

Artists and Theosophy in Present-Day Czech Republic and Slovakia

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Delville in Prague



- In the Summer of 2015, I visited at the Prague City Gallery an important exhibition of Jean Delville (1867-1953), the Belgian painter who was the leader of the Theosophical Society in his country between 1909 and 1913

Šaloun: An Occult Sculptor

- Just outside the Gallery, in the Old Town Square, I was able to admire the famous Memorial of the Czech reformer Jan Hus (1371-1415), sculpted by 1901-1915 by Ladislav Jan Šaloun (1870-1946), himself an artist with significant esoteric interests



Šaloun the Spiritualist



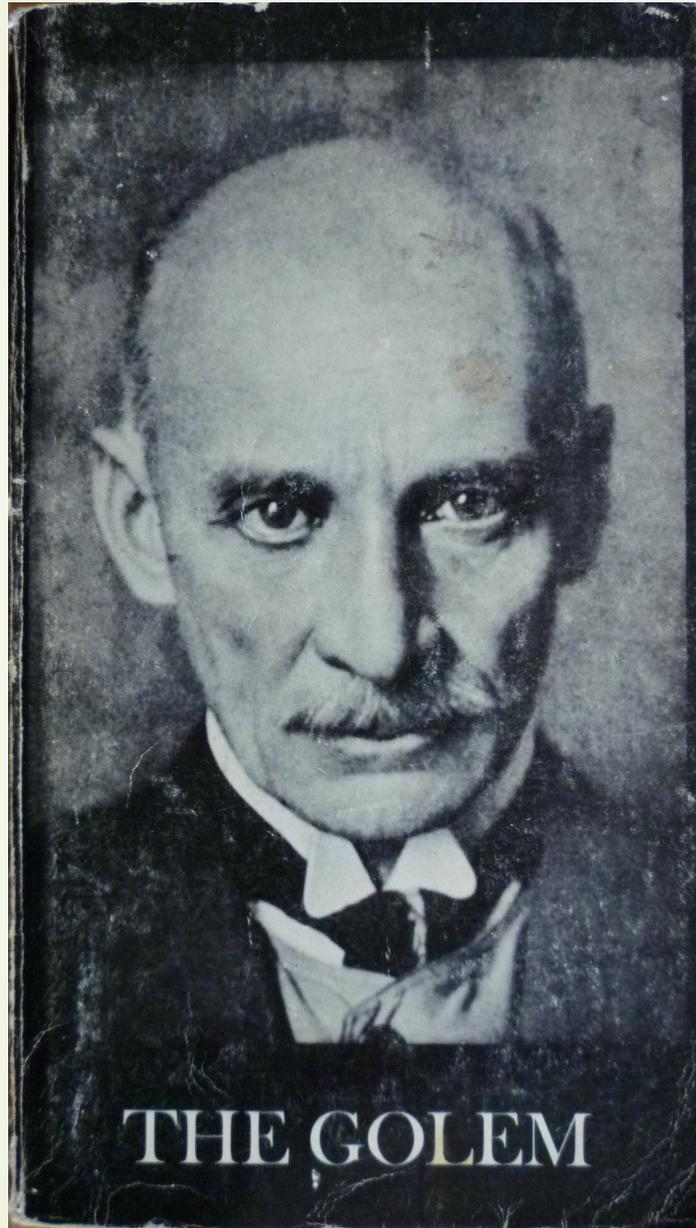
- ▶ Šaloun (left) organized with other artists «notoriously known séances» in his studio, whose walls were «painted with deep red from ox blood»*

* Josef Dvorák, «Visions, Prophecies, Madnesses: The Textual and Pictorial Approaches of William Blake and Josef Váchal», M.A. Thesis, University of Pardubice 2007, 31

Ænigma in Olomouc

- From Prague, I took a train to Olomouc, Moravia, where in the same Summer of 2015 the Museum of Modern Art hosted the exhibition «Ænigma: 100 Years of Anthroposophical Art», devoted to the artists who belonged to the Anthroposophical Society. A surprising number of them were Czech





Theosophy in Prague

- ▶ The Theosophical Lodge of Prague was founded in 1891 and started publishing the journal *Lotus* in 1897. Among the first member was Austrian novelist Gustav Meyrink (1868-1932, left)

Ibning's Mystic Circle

- ▶ Prague was also home to several independent para-Theosophical societies, including Ibningův mystický kruh (Ibning's Mystic Circle), which included several painters. One was Rudolf Adámek (1882-1953: *Evocation*, 1911)



Hradečný and Universalia



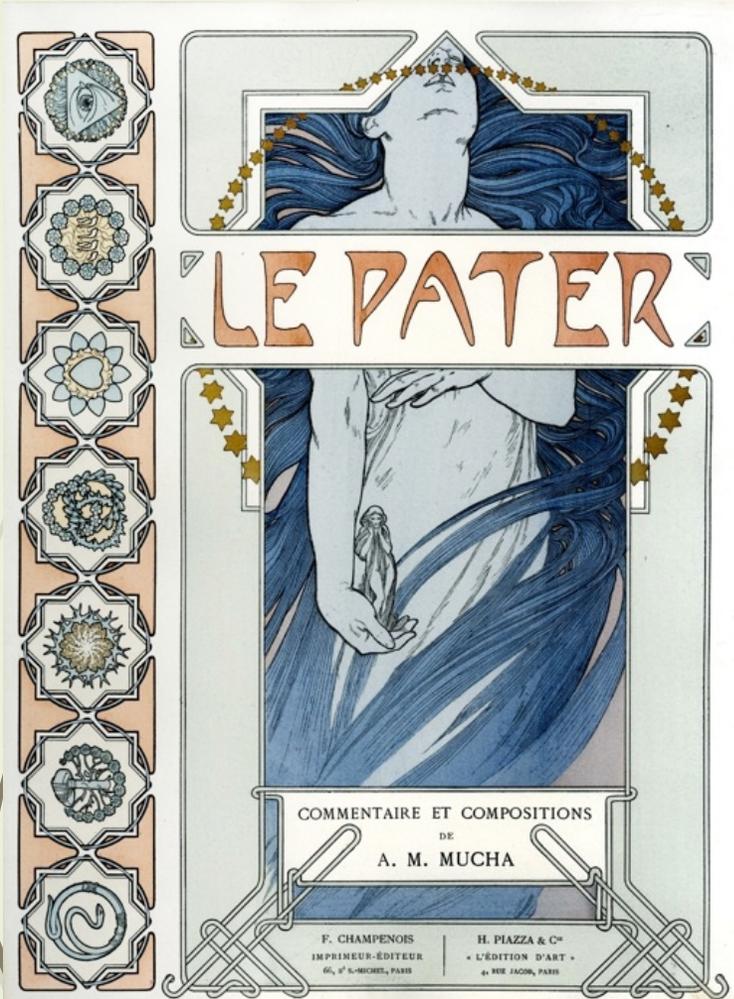
- ▶ Another artist and occultist participating in Ibing's Mystic Circle was Bohumil Hradečný (1876 -1960, left). Later, both Adámek and Hradečný became founding members of Universalia, an important Czech esoteric society started in 1920 and legally incorporated in 1930

