



# JAROMÍR FUNKE

and the Amateur Avant-Garde

National Gallery of Art | May 3–August 9, 2009



## JAROMÍR FUNKE (1896–1945)

was a leading figure in Czech and Slovak photography between the world wars, although his distance from international circles coupled with his death before his fiftieth birthday slowed global recognition of his achievements. This exhibition constitutes the first extensive presentation of Funke's work outside his home country in nearly a quarter century. Its focus is the exemplary path forged by Funke and certain of his compatriots toward photography as a modern art. The route they took did not lead through advertising or the press, nor was it the

one followed by fine artists who abandoned their brushes for cameras. Theirs was, instead, the course of the committed amateur—enthusiasts who exhibited or published their own prints and shared knowledge of photography but did not make a commercial or artistic living from it.

Although amateurs have propelled discoveries in photography since its beginnings in the first half of the nineteenth century, amateurism as an established international movement—with membership dues, specialized journals, and juried salons—started only in the late 1870s and petered out during the 1950s. Amateurism was largely a conservative movement that valued harmony, restraint, and above all the display of skill and mastery. While loyal to those ideals, Funke and the other photographers represented in this exhibition also sympathized with the avant-garde movements of the early decades of the twentieth century, from cubism to constructivism and surrealism, especially their emphases on abstraction, modern life and new technologies, and irrational states of mind. Bridging those worlds during decades of sweeping aesthetic change became a central concern for what we are calling here the “amateur avant-garde.”

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1. Josef Sudek, *Portrait of a Friend (Jaromír Funke)*, 1924–1925, no. 60

## Funke's Beginnings in the Amateur Movement

Jaromír Funke was born in 1896, the son of an affluent lawyer in Kolín, a midsize mercantile town one hour east of Prague. Kolín, and the Czech lands generally, was an economic engine for the fading Austrian empire; light manufacturing thrived, and the Czech middle classes were quick to embrace the camera. Beginning in the 1890s, hundreds of local camera clubs were formed; most joined the Union of Czechoslovak Amateur Clubs, a national federation established after the country became independent in 1918. Funke, a committed amateur, in 1924 placed fifteen photographs in the first nationwide amateur photography exhibition in Czechoslovakia, and upon the exhibition's close he gained acceptance into the prestigious Prague Photo Club. No sooner had he been admitted into its ranks, however, than he rebelled against the aesthetic conservatism of the amateur establishment, for which he was temporarily disbarred from the Photo Club just five months later.

2. Jaromír Funke, *Staircase in Old Prague*, c. 1922, no. 3

3. Jan Lauschmann, *Roofs in Malá Strana*, 1924, no. 47

Two streams of influence inspired Funke's conflict with the amateur establishment. First was cubist painting and the "anti-art" photographic experiments of expatriate American artist Man Ray; Funke read about those works in journals and saw examples firsthand at exhibitions in Prague during the early 1920s. The second inspiration came via Drahomír Josef Růžička (1870–1960), a Czech-born doctor raised in New York City who returned to Prague repeatedly between 1921 and 1923. Růžička had taken classes in New York with Clarence White, a former member of the amateur group Photo-Secession, founded by Alfred Stieglitz. Like White, Růžička mostly upheld the pictorialist style, distinguished by idyllic subjects, soft-focus shots, and liberal retouching of negative and print, which Stieglitz had renounced years earlier in favor of a modernist approach—metropolitan subjects, sharp focus, and minimal manipulation of negatives or prints. Růžička nevertheless experimented with modern methods, for example, in the tightly framed photograph of Prague rooftops (no. 52). Equally important, Růžička brought to Prague copies of Stieglitz's vanguard journal *Camera Work*, which he showed around to his Czech colleagues, who hotly debated its merits.

Like many of the *Camera Work* photographers, Funke embraced urban subjects; his pictures of bridge building in his native Kolín (cover) and a wall of advertising posters in Prague (fig. 2) reflect his sympathy for the



modern outlook. The early picture *Roofs in Malá Strana* (fig. 3) by Jan Lauschmann (1901–1991), a chemist with the Czech photo-manufacturing company Neobrom, also captures urban subjects with a direct imitation of Růžička’s composition. While not nearly so crisply focused or emphatic in their abstraction as work by Stieglitz or the artists he published, the compositions by Lauschmann broke sharply with norms promulgated by the Czech amateur leadership.

