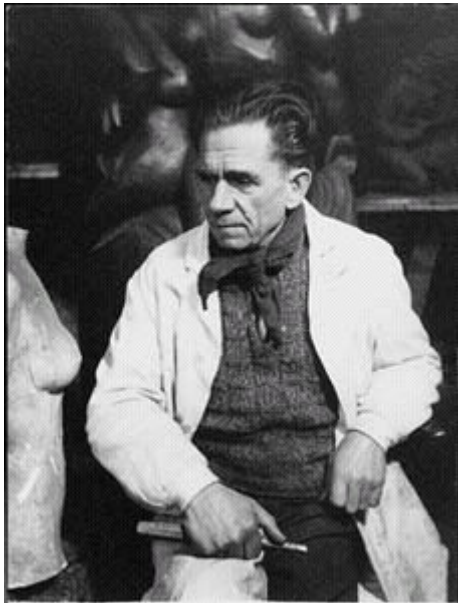


Jiří Hlušíčka: The sculptor Josef Kubíček

SUMMARY



The sculptor Josef Kubíček (1890-1972) was among the foremost figures in Czech realist sculpture during the first half of the 20th century. Although the social events and fundamental artistic tendencies of his time were echoed in his artistic development, in the wider context of national culture his work occupied a solitary position. This was so thanks mainly to the specific qualities of the artist's talent and the orientation of his thinking, but also as a result of the course his life took.

Josef Kubíček came from a region whose stirring beauty has enchanted many a Czech painter. He was born on March 13, 1890 in Slatina nad Zdobnicí, on the slopes of the Orlice Mountains. The talented boy was one of six children born to a poor family, and so he had to struggle with great tenacity in order to become a creative artist. However, he acquired a good grounding in his longed-for career at Josef Rous' wood-carving workshop in Žamberk, where he learned the craft which was to have such great significance for his later work as a sculptor.

Shortly after completing his apprenticeship, Josef Kubíček left with his older brother Leoš to practice his trade in Bavaria. He worked in a church-decorating workshop in Augsburg, but did not forget his resolve to become a sculptor. The experiences he carried away with him on repeated visits to the museums and galleries of Munich only reinforced this desire. It was also in Munich that he entered the School of Applied Arts. After four years in Germany, the young adept continued his studies at the Academy of Visual Arts in Prague, where he joined the atelier of Professor J. V. Myslbek. Yet after three semesters he returned to Munich, where in 1914 he completed his sculptor's education at the Royal Academy, studying with Professor Hermann Hahn.

Josef Kubíček's artistic orientation was influenced not only by his years in Prague and Munich, but also by the trip he took to northern Italy on a study grant, again with his brother Leoš. Here he was especially impressed by the legacy of sculptors like Donatello, Verrocchio, Michelangelo and Giovanni de Bologna, in whose work he recognized the demanding standards by which his future creative work would be measured, as well as a model of artistic responsibility.

Hardly had the young sculptor completed his academic studies than he found himself face to face with the overwhelming reality of the First World War. Though he was spared the hardships of the frontlines, he was still prey to dejection and distressing thoughts which agitated his imagination, and which soon made their distinctive mark on many of his sculptures as well. These works at first originated in his native village, where he was forced to take refuge during the war. Among these small-scale pieces, most of them portraits (Mother, 1916), two sculptures stand out as eloquent symbols of the young artist's emergence: Adam and Youth (1915). The fact that Kubíček was also painting as well as sculpting at this time testifies to his many-sided creativity and vitality. His work as a painter was made possible by his stay at the castle in Nová Ves near Chotěboř, where he and his friend the painter Jan Trampota had been invited in 1915 by Jarmila Šťastná, a patroness of the arts.

Yet Josef Kubíček did not forsake the sculptor's calling. After all, the wartime period represented an urgent appeal to his perception and his conscience. The expressive bronze Fallen Comrade attests to this, as do his symbolic wood carvings from 1917 (Melancholy, Judith, Angel of Death, Furies). The tragic events of the war years were directly reflected in a series of Kubíček's woodcuts depicting wounded men, horsemen, refugees and funeral guests, as well as indirectly in his graphics inspired by Christian or ancient myths.



In 1917 the artist found a temporary home in Nové Hradky near Vysoké Mýto after marrying Marie Čiháková (1893-1980) there. That same year the newlyweds had their first child, Jarmila, followed in 1921 by a son, Jánuš, who was later to become a painter.

War trauma also marked Kubiček's sculptures in subsequent years, not only thematically but also in terms of his sharply expressive visual style (The Slavs' Sufferings in the World War, 1919; The Wounded Rider, The Airman's Fall, 1920) or his allegorical manner of conception (Fratricide, 1921). The birth of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1918 and the new conditions of life that it brought presented entirely new artistic problems, and inspired Kubiček to an outburst of creative effort. This was visible in the sculptor's move away from allegorically-motivated works to civic manifestations and his inclination towards current social events. This metamorphosis cannot be regarded merely as a response to the tendencies current in Czech sculpture during the first half of the Twenties, especially the wave of social "civilism", but rather primarily as a sign of Kubiček's deep interest in the fate of the common man. After all, this ethos may be observed throughout his entire work as a sculptor. It is likewise present in a cycle of woodcuts inspired by the landscape and life of Slovakia, which was then awakening as a nation, and where the sculptor liked to travel frequently during those years.

