



BEDŘICH FORMAN (1919–1985)
CZECH GRAPHIC ARTIST, ART PHOTOGRAPHER AND PUBLICIST,
CONNOISSEUR OF VISUAL ART

Dagmar Pospíšilová

Bedřich Forman was born on April 17th 1919 in Prague and since his childhood was predestined to paint and to draw. As early as at the age of twelve, he experimented with using oil paints. His innermost relations to art were cultivated in him by his mother, who was a music teacher. Having graduated from secondary school, Forman started to work as a draughtsman in the graphic department of Gestetner Company in Prague. He worked at duplicating machines, produced pen-and-ink drawings, semitonal drafts and even photographs. Later on he continued working in the art department while at the same time studying in a private art studio. He acquainted himself with various special graphic techniques and at about the same time he succeeded in finishing his own works – book editing, book jackets etc. During World War II, the Gestetner Company was seized by the Germans and shortly afterwards, Bedřich Forman was forced to quit his job and was sent to a concentration camp for the latter part of the war.

After the war, Forman once again became involved with cultural life and devoted himself to graphic art and photography. He was a member of the Union of Czechoslovak Artists. His activities were closely connected to that of his brother Werner. They both dealt with three-dimensional photography and developed good relations with art historians, including friendships with leading artists of that period such as Ludvík Kuba, Emil Filla, professor V. V. Štech, as well as with members of the Academy of Sciences such as František Lexa or Jaroslav Průšek among many others.

Forman and his brother discovered the fascinating world of oriental art, which became an everlasting source of inspiration. They cooperated with the Oriental Institute, the Czechoslovak Academy of Sciences and with the Náprstek Museum, where they helped to organize many of exhibitions.¹ Friends, travellers and collectors of art e.g. Joe Hloucha, showed them their collections and owing to these contacts and influences, the Forman brothers naturally started to appreciate, love and collect non-European art. They travelled all over the world, visiting China in 1956 and 1959, Egypt in 1957, Mongolia and Vietnam in 1959, Burma in

¹ See Kandert, J., *A Survey of Bedřich's Forman Cooperation with Náprstek Museum*, p. 6.

1960 and Syria in 1982. They visited also India and Indonesia twice in 1972 and 1982, taking the opportunity to visit Thailand and Singapore as well. The Forman brothers took many photographs from the field and also have many photographs in leading world museums. Thanks to their efforts, many art collections, both public and private, were published.

Bedřich Forman was an artist, art lover and connoisseur of culture. One of the main contributions of his fruitful life can be described as making cultural treasures widely known to the public. With everlasting energy he encouraged experts, Czech and foreign specialists and orientalists to cooperate in publishing activities. Thus, tens of books on Asian and African cultures were published and the names of both brothers are related to innumerable publications on art. Their thematic variety is unusual and covers vast territories of the Far East – China, Japan and Korea, of South Eastern Asia, India and ancient Mesopotamia, Egypt, medieval Iran, Africa and pre-Columbian America. Non-European cultures stood in the centre of their interest but on various occasions they concentrated also on art of other territories such as Byzantium or other periods such as prehistory or ancient world. The Formans' publications on art are still, in spite of great progress in photography technologies, quite unique. Because of this, they were awarded with many prizes and published in different language versions.² They succeeded in showing an object's beauty through a single symbol or a discreet detail.

Bedřich Forman died after a short illness on the 6th of August 1985, in Prague. He left behind him his life's work, important not only for its scope, but most of all for its message.

The Collections of Bedřich Forman in the Náprstek Museum, Prague

The Náprstek Museum has been able either to buy or to be granted about 550 objects from Mr. Forman's collection thanks to his wife, Mrs. Ludmila Formanová who has been lovingly taking care of her late husband's heritage and has been seeing to that it will be preserved in the Czech museums' collections. One part of the collection was also granted or sold to the Asian Collection of the National Gallery, Prague.³

The **Ancient Near East** is represented in the Náprstek Museum by ten objects. This sphere did not belong among Mr. Forman's priorities, nevertheless his true collector's instinct enabled him to find remarkable masterpieces in various European antiquity auctions which are still part of the Náprstek Museum Collection of the Ancient Near East.