The Esoteric Mucha

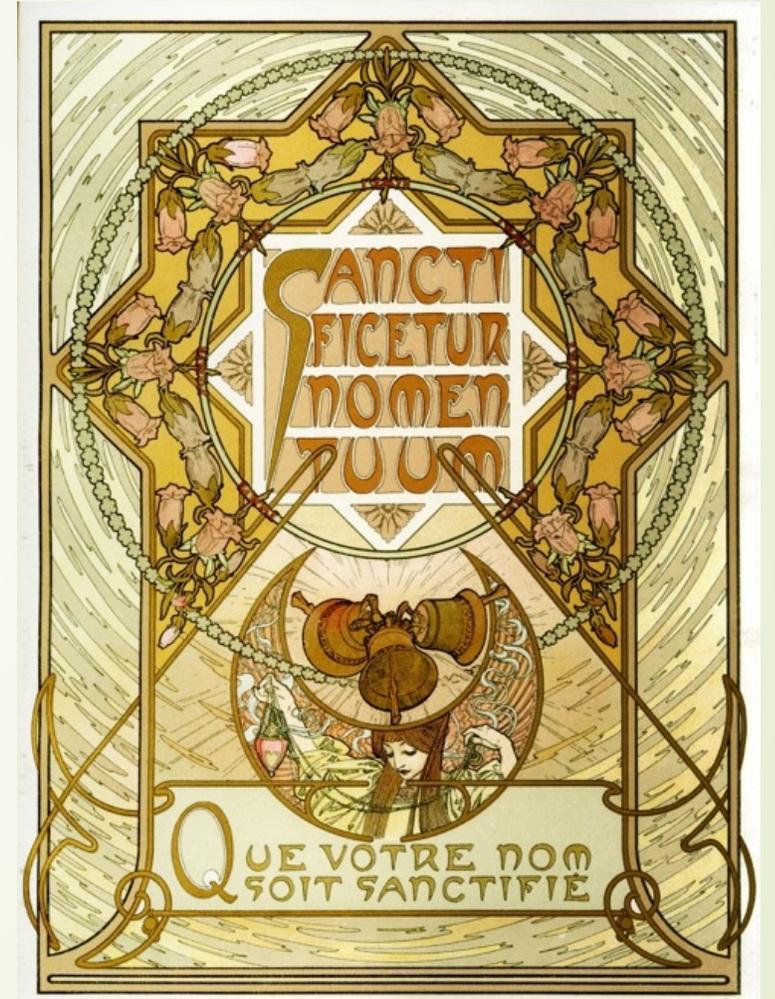
- ▶ Alfons Mucha (1860-1939, right), one of the most popular Czech modern painters, was also interested in Spiritualism and Theosophy. In 1898, he joined Freemasonry in Paris and in 1923 he was elected Grand Master of Czech Freemasonry



Mucha and the Lord's Prayer



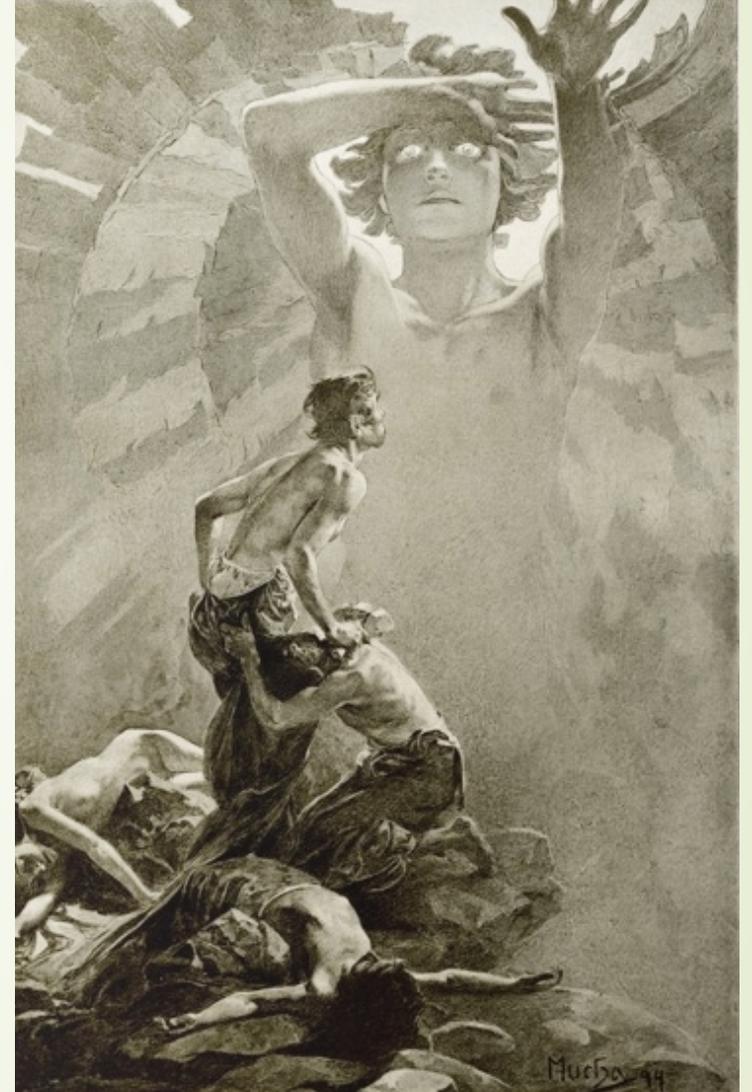
- Mucha's Theosophical interests appear particularly in his luxury edition of the Lord's Prayer (*Pater*, 1899)



Towards the Light



- Mucha's illustrations for the Lord's Prayer show the (Theosophical) ascension of human beings striving to return to the light





The Slav Epic

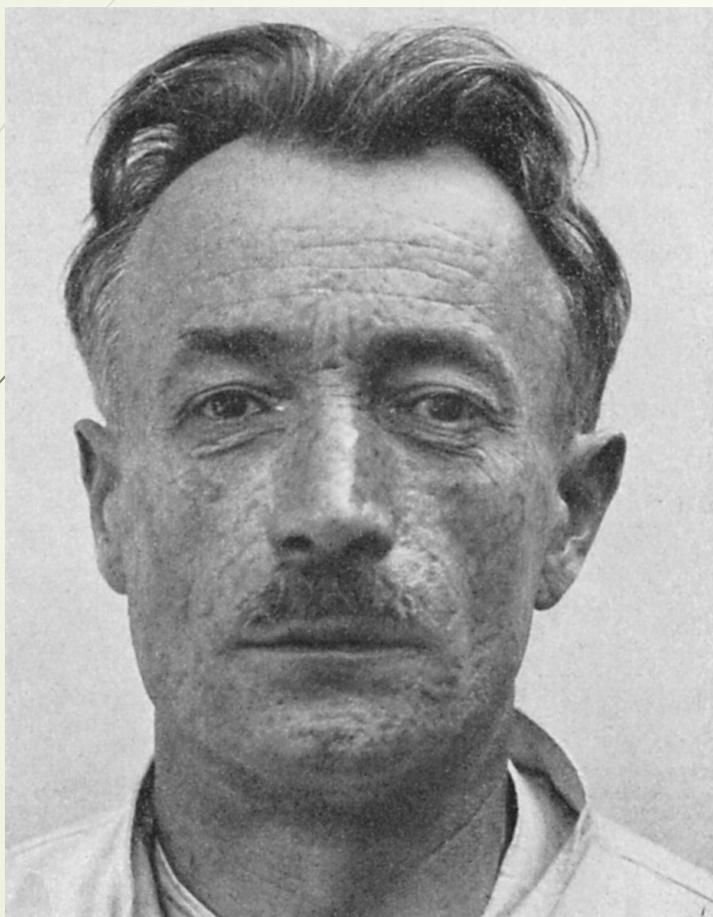
- Mucha's esoteric interests also appears in his huge canvases of the *Slav Epic*, painted between 1911 and 1926 (*Apotheosis of the Slavs*, left, 1926), where the Slavs are portrayed as a people more spiritually developed than others

