

MARTIN STEJSKAL



SECRET PRAGUE



JONGLEZ PUBLISHING

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PRAGUE MERIDIAN

12

High noon

Staroměstské náměstí
Metro Staroměstská



Although thousands of locals and tourists alike pass through Prague's Old Town Square each day, they may not notice a brass strip running along the cobbles near the Jan Hus monument.

At one end of the strip is inscribed: *meridianus quo olim tempus pragensis dirigebatur* ('the meridian by which Prague time used to be determined').

This strip does in fact mark the location of the Prague Meridian ($14^{\circ} 25' 17''$), by which it was possible to read the time: as in Rome and Paris,* the Marian Column that once stood in the square cast a shadow on the ground that moved with the sun.

By analysing the position of the shadow over the years, high noon can be determined.

Prague's Marian Column was erected in 1650 in gratitude to the Virgin Mary when Swedish troops left the city.

Surrounded with statues by Czech sculptor Jan Jiří Bendl, the column was pulled down in 1918 by an angry mob who considered it to be linked to the hated Habsburg rule.



*For more information on meridians in this series of guidebooks, see the Place de la Concorde obelisk in Secret Paris and the Vatican obelisk in Secret Rome.

The original site of the Marian Column is marked by five paving stones in the square.



NEW ROCOCO INTERIOR OF THE POSTAL MUSEUM

①

Philately in a former mill

Novomlýnská 2 – +420 222 312 006

Daily except Monday, 9am–12 noon and 1pm–5pm

Tram 5, 8, 14, 26, Dlouhá třída stop

With its rich collections of Czech and foreign stamps, the Postal Museum (Poštovní muzeum) is located in Prague's only surviving old mill – it escaped demolition thanks to its extraordinary new Rococo interior. The building, which is also known as the Vávra mill (Vávřův mlýn), was rebuilt in Baroque and classical style on foundations dating back to the Renaissance. The beautiful frescoes are the main attraction of its typical Biedermeier-period* interior: it was in 1847 that the miller V. Michalovic asked his friend, the renowned Czech painter Josef Navrátil, to undertake the interior design.

Today you can visit the dining room where there is a huge still life with a lobster, and several other remarkably decorated rooms featuring alpine landscapes and well-known characters from plays and operas of the time. In the living room, the original tiled stove was also built to Navrátil's design.

**A trend in central Europe for artistic styles named after 'Papa Biedermeier', a comic symbol parodying petit-bourgeois family life and activities.*



SYMBOLISM AT THE GOLDEN SUN

②

On the road with St Wenceslas ...

Na Poříčí 22

Tram 3, 8, 24, Bílá labuť stop

Rebuilt in the early 19th century in classical style, the house known as At the Golden Sun owes its name to two suns that feature on the triangular pediment and above the door.

They remind us that we are on the route taken by the body of St Wenceslas (Václav) at his funeral.

This path leading to Prague from Stará Boleslav, east of the capital, was an important pilgrimage site.

The Czech king and duke of Bohemia, St Wenceslas (born around 907 and died in 927 or 935) is the patron saint of Bohemia.

In the context of Czech mythology he was associated with the Sun for its classic attributes of strength, power and authority, but also because, just as the Sun gives life, Wenceslas gave birth to the Czech nation.



BAS-RELIEF OF A TRIPLE HANDSHAKE

⑥

Masonic symbols as house sign

Karmelitská 18

Tram 22, 9, 12, Hellichova stop



At No. 18 Karmelitská Street you can see a strange house sign: three linked forearms, shaking each other's hands. This is the Masonic symbol of brotherhood and unity. It also recalls the special Freemasons' greeting.

Other Masonic handshakes

This symbolic handshake is found in two other Prague streets: at No. 3 Na Zderaze and No. 73 Vinohradská.

The masonic salute

Freemasons salute each other by shaking hands in a distinctive manner. By pressing with their thumb, they indicate their rank. Using the tip of the thumb of the right hand, an apprentice will lightly touch the first knuckle of the other person's right index finger three times: two rapid touches and one long one. A companion will do the same, but will use his right thumb to touch the first knuckle of the other person's middle finger five times: two rapid touches, a long one, and two more rapid ones. A master will do likewise, but with seven touches: four rapid ones and three long ones.