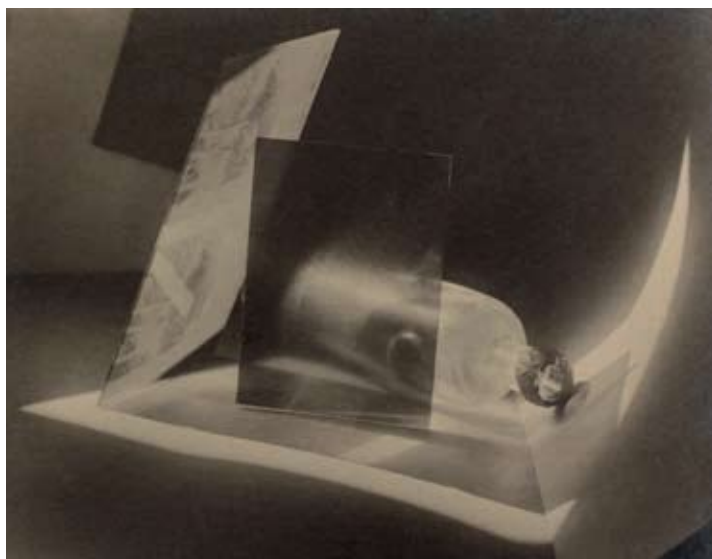
### The Czech Photographic Society and Abstract Photo

By the end of 1924, Funke had helped launch an unaffiliated amateur enterprise, the Czech Photographic Society (Česká fotografická společnost, or ČFS). In an attack on the amateur mainstream, ČFS adherents trumpeted the modernist values shown in later issues of *Camera Work* and explicated by Růžička, such as the inviolability of negative and print conveyed in the American catchphrase “straight photography” (in Czech, *čistá fotografie*, or “clean photography”).

Among the cofounders of ČFS was Josef Sudek (1896–1976), with whom Funke had formed a close friendship (see Sudek’s portrait of Funke, fig. 1). A fellow Kolín native, Sudek had met Funke when Sudek was completing his professional degree at the State Graphic School in Prague. Sudek remained active in the amateur movement until 1928, when he established a studio business. He dramatically changed print and advertising photography in Czechoslovakia and went on to achieve the status of an artist-photographer—an ambition Funke shared. Funke, however, preferred to remain an amateur. “A reporter photographs a given model,” he wrote in an early, unpublished essay, taking journalism to stand in for all commercial photography. “But an amateur can artificially arrange and combine situations. This shows his taste—in the selection and arrangement of objects as well.” The freedom to choose one’s subject and approach seemed to many amateurs an indispensable

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4. Jaromír Funke, *Still Life*,  
1924, no. 6





guarantee of artistic value in a field in which aesthetics and commerce were manifestly intertwined.

The ČFS held two exhibitions, in 1926 and 1929, before its founding members went their separate ways. Funke showed there his more adventurous compositions, such as *Still Life* (fig. 4) and photographs titled *Ball and Cube* (nos. 8 and 9). With these works, Funke initiated years of experimentation with the materials of the darkroom and photography itself that culminated in the series known as *Abstract Photo*. His first pictures showed photographic accessories: mat board, glass negatives, bottles of developer fluid, a hose for washing prints, and the lightbulb from an enlarger. Here Funke investigated photography's conditions of creation in a manner analogous to Pablo Picasso and Georges Braque, with their attention to framing, perspective, and the flat canvas. With *Abstract Photo*, 1927–1929 (fig. 5), Funke shifted his emphasis from purchasable materials to light and shadow, or photographic “matter” itself. Placing household or darkroom items on a windowsill, Funke overlapped pieces of mat board against an opposing wall and captured the layering of cast shadows on patches of reflected light (likely aided by mirrors). He played with reality and its photographic representation, juxtaposing “actual” shadows with those “invented” in the gaps between pieces of board. The overall effect is of a shifting, uncertain depth of field brought constantly back to the picture plane, as in cubist art, especially cubist collage. By constructing an autonomous, planar arrangement of forms that has a tangential yet inseparable connection to the real world, Funke made expressive shadow clusters an allegory for progressive camera art.

