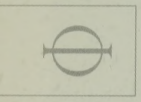
PHAIDON

JOSEF SUDEK 55

Ian Jeffrey



JOSEF SUDEK 55

Self-portrait, 1964

Josef Sudek is one of the most mysterious of all the great photographers. His is a personal, even a private vision, yet one which makes use of the most commonplace materials that might appear in a kitchen or a working studio: a vase on a window ledge, a facetted glass tumbler, a marine shell, a loaf of bread, a frosted pane of glass. Out of doors, he photographed the landscapes with which he was familiar: the parks and gardens of Prague and, during the 1950s, the suburbs of the city, including its builders' yards and tram termini. The key to an understanding of Sudek's art, however, lies not so much in any list of his subject matter and topics, but in the concept of 'available light'. Sunlight, even if mediated by foliage or vapour, revealed its cast of objects, places and spaces, and the viewer, represented by the camera, perceived these acts of revelation. It was a spiritual approach to art and photography, and one which revered natural light. The artist's work, under these terms of reference, was to make acknowledgements and to give thanks; and the process was justified and pushed forward by a sense that neither life nor beauty could be taken for granted.

Sudek was born in 1896 in Kolín, a town on the river Elbe 50 kilometres (30 miles) east of Prague. His father, a house painter, died when Sudek was three and he grew up in the nearby town of Kutná Hora. He had little success at school, 'and everybody predicted I'd wind up on the gallows or if I was lucky I'd become a shepherd'. In fact, in 1911, he was apprenticed to a bookbinder and seems to have continued there until 1913. Somehow he became involved in photography at around this time, although the sources give little away as to how this actually happened; much of what we know about him derives from interviews and reminiscences. However, there were photographic connections within the Sudek family; one of his cousins in Kolín was a professional photographer, and it

was in his atelier that Josef's elder sister, Božena Sudková, learned the trade. It was probably she who taught him the rudiments of photography, and she continued to assist him throughout his career, eventually moving into his studio after the death of their mother. Anna Fárová, who has published much of what we know about Sudek, describes Božena Sudková as 'a real professional photographer. Technically she could manage much better than he.'

Years later, while in conversation with Emil Filla, the great Czech Cubist painter, Sudek recalled his early taste for patriotic kitsch. Only later, he said, did he come to Picasso, to which Filla replied that it was better that than the other way round. His youthful patriotism urged him to volunteer to join the army, and although declared unfit on his first attempt he was taken on in 1915. He served on the Italian front during World War I: 'The landscape was beautiful – as long as there was no shooting.' In 1916 he was badly wounded by a grenade, which resulted in the loss of his right arm and three years in hospital: 'Of course I did not enjoy that, but I was consoling myself that at least I did not lose my head. That would have been worse.' What should he do, a one-armed ex-soldier? The initial choice seemed to be between running a tobacconist's shop or taking a job in an office, and one such job was offered to him: 'I didn't want the job – because it was springtime and the sparrows were chirping.' Instead he decided to become a photographer, and in 1920 joined the Club of Amateur Photographers in Prague. In 1922, he entered the School of Graphic Arts in Prague on a two-year course where he was taught by Karel Novak, described by Sudek as 'a noble gentleman, intelligent, you could tell right away, because he withstood the way cursing and statements had stayed in my vocabulary from the war. I also liked the fact that he would show a collection of photographs and say nothing.' Thus the ex-soldier little by little entered into the ranks of art, even

though he appeared – and continued to appear – a rough diamond. Sonja Bullaty, a concentration camp survivor and his assistant in the 1940s, describes him in a book as 'a man of the people' and tells a story of his exclusion from a major opening in the 1930s by a policeman who mistook him for a tramp.

Sudek was vague when recalling his art education. Novak belonged to the old school and had his students photograph still lifes in what Sudek remembered as 'the so-called "modern" style ... it was so artificial'. That must have been the style of 1900: fruit carefully arranged on flat dishes and taken with a soft-focus lens. Nevertheless, despite Novak's old-fashioned ways, Sudek found himself as an artist during those two years at the School of Graphic Arts. Principally, he discovered that he was an artist of contained spaces. His earlier pictures, from around 1918, often feature wide open spaces, with horizons punctuated by trees and distant houses and the sky piled with clouds. In 1922, he began to imagine the picture space as a delimited area of darkness, almost as a theatre of shadows clarified in segments by shafts of sunlight. The cameraman withdrew to a discreet distance leaving the stage, with its dappled lighting, to the passers-by of Prague or the people of Kolín relaxing by the river on a Sunday afternoon.

Sudek's first photographic mode was pastoral, and it remained his preferred way of making pictures. The inhabited world, in all its variety, was subject to a kind of benign and unifying light. Soft focus denied objects their particularity, it softened conversation and stilled the hubbub of the streets – the screeching of tramwheels which even then were a feature of life in Prague. Arcadian imagery must have appealed to him after his experiences on the front line, and some of his finest pictures from the early 1920s were made in the Veterans' Hospital in

Prague. These are of men seated at tables, reading and talking sociably in the dusty light of their ancient hospital. At that stage in his career, Sudek was still a conventional picture-maker working to a tested formula: a deep stage of shadowed space, raking light and participants lost in thought or engrossed by the matter to hand. He might easily have continued along these lines, getting others to act out the central roles in his pastoral dramas. Instead, he decided to take on the principal role himself and to dispense with the invalids and other characters who had acted for him. Later, when he returned to the pastoral mode after a long period as a modernist during the late 1920s and 1930s, he had the same vision but this time unmediated, experienced through his own eyes.

Events and influences crowded in on the young photographer. Under the influence of Karel Novak, he had mastered the graceful and dreamy 'modern' style of 1900. By 1924, however, another kind of hard-edged modernism had been brought to Prague from the USA by Dr D. J. Růžička, a Czech-American photographer of skyscrapers and the new streamlined product. Růžička's advice to Sudek, which he subsequently took to heart, was to '"expose for the shadows, the rest will come by itself" – he was right ... But how to master the technique, that I did not know yet.' His third great influence in those early years was Jaromír Funke, also born in 1896, described by Sudek as an intellectual and as the representative of the avant-garde Czech photographers. Together with Funke and some others, Sudek founded the Czech Photographic Society in 1924: 'We set up in opposition to our fathers' generation and protested against the artistic tendencies in photography. We dedicated ourselves to photography as a documentary medium, we advocated the integrity of the negative and energetically opposed all manipulation and complicated techniques that came

under the heading of "artistic processes", such as bromoil, carbon, gum-prints, etc., and we also rejected retouching and aftertreatment of the negative.' How comprehensively all of this happened is a moot point, for at the time of the founding of the new society, Sudek was beginning to take rather romantic pictures of building work then in progress at the city's cathedral of St Vitus. On the completion of the building work in 1928, these were reproduced in a very limited edition of 120 copies by the publishing firm of Družstevní práce. Some pictures show work scenes with sacred spaces above and gangways, tools and building materials below – Sudek always liked to remark on walking, as if he enjoyed the idea of picking his way across complicated surfaces.

