

# Sudek: Paintings and Reflections

“I began to photograph works by contemporary painters. The paintings are in color, but I have to do everything in black-and-white. It was Filla who told me that you can use black-and-white to give an impression of color. He could see color in black-and-white. Filla always wanted to photograph the painting without enlarging it. Because enlarging disturbs the subtlest half-tones. You could build an entire theory of physical optics on this phenomenon.”

This recollection by Josef Sudek reveals a subject that few people would associate with his name but that forms an important, productive, and at the time highly appreciated part of his photographic oeuvre. Photographic documentation and reproductions formed the core of Sudek's non-art photography, with reproductions of paintings, drawings, and prints forming the largest part of this body of work (the collection of the Czech Academy of Sciences' Institute of Art History is in possession of around 9,000 such negatives and positives).

The exhibition presents photographs Sudek made of paintings and drawings by eight artists with whom he had a close relationship, either personally or on an artistic level. When creating these reproductions, Sudek spent many hours with the work of art, and in view of the exposure time involved, which could last up to several tens of minutes, he truly kept these works in his “mind's eye.” It was a unique way of learning about art, and one that almost certainly helped him achieve the status of a sought-after expert who was especially appreciated by the young artists who had begun visiting his studio in the late 1930s, and who went on to become his clients. This visual world, mediated through photographic reproductions and further deepened by long discussions with the works' creators, resonated on both sides of the dialogue. For this reason, the exhibition also includes

examples of Sudek's fine art photography possessing thematic and visual parallels to the exhibited reproductions, thus offering viewers the chance to compare them and try to find explicit as well as implicit associations between these two areas of his work.

A somewhat different approach has been taken to the part of the exhibition in the former darkroom, the gallery's small room in the rear, where viewers will find photographic reproductions of painted portraits of Sudek by the artists whose works are being shown in the main part of the exhibition. Sudek is here in a position where he reproduces himself. The first portrait is apparently the one by František Tichý, painted as early as in 1922. This was followed by a whole series of portraits, and Sudek's distinctive face literally became a phenomenon in its own right, institutionally confirmed by the 1960 exhibition at the Fronta Gallery, *Josef Sudek in Fine Art*, which presented 114 portraits of Sudek by twenty-two different artists.

As with his fine art photography, in many cases Sudek did not enlarge the reproductions he made but only created contact prints – although many of these, because of the way they were cropped, show only a part of the original image. The negative and positive thus depict two very different photographic worlds. Because of the way the paintings were mounted in Sudek's studio, the reproduced work is often

photographed as a part of the studio's still-life – at least, on the negative. For the final positive, Sudek cropped the margins in order to present the client with a clean reproduction. Some of these positives can be seen at the exhibition as well. In addition to Sudek's original positives, the exhibition also shows several new contact prints – uncropped positives made from the original negatives showing what the image looked like before Sudek adjusted them for his clients. Many of the photographs of Sudek's painted portraits are digital prints made from the original negatives.

The beginnings of Sudek's entrepreneurial activities in the area of photographic reproductions of fine art are closely tied to the person of Emil Filla. Filla was one of the first people to order reproductions from Sudek in the 1920s and 1930s, specifically for *Volné směry* magazine, where he worked as a contributing editor. Over time, Sudek became a sought-after documentary and advertising photographer whose work for various magazines helped to launch his long-term collaboration with organizations such as SVU Mánes, Družstevní Práce, and Umělecká Beseda. Filla himself was so satisfied with Sudek's work that he had him systematically document his artistic creations, often paying him with drawings or paintings. This form of remuneration became an unwritten rule among Sudek's artist friends, and so Sudek

An exhibition of photographs from the collections of PPF Art and the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences  
SUDEK PROJECT

gradually amassed an extensive collection of artworks that today can be found in the collections of the National Gallery in Prague and the Gallery of Modern Art in Roudnice nad Labem.

By the late 1930s, a community of artists had begun to form around Josef Sudek. It was a time when the gloomy atmosphere in society bonded people together and the public realm was replaced by the privacy of people's homes and studios. Many of them were young beginning artists, who visited Sudek “to pick his brains.” This situation gave rise to more than a few deep friendships and commissions for photographic reproductions, paid through more and more works of art. Of these young artists, the exhibition has included works by Andrej Bělocvėtov, Ota Janeček, and Václav Sivko. Sudek's generational peers are represented by Vlastimil Rada, František Tichý, and František Zikmund, and his “older teachers” are Emil Filla and, in a certain sense, Josef Navrátil.

Martin Pavlis

The exhibition has been realized as part of the Czech Ministry of Culture's NAKI II program "Josef Sudek and Photographic Documentation of Works of Art: From a Private Art Archive to Representing a Cultural Heritage." [www.sudekproject.cz](http://www.sudekproject.cz)

Exhibition curator: Martin Pavlis  
Exhibition installation: Adéla Kremplová  
New prints by: Vlado Bohdan

#### Josef Navrátil (1798—1865)

An important artist thanks to whom Sudek began, still in his youth, to more distinctively meditate on the subject of the still-life. Not only did Sudek photograph Navrátil's paintings, but he also paid homage to him in several of his photographs.

#### Emil Filla (1882—1953)

Filla was a major influence on Sudek's decision to begin reproducing works of fine art. The two were close friends and intellectual partners who were also involved in long-term professional collaboration – for instance, at the turn of the 1940s and 1950s, they worked together to create panoramic views of the Central Bohemian Uplands. Filla's Cubist still-lives so influenced Sudek that he reimagined them in his own famous still-lives from the 1940s and 1950s.

#### František Zikmund (1893—1955)

Sudek and Zikmund shared above all an interest in the still-life, which both artists expressed on more than one occasion in a wide format. Besides a large number of reproductions, Sudek's posthumous estate also contained photographic documentation of Zikmund's studio and solo exhibitions.

#### Vlastimil Rada (1895—1962)

One of Sudek's closest friends, with whom he forged a friendship at the Umělecká Beseda, Rada began teaching painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in 1945. The two shared a passion for classical music, and at one point even shared a flat together. They regularly attended concerts and discussed music or art.

#### František Tichý (1896—1961)

Tichý was a great friend of Sudek's, especially in the 1920s and 1930s. Sudek was one of the first to recognize Tichý's talents as a painter, supported him financially, and was one of his first collectors. Sudek's largest number of reproductions is of works by Tichý.

#### Ota Janeček (1919—1996)

Janeček was a painter from the younger circle of artists who regularly visited Sudek's studio in the 1940s. He is the author of many portraits of Sudek, just as Sudek created numerous portraits of Janeček.

#### Václav Sivko (1923—1974)

The painter, printmaker, and illustrator Václav Sivko worked as Sudek's assistant during the Protectorate. He drew illustrations in the places where Sudek photographed and also produced several portraits of his employer.

#### Andrej Bělocvětov (1923—1997)

Sudek's lifelong friend from the younger generation of artists, whom he supported both financially and artistically. Their works have many themes and motifs in common. Like his contemporaries Janeček and Sivko, Bělocvětov enjoyed painting portraits of Sudek, while Sudek created unique photographs of the painter's studio.