As important as cubism to this photographic series were the photographs (prints made by exposing sensitized paper directly to light, without use of a camera) by Man Ray. Funke took Man Ray, whom he would never meet, as his most significant rival in the advancement of photo-

graphic history. While he admired Man Ray's trespass against conventional models for art photography (partly indebted to cubist precedent), Funke could not accept as truly photographic a procedure that involved neither a negative nor a camera and that so evidently courted unpredictability. To forsake the camera meant to abandon the demonstration of technical competence that, for serious amateurs, lay at the heart of photography. Through *Abstract Photo*, Funke found a means to match Man Ray's results with a body of work that did not exhibit such an unnerving loss of control.



6. Miloš Dohnány, *Study with a Cone*, 1932, no. 29

### Popularizing the Modern

In September 1931, Funke assumed a professorship in photography at the School of Applied Arts in the Slovak capital city, Bratislava. Funke's directive at this training school loosely modeled on the Bauhaus (the famed German school of art, design, and architecture) was to prepare students for careers in advertising or graphic design. He accordingly established a curriculum that began with basic camera principles and studies in form, progressed to studio arrangements, and culminated with mock advertisements.

Among his students was Miloš Dohnány (1904–1944), a zealous advocate for all things modern in Slovakia. Employed by the Ministry of Transportation, Dohnány wrote advice columns on photography in his spare time and used night classes with Funke as a basis

for offering his own private lessons in camera technique. His *Study with a Cone* (fig. 6), almost certainly prepared in coursework with Funke, expertly follows Bauhaus constructivist precepts: simple geometric forms, exhibiting differing degrees of translucency and reflectivity as well as varied surface materials, are brought together in an examination of contrasts and common properties. The results yield a utopian gloss on the perfectibility of the human hand through camera technology.

Dohnány's *Study with a Cone* appeared in an amateur exhibition held in 1935. By then the world of amateur photography had been thoroughly transformed; the mission of the early amateur rebels had been overtaken and completed by an explosion in photographically illustrated books and magazines about modern life. Off-center compositions, handheld cameras, and crisply focused silver prints (see fig. 7) had thoroughly displaced classically centered views printed on vellum or other expensive papers.

One of the most remarkable amateurs to come of age in this period of triumphal modernism was Eugen Wiškovský (1888–1964), yet another native of Kolín. A highly educated schoolteacher, Wiškovský, inspired by his former student Funke, began taking pictures in earnest around 1928. He gravitated toward the industrial subjects and raking



angles identified with the Bauhaus and the German “new vision,” but his familiarity with Funke’s abstract compositions nevertheless pushed him in lyrical directions. In an unidentified portrait of 1935 (fig. 8), Wiškovský transposes Funke’s interest in cast shadows onto an openly sensual plane; here the photographic surface becomes an impenetrable barrier, keeping desire at a distance.



### Surrealism, Social Documentary, and the Changing Role of the Amateur

Funke returned to Prague in early 1935 as head of photographic instruction at his friend Josef Sudek’s alma mater, the State Graphic School. His first important act was to coedit a primer, *Photography Sees the Surface* (no. 23), which explained the camera as an instrument uniquely suited to picturing and classifying the modern world: botany and zoology, art conservation, philately, and ultimately all categories of human knowledge could be improved through the use of photographs. But outside the school, in his own photography, Funke remained far removed from that rational vision of the world. Inspired by shopwindow images by photographer Eugène Atget, beloved of the French surrealists, Funke had made a group of works called *Reflections* (fig. 9). Visibility diminishes nearly to nothing in these views of glass store-

fronts, while shades of darkness, now penumbral, again predominate, as seen earlier in Funke’s *Abstract Photo*.

Funke threaded his own path through surrealism as he had through cubism and Bauhaus teachings. *Time Persists* (no. 21), a series begun directly after *Reflections* (no. 20), features haunting, outmoded details torn from the Czech urban landscape. In these and other series focused on modern architecture, slum housing, or rural peasantry, Funke left the studio behind to capture scenes out of doors, often in a documentary spirit. His supposed documents, however, are not the scientific records prized in *Photography Sees the Surface*, but instead are emotionally charged views, their expressivity heightened through dramatic angles or literary symbolism.

Funke’s shifts in subject and approach came amid large-scale changes in the role of the amateur. No longer necessarily a middle-class gentleman seeking personal recognition, the amateur in the 1930s was often an engaged citizen. As an example, two mammoth international

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7. Jaroslav Krupka,  
*Path near Police nad Metují*,  
c. 1930, no. 45

8. Eugen Wiškovský,  
*Portrait*, 1935, no. 67

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9. Jaromír Funke, *Untitled*,  
from the series *Reflections*,  
1930, no. 20



surveys of “social photography” organized in 1933 and 1934 garnered widespread participation, including the involvement of amateur collectives from the Soviet Union and France whose members submitted some photographs anonymously. Other pictures, such as *The Glazier (Prague)* by Bohumil Štátný (1905–1991; fig. 10), likely shown at the second of these exhibitions, lionized the (ordinarily) equally anonymous mass of industrial laborers.