Artist or not, Sudek still had to earn a living, and from 1927 until 1936 he worked for Družstevní práce, principally on the illustrated magazine *Panorama*. It was an important period for him which brought both material gain and intellectual recognition. Družstevní práce was really, in Sudek's words, 'a combine that provided its members not only with an excellent choice of high-quality books, but also with articles'. He also made advertising pictures of glass and porcelain objects for Ladislav Sutnar, a well-known Czech designer: 'One learns everywhere. I made advertising photos too, shoes for instance; it was interesting work for its detail, its accuracy. I also photographed underwear – women's was fun, men's less so.' He remarked of these years that, as soon as he had earned enough money to pay for his rent and food, he closed the studio and worked for himself: 'You should never lose contact with that which is close to your heart; at the most you can make an interruption for half a year. If it is longer you lose the thread and never find it again.' In 1975–6 he recalled a friend of his youth, the artist František Tichý, who moved to Paris in 1930 and 'earned too much money during World War II'. Tichý, Sudek

concluded, 'lost his real self and never found time to work because he had so many visitors'.

In 1927, Sudek moved into a studio in Újezd, a street in Prague parallel to the river Vltava. Sonja Bullaty, in her monograph of 1978, described it as a wooden shack. She added that it was incredibly cluttered, 'like an antique shop with a feeling of home' – although this was in the 1940s after almost twenty years of settling in. Shack or not, it is an important element in Sudek's story, for it seems to have served as a retreat or world apart. Despite his rough military background, he was, it seems, a shy man averse to public functions – including the openings of his own exhibitions. The studio was also a place where he could indulge his liking for music; he bought his first phonograph in 1928 and was a devotee all his life. Indeed, his last trip abroad, in 1926, seems to have been at the behest of friends in the Czech Philharmonic Orchestra undertaking a tour of Italy. (According to his account, he quit the tour to look for the site where he lost his arm, spending weeks on the loose in Italy.)

The Sudek story, vague at the best of times, now becomes increasingly hard to follow; in fact, he seems to have withdrawn from public life altogether during the late 1930s. Perhaps he had to. In 1933, he participated in a group show on 'Social Photography' organized by the Left Front, and in 1936 in an International Exhibition at the modernist Mánes exhibition hall in Prague, which included László Moholy-Nagy, John Heartfield, Man Ray, Alexander Rodchenko and Max Alpert. Both Rodchenko and Alpert represented the USSR, and Heartfield was a staunch anti-fascist. Sudek, even if principally by association, was identifiably an artist on the political Left. Added to that was the fact that

his close friend Emil Filla was arrested upon the German occupation of Prague in 1938 and committed to prison for the next six years. It must have seemed advisable to keep a low profile during this period.

Asked about his life between 1939 and 1945 he said simply that he continued photographing Prague; above all the Castle, which was the subject of two books he published after the war. Around 1940, he decided to work only with contact prints after he came across a photographic reproduction from around 1900 of a statue in Chartres Cathedral. This contact print, about 30 x 40 cm, impressed him greatly and from that day on he made no more enlargements. In the same recollection he said that, at the time he came across the Chartres picture, he was reproducing paintings in a gallery or museum. According to Anna Fárová, he reproduced art pieces for the National Gallery in Prague from the 1920s onwards, and in his lifetime made between 10,000 and 20,000 reproductions. It may have been in this context that he met Emil Filla who, in addition to being a painter, was also an expert who bought art for the national collections.

When not reproducing art works or photographing the Castle, Sudek took pictures in his own studio: still lifes and studies of the studio window. These apparently simple images are among his best known. This is how he commented on them: 'When I began photographing my window during the war, I discovered that very often something was going on under the window which became more and more important to me. An object of some kind, a bunch of flowers, a stone – in short, something separated this still life and made an independent picture. I believe that photography loves banal objects, and I love the life of objects. I am sure you know the fairytales of Andersen: when the children go to bed, the objects come to life, toys for example. I like to tell stories about the life of

inanimate objects, to relate something mysterious: the seventh side of a dice.' These pictures of vases with flowering shoots and leaves often show nothing more than condensation with the shapes of the garden dimly visible beyond. They might almost have been taken by someone held in detention, whose only access to the outside world was via a small window, sometimes partly obscured. Through such a window the detainee might just about register the passage of the seasons, signified by apple blossoms or by traces of frost and snow. In one picture, washing hangs on a line beyond the veil of condensation: a sign of warmth or drying weather. It is the most restrained photography imaginable, almost elemental, and appropriate to the constraints under which Sudek and his contemporaries existed during the war years. He continued the series of window pictures through into the 1950s, by which time they had disclosed all sorts of symbolic possibilities: the bent apple tree in his garden, for instance, had lost one of its major branches and could easily be taken for a figure representing Sudek himself; likewise, a clear glass or vase of water might mean sustenance, just as condensation was a sign of the bodily warmth and breath of the inmates of the studio at No.432 Újezd.

He took other, deeply melancholic pictures of the wooded cemeteries of Prague and of the Castle gardens. He explained that many of his landscapes were unpeopled because, by the time he had set up his equipment, pedestrians had been and gone. But it is just as likely that he was committed to a particular vision of the city being somehow depopulated. A recurring motif in his pictures, through the 1940s and into the 1950s, is that of the empty bench or chair turned towards a vista screened by trees and branches. The pictures can often look like memorials or tableaux dedicated to absent friends. Once upon a time, the pictures seem to intimate, other eyes looked at these romantic landscapes –

and Sudek might well have had that in mind for, although only in his fifties, he had lived through two substantial wars and seen the friends of his youth scattered. In another reminiscence, he discussed his friendship with Otto Rothmayer, the senior architect of Prague Castle during the 1930s, whom he came to know during the war: 'He was isolated, the last of his generation, and he badly needed to talk to someone. I visited him often, and we sat either in his garden or his house with its huge tiled stove. We were friends right up to his death.' The friendship had developed because Sudek had wanted to take pictures of Rothmayer's garden, of which he had heard by reputation. Many of these were taken after Rothmayer's death and feature empty chairs, as if in homage to those discussions of the 1940s and 1950s, and they subsequently appeared under the heading 'The Garden of the Magician'. It was Rothmayer who designed Sudek's ambitious book of panoramas of 1959, *Praha Panoramatická*, and his retrospective exhibition of 1963, although that exhibition was criticized by contemporaries (Anna Fárová has called it 'too black, too sad ... too artistic').