Reason, Wisdom, Love

- ▶ A summary of Mucha's esoteric ideas is in his final work, the unfinished triptych including *The Age of Reason*, *The Age of Wisdom* and *The Age of Love* (1936-1938). Reason and love can only be united through wisdom



Kupka The Spiritualist Medium



- ▶ The most distinguished modern Czech painter was František Kupka (1871-1957), a pioneer of abstract art. He moved from Prague to Vienna, then settled in Paris
- ▶ «Spiritualism was responsible for Kupka's lifelong involvement with the occult». As a young man, he supplemented his income by acting as a medium, and «never ceased to practise spiritism, except, probably, during long period of illness and in very old age»*

* Meda Mládek, «Central European Influences on the Work of František Kupka», in M. Mládek - Jan Sekera, *František Kupka: From the Jan and Meda Mládek Collection*, Prague: Museum Kampa - The Jan and Meda Mládek Foundation, 17-48 (38)

Kupka and Theosophy

- ▶ «Kupka' stay in Vienna introduced him to Theosophy»* through his association with Karl Wilhelm Diefenbach (1851-1913, right, the bizarre Theosophical prophet whose commune, Himmelhof, was a model for the Swiss Monte Verità

* Chelsea Ann Jones, «The Role of Buddhism, Theosophy, and Science in František Kupka's Search for the Immaterial through 1909», M.A. Thesis, University of Texas at Austin 2012, 26



The Soul of the Lotus

- Kupka's *The Soul of the Lotus* (1898, right) reveals the painter's interest in Buddhism. But he related to Buddhism – and Hinduism – through the lenses of the Theosophical literature he was reading at that time in Paris





The Beginning of Life

- ▶ In *The Beginning of Life* (1900), Kupka continues his exploration of creation. Reminiscences of Buddhist imagery are obvious, but Kupka also makes «a [Theosophical] direct correlation between the form of the circle and creation»*

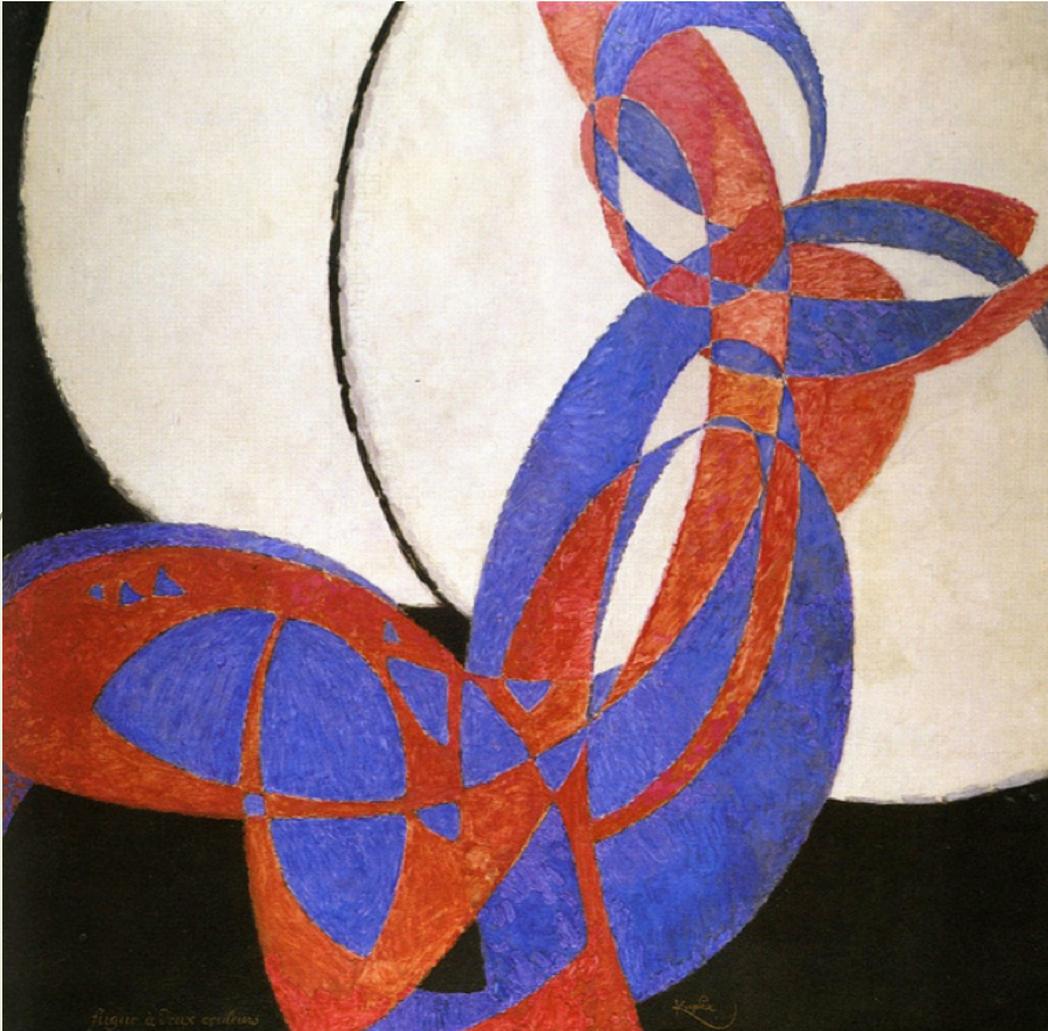
*Jones, *op. cit.*, 17

Kupka and Schuré

- ▶ Jones' thesis argues that Kupka probably read *The Great Initiates* (1889) by Theosophist Édouard Schuré (1841-1929). Schuré's book was extremely influential on several artists, and echoes may be seen in Kupka's *The Way of Silence* (1903, right)



