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**'THE LAST SECRET IN EUROPE'**

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Dear Peter and friends:

I think I now know how an archaeologist must feel when stumbling upon something exquisite and unexpected, something he or she had no idea even existed.

The whole thing started when an exhibit called "Czech Cubism: Architecture and Design 1910-1925" opened at the Applied Arts Museum in Prague. I knew about Cubist painting and sculpture. But what was Cubist design and architecture? For a minute I envisioned a house looking like a Picasso still life. Maybe you have to squint for a long time before you find a window or the door.

What I found instead were finely drawn plans for functional, elegant buildings and furnishings designed with vision, boldness and a sense of humor by a pioneering group of Czech architects. Traces of Cubism can be found in today's popular Post-Modernism and even in the space-challenging Deconstructivism. It's a beautiful, bittersweet record of Czech genius. Bittersweet because for decades, the world didn't know about it, like a great story no one ever got to read. As I looked at every crevice, every curve of the massive chairs, every facet of the porcelain bowls, I felt the spirit and pride of their creators and of a nation just being born.

It wasn't just the rest of the world that was deprived when Cubism was ignored. People who've lived their whole lives in Prague, for example, walk every day by Cubist buildings, not knowing this is something unique, a source of pride at a time this country suffers from a definite lack of it.

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Cubism is just one more architectural jewel in a country that's a treasure trove of the Gothic, the Renaissance and the Baroque. Neglect and the passage of time have left their mark, of course. Structures built with meticulous care in centuries past, even early in this century, are worn and crumbling. One can still make out a clever architectural detail here, a whimsical stone face or cherub there, silent reminders of this country's former greatness. Villages that once bustled with private bakeries, grocers and other shops have turned into virtual ghost towns. Bucolic communities and big cities alike have been invaded by ugly high rises made of expensive, inefficient, steel-reinforced concrete. Entire neighborhoods of historic homes have been torn down to make way for these unhappy excuses for housing projects, which symbolize the "building of Socialism" in the former East Bloc.

Czechoslovakia's Communist government knew it had a unique style of architecture in Cubism. The phenomenon was mentioned in some tourist guidebooks, and some architects and art historians know what it is. But in general, Cubist architecture and design has been a well-kept secret.

It spoke to me so powerfully that I started researching it. I began by going to see Milena Lamarová, head of design at the Prague Applied Arts Museum. Her desk is in a room cluttered with art objects and packing materials. The phone keeps ringing. The calls are about the Cubism show. She's figuring out what light fixtures would be appropriate for when the exhibit moves to Germany. She's monitoring catalog production and learning about copyright and the fine art of negotiations with other museums.

Lamarová, who has a master's degree in art from the Royal College of Art in London, has worked at the museum for 20 years. She's chic and down to earth.

"I always say Cubism is the last secret in Europe," she tells me, her speech punctuated by the persistent cough of a chain smoker. Lamarová says the Communist Ministry of Culture, which decided on what exhibits were organized, wasn't interested in Cubism because it was an avant garde movement. "And anything avant garde was suspect."

It isn't anymore. The museum, which has been acquiring Cubist pieces since the 1950s, has packed most of them (about 300) into its biggest Cubism exhibit ever. The show, after opening in Prague, travels to Germany, Spain, France and Canada. Lamarová says her museum also is in the final stages of negotiations with the Cooper-Hewitt Museum in New York. The Chicago Art Institute is another possibility. She wants the collection back in Prague by 1993, when the city's new modern art gallery is scheduled to open. The Cubist items are to be the centerpiece of the gallery's permanent collection.

Czechs became acquainted with Cubism along with the rest of the world when Picasso's *Demoiselles d'Avignon* was painted in 1907.



From the exhibit "Czech Cubism: Architecture and Design 1910-1925," Applied Arts Museum in Prague.

Photos by Karel Kameník. ©

Czech painters took up Cubism just a short time later. Some say Prague became the second capital of Cubist art, behind Paris.