In 1956, Sudek's career was anthologized in a retrospective published by the State Publishing House. In 1959, the same organization published *Praha Panoramatická*, his most substantial work in photography, although not one that he makes very much of in his memoirs. He recalled that he had been searching for a panoramic camera for some time and, during World War II, found one in a small town in Moravia. He referred to it as 'a Kodak 1894' – more than likely the No.4 Panoram Kodak, the first Kodak panoramic camera which was introduced in 1899. It had two shutter speeds and made negatives of 10 x 30 cm. He seems to have begun his panoramic project – which was nothing less than a comprehensive record of Prague as cityscape – around 1950. His

assistant, Jiří Toman, described the taking of the panoramas as 'an incredible sports activity. We'd leave at 9.30am at the latest and be back after sunset. Breakfast in the morning and then only photographing. Three or more cameras, material, a darkroom for the panoramic camera, lenses, tripod, etc.'

Praha Panoramatická is anything but spectacular. It has a backstage look. A commentator in 1956 wondered that Sudek's pictures could be acceptable to the orthodox and the powerful for they contained not 'a single shock-worker, May Day Parade, record-breaking milkmaid'. The panoramas are just as diffident with respect to shock-workers (i.e. Communist workforce heroes), yet they do introduce work sites: small wooden sheds adjacent to gardens and fields, and industrial yards behind closed wooden gates. The Prague of the panoramas is also a city of sport, to judge from the patches of beaten earth which crop up from time to time with canted goalposts. The full set of 284 pictures looks as if it might have been put together by Samuel Beckett, responsible for the scenarios, in collaboration with Alberto Giacometti, in charge of distant pedestrians. What is to be learned from the panoramas is that other people, although they may not matter very much with respect to History (represented by the spires and towers of the city itself), do live mysterious private lives. Sudek was interested in what remained when the tide of topicality had receded. The art of the panoramas is remarkably understated, as if Sudek wished to admit only to what had been tried and tested in person. There may be an idea of Prague as a city of fine churches and opera houses, but the actualities recorded by Sudek's ancient panoramic camera are made up of earthen tracks and cobbled pavements.

Sudek, from the wartime window pictures onwards, was an existentialist in his art, bearing witness to the here and now. In this respect, the panoramic

format, with its stress on foreground details, was just right. Perhaps he discussed some of these issues in his unrecorded conversations with Emil Filla and Otto Rothmayer. Art, it seems, was born out of experience and not from abstract principles: this appears to be the import of Sudek's later years. Towards the end, he occupied himself with a study of the composer Janáček's countryside around Hukvaldy in the eastern part of Moravia, just south of Ostrava. His picture-book *Janáček-Hukvaldy* came out in 1971, although the pictures had been taken years before: 'They came from a time when I was in love with the music of Leoš Janáček, and I created it from a feeling of friendship. I told myself that if Janáček had such beautiful music, he had to have a beautiful landscape too – where the music came from – and that I should go there and take a look.' He appears to have taken several looks annually, which must have involved some effort, as Hukvaldy is a long way from Prague. Janáček (d.1928) believed in speech melodies: 'As the person talked to me in a conventional conversation, I felt, I *heard* that, inside himself, the person perhaps wept. Sounds, the intonation of human speech, indeed of every living being, have had for me the deepest truth. And you see – this was my *need in life*. The whole body has to work.' This was from an interview with Janáček in the literary publication *Literární svet*, on 8 March 1928. Sudek, in his long romantic phase from the late 1930s on, could well have taken his cue from Janáček, substituting the blossoms of Prague for the 'speech melodies' noted by the composer. He must have known Janáček's writings too, where everything possible is set to music; not just speech melodies, but even 'the chord of stalagmites covered with hoarfrost' (a quote from an article of 1922, 'Wells and Fountains').

It would be tempting to leave Sudek in his Czech environment, in his studio and darkroom at Újezd, from which he moved in 1959 to studio nearer to the Castle.

Yet it would be a mistake to set him apart as a Czech character actor. *Praha Panoramatická* came out in 1959, Robert Frank's *Les Américains* in 1958 and René Burri's *Die Deutschen* in 1962: three of the outstanding photographic collections of that era. Frank's book thrives on metaphors: totemic juke-boxes, sacred filling stations, resplendent names – Belle Isle and Ann Arbor. Among these splendours of the imagination – the equivalent to the domes and spires of Prague in Sudek's art – disconcerted citizens circulate and wait, sometimes made uneasy by the photographer in their midst. Frank liked to remark on traces of grandeur embedded in a dingy actuality. Burri, another Swiss, took pictures in Germany in the late 1950s of a culture which looked like a negative of the Third Reich, bereft of energy, spectacle and collective will. Sudek, too, dealt with distinctions of this kind. Civilization, with its monuments, had withdrawn somewhere towards the edge of consciousness, leaving him with what remained – with the backyards and tram termini of the panoramic series.

Although his intentions cannot be established with any certainty, there are clues. *Praha Panoramatická*, for example, opens with pictures of two sculpted heads of Bacchus and Flora (at least, of a smiling young woman) from the sculpture museum in Prague, the Lapidarium – subject of another of his books in 1958. It closes with a picture of what might be a babyish Silenus playing a pipe. It looks as if he might have wanted to put the extended whole, with its acres of cobblestones and miles of tramways, under a classical sign. This would not have been so odd for someone of Sudek's generation, for there were those who believed in the 1920s that the Slavs, and the Czechs in particular, were of Mediterranean origin. Prague Castle, as it was refurbished in the 1920s, was considered to be a new Knossos, an unfortified temple presiding

over a civilized community. Sudek's suggestion, framed and supported by Bacchus and Silenus, is of a classicism with a hedonistic bias, of Prague as a city of material delights.

But why, finally, does Sudek matter? As a maker of an integrated personal world centred around his studio, a place which he described in a letter to one of his collectors in the 1970s as 'a bordello [i.e. a mess], where you can't lose anything but neither will you find it'. The world he made in and around this chaos was constituted of the woods and walks of Hukvaldy, the structures and spaces of Prague, and the environs of his studio. It was a personal space, known, tested and vouched for: a territory, in fact, and one of the last of its kind, a modernist's world. Sudek was one of the last artists, maybe *the* last, to bear witness to such a place.

