Italian artists, who came to the country on the behest of Jagiellonian kings. They included stonemasons – an example of their work is the portal of St. George's Romanesque church at Prague castle and the sculpted decorations of Belvedere, the summer palace in the Royal Gardens. Paolo della Stella and Alexander Colyn are the two leading artists that come to mind. Thanks to the Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf III (1552 – 1612), king of Bohemia, Hungary, Germany and the Romans, who made Prague his capital, artistic development surpassed that of any previous period.

His collection of Renaissance works had no equal, including paintings by Hieronymus Bosch, Hubert van Eyck, Roger van der Weyden and Peter Brueghel, among his 3000 works. He supported a group of painters, among whom Giuseppe Arcimboldo was the most original. He has been celebrated as anticipating surrealism and pop art in the style of his work.



Master Theodorik: St. Mathias

Fra Angelico, for example, you should know 14th century Czech painter Master Theodorik. He became court painter to Charles IV. Visiting Karlštejn, you will see Theodorik's dozens of images of vivid, full-figured saints that seem to burst from their frames.

The Gothic style, which flourished in the country for three centuries, provided artists of the time the opportunity to express the specific character of the country, the views, feelings and aspirations of its population. The centre of sculpture at the time of Charles IV was the workshop of Peter Parléř. It employed Czech, German and French stonemasons, many of whose works survived to this day. Its greatest masterpieces may be found within the confines of St. Vitus cathedral as, for



Church in Kutná Hora

The most prolific court artist of the time was Bartolomeus Spranger. He provided Rudolf with a steady stream of paintings consisting of mythologies, allegories, religious themes and occasional portraits.

The Baroque period

Here you find another rich era of Czech painting and sculpture. Prague became a major centre of Baroque culture in Europe

(first half of 18th century). The pioneer of the Baroque style in Czech art was Karel Škréta. Apart from painting, he produced



"Pride" by Mathias Bernard Braun

many graphic designs for engravers in Prague and Augsburg. Probably the most famous graphic designer of the time was Václav Hollar whose graphic cityscapes



St. Catherine by Karel Škréta

found international recognition, with some of his work to be found in the British museum in London.

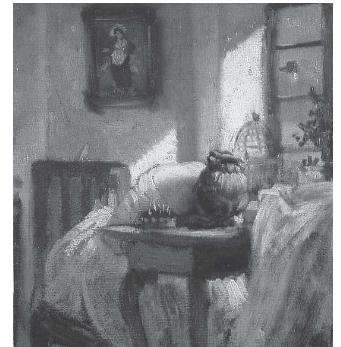
Famous names of artists resident in the country include: J.B. Fischer of Erlach, Mathias Bernard Braun, P.J. Brandl, V. Reiner and court and guild painters, as well as artists from the holy orders. The family workshops of sculptors Brauns, Brokofs, Platzers and others were overwhelmed with commissions. The permeation of architecture, painting, sculpture and furnishings transformed the Baroque style into an impressive synthesis. Travelling through the Czech Republic will open your eyes to countless examples of chateaus, churches, monasteries and pilgrimage sacred sites with carefully coordinated landscaping.

19th Century art

Historically, the period of reforms introduced by Emperor Joseph II (1780 – 1790), in contrast to the oppressive reign of his mother the Empress Maria Theresa (1740 – 1780), was one of a

profound decline. In original painting and sculpture. Second-hand older pieces of art were readily available. It took the newly founded Association of Patriotic Art Lovers some time to revive Czech cultural endeavours.

Antonín Mánes, in the early 19th century, was the first artist of significance of this period. He became a teacher of landscape painting. His son Joseph Mánes is considered to be the founder of the flourishing treasury (hundreds) of Czech painters that worked in subsequent centuries. A small but influential gallery on the riverside in Prague is named after him. An important landscape painter working at the time was Adolf Kosárek. Karel Purkyně, the greatest painter of



Josef Mánes's The Dressmaker

this generation, painted portraits in monumental style and his still-lives excelled in the expression of character and the display of versatility of his brush work. His contemporaries Jaroslav Cermák, Soběslav Pinkas and Viktor Barvitijs widened their horizons by spending time and working in Paris.



Karel Purkyně, Portrait of blacksmith Jech

We will continue our overview of the treasures of the Czech art in Part 2. The second part of the History of Czech Art will be featured in a forthcoming issue of Nový domov.

The author is a member of the Board of Directors of the Masaryk Memorial Institute who has been active in the effort to find new readers for Nový domov among young Czech and Slovak, second and third generation compatriots, as well as potential new members of the Institute.

Christmas the Czech way ... cont. from front page

believe that Christmas gifts are brought by Baby Jesus (Ježíšek) who comes into the room through the window to leave the presents. Unlike Santa Claus, Baby Jesus is a rather abstract figure with no particular physical image attached to him, and no one knows where he lives. Just like Santa though, he receives wish-list letters from Czech children a few weeks before Christmas.

Christmas Eve is associated with many superstitions that usually relate to life, love, and destiny that awaits one in the year to come.

According to one Czech Christmas custom, one is supposed to fast all day to see the "golden piglet" (zlaté prasátko) in the evening. All of the household customs are done just for fun.

It makes Christmas time a time of wonderful connection to the deep past of the nation - Christian as well as Pagan.

Some people end Christmas Eve by attending a midnight mass (půlnoční mše) at a local church. In the Czech Republic Christmas stretches over December 25 and 26, which are also referred to as the

First and Second Christmas Holidays, or the Christmas Feast (Boží hod vánoční) and St. Stephen's Day (Sv. Štěpán). On St. Stephen's Day, children, students, teachers, and the poor used to go around people's homes singing Christmas carols.