A core group of about five Czech architects, "giant personalities," Lamarová says, then sought to take the movement a bit further. They also wanted to push Czech culture to a more "worldly" level, she says.

They designed Cubist buildings and furnishings, down to door handles and wallpaper. No one else thought of doing that, Lamarová said. (An exception was one Cubist home done by Raymond Duchamp-Villon in 1912.)

The early, "classic" phase of Cubism featured bold, three-dimensional designs with sharp, often non-right angles that emphasized light and shadow. Lines mimicked those you see in a crystal. Chair legs were bent at sharp, unnatural angles, their backs often triangular or diamond-shaped.

This phase ended with the start of World War I. After the war came a softened, rounded version -- Rondo-Cubism, one historian paradoxically dubbed it -- featuring curved lines and elements such as circles and half-moons. Such playful shapes -- think of a child's wooden building blocks set -- also appeared on wooden country homes that resembled gingerbread cottages. Another name for this was "National Decorativism." Lamarová calls National Decorativism the Czech version of Art Deco, also popular at that time.

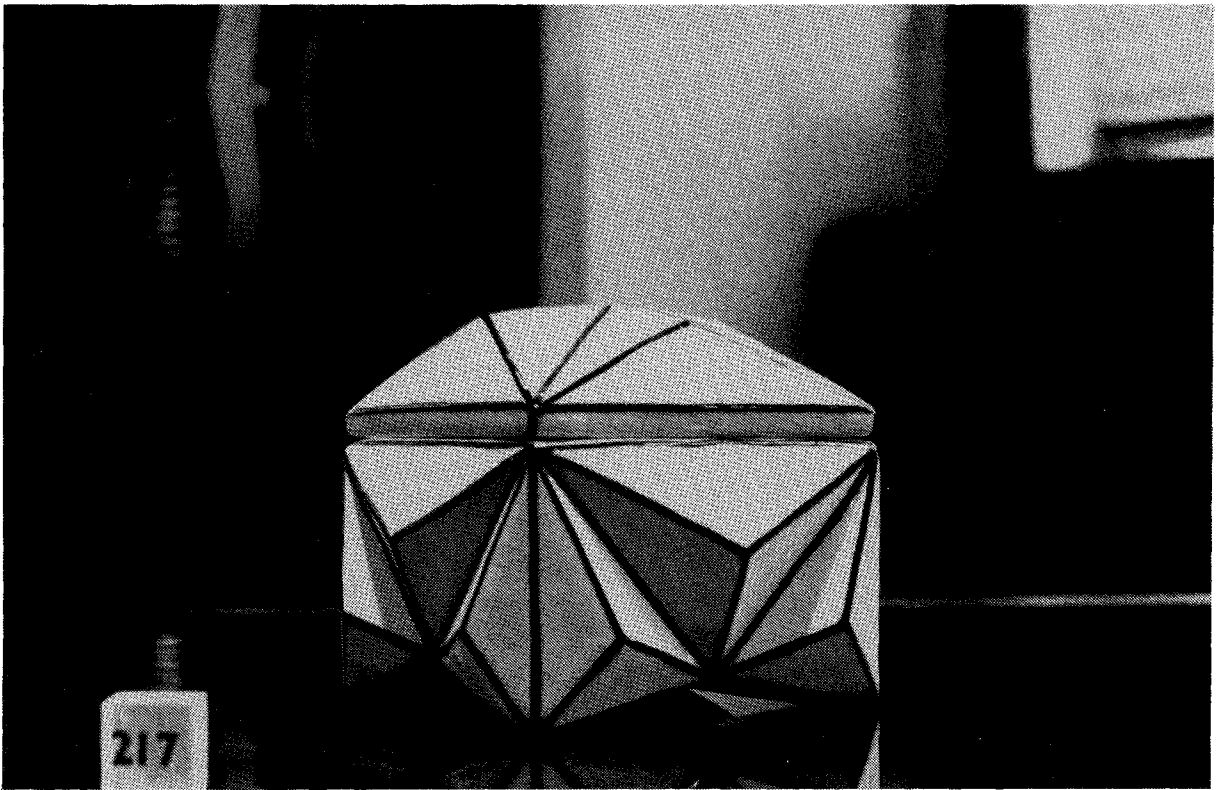
But why did it happen here? Lamarová replies: "I have a feeling it was a certain meeting of cultural, national, societal and creative facts, but maybe also -- because everyone racks his brain over this -- I think we shouldn't underestimate the power of a generation," because the Czech Cubists were such a small, select group of people.