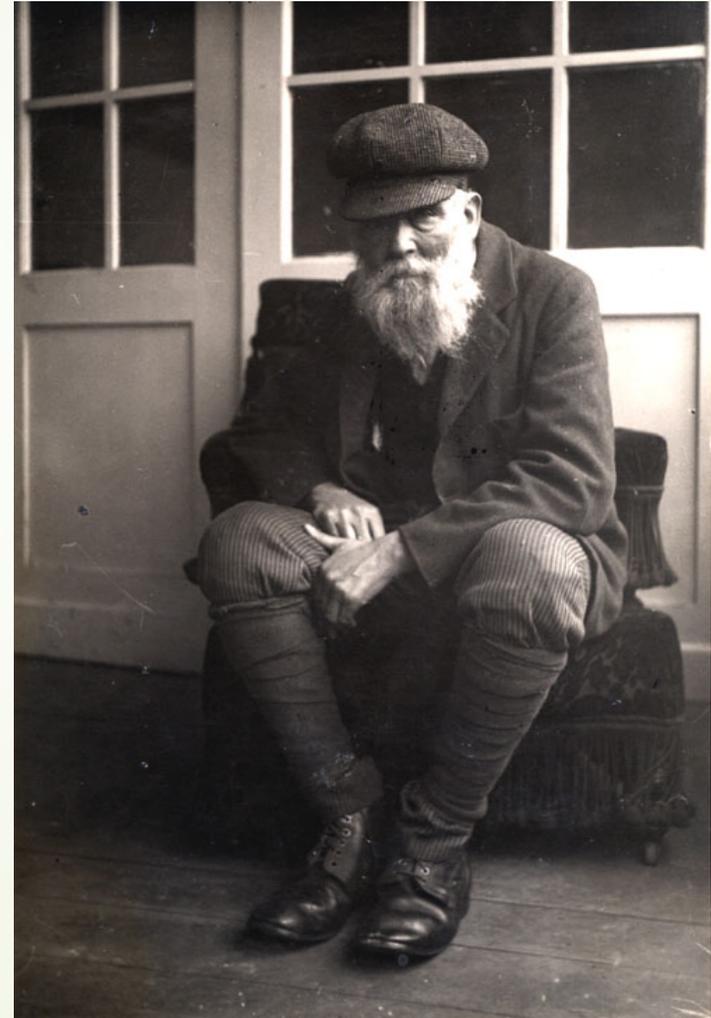
The Turn to the Abstract



- From his early Symbolist works, Kupka went on to Orphic cubism and became one of the founders of modern abstract art. Works like *Amorpha* (1912, left) insist on the correlation between circles, ovals, spirals and the creation of life, a theme also discussed in Kupka's theoretical work and not foreign to Theosophy

Slovakia: László Mednyánszky

- ▶ In the meantime in Slovakia, Ladislav Medňanský, better known under his Hungarian name László Mednyánszky (1852-1919, right) became the leading national painter, although both Slovakia and Hungary claim him as their own. In his art, impressionism meets symbolism



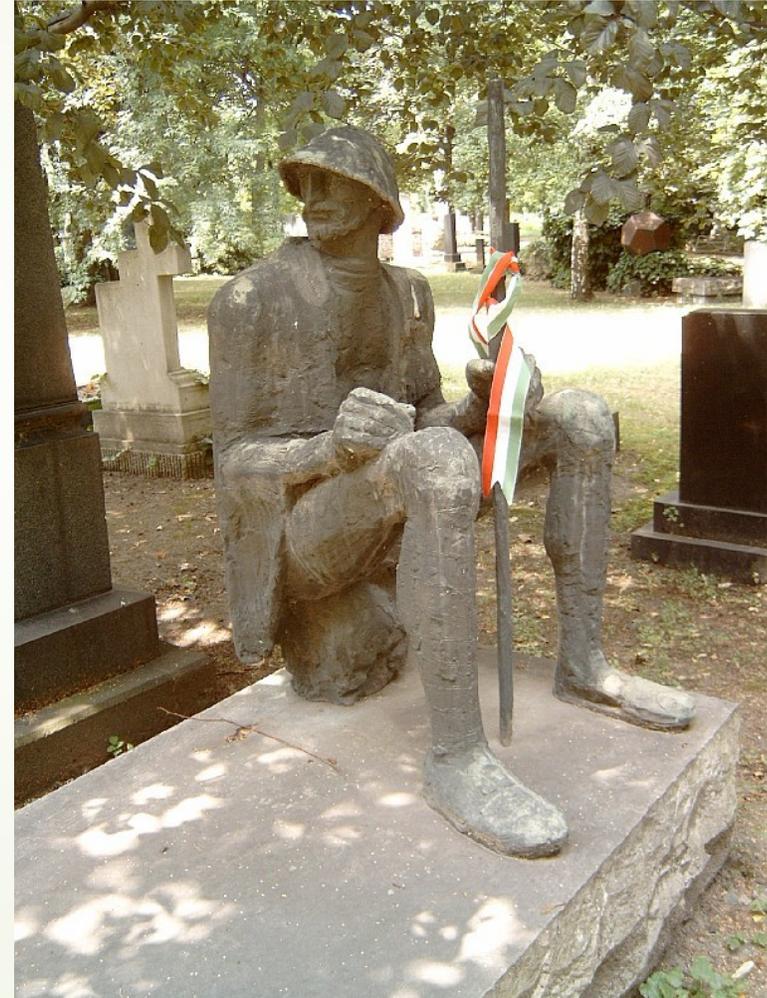
A Slovakian-Hungarian Aristocrat



- Born in Beckov, Slovakia, in 1852 in the castle of his aristocratic family, Mednyánszky (*Hillside at Springtime*, 1903, left), was educated as an academic artist in Munich and Paris, and lived in Budapest and Vienna, where he died in 1919

Mednyánszky's Politics

- Mednyánszky was a Hungarian patriot (see his gravestone in the Kerepesi cemetery in Budapest, right) and at age 62 volunteered as a war painter in World War I. He saw Pan-Slavism as a great danger for both Hungarian identity and regional stability. He conceived the idea of a secret society to fight Pan-Slavism, although later he came to believe that the best protections against political extremism were education and the arts



Mednyánszky and Theosophy

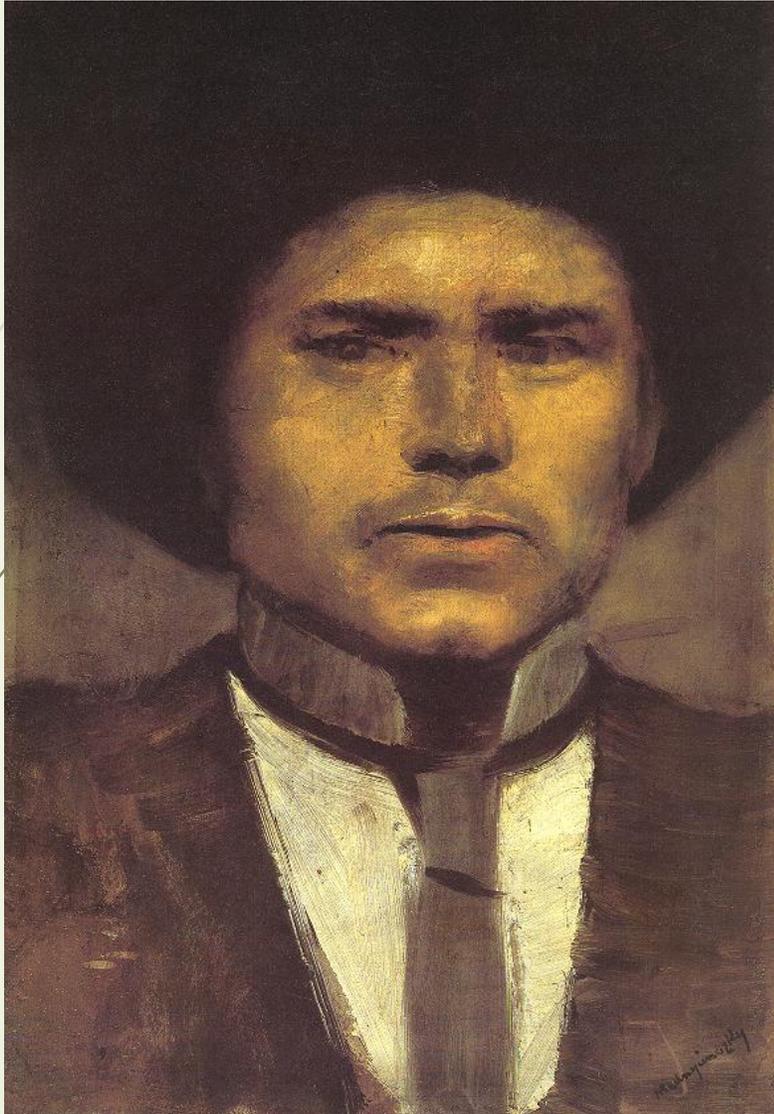


- Mednyánszky's circle was interested in Theosophical ideas and included his brother-in-law István Czóbel (1847-1932), who wrote in German about Theosophy. Mednyánszky's journals quote Madame Blavatsky (1831-1891), Annie Besant (1847-1933), and German Theosophist Franz Hartmann (1838-1912), and show that he was interested in Theosophical doctrines about the spiritual meaning of colors (*Soldiers*, ca. 1916, left)