Winter in the Village, 1918. Few of Sudek's very early pictures survive. Most of them were taken with considerable depth-of-field showing continuous scenes such as this. It is what might be called a documentary landscape in that it describes and itemizes a topic objectively. Afterwards, he began to compose in relatively shallow spaces, none of which opened on to infinity as this one does. Infinity was a romantic idea; it suggested that the here and now in which the picture was taken was no more than an inconsequential fragment in the very much greater order of things.

Landscape Study, c.1918. In his later images, Sudek emphasized a viewpoint that was very close to his subject matter. He tended to see landscape either as a series of screens arranged parallel to the surface of a picture or as an accumulation of details: irregular pavements and rough ground to be traversed. In such early pictures as this, by contrast, he remarks on disappearance and absence; the sun goes down and the surface details of the earth, such as that stretch of woodland, seem to sink below the horizon. The earth curves away out of sight, moving towards infinity.

Prague Street Vendors, 1920. Street traders were preferred subjects in photography from the 1880s through to the 1930s. They were picturesque and static enough to give the photographer plenty of time and space. Sometimes they represented working life, but Sudek was always more interested in the delineation of the scene. The ground in this instance is calibrated by a variety of cut stones. Atmospheric shading takes care of the far distance, but the whole centres on and accentuates that still-life tableau sparsely arranged on the trestle table which the two women tend.

Morning at the Museum, 1922. Those look like easels to the left, as if their attendant were preparing for a day's painting, but it is no more than the framework of a vendor's stall. It is the kind of space which often caught Sudek's eye in the early days. Meanwhile, Prague's people step out at the beginning of a new fog-shrouded day. Sudek was always interested in the idea of work, including his own work in photography, as a process entailing preparations, of the kind indicated in the street scene. It might be thought of as a metaphor bearing on the laborious and light-dependent work of photography.

At the Invalids' Hospital, 1922–7. Sudek, as an invalided veteran himself, had spent time in this particular hospital in Prague, and it became the subject of one of the earliest of his long-running picture series. He thought of the photograph as a space crossed by his vision and by the sun's rays; the object stood at the point of intersection. The object in this case is a seated veteran who is, in his turn, studying an object: a used-up bottle of liquor. The veteran functions as a mediator, or the instrument of vision. As Sudek matured, he took over this position himself, seeing at first hand.

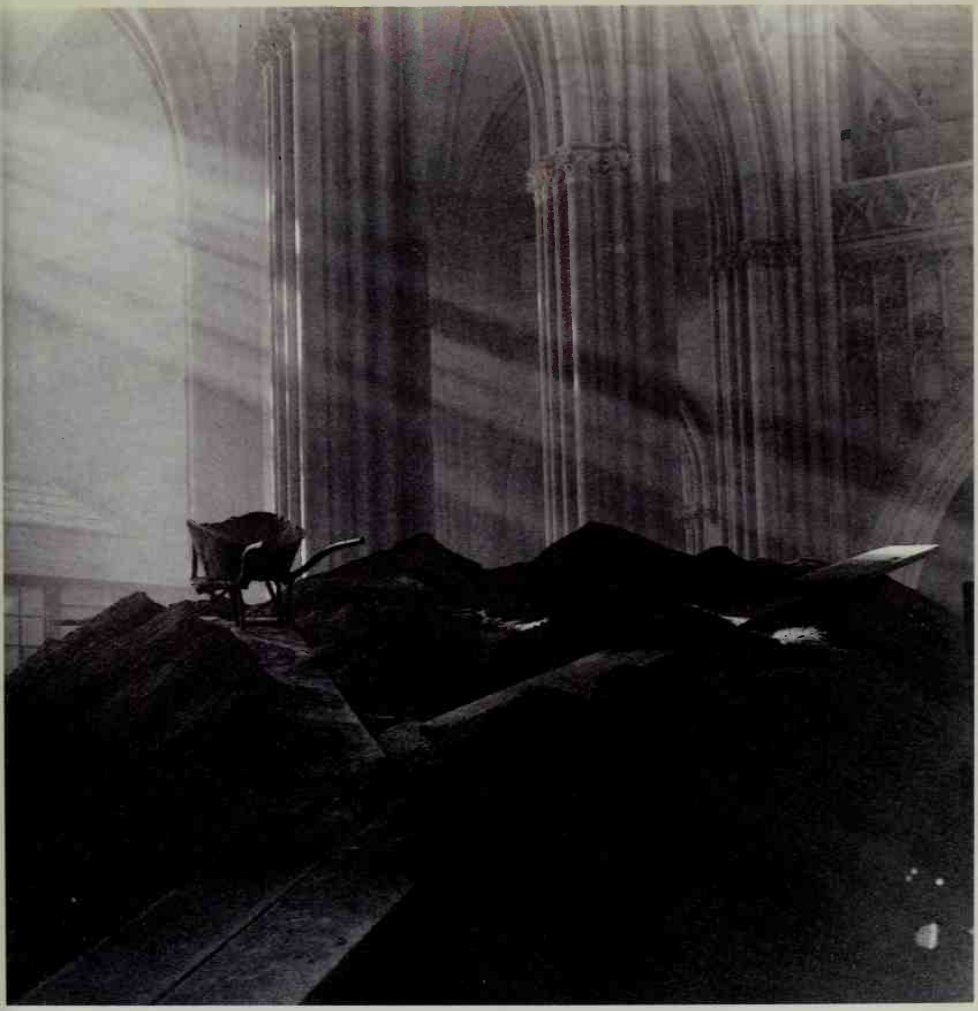
Lobkowitz Palace (Worker in Archway), c.1922. The Lobkowitz Palace is on the Vlašská, on the edge of the Petřín Park. Sudek would come to know this area very well in the years ahead. In the early 1920s, however, his interest in the place was comparatively formal, and he would have been attracted to this view because of its proscenium archway and arrangement of baluster stairways. Conceivably he meant to contrast the workman and his wooden bucket with those decorative and muscular giants to either side of the gateway, but it is just as likely that he was intrigued by the way in which space appears to have been flattened and managed theatrically. As an apprentice modernist he would have been interested in the careful structuring of shallow space.

A Cartwright, c.1922. Cartwheels had wooden spokes and iron 'tyres', and Sudek must have been very familiar with their noise on the cobbled streets of Prague. They were heavy, difficult to manoeuvre and often in need of maintenance. So in one respect this is a work study in the documentary mode. At the same time, wheels function as modules which allow the photographer to delineate and analyse what would otherwise be no more than an indifferent space fronting a workshop on a street.

Pavers, 1923. This relatively modest-looking picture is pivotal in Sudek's career. Although it was probably taken as a work subject, it depicts a space carefully stratified in both directions. The pavement may sweep into the distance but that pillar and screen bar the way and return us to the surface. The pavers have completed part of their work, but raw materials lie all around in what is, in effect, an open-air studio or atelier. This was exactly how Sudek approached his work on the cathedral of St Vitus which he undertook in 1924, and which constituted his first major project and publication (1928).