Masonic symbols

The square and compass are other important Masonic symbols: examples can easily be seen at No. 7 Janáček embankment (Janáčkovo nábřeží) and at No. 35 Karmelitská, No. 53 Lublaňská, No. 1 Vejvodova and No. 22 Vinohradská streets.

NEARBY

Inaugural meeting of Czech Freemasonry

⑦

The first Freemasons' meeting in the Czech lands, initiated by the French and Saxon troops who occupied Prague in 1741, is thought to have been held at the house of a nobleman called Karel David. Known as U kamenného zvonku (At the Little Stone Bell), the house is at No. 10 Dražického Square. The men behind the creation of the Czech Lodges were allegedly the Count of Belle-Isle, Marshal of France, and Count Frederick Augustus Rutowski (illegitimate son of the Polish King Augustus II and Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Upper Saxony, based in Dresden), commander of the Saxons. According to some sources, the Masonic initiation activities revived the former activities of Count F. A. Sporck (see p. 120).

HERMETIC SYMBOLISM OF THE BELVEDERE

①

Occult architectural gem

*Královská zahrada (Royal Garden)
Tram 22, Letohrádek královny Anny stop*

Built by Emperor Ferdinand I, the Royal Summer Palace of Queen Anne (also known as the Belvedere) is one of the most beautiful Renaissance buildings in Prague.

Like much of the city's architecture, it features many references to alchemy, in which Ferdinand I took a great interest (the physician and alchemist Paracelsus, who established the role of chemistry in medicine, even dedicated several treatises to him).

The Summer Palace is designed like a Roman villa, encircled by an arcade with 36 Ionic columns set 3 metres apart.

There are 6 columns on each side and 14 to the front and back of the rectangular building, which is oriented on a north-south axis. Narrative bas-reliefs in stone, 12 and 4 on their respective sides of the building, are set between the arches above the capital of each of these columns.

The 12 bas-reliefs are related to the signs of the zodiac and the months of the year. The others recall the four constituent elements (Earth, Air, Water, Fire), and the four cardinal virtues (Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance).

Totalling 32 (12+12+4+4), a perfect Kabbalistic number, the upper bas-reliefs tell the story of '32 ways that lead to Wisdom'.

As the bases of the columns each bear a vertical bas-relief, the Bel-



vedere has 72 in all (32+40), a figure that Kabbalists attribute to the number of letters in the explicit name of God, which is Shem-ham-forash (see p. 64).

The upper bas-reliefs of the north, south and west walls of the palace are essentially Graeco-Roman mythological motifs, while the lower ones are dedicated to the struggles of the heroes of antiquity.

Two interior reliefs at the end of the west wall show the symbolic battle with the dragon: to the left Jason the Argonaut at Colchis in his quest for the Golden Fleece, and to the right the hero Cadmus fighting the dragon of the Greek god Ares. This is an allegory of alchemists' treatises symbolising their work in the transmutation of matter. Various reliefs depict the interventions of Zeus in the presence of most of the gods of Olympus. Near the former entrance on the same side is a relief of Vulcan and Mercury, the two protagonists of work on base metals.

The former entrance bears the personification of Furor (symbolising *prima materia*, or first matter) and the god Janus holding two keys in his hand. This not only confirms his erstwhile function as custodian of the entrance to the Belvedere, but the two keys also symbolically recall the two possible routes to the alchemical Great Work (the dry and the wet), which makes it possible to 'open the door to the closed palace of the king' or find the philosopher's stone. This hoped-for success is symbolised by an adjacent relief of Aeneas harvesting crops.

The bases of the four columns on the side walls feature bas-reliefs of the Labours of Hercules, synonymous with the alchemical process. In this way the mythical hero symbolically endorses this construction.

The upper reliefs on the south side depict mythological hunting scenes of antiquity (Meleager, the leader of the Calydonian boar hunt, Atalanta the huntress), as well as an amazing scene in which the head of the Calydonian boar is offered as a trophy to Ferdinand I and his sons Maximilian and Ferdinand of Tyrol.

This thematic group of Atalanta's race and the boar hunt is recalled in the renowned work *Atalanta fugiens* by the alchemist and personal physician of Rudolf II, Michael Maier, who probably took part in alchemical experiments at the Belvedere.

In addition, the roof of the building looks like a capsized boat, evoking the notion of *naufragio philosophorum* (philosophical shipwreck): this symbolises the many unsuccessful alchemical experiments that took place here, especially during the reign of Rudolf II.



