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Release Date: April 27, 2009

JAROMÍR FUNKE AND THE AMATEUR AVANT-GARDE ON VIEW AT THE NATIONAL GALLERY OF ART, WASHINGTON
MAY 3 THROUGH AUGUST 9, 2009



Jaromír Funke
Spiral, 1924
gelatin silver print
23.3 x 28.4 cm (9 3/16 x 11 3/16 in.)
National Gallery of Art, Patrons' Permanent Fund

The first major exhibition of photographer Jaromír Funke's work outside of Europe in nearly 25 years will be on view at the National Gallery of Art, Washington, from May 3 through August 9, 2009. Some 70 works in *Jaromír Funke and the Amateur Avant-Garde* will reveal his influential role in the Czech and Slovak amateur photography movement in the 1920s and 1930s and will include works by Josef Sudek (1896–1976), one of the best-known Czech photographers worldwide, and Eugen Wiškovský (1888–1964).

"The exhibition places Jaromír Funke's career at the center of an important, if often overlooked, history of amateur photography that developed quickly in central Europe between the wars," said Earl A. Powell III, director, National Gallery of Art. "The Gallery is the only venue for this thought-provoking exhibition with important works

from our collection joined by generous loans from public and private collections."

Exhibition Support

The exhibition is made possible by the generous support of The Ryna and Melvin Cohen Family Foundation and Marcella and Neil Cohen.

Jaromír Funke (1896–1945)

Funke, a law student from a well-to-do family in Kolín, became passionate about photography in 1920 and joined his local amateur club two years later. In 1924, Funke founded the Czech Photographic Society with Josef Sudek, Adolf Schneeberger (1897–1977), and Ludvík Dvořák (1891–1969), promoting modern subjects and proclaiming their allegiance to ideas derived from American photographer Alfred Stieglitz and his circle. From 1924 to 1930, Funke developed an extensive still-life series that depicted materials of darkroom photography: the light bulb from an enlarger, bottles of developer chemicals, mat board, and the hose for washing prints.

In 1931 Funke became a professor of photography at the School of Applied Arts in Bratislava, and then in 1935 at the State Graphic Arts School in Prague. His advertising and design curriculum, modeled on the Bauhaus, emphasized unity of the fine arts, architecture, technology, and design. In 1937 and 1938, Funke made two significant trips to Subcarpathian Ruthenia—a mountainous region now part of Ukraine—that would result in two pivotal series of landscape photography. In the final weeks of World War II the artist died unexpectedly due to illness.

Exhibition Highlights

Jaromír Funke and the Amateur Avant-Garde traces the careers of Funke and his compatriots and reveals how their photographs bridged the aesthetics of the amateur mainstream and the experimental styles of the avant-garde. From the early 1920s and the 1930s—when avant-garde photography became more widespread in Czech culture—to photographs made during World War II, these visionaries followed the path of the committed amateur. They exhibited or published their own prints and shared knowledge of photography but did not make a commercial or artistic living from it.

The first room of the exhibition will include works that established

Funke as a world-class artist, such as photographs from the first nationwide amateur photography salon: *Untitled (Bridge in Kolín)* (1922) and *Staircase in Old Prague* (c. 1922). Rarely exhibited during his career and on view together for the first time in a significant number, darkroom works, including *Spiral* (1924) and *Abstract Photo* (1927–1929), make a profound statement about the mystery of photography.

Throughout the 1930s amateur modernist photography blossomed in Czechoslovakia with talented enthusiasts taking their handheld cameras everywhere. Eugen Wiškovský, a close friend of Funke who wrote theoretical articles on photography, made tightly framed yet emotionally expansive compositions. Several recently discovered exhibition prints by Wiškovský including *Insulator* (1932) and *Portrait* (1935), will be on view.

Classroom studies by several of Funke's pupils and similarly conceived compositions by Jindřich Koch (1896–1934), who taught photography at a sister school to the Bauhaus in Halle, Germany, will be paired in the exhibition. They include *Study with a Cone* (1932) by Miloš Dohnány (1904–1944) and *Untitled (Textile Study)* (1930) by Koch.

Apart from his professional positions, Funke made original contributions to socially committed photography and to surrealism. This experimental, more personal work is represented in his series *Reflections and Time Persists*, and later work depicting urban housing and peasants, seen in *Student Housing, Brno* (1930).