Czech Cubism gradually faded away in the '20s, its creators moving on to styles such as Modernism and Functionalism. One of them, Pavel Janak, became the head architect at Prague Castle in 1936.

After my meeting with Lamarová, I began reading books about Cubism. I talked to architects. And I looked around. Fortunately, many of the Cubist buildings that were built still stand today. The people who work in them, the guards, the doormen, still remember their days of glory.

One early Cubist building is a former department store, built on historic Celetná Street in 1912. With its modest scale and respect for the structures around it, it helped Cubist design gain quick acceptance by Prague residents. The elegant Cubist cafe that used to be on the second floor is gone. But not forgotten. When I questioned the doorman about it he pointed out a photo of the cafe and the building in its heyday in a display case in the hall. He said a private investor who's now renting the bottom floor is interested in recreating the cafe.

I also visited an opulent example of Rondo-Cubism, the office and retail building called "Riunione Adriatica di Sicurta," or the Adria Palace, on Jungmann Street. Large leaf shapes, half-circles and triangles are carved into the facade, the walls ending in a series of turrets. You can get a close-up view of the workmanship



from a cafe on the terrace. It was closed the day I went there, but a waiter let me have a look. When I explained to him what I was looking at, he said, "Well, I'm just a layman, but I think it's pretty ugly." OK, so not everyone is a fan.

One muggy day, while out walking in the kind of warm rain that falls so softly one doesn't feel like opening an umbrella, I pushed open the massive glass and wooden door of the former Bank of the Czechoslovak Legions. The building, still in good shape, is a beautiful example of Rondo-Cubism. Its pink-and-white marble facade features a sculpture panel depicting the World War I battles in which the world-famous Czechoslovak Legions participated.

The facade's circle-and-cylinder theme continues inside -- ceilings, railings, floors. I spotted a set of Cubist furniture in one dark corner. There was a Cubist coat rack and wooden reading holders for newspapers. The heavy chairs were covered in still-soft leather. The clock was stopped.

The doorman, 77-year-old Zdeňek Veselý, knew all about Rondo-Cubism. He loves this building. He said architects from all around the world have come to see it. I told him about the Cubism show and said even more people might visit now. Veselý mentioned that his brother had been a legionnaire and had worked at the bank. He showed me a formal photograph of the group of legionnaires who founded the bank in the 1920s, war heroes proudly standing in suits and starched white shirts in the bank's main hall.

Veselý said he used to visit his brother here as a child. "I never imagined I'd wind up here." Limping painfully -- arthritis -- he gave me a tour. He said the bank was taken over by the state after World War II. It then became the Ministry of Industry, which moved out earlier this year. The building is supposed to become a bank again, but the vaults will have to be fixed. They were devastated when they were turned into a civil defense shelter in the 1950s, Veselý said. The shelter reportedly had its own electricity, a health center, supplies including gas masks. Veselý also said the government met there when the Soviets invaded in 1968.

He said the building, although historically protected, wasn't much promoted as a tourist stop under the Communists. "The ruling school of thought was that every foreigner was a spy." He said he never agreed with this policy. "Every nation has some kind of civilization, so why keep it a secret?"

His voice echoed in the empty hall that was once was the main bank lobby. Light streamed in through the rounded glass ceiling. Circular glass panels framed a clock on the back wall, also stopped. Veselý said he himself never was a Communist. When he decided not to join the party in 1948, he wrote himself off, he said, but he felt it was important not to compromise oneself. And he respects those who felt the same way. He couldn't finish

university studies. He had trouble finding work.