«Going to the People»

- ▶ During the final crisis of the Austrian Empire, Slovakian-Hungarian aristocrats such as Mednyánszky often believed that «going to the people» was the only way to revive a moribund aristocracy. Some married peasant girls. Mednyánszky (*Angling Boy*, 1890) «went to the people» in a homoerotic way, entering into multiple relationships with young men of modest condition





A Homoerotic Cult

- ▶ Mednyánszky had several homosexual relationships but idealized the one with Bálint Kurdi (1860-1906), a Danube boatman from Vác, Hungary (see portrait by Mednyánszky, date unknown, left). He called him Nyuli (Rabbit) and after his death believed he was a divine incarnation and built a personal and private cult around his grave in Vác

Homoeroticism and Theosophy

- ▶ Mednyánszky could have joined the homosexual circles who fought for some sort of social acknowledgement in Germany and Austria – but he didn't. He was familiar with medical writings on homosexuality, but tried to interpret it in a spiritual, private way through Theosophical lenses. He explained his own homosexuality through karma and reincarnation and believed he could «spiritualize» it by transforming erotic energy into spiritual energy



Mednyánszky , *Resting Vagabonds*, between 1914 and 1918

Josef Váchal



- ▶ Josef Váchal (1884-1969) was the illegitimate son of sportsman Josef Aleš-Lyžec (1862-1927), one of the pioneers of modern skiing. His father introduced Váchal to Theosophy and he joined the Theosophical Society at age 19 in 1903

A Talented Young Artist

- ▶ Born in Milavče, in the region of Pilsen, Váchal was raised by his grandparents in Písek. His father, however, decided to support his study of bookbinding in Prague and put him in touch with his cousin, the celebrated academic painter Mikoláš Aleš (1852-1913). Váchal emerged as a talented young artist, more interested in German Expressionism (see his *Cry of the Masses*, ca. 1901, right) than in Aleš' academic style





Spiritualist Séances

- Váchal (*Séance*, 1918, left) participated in the gatherings in Prague in the studio of Theosophist and sculptor Ladislav Jan Šaloun. Because of his participation in Šaloun's occult experiments, Váchal started experiencing «nocturnal sightings and hearings of beings with misty bodies» and feelings of horrible fear. As he later reported, only «when I began to occupy myself with Spiritualism and even with the devil, my fear ceased»

Spiritualism: A Continued Interest



- ▶ Váchal kept attending spiritualist séances for years, and the theme never really disappeared from his work (left: *Spiritualist Séance*, 1904-1906)*

*On Váchal's occult interests, see Marie Rakušanová, *Josef Váchal. Magie hledání*, Prague and Litomyšl: Paseka, 2014)

Mystics and Visionaries



- Beyond Spiritualism, the Prague Theosophical Lodge introduced Váchal to a larger tradition of Western and Eastern esotericism. In his 1913 book *Mystics and Visionaries* (left), he paid homage to the leading figures of Western esotericism, including Jakob Böhme (1575-1624, right)



Kabbalah

- ▶ Váchal's reading of Kabbalah was also influenced by Blavatsky (*Kabbalah*, 1920, left)

Mystical Cards



- In 1912, as several other artists did in these years, Váchal produced his own set of divination cards, a variation of the Tarot

Váchal and František Bilek



- ▶ Váchal was in touch with the leading exponent of Czech symbolism, František Bilek (1872-1941: *Sphinx* 1902, right). Primarily a sculptor (*Monument to Comenius*, 1926, left), Bilek was not a member of the Theosophical Society but was familiar with its literature

Sursum and Jan Konupek



- ▶ Together with Jan Konupek (1883-1950, left) and others, Váchal founded in Prague in 1910 the Sursum group, devoted to «spiritual and occult» art and often referred to as the second wave of Czech Symbolism

Satanism

- ▶ Váchal was also influenced by Polish novelist Stanisław Przybyszewski (1868-1927), regarded by Per Faxneld as the author who «formulated what is likely the first attempt ever to construct a more or less systematic Satanism». Satanic themes are a constant in Váchal's work (*Invokers of the Devil*, 1909, right)



The Portmoneum



- ▶ Disturbing satanic, as well as Theosophical and Christian, images were painted by Váchal between 1920 and 1924 in the extraordinary murals in the home of collector Josef Portman (1893-1968), in the Czech city of Litomyšl, which he painted while he was writing his *Blood Novel*, a book including allusions to the home