10. Bohumil Štátný, *The  
Glazier (Prague)*, 1934, no. 57



Funke, Wiškovský, and Sudek, however, refused the activist trend, which grew in strength around Europe and across the political spectrum as World War II approached. In fact, much of their strongest work from that

time, such as Funke’s *Landscape near Kutná Hora* (fig. 11), looks for its symbolic strength away from people and toward the landscape. Funke continued during the war to teach and to publish in amateur journals. He also produced five large-format picture albums on Czech cathedrals (for example, no. 28), a project that conveyed his great reverence for art and photography—and his beleaguered country. Meanwhile, a lavish portfolio of 1943, *Modern Czech Photography* (no. 68), included pictures by all three of Kolín’s leading participants in the amateur movement. The album was introduced by Karel Teige, founding figure of the Czech artistic avant-garde, who had twenty years earlier been the first in Prague to show Man Ray’s photographs.

Funke died in Prague of untreated illness in the final weeks of the war. A series that Sudek had begun during the war years suggests with particular poignancy his friend’s



11. Jaromír Funke, *Land-  
scape near Kutná Hora*, 1939,  
no. 25

12. Josef Sudek, *From My  
Studio Window*, 1946, no. 62

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lasting influence. The works titled *From My Studio Window* show glimpses of a modest garden through an invariably fogged pane of glass (fig. 12), or objects arranged artfully on the windowsill, similar in setup to *Abstract Photo*. Sudek here likewise attenuates depth perception and renders vision uncertain, training his lens on the plane of the photograph (the sweating windowpane) rather than its nominal view. Where Funke reflected on material properties, however, Sudek seems to propose lamentation as the quintessence of photography. One may justly see in this series a remembrance of Funke and, more than that, bygone possibilities for an “amateur avant-garde.”

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This brochure was written by Matthew S. Witkovsky, curator and chair, department of photography, The Art Institute of Chicago, and former associate curator, department of photographs, National Gallery of Art. It was produced by the department of exhibition programs and the publishing office, National Gallery of Art.

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THE EXHIBITION IS MADE POSSIBLE BY THE GENEROUS SUPPORT OF THE RYNA AND MELVIN COHEN FAMILY FOUNDATION AND MARCELLA AND NEIL COHEN.

THE BROCHURE IS MADE POSSIBLE THROUGH THE SUPPORT OF THE TRELIS FUND.

#### SUNDAY LECTURE

June 28 at 2:00 pm  
East Building Auditorium  
*The Curious Case of Czech Photographer Jaromír Funke*  
Matthew S. Witkovsky, curator and chair, department of photography, The Art Institute of Chicago

#### FILM SERIES

June 6, 13, 20, and 27 at 1:30 pm  
East Building Auditorium  
*The Film Novels of Karel Vachek*  
Karel Vachek, director of the documentary department at Prague's film academy (FAMU), has created one of the most original bodies of work in contemporary Czech cinema. Four of his film novels, shot largely with handheld cameras, will be presented; the director introduces the program on June 27.

#### GENERAL INFORMATION

Hours: Monday–Saturday 10:00 am–5:00 pm; Sunday 11:00 am–6:00 pm

Gallery Web site: [www.nga.gov](http://www.nga.gov)

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Admission to the National Gallery of Art and all of its programs is free of charge, except as noted.

#### CHECKLIST OF THE EXHIBITION

Photographs by Jaromír Funke (nos. 1–28) are followed in alphabetical order by those of the other photographers represented in the exhibition; works are arranged chronologically within artist. All photographs are gelatin silver prints.

National or ethnic identifications accompany the artists' birth and death dates.

Owing to the turbulent history that coincides with the life spans of these photographers, the designations do not necessarily reflect the shifting political designations. Formerly part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, Czechoslovakia became independent in 1918; the country dissolved in 1993 into the Czech and Slovak Republics.