As we walked on, he surreptitiously wiped away a stray tear under his thick glasses. But, he said, shifting the tone of the conversation, "We survived everything. I'm happy we've reached free thinking again."

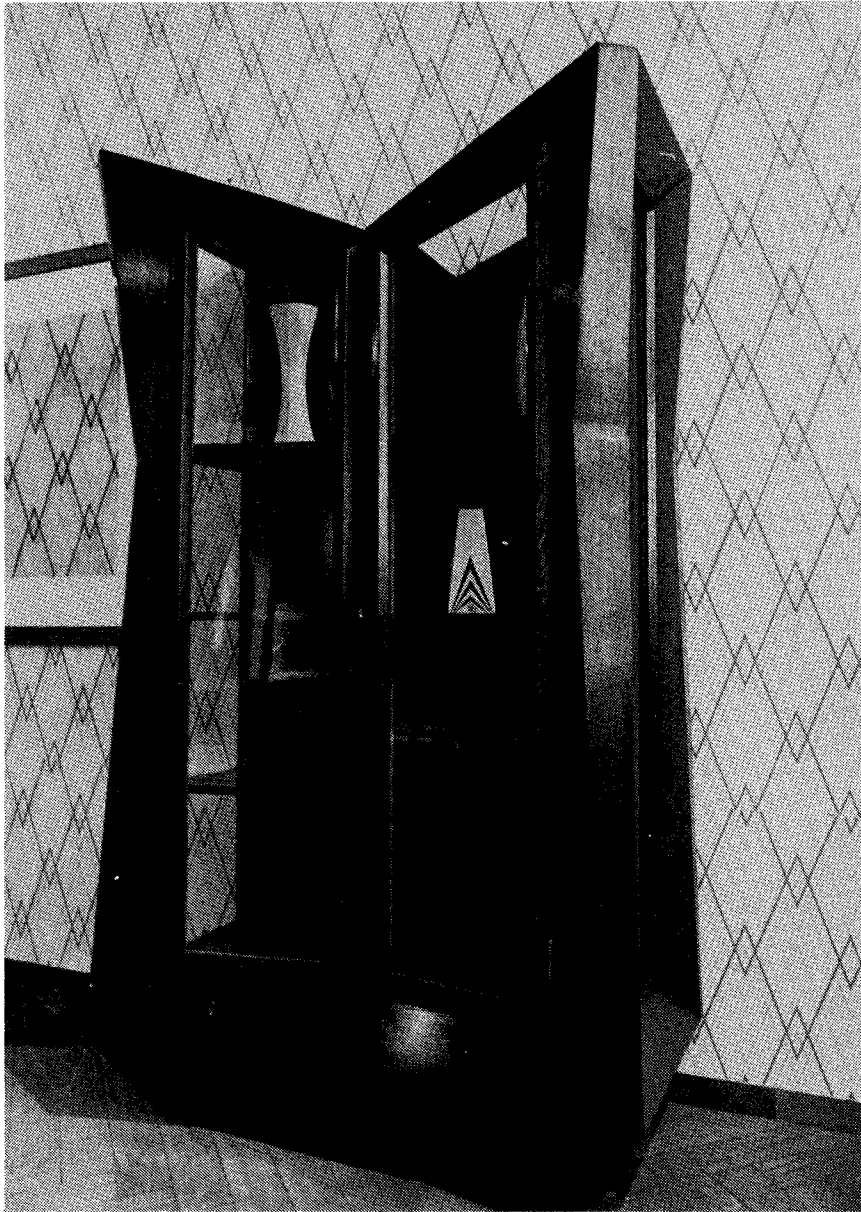
Vesely said he has a very ill wife at home. Having held a variety of banking jobs, he's never stopped working. "I want to have the feeling that one is useful." He speaks English and German and says that helps him keep his guard/doorman job now.

I promised to come back and show him the catalog from the Cubism show. He said he'd like that. He gave me a warm handshake, and I walked out into the warm rain. I carefully closed the heavy door.

All the best,

*Dapman*





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