The National Gallery of Art, Washington, owns an important suite of portfolios on Czech cathedrals from Funke's late career; examples from one of these, on the gothic St. Vitus cathedral in Prague, will be on view. They will be presented with rare photographs of St. Vitus taken in 1945 by Funke's contemporary Jiří Jeníček (1895–1963). The studies are part of a set of 72 possibly unique photographs, owned by the National Gallery as well, that were intended for a book on the great cathedral.

The last room of the exhibition will explore Funke's career from the late 1930s through the final weeks of World War II, when the artist suddenly died. Landscape photographs by Funke from Subcarpathian Ruthenia and an example of his related series, *The Unsated Earth* (1940–1944), a mournful reflection on the disappearance of humanity into a bloodsoaked soil during World War II, will be

showcased.

Curator and Related Activities

The exhibition curator is Matthew Witkovsky, curator and chair, department of photography, The Art Institute of Chicago and former associate curator, department of photographs, National Gallery of Art. An exhibition brochure written by Witkovsky will be available to visitors free of charge.

On Sunday, June 28, 2009, Witkovsky will present the lecture "The Curious Case of Czech Photographer Jaromír Funke" in the East Building Auditorium at 2:00 p.m. Gallery talks will be held July 7, 14, 21 and 28 at 2:00 p.m. All gallery talks start in the West Building Rotunda.

In June, the National Gallery of Art will present "The Film Novels of Karel Vachek," a series of four film novels by the director of the documentary department at Prague's legendary FAMU (film school of the Academy of Performing Arts). Vachek has created one of the most original bodies of work in the history of Czech cinema.

Enormous in scope, ambition, and duration, his films are improvisational and intuitive but also highly structured and philosophical. Following 20 years of manual labor from 1968 on, Vachek returned to film in the wake of the Velvet Revolution and proceeded to produce this enormous four-part kaleidoscope of the Czech Republic, post-freedom. Visit

www.nga.gov/press/2009/films_spring_2009.shtm for titles, dates, and times of films.

General Information

The National Gallery of Art and its Sculpture Garden are at all times free to the public. They are located on the National Mall between 3rd and 9th Streets at Constitution Avenue NW, and are open Monday through Saturday from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. and Sunday from 11:00 a.m. to 6:00 p.m. The Gallery is closed on December 25 and January 1. For information call (202) 737-4215 or the Telecommunications Device for the Deaf (TDD) at (202) 842-6176, or visit the Gallery's Web site at www.nga.gov.

Visitors will be asked to present all carried items for inspection upon

entering the East and West Buildings. Checkrooms are free of charge and located at each entrance. Luggage and other oversized bags must be presented at the 4th Street entrances to the East or West Building to permit x-ray screening and must be deposited in the checkrooms at those entrances. For the safety of visitors and the works of art, nothing may be carried into the Gallery on a visitor's back. Any bag or other items that cannot be carried reasonably and safely in some other manner must be left in the checkrooms. Items larger than 17 x 26 inches cannot be accepted by the Gallery or its checkrooms.

For additional press information please call or send inquiries to:

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Biography

MATTHEW S. WITKOVSKY



Matthew S. Witkovsky is curator and chair, department of photography, at The Art Institute of Chicago. He is the former associate curator of photographs at the National Gallery of Art. He received his undergraduate degree in literature from Yale University (1989), and his doctorate in the history of art from the University of Pennsylvania (2002), with a thesis on avant-garde art in the former Czechoslovakia.

Witkovsky has worked in the art world since 1988, first in galleries of contemporary art and vintage photography in New York and Paris, and then at the Philadelphia Museum of Art, where he helped prepare the retrospective *Constantin Brancusi: 1876–1957* (1995). Witkovsky returned to the Philadelphia Museum of Art as interim curator of photographs in 1998–1999. He has published and lectured widely on Czech art and architecture, Dada, and modern and contemporary photography, with articles in *Harvard Design Magazine*, *The Art Bulletin*, and *October*. Witkovsky joined the National Gallery of Art in 2002 to assist in the preparation of the large-scale touring exhibition *Dada* (2006) and was curator of the landmark traveling exhibition, *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945*, in 2007. Witkovsky began his current position at The Art Institute of Chicago in early 2009.

Recent publications include *History of Photography* (guest editor, 2008), the exhibition catalogue for *Foto: Modernity in Central Europe, 1918–1945* (author, 2007), *The Dada Seminars* (associate editor, 2005) and *History of Photography* (guest editor, fall 2005).

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