Stromovka, 1924–6. This is from one of Sudek's early picture cycles, taken in Stromovka, a busy park in Bubeneč to the northeast of Prague Castle. In all of these pictures, he seems to have kept to the shadows under the trees, watching the people of Prague enjoying the summer sunlight. By standing back like this he hoped to find a configuration which represented the mood and tone of the day, its relaxed, contented rhythms. This was a pictorial tactic of around 1900, when pictures were expected to function as symbols or as abstract idealizations. His tendency was increasingly to move closer to events and objects, and to present himself as sole witness to their emergence from darkness into light.

In St Vitus' Cathedral, 1924–8. Between 1924 and 1928 Sudek took around 100 photographs of building work in the cathedral of St Vitus. Fifteen of these, including the present picture, were published in a very limited edition of 120 copies in 1928. The publication was meant to celebrate the completion of the cathedral and the tenth anniversary of the founding of Czechoslovakia. Sudek rarely seems to have had a programme in his photographs, but this one does suggest some allegorical 'parting of the ways'. It is more than likely, though, that he was simply attracted by the suggestion of a miniature landscape within a sacred space. He was also conscious at the time of social issues. This was an opportunity to register the presence of the worker as a labourer and bearer of weights within a transcendental space suffused with divine light.



In St Vitus' Cathedral, 1924–8. Restoration of the cathedral was completed in 1928, in time for the tenth anniversary of the founding of the republic. This photograph must have been taken some years before. Sudek was attracted by those Constructivist arrangements on the floor, signifiers of modernism and in contrast to all that debris piled in a side chapel to the left, like a forgotten episode from the Last Judgement.

A Portrait Bust in St Vitus' Cathedral, 1924–8. Sudek took this when documenting the completion of the cathedral. St Vitus' is a national shrine, with many references to ancient monarchs and princes. At first sight it is odd that Sudek should have devoted so much time to the project, for in a modernist context it looks archaic. However, it should be remembered that it was a work site in whose dusty space light was scrupulously defined. To Sudek it must have had many qualities of a theatre with spotlights. At around this time he had also begun to think of atmosphere as plenitude, as thick and heavy, with light, darkness and turgid air.

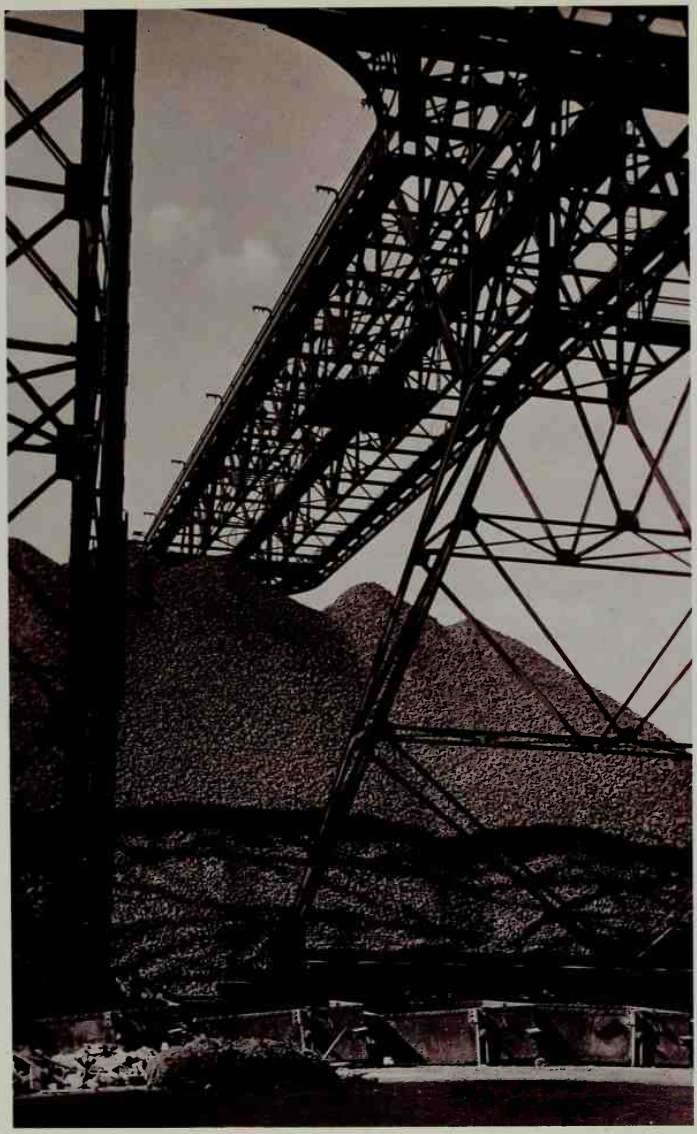
A Street in Prague, c.1926. The young Sudek must have been pleased to find such a scene with a range of fine modernist elements: a slatted handcart, tidy geometrical cobblestones, a neat set of window panes and cast shadows which transform the scene into a giant sundial. Modernism in photography was, at heart, a cartographic movement engrossed by the idea that space might be charted with the sun as an Archimedean point of reference. As Sudek grew older, however, he took more and more account of viewpoint. The sun continued to shine and to cast exact shadows, but it did so for him and for other individuals, rather than for the audience at large, as it does here.

Reconstruction of St Vitus' Cathedral (ropes), 1927. This image was published in 1928 in Sudek's book on the completion of the cathedral. Sudek took great care with the lighting of his images, for there were extremes of light and shadow in the dusty interior. He also remarked on the work involved in the completion of the building, indicated here by ropes, trestles and frames.

In Nekázanka Street, 1928. Nekázanka Street is in Nové Město, or the New Town, a relatively busy part of Prague near to the main railway station. At one level the image is about the working life of the city, but in all likelihood was selected by Sudek for its spectacular lighting and zonal disposition. It might, in fact, be a city scene as imagined and staged by a director in the new Expressionist cinema, by Fritz Lang, for instance. Like all other young modernists during the 1920s, Sudek was interested in the social, which meant he photographed in the eastern sector of the city. As his interest in the social waned, he increasingly turned his attention to the Malá Strana or 'Lesser Side' to the north and west of the river.

