

# **B**OHUSLAV REYNEK. DON QUIXOTE IN PETRKOV

Good evening Your Excellency, ladies and gentlemen, dear friends. Thank you for coming. It is an honour and a great pleasure for me to present an exhibition devoted to the Czech artist Bohuslav Reynek. I warmly thank all those who helped to organise it without holding back their time or skills, especially Mr. Jean-Gaspard Páleníček, Ms. Kateřina Divišová, as well as Václav, Anna and Martina, whose aid was so precious to me during the hanging. I also want to mention the art historian Nathalie Servonnat-Favier, who was always by my side during my work on Reynek. And allow me to salute the presence of Veronika Reynková, Bohuslav Reynek's granddaughter.

In 1986, the Czech poet Jan Vladislav wrote to me that *“the French public's attention must be drawn to this unique couple [Bohuslav Reynek and his wife Suzanne Renaud], who embody the cultural affinities between France and Czechoslovakia from the 1920s to the 1970s: five of the most important decades in our modern history.”*<sup>1</sup> By bringing this project to fruition today, after others that have taken place in France since 1985, we heeded this brave, generous friend, who is also a cultural ambassador.

This is not the first Reynek show that the Czech Centre of Paris has organised, for an “Homage to Suzanne Renaud and Bohuslav Reynek” took place here nearly 20 years ago.

The recent exhibition “For Czechoslovakia: Homage to an Inexistent Country”<sup>2</sup> has just recalled the political and cultural importance of this place in the foundation of the Czechoslovak state in 1918. Although born 1892 in a country that was still the Kingdom of Bohemia in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, poet, translator and printmaker Bohuslav Reynek lived in a quite-real Czechoslovakia. His birthplace, Petrkov, located halfway between Prague and Brno, is where he spent his life. There, far from the world and fashions, the artist, assiduous in his work, his dreams, his poetic visions, produced an immense oeuvre.

For his friends the publishers Josef Florian, Vlastimil Vokolek, Zdeněk Řezníček and Jan V. Pojer he translated around 70 collections of works, mainly by French writers, including Péguy, Valéry, Giono and Bernanos. As a visual artist he created around a thousand works—paintings, drawings, prints—as well as many variants with monotype for each engraved plate. Though briefly revealed to the Czech public during the Prague Spring, Reynek's work remained out of sight until the Velvet Revolution due

---

<sup>1</sup> Jan Vladislav, letter of 20 May 1986.

<sup>2</sup> On 14 May 1916, the Czechoslovak National Council was founded in the present building of the Paris Czech Centre. At its head were the two presidents of the future First Czechoslovak Republic, Tomáš Garrigue Masaryk and Edvard Beneš.

to the political context. Today he is a recognised artist, fervently admired in his native country and beyond.

Given the size of Reynek's visual output—as the catalogue raisonné of his work currently online attests—the present exposition's selection of works may seem small, but the show is welcome. Reynek's work is still not known well enough in France. Yet a singular link tied and still ties him to a French region, the Dauphiné.

One of the most beautiful Franco-Czech stories started in Grenoble between the wars, in the Francophile and francophone context of the young Czechoslovak republic. A young woman from Grenoble, Suzanne Renaud, had just published her first book of poems, *Ta vie est là...* Attracted by their beauty, Reynek asked her if he could translate them. That meeting was the prelude to their marriage in 1926.

For the next 10 years the couple split their time between France and Czechoslovakia. Reynek's art blossomed in the cultural and artistic mood in Grenoble at the time. For the first time, the young artist showed his charcoal, pastel and watercolour drawings to the public, which was immediately won over. He exhibited at solo shows nearly every year. In the early 1930s, friends and Grenoble gallery-goers saw small prints appear amongst the drawings: Reynek had turned to engraving. He quickly embraced this plain, austere art form, using it to create very personal work that made him famous today.

Shortly before the Second World War, Bohuslav Reynek and his family definitively moved back to his native land, the harsh Vysočina Plateau.

\*\*\*

The idea of the present exhibition is to shed light on the strong, silent link between the artist's immediate environment in Petrkov and his poetic meditations.

There is a veritable osmosis between daily life and the figures peopling his visions, whether *Pieta*, *Job* or other figures from the Old or New Testament. Steeped in humanity and simplicity, they spring up in this period of creation, from the 1950s to the exhibitions in Brno in 1965 and Prague in 1966. The poster at the entrance recalls this remarkable event.

The landscape at Petrkov is the backdrop of Reynek's prints. Petrkov, the persistent décor where nature and the rural world almost always correspond to passages in the Bible. For example, Jacob's ladder leaning against a wall of the farmhouse is found in several prints.

Little wonder Cervantes's character, Don Quixote, also showed up in Petrkov! The *Don Quixote* album, based on the only secular literary work that inspired Reynek, illustrates the reflection of the real and spiritual world in his art. This creation has the strongest connection to the personality of the artist himself, whose work and life are inseparable. As his son Michel wrote, "*his most remarkable*

work appeared under the heavy pressure of circumstances.”<sup>3</sup> After *The Passion* and *Job* series (1948-1950)—dark, dramatic images mirroring the calamities that relentlessly befell Reynek and his family in the late 1940s—the Don Quixote character emerged during “the winter years of triumphant socialism”.<sup>4</sup>

Faced with the absurdity of the outside world, Reynek made the Knight of the Sorrowful Countenance his double. But unlike the hidalgo of warrior attributes and slapstick adventures, the “Reynek/Don Quixote” figure is an ordinary, humble, suffering yet still-dreaming character. The scenes come alive in Reynek’s familiar world: the stable, the pigsty of the kolkhoz, the farmyard, simple folk, animals, still so present in his work, in a setting that is not Spain but Bohemia, whose silence and somewhat cold light Reynek painted so well.

In 1960, the series of 14 plates dedicated to the memory of the Knight Errant was exhibited in Grenoble for the first time. Reynek had been working on this theme for around 10 years when he had the opportunity to unveil his *Don Quichotte* to the public. The only copy can be seen in one of the display cases of this exhibition.

Some photographs by his contemporary, photographer Jaroslav Krejčí, accompany the works on display, showing Reynek the man, his home, his workplace, etc. They underscore the theme of this new show focusing on the Czech printmaker: the remarkable harmony between his life and work. In Petrkov, the setting has barely changed and the souls of the dead are as if phosphorescent.

Reynek never went to any of his exhibitions. So of course, he would not have come to this opening, for to him:

*“Only whispers  
can be heard”.*

Listen here to the whispers of his poetic images.

Annick Auzimour

Paris, 23 February 2017

*(Address delivered at the opening of the exhibition “Bohuslav Reynek. Don Quixote in Petrkov”, Czech Centre of Paris, 24 February to 31 March 2017)*



B. Reynek *At Home* (detail)

<sup>3</sup> Michel REYNEK: *Les dessins de mon père*, in: *L'image dans l'œuvre poétique et graphique*, Grenoble, Romarin, 1997.

<sup>4</sup> Jiří ŠERÝCH in: *Le Don Quichotte de Reynek / Reynkùv Don Quijote*, Grenoble, Romarin, 2016, p 115.