Many Czech families keep the carp for few days in a tub before preparing it for a dinner

Nowadays, families stay at home and relax or visit relatives and friends to share the special time.

As we said, the Czech Christmas dinner (December 24) is connected with a great number of different customs, rules and superstitions. Quite a few of them are

still observed today, but mostly for fun. It must have been quite a challenge to put the dinner together and go through with it without a mistake if all the customs were to be seriously followed! Here are some of them:



vánočka - Christmas Bread

* No lights should be lit in the house before the first star comes out. After it does, dinner can be served.

* The table should be set for an even number of guests. An extra plate can be used to even out the number of guests. An odd number brings bad luck or death.

* An extra plate should be prepared in case

an unexpected guest or a person in need comes by the house at dinner time.

* No one should sit with their back to the door.

* Christmas dinner should consist of nine courses including soup, bread with honey, carp, potato salad, fruit (dried, fresh or canned), dessert (apple strudel or vánočka Christmas bread), and other foods.

* No one should ever get up from the Christmas table until everyone has finished their dinner. Doing so brings bad luck and death in the family.

* Everyone should finish their dinner and leave nothing on the plate.

* The first person to leave the table after dinner would be the first one to die in the coming year - that is why everyone should get up from the table at the same time.

* Any leftovers from dinner (crumbs, fishbones, etc.) should be buried around the trees to ensure they will bear lots of fruit.

* All household animals should be fed after dinner so that no one goes hungry on Christmas Eve.

Alena Kottová

What is the Czech Meetup?

What connects the people in the Czech community? Is it the history, the food, a common ancestry or just the language? It is probably a mixture of all of these, but it seems that language is the strongest link. We wanted to find out what connects a certain group of friends, who organize themselves through Czech Meetup. Toronto's Czech Language Meetup Group has grown into a lively community that meets regularly.



Silvester Šedivý, The Czech Meetup organizer

From its beginning on a wintery night in 2004, when only a few people took part in it, this group counts several hundred and is still growing. Despite the group's title, one doesn't need to be fluent in Czech (or Slovak) to be a member. Anyone with an interest in Czech, Moravian or Slovak culture or with professional or personal ties to the Czech or Slovak Republics is welcome to join in at the gatherings. In addition to memorable nights out, past events have also included dinners and brunches at Czech restaurants in Toronto, a tour at a brewery, wine-tastings, karaoke and partying with a Czech soccer team. All of these activities are planned under the watchful eye of Silvester Šedivý. His interest in the Czech language and culture started in quite a surprising way, so we asked Silvester several questions on the subject:

When did you come to Canada?

My parents left Czechoslovakia in 1969 with me and my 2 sisters. My parents did not believe that the Prague spring would work and had planned this even before the Soviet invasion of '68. We then spent two years ping-ponging back and forth between Austria and Italy before finally settling down in Canada.

Did your parents keep in touch with their original homeland?

After they emigrated, my parents maintained occasional contact with their relatives who remained in Czechoslovakia. My father returned to live there shortly after the Communists fell. My mother then went several times to visit him.

What led you to start the Czech Meetup group?

I returned to the Czech Republic for the first time in April of 2004 after my father passed away. He chose to be buried there and I went for the funeral. I had always considered myself as a Canadian whose ethnic origin happened to be Czech. However, as the plane approached the airport in Prague - before my feet even touched Czech soil - I began to feel a strong connection to my native land. One day after I returned, when I was feeling a particularly strong yearning for some kind of Czech connection, I typed the words "Toronto Czech Group" into Google. The Toronto Czech Meetup Group was the first hit. There had been a small group that had been meeting regularly. However, once Meetup started charging fees, they no longer met through Meetup. The fees weren't that high, \$10 USD, if I remember correctly. So I decided to pay them for 6 months and see what would happen. By paying the fees, I became the Organizer.

What are your interests and hobbies?

I'm a bit of a family man and spending time with my wife and 11-year old son is a priority for me. I love the outdoors and enjoy hiking, cycling and swimming. I'm also a big fan of NFL football and MMA (Mixed Martial Arts).

I think you are getting married, is your fiancé Czech?

Actually, I'm already married now. We

got married at the end of September and no, she's not Czech, she's Italian. She's learned a few Czech words ("pivo" being an important one) and attended a few Czech meetups. She didn't drink beer until she met me. Then I introduced her to Czech beer. She now enjoys the occasional Pilsner Urquell and Steamwhistle. We're hoping to visit the Czech Republic together next summer.

more Czechs in Toronto, I'm hoping that will change. I guess this would be another good question for a follow up interview.

Do you watch any Czech sports?

A little bit. I follow the Czech national soccer team during the World and Euro cups and the hockey team during international tournaments. I was depressed for 3 days after we lost the semi finals to Greece in the 2004 Euro Cup.



Meetup friends in lively conversation

Are you interested in reading Novy Domov? What content would you like to see?

I recently registered for the online version and plan to start reading it. If you conduct a follow up interview in a couple of months I'll hopefully be able to answer your other questions about ND.

How important is the Czech community and its activities for you?

I have to admit that I'm not all that well plugged into the Czech community in Toronto. The Czech meetup group is my only local Czech link right now. As I mentioned earlier, I didn't feel a very strong connection to my Czech roots until recently. However, as my Czech improves and I get to know

What message do you have for our readers?

I would like to let your readers know that we welcome all Czech speakers to our meetups, regardless of age, sex, religion, ethnic background, occupation, etc.

Check out our website on <http://czech.meetup.com/44>. It's free to register and you can see what's going on. We usually meet on the third Saturday of the month. If you heard about us through Novy Domov, let me or Katka know so that we can give Jerry and Alena the proper credit. Thank you for your interest in our group.

Jerry Kott, photo: Alena Kottova