Co-workers at the Artists' Cooperative, 1928–36. In this epic group portrait, women cluster to the upper left, with the rest of the rectangle occupied by loosely spaced groups of men. They seem newly arrived in the tiled courtyard, awaiting entry, for some of the men have removed their hats. It is very much a modernist tactic, beautifully realized in this picture, to register organic shapes – such as the outlines of these individuals – against a calibrated ground. Eadweard Muybridge did something similar in the 1880s when he referred moving figures to gridded and measured backdrops. The humanist idea, in this instance, is that distinctions show up more readily in relation to a regular, modular setting.

An Industrial Scene, c.1930. This kind of picture, of a coal delivery system at a pit-head, is very typical of modernism in photography. An out-and-out modernist would have paid more attention to the metalwork of the structure. Sudek, however, has chosen to remark on the way in which the shadows of the gantry have been blurred and fused on the flanks of the mound. Other irregularities mark the immediate foreground.

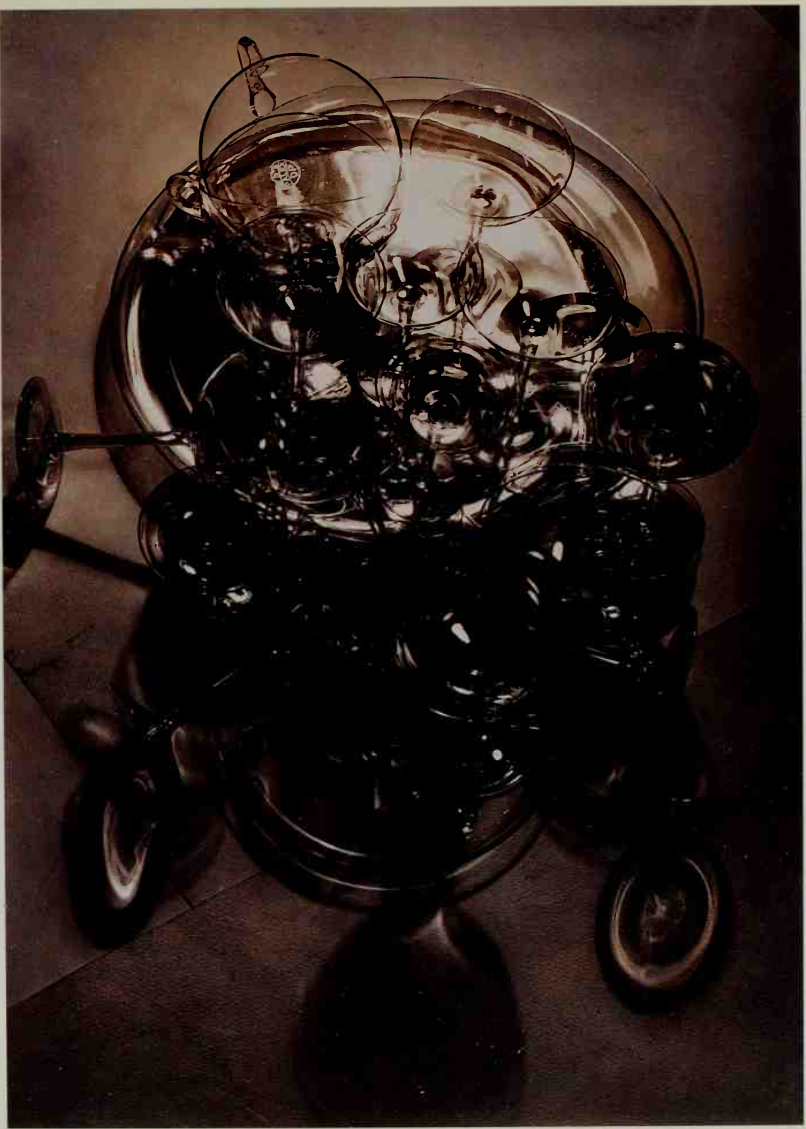


Geometrical Pieces, c.1930. These pieces, made up of cones, discs, cubes and pyramids, must have belonged to a set and have been painted in different colours, for the tones vary considerably. Although jumbled, they might easily be sorted: the discs, for example, could be threaded on to spindles. Modernist designers and architects favoured such ideal primary shapes as these, but would probably have preferred them in better order. Sudek was most likely attracted by the materiality of the pieces, rather than by their underlying unity.

Staircase in the Great Exhibition Palace, 1932. This was taken in the interior of the Prague Trade Fairs Building, an important building of the 1920s designed by Oldřich Tyl and Josef Fuchs, and admired by Le Corbusier in 1930. Typically, Sudek has photographed it in a way which makes the space difficult to decipher at first glance. He has envisaged the building's elements – staircases, screens, handrails and cables – as those in a cubistic arrangement of rhomboids. Prague had more modernist buildings than any comparable city in Europe at the time, and it remained a centre for modernist design until the end of the 1930s.

Glassware, 1932–6. Sudek must have arranged the glassware like this, the tumblers making deep calibrated spaces in contrast to the delicately circling rims of the wine glasses. The plates in the background provide a firmer base to the whole. He seems also to have worked with reflected light which has been splintered and distorted on its passage through the labyrinth. It was always Sudek's tendency to think of vision as travelling through materials, through thickening darkness or screens of undergrowth. In this case, he proposes a hovering vision in general. In the more romantic phase which follows, he eschews such privileged and impersonal positions.

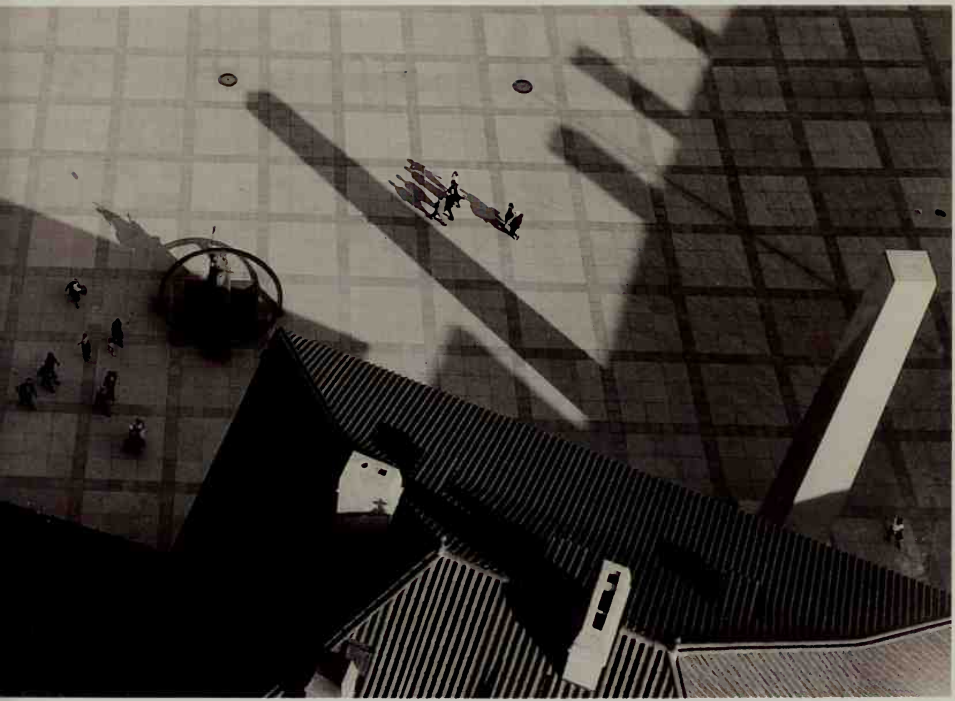
Glassware, 1932–6. Between 1927 and 1936, Sudek worked for a publishing house, and was even co-editor of the magazine *Panorama*. He was busy, too, as an advertising photographer working for a glassware company. This must have been one of those pictures: the logo says PALEX DP. They look like champagne glasses which have clustered or even swarmed around a lighted disk. Close inspection will give you their shape, but for the most part they blend with their ground and intersect with each other to make an interwoven geometry. Sudek's modernist contemporaries involved in the same line of work preferred simplicity and clarity, and would have been loath to risk an image so involved.