Váchal's Museum in Litomyšl



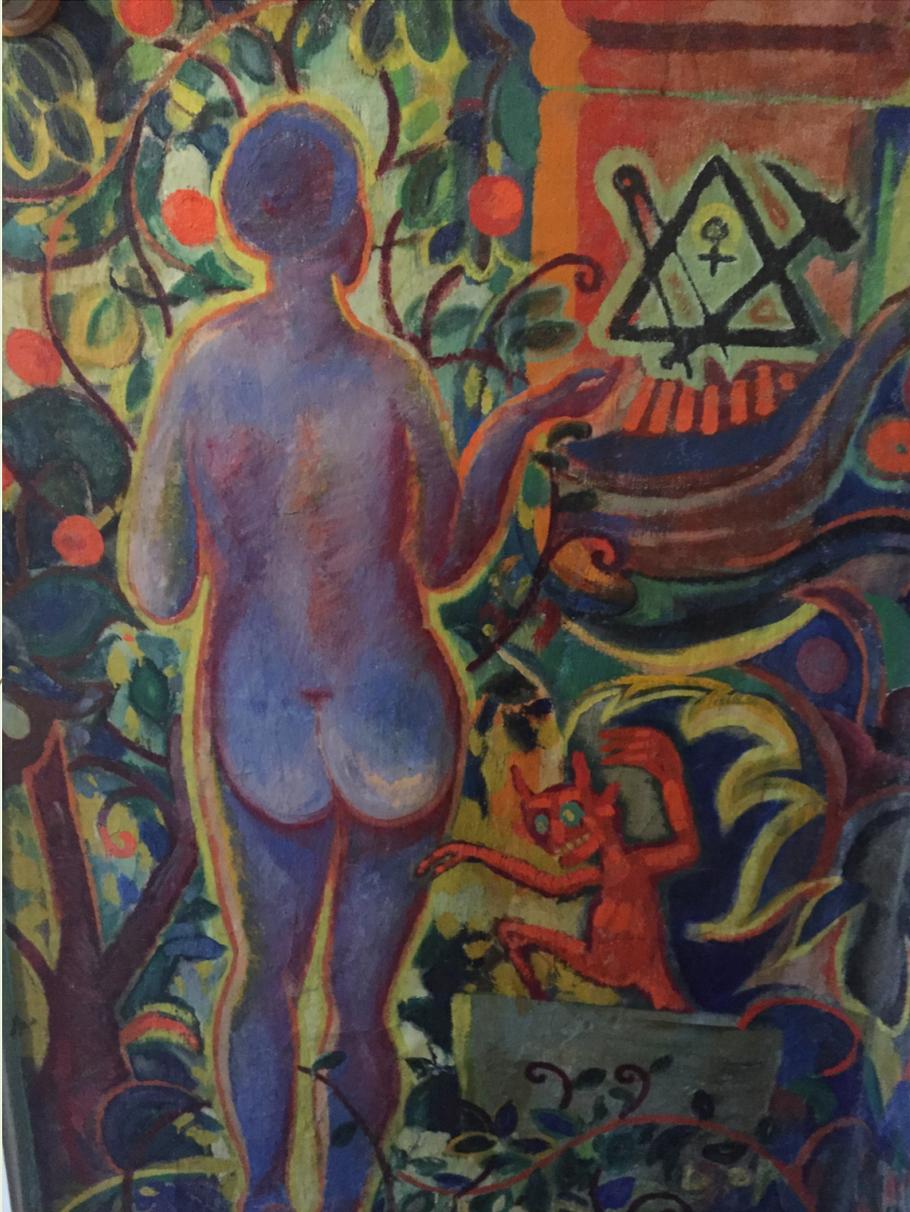
- The home, the Portmoneum, is reminiscent of Aleister Crowley's (1875-1947) Abbey of Thelema in Cefalù, Sicily, but luckily, unlike the Sicilian residence of the British magus, it has been saved from the disrepair into which it fell in Communist times and reopened as a museum in 1993



Entering a Fairy Tale



- ▶ Visiting the Portmoneum is like entering a fairy tale, but demons as well as angels lurk in the shadow and there is no guarantee of a happy end

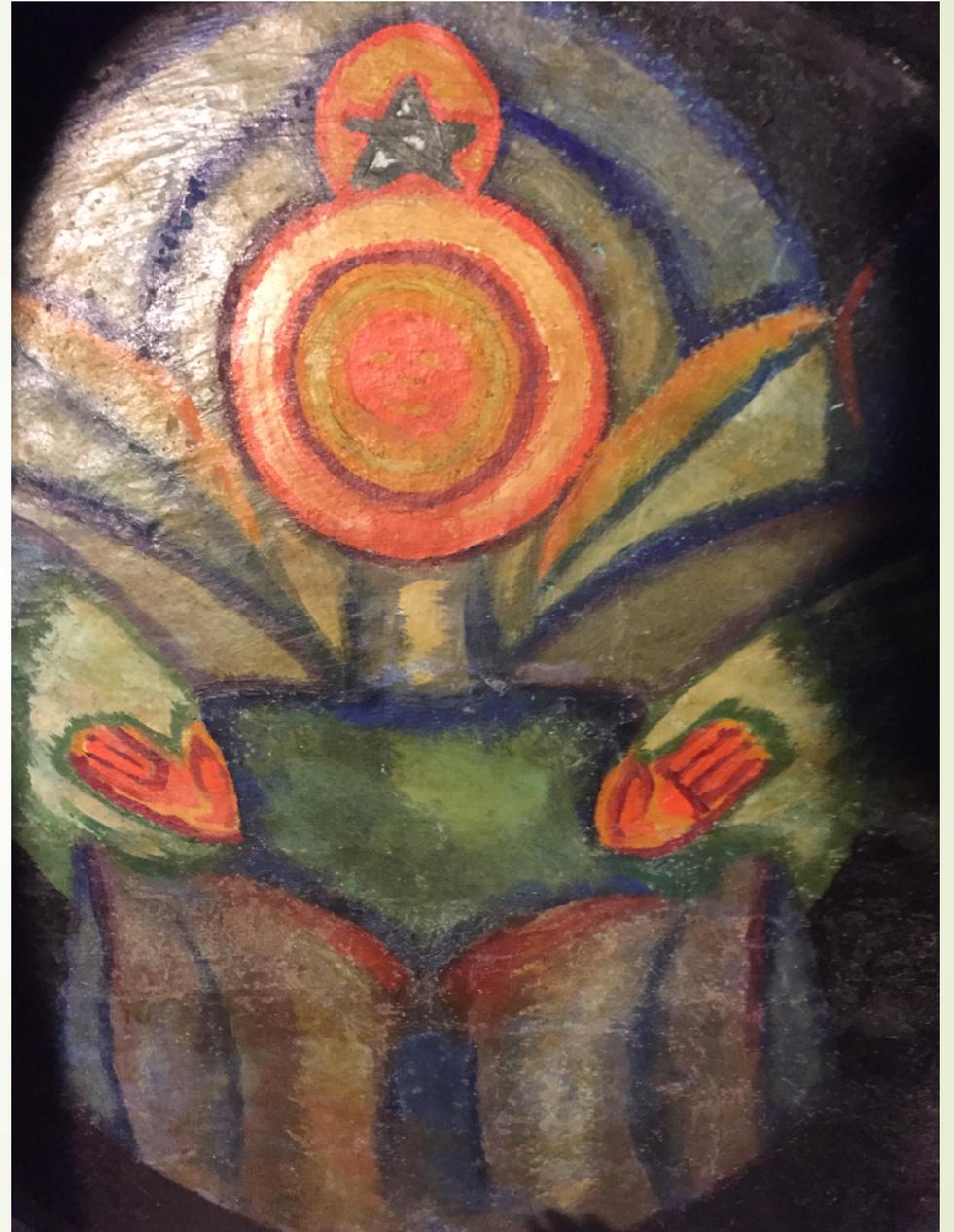


Dangerous Societies

- By the time he decorated the Portmoneum, Váchal had become critical of certain secret societies, and one of the murals (left) alludes to the dangers and shortcomings of some of them

