

Escaping Reality: Art Brut from Czechia

Curated by Terezie Zemánková and Natálie Drtinová

Living on the margins of society, they are regarded as weirdos and outsiders, often plagued by illnesses of the body and mind, paralyzed by life crises, poverty, or feelings of worthlessness. Creating art has become their means of escape from the carousel of despair, allowing them to attain a symbolic rebirth in a better, parallel reality. It enables them to fulfil their dreams and revise their memories: they obtain love, dignity, power, and even supernatural abilities. At the same time, their artistic output doubles as a form of communication, making it possible for them to report on their visionary projects and offer firsthand accounts of other worlds where they have established a connection. And, most importantly, for all of these artists, production is an invigorating act that brings back meaning to their existence. With a few exceptions, these are untrained artists who completely ignore the evolution of art and gallery circuits. They are mostly not interested in art as such – and yet they have both the talent and the compulsive need to create it. In the 1940s, the French artist and theorist Jean Dubuffet coined the term *art brut* – raw art – for these out-of-the-box artists. In the English-speaking world, the term *outsider art* is often used as a synonym.

This project, presented at the **Czech Center New York**, offers an overview of a century of Czech art brut production. Thanks to the curator Alena Nádvořníková and later also to the **ABCD Association**, the term Czech art brut has become internationally acclaimed. In this exhibition entitled *Escaping Reality*, historical works by Czech art brut "classics" are juxtaposed with the creations of newly discovered living artists, some of whose works are being exhibited for the very first time.

A unique subset of Czech outsider art are the historical mediumistic drawings, whose common feature is floral imagery conveying messages of love, hope, and a new life. These spiritistic mediums, working in a state of trance and disconnected from reality, do not consider themselves to be artists, but rather mere mediators and messengers from the Otherworld.

Added to that is a new phenomenon: sheltered studios such as the Prague-based Studio Barvolam or Ateliér radostné tvorby (Studio of Joyful Creation). In these workshops, neurodivergent artists are able to hone their artistic talents as they are not permitted to study in art schools due to their disabilities.

The ABCD Association has long strived to have the often-neglected category of outsider art recognized as a legitimate art form. The **Cavin-Morris Gallery** in New York, which has focused among others on artists from the Czech Republic since 1993, also played a key role in the making of this exhibition, having loaned out many of the works that are on display.

Artists on view: Anonymous, Anonymous "Railroad Worker", Jaroslav Čevora, František Dymáček, Dagmar Filípková, Karel Havlíček, Dagmar Havlíčková, Stanislav Holas, Iveta Horváthová, Vít Kosinka, Zdeněk Košek, Tomáš Malíček, Cecilie Marková, Přemysl Martinec, Lukáš Paleček, František Jaroslav Pecka, Ota Prouza, George Radojčić, Miloslava Ratzingerová, Vojtěch Šůra, Leoš Wertheimer, Marek Zbořil, Anna Zemánková