

Reviews

St Vitus Treasure on View to the Public

by Professor Ivo Hlobil

St. Vitus Treasure, Permanent Exhibition at the Chapel of the Holy Cross at Prague Castle Catalogue, edited by I. Kyzourová, 199pp, 490Kč

The church treasure of Prague Cathedral consists of over 300 most precious objects of liturgical and religious nature, as well as historic artefacts, all connected with the history of Bohemia.

Used for liturgical purposes St. Vitus treasure had been growing from the 10th century onwards as a collection of rare relics of the saints, kept in precious reliquaries. Its beginning dates to the year of 929 when the German king, Henry I, gifted the arm of St. Vitus to Prince Václav (Wenceslas), the first Czech saint and patron. From here also comes the dedication of the Prague Cathedral to St. Vitus.

The treasure reached the height of its riches thanks to the numerous and unusually valuable gifts from the Emperor and Czech king, Charles IV (1346-1378). Every year, together with the imperial jewels, including the Crown of Charlemagne (now on display at the Hofburg in Vienna), the treasure was exhibited to the crowds of believers, in their thousands, at Karlovo náměstí (Charles Square) in Prague.

Losses after the Hussite wars that represented a great danger to the treasure were remedied by Vladislav Jagellon (1471-1516), a Catholic ruler back on the Czech throne after many years' absence. At the beginning of the 17th century Charles IV's personal collection of relics, until then kept at the imperial Castle Karlštejn, was added to the treasure. During the following centuries it was expanded by further gifts. In 1782 the Chapter that administers the treasure managed to buy the reliquaries from the abolished Benedictine monastery at Prague Castle. Despite all the losses St. Vitus Cathedral treasure is one of the most important of its kind in Europe. Its details and description can be found in the so far unsurpassed study by Antonín Podlaha and Eduard Šittler, *The Treasure of St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague*, (1903).

In the last years of Communist government the President's Office took the entire collection into state ownership. Fortunately nothing was lost in the process. After the fall of the regime in November 1989, and during the dispute over the ownership of

St. Vitus Cathedral between the state and the Church, the treasury remained closed both to the researchers and the public.

The situation changed in 2009 when the Metropolitan Chapter of St. Vitus Cathedral and the Prague Castle Authority reached an agreement to put the treasure on display in the Chapel of the Holy Cross at the Castle. Petr Franta and Lucie Lastovicková, architect and designer, were commissioned to work on the exhibition. As a result, by the beginning of 2011 the interior of the chapel had been restored, re-arranged and equipped with security systems and air conditioning ready to house the exhibition. High security display cabinets and other furniture were installed and on 16 December 2011 the permanent exhibition of the treasure was ceremonially opened to the public.

About a year later the Prague Castle Authority published an excellent and beautifully produced catalogue richly illustrated with colour photographs and a foreword by President Václav Klaus and the Archbishop of Prague, Cardinal Dominik Duka, OP. It is edited by Ivana Kyzourová, art historian and head of the heritage department at the President's Office. The core chapter of the book on the development of the treasury and the importance of St. Vitus Treasure is by Karel Otavský, currently the most knowledgeable expert on the subject. The most interesting and precious gems were newly analysed and valued by Jaroslav Hyršl. Due to its historic importance, the famous reliquary cross from the time of Charles IV is listed in the catalogue as the premier and most important item in the collection. It is 62 cm tall, made of gold and decorated with precious stones, cedar wood and cameos. Karel Otavský dates it to the 1460s-1470s, and it comes from the royal treasury at Karlštejn Castle. There are a further 138 mostly unique objects described in detail and viewed from a pan-European angle. This article does not allow space to name them all but I would like to point out the silver and gold plated bust of St. Ludmila, the oldest patron of the Czech lands and grandmother of St. Wenceslas, murdered *circa* 921. This highly revered reliquary from the abolished Benedictine monastery at Prague Castle was the centrepiece of the exhibition, *Prague, the Crown of Bohemia 1347-1437*, at The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York, in 2006. The bust was correctly dated in New York to come from around 1350 while the catalogue identifies it with the first quarter of the 14th century.

The new exhibition of St. Vitus Treasure offers the visitor to Prague Castle a unique and precious display

of the majority of the most important religious objects and artefacts of St. Vitus Cathedral and the Czech State of the last ten centuries – with the exception of Charles IV's Crown of St. Wenceslas which is permanently held behind multiple locks at the Crown Chamber above the chapel of St. Wenceslas and open to the public only on the most special occasions for the Czech Republic.

It is expected that the catalogue will soon come out in English translation. Until then a previous publication, St. Vitus Treasure by Emanuel Poche, Prague 1971, is available in five languages.

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Friends' Events

Splendour and Spectacle: The Great Castles and Châteaux of Moravia by Barbara Peacock

This well-attended lecture for The Friends in November 2012 gave an insight into the numerous castles, châteaux and houses in this part of the Czech Republic. Barbara Peacock's command of her subject enthused the audience as she toured the buildings for us, many of them set in spectacular locations.

Within the Czech Republic some 12,600 'hrady' and 'zámky' survive and many are sited in Moravia. This heritage, whilst being a source of national pride for the Czechs, is at the same time a heavy responsibility especially after many years of neglect. But much has been achieved and it is the aim of the Friends to be helpful. The success was borne out by the examples that Barbara Peacock showed us. For instance the chateau of Uherčice, used in Communist times as a barracks and woman's reformatory, is now benefiting from a bequest to the Friends towards the restoration of Empire banqueting hall.

Though many of the buildings are of mediaeval and Renaissance origin, Moravia is perhaps best known for its splendid Baroque buildings (e.g. Mikulov, Bučovice, Jaroměřice) commissioned by wealthy aristocrats, or the Church. For instance, Bishop Karl von Liechtenstein commissioned the great Archbishop's Palace and gardens at Kroměříž.

Italian stuccoists such as Baldassare Fontana introduced the Baroque to Moravia, while Domenico

Martinelli rebuilt the ancestral seat of the Kounic family at Slavkov (Austerlitz). J.B. Fischer von Erlach converted the mediaeval fortress at Vranov into a Baroque palace for Count Althann, and remodelled Valtice for the Liechtenstein family.

Later the more restrained Empire style influenced the adaptation of the garden at Kroměříž and was responsible for the remodelling of Boskovice. The mediaeval castle at Bítov was gothicised in the Romantic Gothic Revival style, while the seat of the Teutonic Knights at Bouzov was reconstructed between 1894 and 1912, to emphasise the mediaeval origin of the Knights.

As a postscript to the continuing sophistication of the patronage that produced these buildings Barbara Peacock showed the recently restored Villa Tugendhat in Brno. Built in the 1930s and designed by the German architect Mies van der Rohe, it is one of the iconic modernist buildings of the period. Although nearly eighty years old, its mastery allows it to stand alongside the best of the present.

Our thanks go to Barbara Peacock for her meticulous preparation and exciting presentation and to the Czech Ambassador for making the hall available to the Friends.

Charles Thomson

Santini - an Architectural Genius of the Baroque by Caroline Cannon-Brookes

Prague-born J. B. Santini remains one of the most exciting representatives of the European Baroque and deserves a much wider recognition than he is currently accorded. Caroline's memorable, beautifully illustrated lecture held at the Czech Embassy proved the point and raised a respectable sum of money too, *see images of Santini's work on back page*. Rosemary MacVie sums it up on behalf of those who attended:

"I would just like to say how much I enjoyed the lecture on Santini last night. Caroline Cannon-Brookes gave a fascinating lecture with excellent slides and one learnt a great deal - not just about Santini but the period he worked in."

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