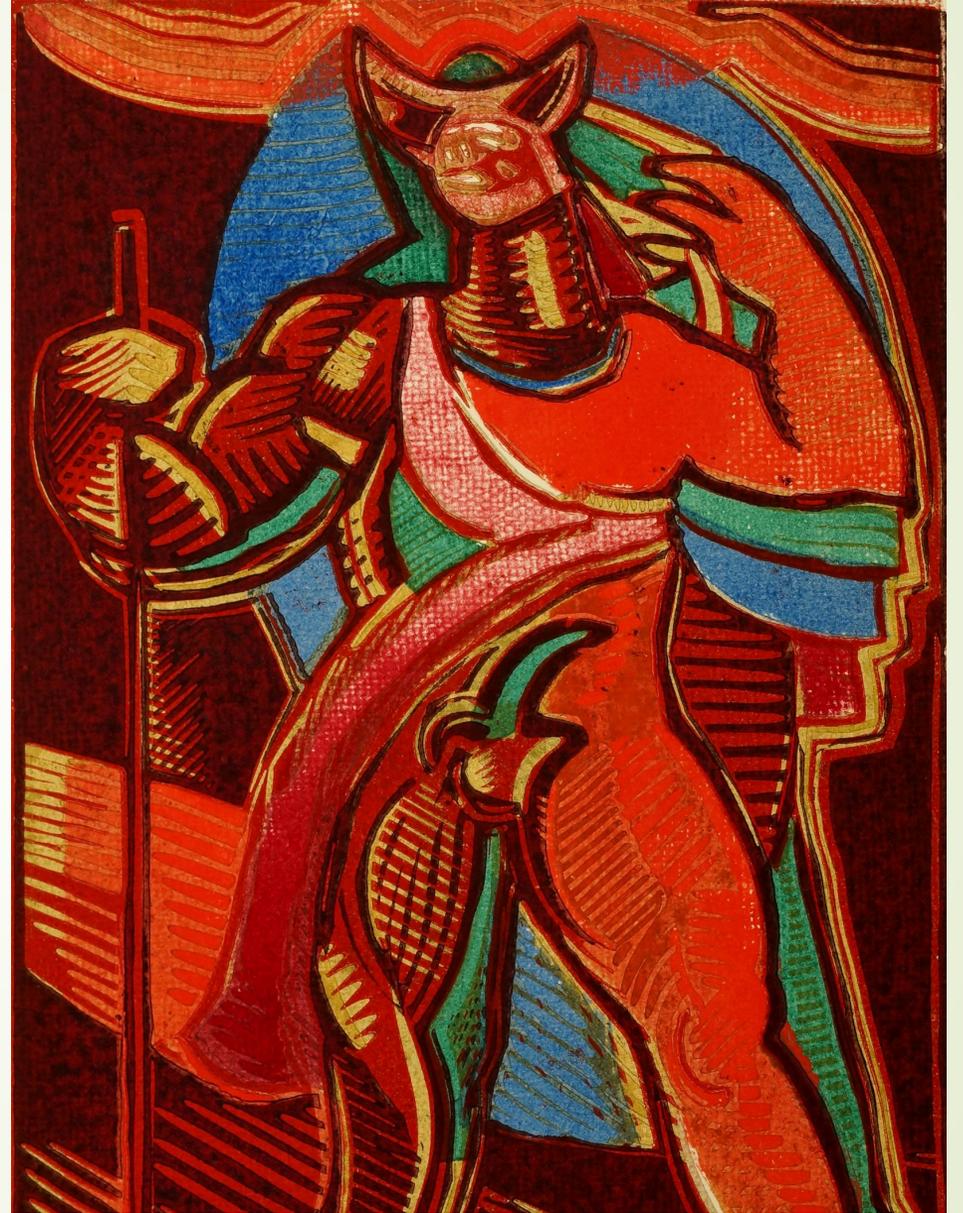
Unity of Religions

- ▶ Facing the previous mural, another image (right) celebrates the Theosophical unity of all great religions, a pacifying theme overcoming certain dangers of the occult



Váchal and Carducci

- ▶ In 1926, Váchal self-published only 17 copies of a richly illustrated edition of *Hymn to Satan*, by the Italian poet Giosuè Carducci (1835-1907). The poem was a hymn to rationalism, but Váchal interpreted Carducci's Satan through the lenses of Blavatsky's comments on Lucifer



Váchal's Satan

- ▶ The book is currently a collector's item, commanding high prices in international auctions



Než v ohnivém voze z země k zemi jedas,
pod gest požehnaném národy si zvedáš,
buráčí a káčí, žehnáš, sílíš, šlejíš,
lidi ze všech zemí Satanu jen vděčí.

Satane, buď pozdraven,
Sáto vzdoru, duchu,
rozumu Ty sílo, pohybe a vzruchu!
Myslenko Ty jasná, sílná beže sporu,
Rozumu myšlenko, vítězná ve sporu!

Možďe dymy kadidla,
svěží přes, díky stěrý,
za to, žes přemohá

Jehovu pátery!



The Last Years



- ▶ Váchal experimented also with sculpture (*Pillars to the library of M. Marten*, 1911, right) but was mostly famous for his prints and ex libris woodcuts (left). During the Communist years, he lived in obscurity and was isolated by the regime, although after the Prague Spring of 1968 he received the medal of «Meritorious Artist» shortly before his death in 1969



Richard Pollak-Karlin



- ▶ Another artist who joined the Theosophical Society was Richard Pollak-Karlin (1867-1942: *Atlantis*, 1914, left). He joined the Society in Vienna in 1906, together with his wife Hilde Pollak- Kotányi (1874-1942)

Martyred Anthroposophists



Richard und Hilde Pollak in Dornach

- ▶ Hilde was also an artist, who eventually became famous for her esoteric embroideries. Both Richard and Hilde joined Anthroposophy, worked at the Goetheanum, and were arrested and killed in Nazi concentration camps

Czech Anthroposophy and the Arts



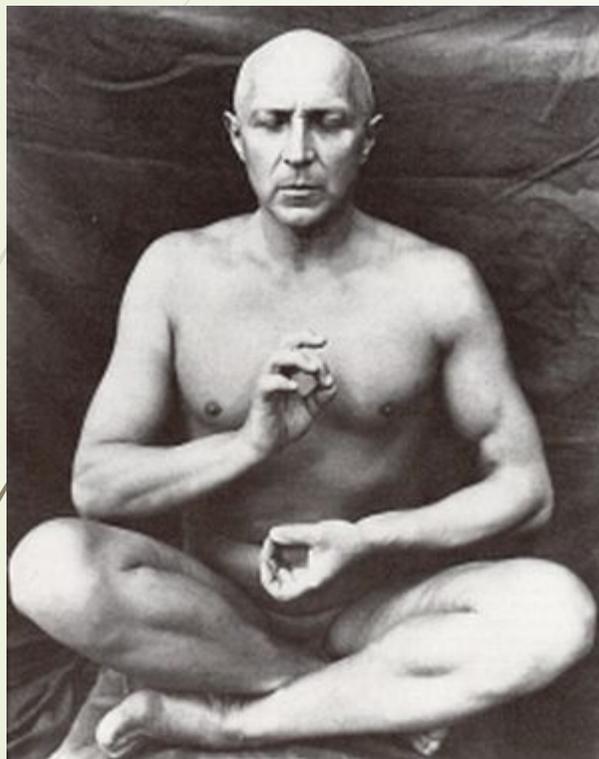
- ▶ Although this paper focuses on Theosophy, it is worth mentioning that several Czech artists joined the Anthroposophical Society, who had been particularly successful in Bohemia, both before and after World War II. They included Richard Teschner (1879-1948), Anton Josef Trčka («Antios», 1893-1940), Josef Prinke (1891-1945), Rudolf Michalik (1901-1993: *The Castle of the St. Grail*, 1931, left), Bogdan Cerovac (1904-1969), Paula Rackwitz-Bulířová (1907-1948), Josef Přikryl (1885-1973), the sculptor Bohumil Josef Jerie (1904-1998), Rudolf Milde (1930-1985), Otakar Hudeček (1924-2007), and Michaela Terčová (1943-)

Photography: František Drtikol

- ▶ Coming back to Theosophy, finally we should mention the internationally acclaimed Czech photographer (right) František Drtikol (1883-1961), a member of the Theosophical Society and later a Buddhist. In 1935, he gave up photography in order to devote himself exclusively to painting and spirituality. During World War II, his home at Spořilov became a center of spiritual training