#### Jaromír Funke Czech, 1896–1945

1 (cover) *Untitled* (Bridge in Kolín), 1922, 22 × 20.4 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

2 *Untitled* (Cathedral, Kolín), May 18, 1922, 16 × 10.8 cm. Private collection

3 (fig. 2) *Staircase in Old Prague*, c. 1922, 23.6 × 26.1 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

4 *Untitled* (Cloud Study), c. 1922, 10.6 × 12.7 cm. Private collection

5 *Spiral*, 1924, 23.3 × 28.4 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

6 (fig. 4) *Still Life*, 1924, 23.3 × 29.6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

7 *After the Carnival*, c. 1924, 29.9 × 23.5 cm. Private collection

8 *Ball and Cube*, c. 1924, 12.9 × 17.7 cm. Private collection

9 *Ball and Cube*, c. 1924, 23.3 × 29 cm. Private collection

10 *Composition*, c. 1924, 22.7 × 28.6 cm. Private collection

**11** *Legs and Crinoline*, 1926, 39.3 × 28.9 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**12** *Composition (with Bottles)*, 1927, 17.3 × 12.4 cm. Private collection

**13** *Nude*, 1927, 40 × 30 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**14** (fig. 5) *Abstract Photo*, 1927–1929, 23.5 × 28.7 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**15** *Abstract Photo*, 1927–1929, 29.8 × 24.1 cm. Private collection

**16** *Abstract Photo*, 1929, 17.7 × 23.5 cm. Private collection

**17** *Portrait of Eugen Wiškovský*, 1929, 29.7 × 22.8 cm. Private collection

**18** *Abstract Photo*, c. 1929, 12.1 × 21.3 cm. Private collection

**19** *Student Housing*, Brno, 1930, 23.6 × 17.8 cm. Private collection

**20** (fig. 9) *Untitled*, from the series *Reflections*, 1930, 30 × 40 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**21** *Untitled*, from the series *Time Persists*, 1930–1933, 11.5 × 8.6 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**22** *Church of St. Marten*, Bratislava, 1930–1935, 30.3 × 29.5 cm. Private collection

**23** *Untitled*, from the book *Photography Sees the Surface*, 1935, 14 × 8.9 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**24** *Untitled*, two photographs from the series *Primeval Forests*, 1937–1938, 50.6 × 40.5 cm and 49.2 × 39.5 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**25** (fig. 11) *Landscape near Kutná Hora*, 1939, 22.2 × 29.4 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**26** *Nude*, 1939, 17.7 × 23.8 cm. Private collection

**27** *Untitled*, from the series *The Unsated Earth*, 1940–1944, 39.7 × 29.8 cm. National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

**28** *St. Vitus*, 1943. Three photographs from an album of six, each 33.5 × 25 cm, overall 39.7 × 30 cm. National Gallery of Art Library, Department of Image Collections

**Miloš Dohnány**  
**Slovak, born**  
**Austria, 1904–1944**

**29** (fig. 6) *Study with a Cone*, 1932, 28.1 × 23.1 cm. Private collection

**30** *Untitled (Živnosti)*, c. 1932, 12.1 × 9.2 cm. Private collection

**31** *Young Lady at the Telephone*, c. 1932, 8.5 × 12 cm. Private collection

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**Jaroslav Fabinger**  
**Czech, 1899–1942**

**32** *Study*, 1930, 22.9 × 16.7 cm. Private collection

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**Ladislav Foltýn**  
**Slovak, 1906–2002**

**33** *The Virgin Mary in the Forest*, 1933?, 18.8 × 17.7 cm. National Gallery of Art, Veverka Family Foundation Fund

**34** *Bridge of Our Lady in Vienna*, 1933–1934, 12.3 × 11.9 cm. National Gallery of Art, Veverka Family Foundation Fund

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**Věra Gabrielová**  
**Czech, 1919–?**

**35** *Untitled (Metal Plates)*, 1935–1936, 30.5 × 22.9 cm, Private collection

**36** *Untitled (Patent Leather Shoes)*, 1936, 24 × 17.6 cm. Private collection

**Miroslav Hák**  
**Czech, 1911–1977**

**37** *Near Smíchov*, 1943, 29.8 × 39.8 cm. National Gallery of Art, Gift of Anna Fárová

**38** *Gas Container*, 1945, 29.7 × 39.7 cm. National Gallery of Art, Gift of Anna Fárová

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**Jaroslava Hatláková**  
**Czech, 1904–1989**

**39** *Cone on Glass*, 1935, 20.4 × 15 cm. Private collection

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**Tibor Honty**  
**Slovak, 1907–1968**