The collection from territories of today's Iran, Egypt and Morocco consist of twenty earthenware fragments and vessels and are also very interesting. They are valuable fragments of earthenware or fritware, painted in lustre over opaque whitish or blue glaze dating back to the 10th century. A lobed bowl with moulded decoration showing human heads from the 12th–13th centuries⁴ can be also counted among the valuable items. A sculpture of a pigeon made of forged steel and decorated with gold inlays belongs to a rare tradition of non-religious figurative sculpture found in Islamic art. It was made in Iran during the 19th century. The dish decorated with inscriptions and geometrical, floral and figural motifs originated from the same region and dates back to the 19th century as well.⁵

² See *Selected Bibliography*, p. 7.

³ See pp. 73–80.

⁴ See pp. 95–104.

⁵ See pp. 87–94.

The **Indian collection** contains twenty seven items, including votive stone tablets and terracotta and metal sheets depicting various Hindu gods. The individual sculptures or their fragments show e.g. the Hindu god Shiva elaborated in the style of the Central India of the 11th century. A head of a beautiful woman with a turban decorated with ornaments and made of terracotta recalls the Gupta style of the 2nd–4th century. A terracotta tale from a brick temple in Bengal, Eastern India, represents the 19th century production. In many ways, the Indian collection is still waiting for scientific evaluation. A Nepalese temple lamp⁶ represents a long tradition of metal casting in this area, as well as two Jain metal objects originating from Rajasthan, Western India, in the 18th century.

Objects from **Indonesia**⁷ form the largest part of Forman's collections. Bedřich Forman especially appreciated Indonesian textile which amounts to 70 pieces in the Náprstek Indonesian collection. The main part of the collection is comprised of Javanese batiks from the production centres in Yogya and Solo. There are also batiks decorated in the European style as well as technically complicated songkets from Sumatra and ikats from Kalimantan and Sumba. The island of Bali is represented by a ritual figure made of coins. A rectangular box made of a hammered out copper plate and the bronze mirror handle picturing a charming relief of woman's figure, originating in Central Java between the 10th and 11th centuries are also very interesting pieces. Further on the collection includes a ritual animal sculpture from Sumatra, kris hilts carved in bone and wood, and four nutcrackers made of cast brass with iron blades from Bali, Eastern Java, Sumatra, and one nutcracker with particularly interesting detail from Kalimantan.⁸

The Chinese collection consists of about twenty five objects including outstanding wooden carvings of the Kuan-jin bodhisattva and several specimens of temple decorations. Bedřich Forman's collection also includes tomb ceramics with a lion motif, some interesting specimens of glazes from the Song dynasty (960–1279) and china from unofficial furnaces made during the last three centuries.⁹

The largest part of the collection consists of buddhist small-scale votive reliefs called tsa-tsa (more than 300 pieces) which originated in various parts of **Tibet, Mongolia and Thailand**.¹⁰

Japan is represented in the collection only by several bone hairpins from Nara as well as two tourist maps from the 1930s.

The African collection includes about sixty five items.¹¹ Bedřich Forman gathered them in various ways. For example, in Egypt he discovered several fragments of medieval ceramics and during an archeological and ethnological expedition to the Dogon people he attained a set of cotton fabric samples, a winding skirt, ceramic fragments and several wood carvings. He also managed to obtain a wooden antelope mask of the Kurumba people as well as some Bambar puppets.

America, specifically the regions of Mexico and Peru, is represented by 11 objects, mostly ceramic vessels, the head of a deity and also some anthropomorphic sculptures.

⁶ See pp. 51–57.

⁷ See pp. 27–49.

⁸ See Pospíšilová, D., *Cutters for Areca Nuts*, Annals of the Náprstek Museum, 25, 2004, pp. 1–16.

⁹ See pp. 81–86.

¹⁰ See pp. 59–72.

¹¹ See pp. 11–16, 17–25.