FRESCO OF ST BARBARA'S CHAPEL

9

Impalement of a thief

Loretánská ulice
Tram 22, Pohořelec stop



In Loretánská Street, the small chapel dedicated to St Barbara reflects a cruel legend relating to events of 1512: in that year, two knights convicted of theft were condemned to be impaled alive here.

One of them managed to free himself and crawled to the Church of St Benedict.

The Czech Baroque painter V. V. Reiner probably depicted the legend in this chapel because St Barbara is the patron of those who die without receiving the last rites.

Inside the chapel, the small figure of an impaled convict can be seen in the background of the fresco.



Legend of Prague's oldest carillon

The Loreta pilgrimage site possesses the oldest carillon in Prague. Composed of 30 bells cast by Amsterdam's master bell founder, Claudy Frémy, and assembled by Prague watchmaker Peter Neumann, the carillon rang out for the first time on 15 August 1695.

According to a local legend, the only possession of a poor widow with almost as many children as the number of bells was a purse full of coins.

When the plague was raging through Prague, her children began to die. For each child that died, she gave a coin to the bellringer. When her last child died, she gave him her final coin. When she too fell ill and died, all the bells of Loreta chimed a beautiful melody.

Home of Tycho Brahe

At the entrance to the lane called Nový svět (New World), at No. 76, the old U zlatého noha (At the Golden Griffin) inn was for a while the home of the Danish astronomer-chemist Tycho Brahe, who later settled with the emperor's consent in a house in the Pohořelec neighbourhood.

ENGRAVING OF THE ADORATION OF CHRIST

⑩

A picture that led to victory at White Mountain

Chapel of Our Lady Victorious
Zbečenská, Ruzyně
Tours by appointment with the Břevnov Monastery
Tram 22, Bílá Hora stop; Bus 164, 225



At the outbreak of the Thirty Years' War (1618–48), the Carmelite monk Dominic, armed with his blessed sword, left Rome to fight with the Catholic forces. He accompanied the Bavarian army of Duke Maximilian I as far as Bohemia. Besides the sword, he had with him an engraving of the *Adoration of Christ* found at Strakonice Castle (although another version of the story claims that the image comes from Štěpánov chapel in south-west Bohemia), which had been vandalized by the Protestants: the eyes of all the figures, with the exception of the Baby Jesus, had been put out. After blessing the Catholic soldiers with this picture hanging round his neck, he prayed for them throughout the course of the Battle of Bílá Hora, so he and his miraculous picture were given credit for the victory.

Only later did the battle begin to be described as a theatre of supernatural events: shots had allegedly bounced off the picture, and lightning is said to have blinded Protestant soldiers. After the battle, Brother Dominic carried the engraving to Rome and handed it over to Pope Gregory XV.

In 1622, the engraving was solemnly moved from the Roman Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore to the Church of the Conversion of St Paul, which was renamed Santa Maria della Vittoria for the occasion.

Although the altar where the engraving was kept was destroyed by a fire in 1833, there are still three copies of which two are from that period. One can be seen in Rome in the sacristy of Santa Maria della Vittoria, and another in the Church of Our Lady Victorious (kostel Panny Marie Vítězné) in Malá Strana.

The third and later engraving (1708) is in the chapel dedicated to Our Lady Victorious, which replaced a small chapel to St Wenceslas erected on the site of the battle. The impressive dome of the chapel was probably built by G. Santini, and the paintings executed by C. D. Asam, J. A. Schöpf and W. L. Reiner.

The legend of the magical power of the engraving is also the theme of a relief above the main door of the chapel.



MARTIN STEJSKAL



SECRET

PRAGUE

A totally overlooked Art Nouveau masterpiece, secrets of the castle alchemists, the message in the hidden palindrome on Charles Bridge, the Kabbalistic mysteries of the Jewish ghetto, a thief's shrivelled forearm hanging in a church, a statue revealing its intestines, the largest wind tunnel in the Czech Republic, a fragment of the Great Pyramid of Cheops in a pet cemetery, a clock that runs backwards, a house/museum painted blue to meet the needs of the partially blind musician owner ...

Unmissable for lovers of architecture, from Baroque to Art Nouveau via Cubism, and the European capital of alchemy and esotericism in the 17th century, Prague offers a myriad of little-known marvels.

An indispensable guide for those who thought they knew Prague well, or who would like to discover the hidden face of the city.

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