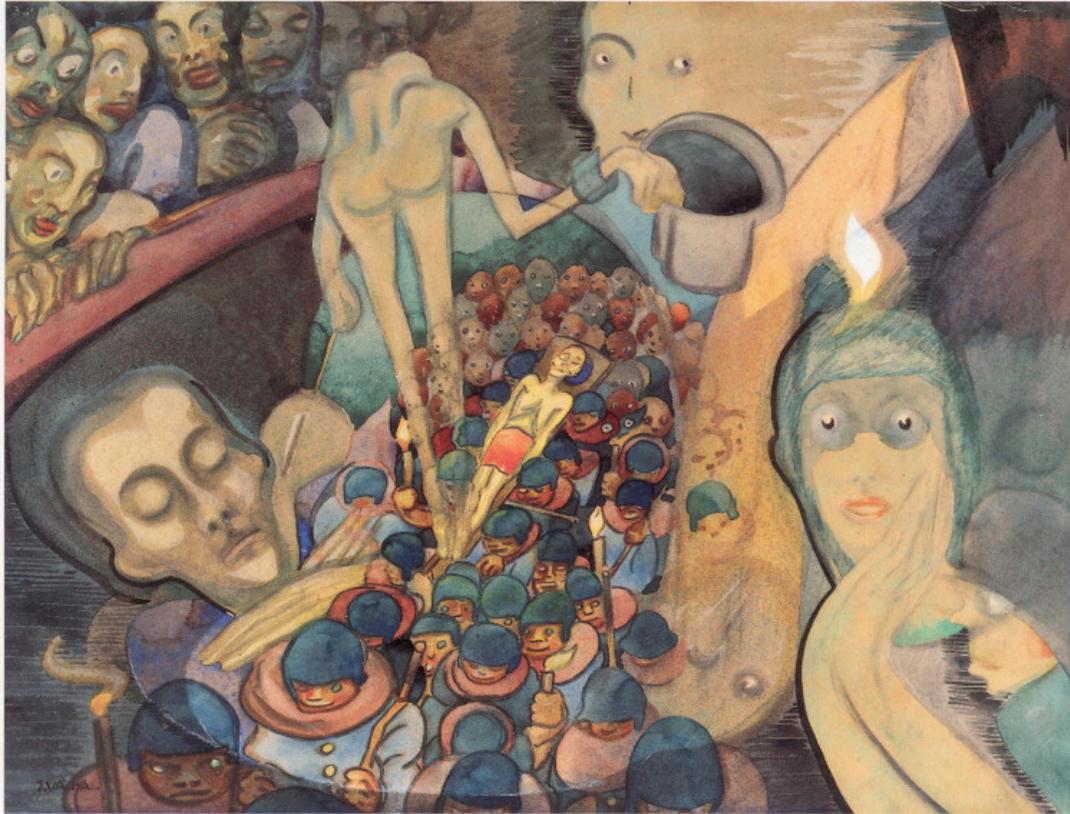


Drtikol, Buddhism, and Yoga



- ▶ Drtikol's activities should be seen within the larger context of the Czech Yoga movement, where controversies existed between followers and opponents of British Theosophist and neo-Hindu teacher Paul Brunton (1898-1981), who visited Prague twice in 1937 and 1947. Drtikol (left) interpreted the Advaita Vedanta of Ramana Maharshi (1879-1950), Brunton's master, through the lenses of Mahayana Buddhism, and regarded Buddhism as a form of esoteric atheism compatible with Communism. Drtikol remained a crucial figure for the rich tradition of «Czechoslovak Yoga-Vedanta»*

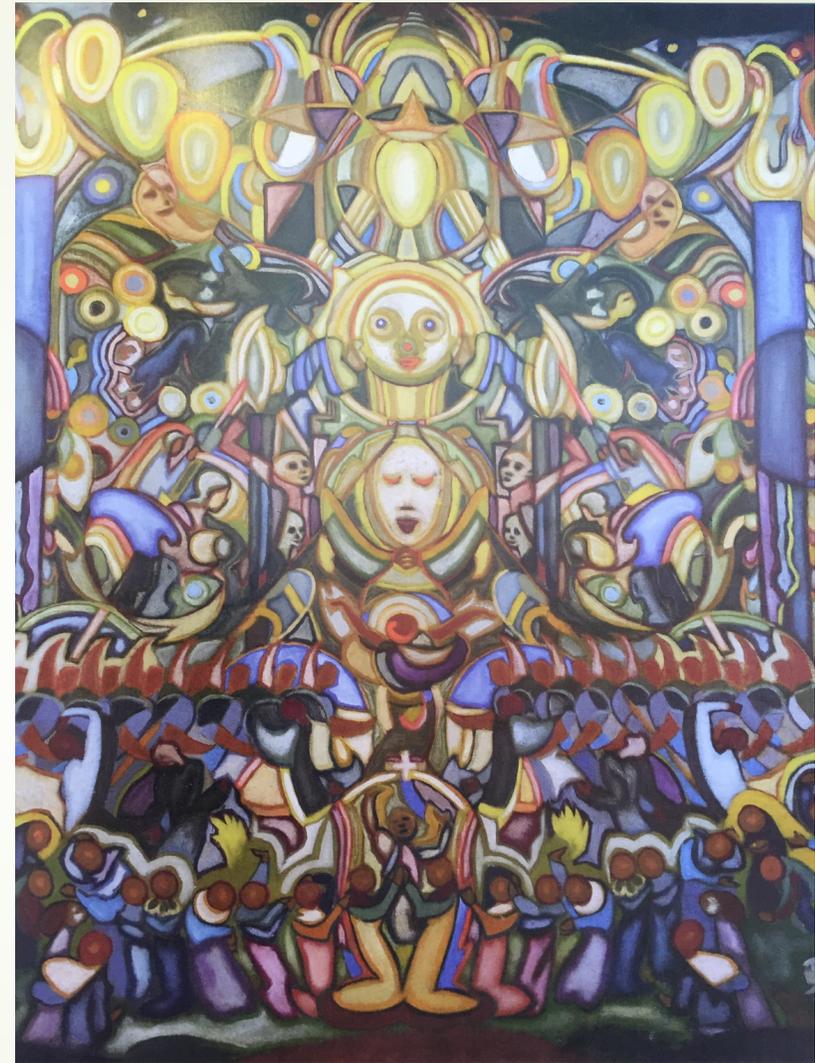
* See Milan Fujda, «Acculturation of Hinduism and the Czech Traditions of Yoga: From Freedom to Totality and Back Again», in András Máté-Tóth – Cosima Rughiniş (eds.), *Spaces and Borders: Current Research on Religion in Central and Eastern Europe*, Berlin and Boston: Walter de Gruyter, 2011, 81-101 (86-93)



Váchal, *Dead Man's Dream* (1918)

In Conclusion

- ▶ As it happened in other countries, Theosophy was a significant influence on Czech modern art, including on such luminaries as Kupka and Mucha. Mednyánszky in Slovakia and Váchal in Bohemia offered idiosyncratic but powerful interpretation of Theosophical themes in their art. As was the case elsewhere, the area did not have a single, coherent «Theosophical art», but the influence of Theosophy was felt in various different currents and trends



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