It was wood that most readily offered itself to this trained carver when he was realizing his ideas in sculpture. However, Kubiček enriched his craftsman's skills in his wood sculptures through his incisive initial conceptions and distinctive artistic vision. By reducing the formal composition of reality into a relief, he achieved an effective means of expression whereby the chosen theme was elevated to the level of a powerful artistic act.



The year 1924 represented an important milestone in Josef Kubiček's creative development, as well as his life. He received a grant to spend half a year in France, residing mainly on the Côte d'Azur, where he did a lot of drawing and also gained the inspiration for his statue *Man Pulling on a Rope*. He also devoted some of his time to studying the collections in Paris museums, particularly works of sculpture by Rodin, Bourdelle, Maillol and Renoir. In the autumn of that same year he and his family moved from Nové Hradky to Brno, where they settled permanently. Kubiček had already maintained lively contacts with the Moravian capital in earlier years, whether through his participation at the exhibition by *Koliba*, a Moravian artists' collective, or as a founding member of the *Visual Artists' Group*, which was responsible for spreading the principles of modern art in Moravia.

Around the mid-Twenties Kubiček's work began to exhibit an increasing urge to poeticize the female form. This is evident not only in his wood carvings (*The Tree of Life*, 1925), but also in works done in terracotta (*Feeding the Pigeons*, *Yawning*, *Girl with Dove*, 1927), whose effect oscillates between a lyrical mood and an aptness of form unburdened by detail. This expressive tension allowed the sculptor to take on tasks which were quite varied in terms of content (*Remembrance*, *Man and Woman*, 1928; *Confession*, 1929; *Mother with Children*, 1930).

Whereas the subject of woman inspired the melodic language of Kubiček's sculptures, the theme of men at work enlivened the expressive element in his terracotta pieces. This was seen in the late Twenties and early Thirties in his rough depictions of male figures (*Head of a Miner*, 1929; *Work in the Mines*, 1931; *In the Mineshaft*, 1932), as well as in his ability to point out the deeper meaning of a scene and endow it with a more far-reaching message in a work of sculpture (*Shift*, 1929). Kubiček had the opportunity to get to know mining work more intimately when making some monumental sculptures for the Mining and Metallurgy Society's building in Moravian Ostrava, something reminiscent of the experience the Belgian sculptor Constantin Meunier had gained long before him. The large-scale wood sculpture *Victory* (1929) opened a new chapter in Kubiček's evolution as a sculptor. Despite the work's dramatic conception, it foreshadowed a series of lyrically poetic statues in which the sculptor went beyond his previous primitivist transposition of reality in favor of classical form. Of course, the struggle for the classical ideal required a continual balancing of various polar opposites and the discovery of new formal procedures (*Nude Girl*, 1930; *The Brink of Life*, *Boy with Ball*, *Two Women*, 1931). The appealingly decorative *Autumn* (1930-1931), in which an allegory of fertility grew into a celebration of nature, was an outstanding result

of this effort.

Kubíček's broad-based artistic interest in the world was indicated around 1933 by, on the one hand, the vitalism of *Reclining Woman* and, on the other, the social empathy of *Drowned Woman*. The artist's subsequent activity was to oscillate between the two poles thus articulated, with a tragic note coming to dominate his work in the later Thirties, under the pressure of fears aroused by the rising threat of fascism.

It was precisely in those troubled times that Josef Kubíček most appreciated the value of personal friendship. Among the frequent guests at his atelier in Brno's Královo Pole district were the painters Jan Trampota, Ferdiš Duša and František Foltýn, the editor Emil Pacovský, the writer J. V. Pleva and the poet Jirí Mahen, an especially welcome friend who observed the sculptor's work with an unusually perceptive eye up until the very last minutes of his life.

The serious tone of Kubíček's work culminated in a series of related sculptures realized in connection with the headlong course of political developments, and likewise anticipating the nation's suffering during the war years (*Homeless*, 1937; *Mining Accident*, *Cruel Fate*, 1938; *Martyr*, *Calvary*, 1940). The bitter experience which the war years brought the aging artist found an echo even in statues he made after the liberation (*Female Martyr*, *Abandoned Women*, 1945). Nonetheless, a positive life philosophy finally came to dominate Kubíček's art. In his late sculptures, the use of the theme of the harvest (*Girl with Grapes*, *Girl with Apple*, 1949-1950, *Collective Harvest*, 1951) or other, thoroughly humanist subjects (*Mother and Child*, 1950) was proverbial.

In Josef Kubíček's final works of sculpture, there emerge figures with clear contours, expressive gestures and well-defined characters. They are effective thanks to the sculptor's ability to capture internal impulses in sculpted form, based on either a plastic or a sculptural principle, something which is evident from the artist's alternation between terracotta or bronze and wood carving. Wood sculpture, realized using the *taille directe* method, finally predominated to such a degree that it may be regarded as Kubíček's specific contribution to Czech sculpture of the first half of the 20th century.

Kubíček's artistic legacy demonstrates, at the outset, ties to the heritage of folk art and to the primitivist inclinations of contemporary "civilist" sculpture. It is connected to the dominant line in Czech art from between the wars by its strong lyrical tendency, as well as its subtext of urgent social concern, which is generally manifested in his statues as an expressive overstatement. While this gave way in time to the classical ideal, it began to make itself felt again with a new intensity at the end of the Thirties. These transformations in the artist's creative thinking could not, however, disrupt the unity of his development as a sculptor, a unity which was an expression of his independence and strength of vision. It was precisely thanks to these qualities that Josef Kubíček was able to enrich the realist tradition in contemporary Czech sculpture in such a distinctive way.



Translated by Timothy Steyskal