A Mirror and a Portrait, 1932–6. Sudek asks you to imagine, and even to work out exactly where she might be with respect to the mirror. She must, in fact, have leaned forward almost parallel to the tilted mirror to appear in the picture in this way. Perhaps he meant to make an image in the Cubist style, for the angled shape in the foreground just touches the line which bisects the mirror. He kept company with Cubists such as Emil Filla, and was thoroughly familiar with the modernist styles of the era. He made variants of this composition, one without the portrait, which must be of his sister, Božena Sudková.

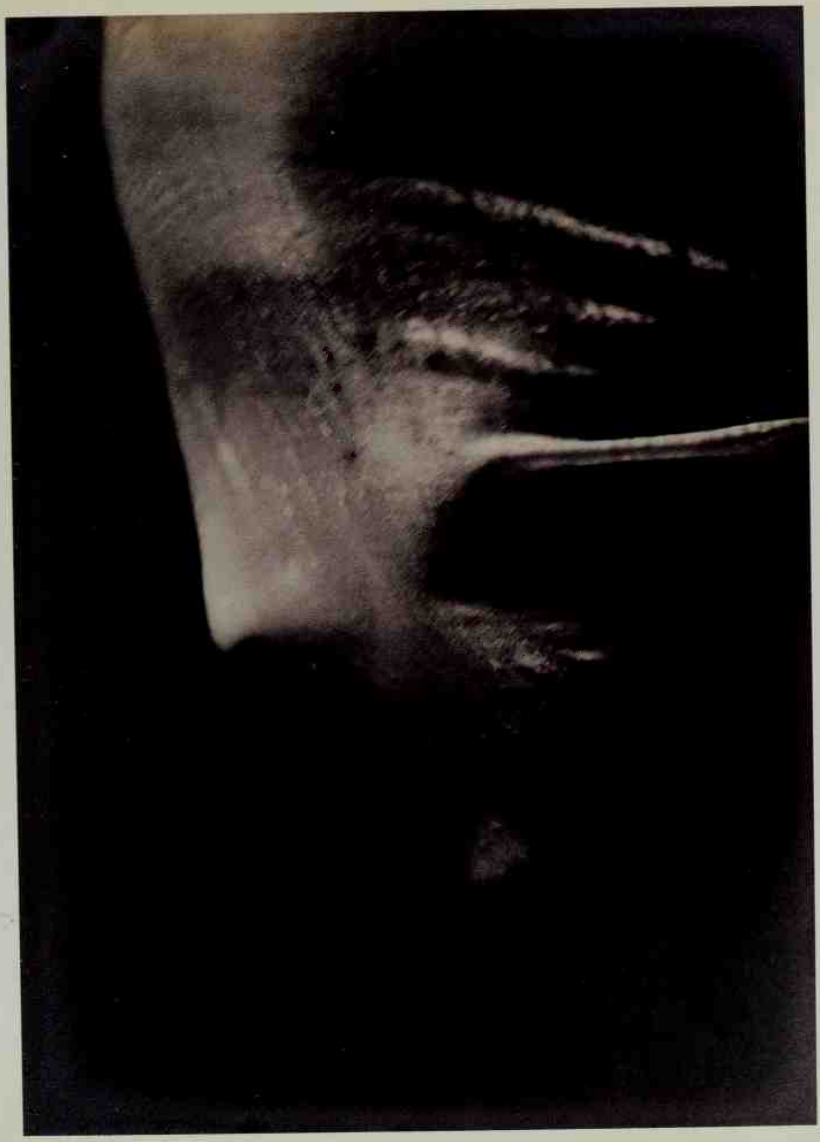
Emil Filla in his Studio, 1933. Sudek first met Filla around 1930. Filla was fourteen years older and a well-established painter, one of the leading Cubists in Prague. Editor of the arts journal *Free Directions*, he employed Sudek to make reproductions. Sudek made several portraits of the painter in which, apparently lost in thought, he looks off into the distance. In this instance, the framed mirror might be meant to represent one of his paintings in the making. By 1933 Filla's Cubism had given way to a lurid Expressionism, hinted at by some of the details on show here (the grotesque carvings above the mirror, for example).

Third Courtyard, Prague Castle, 1936. Sudek has looked down from one of the towers on the southern side of the cathedral of St Vitus, situated within the confines of the Castle. It is evening and the broken obelisk to the right, erected in honour of the Czech Legionnaires, casts a long shadow across a pavement made of stone taken from every region in the new republic of Czechoslovakia. The ring to the left houses a late medieval statue of St George disposing of the dragon. The courtyard had been arranged almost as a national sculpture park by Josef Plečnik, the principal architect at the Castle. Plečnik's assistant and successor was Otto Rothmayer, befriended on his retirement by Sudek.