**40** *Untitled*, from the series *Caravans*, 1940, 18.1 × 23.8 cm. Private collection

**41** *Untitled (Hands)*, 1940s, 18.1 × 23.8 cm. Private collection

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**Jiří Jeniček**  
**Czech, 1895–1963**

**42** Four photographs for the unrealized book *St. Vitus in Photographs*, 1945, each 28.5 × 22.5 cm. National Gallery of Art Library, Department of Image Collections

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**Václav Jirů**  
**Czech, 1910–1980**

**43** *Poverty*, 1933, 28.9 × 22.9 cm. Private collection

**Jindřich (Heinrich)  
Koch  
Czech, 1896–1934**

44 *Untitled* (Textile Study), 1930, 22.2 × 16.5 cm. Private collection

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**Jaroslav Krupka  
Czech, 1884–1947**

45 (fig. 7) *Path near Police nad Metují*, c. 1930, 19.8 × 29.2 cm. Private collection

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**Jaroslav Kysela  
Czech, 1913–?**

46 *Solarization*, 1932, 28.2 × 37.8 cm. Private collection

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**Jan Lauschmann  
Czech, 1901–1991**

47 (fig. 3) *Roofs in Malá Strana*, 1924, 22 × 27 cm. National Gallery of Art, Gift of Anonymous Donor

48 *Garden Café* (“Coffee im Freien”), 1931, 27.3 × 27 cm. Private collection

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**Arnošt Pikart  
Czech, 1895–1932**

49 *Untitled* (White Rowboat), 1930, 23.8 × 29.9 cm. Private collection

**Grete Popper  
Czech, 1897–1976**

50 *View from the Tower of Pisa*, 1935, 28.3 × 39.9 cm. Private collection

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**Vilém Reichmann  
Czech, 1908–1991**

51 *Untitled*, from the series *Enchantments*, 1941, 23.2 × 17.9 cm. Private collection

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**Drahomír Josef  
Růžička  
American, born  
Bohemia, 1870–1960**

52 *Old Roofs, Prague*, 1922, 34.5 × 27 cm. The Minneapolis Institute of Arts, Gift of Lora and Martin G. Weinstein

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**Adolf Schneeberger  
Czech, 1897–1977**

53 *Childlike Scene*, 1925, 22.7 × 24.4 cm. Michal Venera

54 *Prague Fountain*, 1925, 26.9 × 23.2 cm. National Gallery of Art, Gift of Michal Venera

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55 *Line*, 1933, 23 × 23 cm. Private collection

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**Bohumil Šťastný  
Czech, 1905–1991**

56 *Untitled* (Composition with Bottles), 1930, 23.5 × 16.8 cm. Private collection

57 (fig. 10) *The Glazier* (Prague), 1934, 17.9 × 22.9 cm. Private collection

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**Jindřich Štyrský  
Czech, 1899–1942**

58 *Untitled*, 1934, 30.3 × 26 cm, printed by Jaroslav Fabinger. Private collection

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**Josef Sudek  
Czech, 1896–1976**

59 *Prague in Ten Atmospheric Photographs*, 1924. Ten photographs, each 49.8 × 40 cm. June and Bob Leibowitz

60 (fig. 1) *Portrait of a Friend* (Jaromír Funke), 1924–1925, 28.6 × 22.6 cm. Private collection

61 *St. Vitus Cathedral*, 1928. Two photographs from an album of ten, each 49.8 × 40 cm; overall 51.1 × 41.3 cm. June and Bob Leibowitz

62 (fig. 12) *From My Studio Window*, 1946, 40 × 20 cm. Private collection

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**Květoslav Trojna  
Czech, active c. 1930s**

63 *Post Office Courtyard from Above*, 1930s, 23 × 22 cm. Michal Venera

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**Eugen Wiškovský  
Czech, 1888–1964**

64 *Still Life*, 1929, 26.2 × 23.3 cm. Private collection

65 *Insulator*, 1932, 29 × 19.7 cm. Private collection

66 *Behind Bars*, 1934, 29.7 × 23 cm. Private collection

67 (fig. 8) *Portrait*, 1935, 29 × 20.3 cm. Private collection

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68 *Modern Czech Photography*, 1943. Introduction by Karel Teige. Two photographs from an album of ten, each 49.7 × 34.7 cm, overall 50.5 × 36 cm. Michal Venera