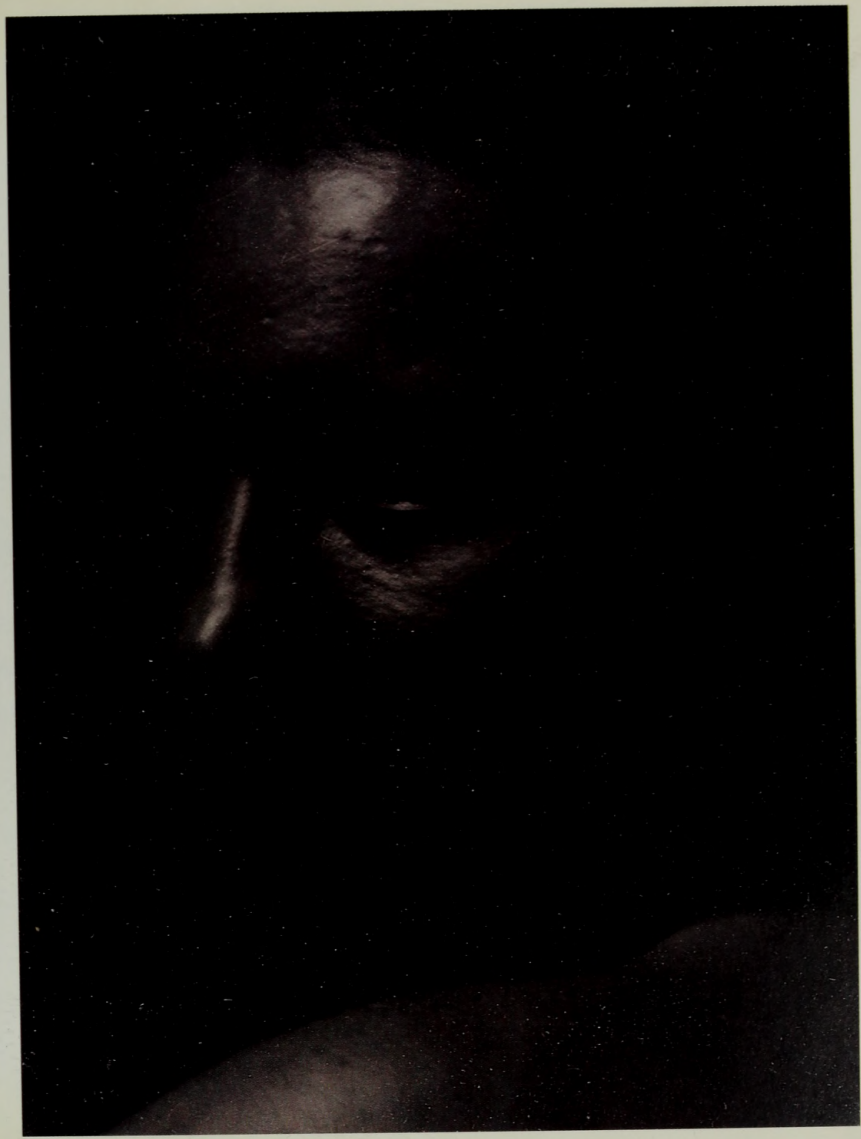


Portrait of a Man, 1938. In this portrait, one of his nicest inventions, the man is accompanied by his shadow, which he seems to have borrowed from a Bauhaus exercise in the style of Oscar Schlemmer, and by his reflection, in anticipation of the disturbed portraiture of Francis Bacon. Sudek must have had all of this in mind for no one would normally opt to be portrayed leaning so oddly against a wall. It may have been an opportunistic portrait, of a waiter perhaps. It anticipates the postwar unease of Giacometti, for it is a portrayal of a subject reduced and simplified almost out of existence.

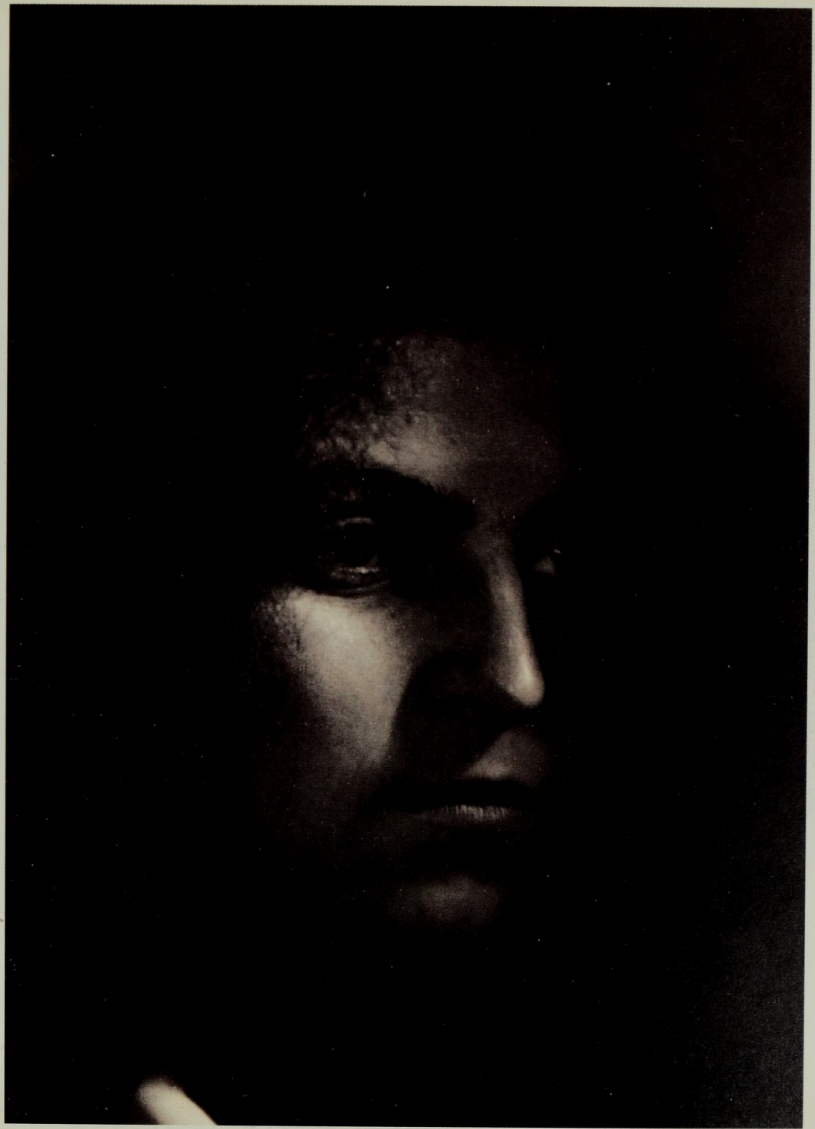
Masked Portrait, 1942. Conceivably, this is intended as a reflection on circumstances in occupied Prague in 1942. René Magritte painted such veiled and hooded figures as this in the late 1920s, whence they passed into the language of Surrealism. Perhaps Sudek meant to represent the senses dimmed: sight obscured, smell, taste and hearing all muffled. He was always alert to the idea that vision itself was to be achieved across and through opacities, through haze and foliage, in fading difficult light.



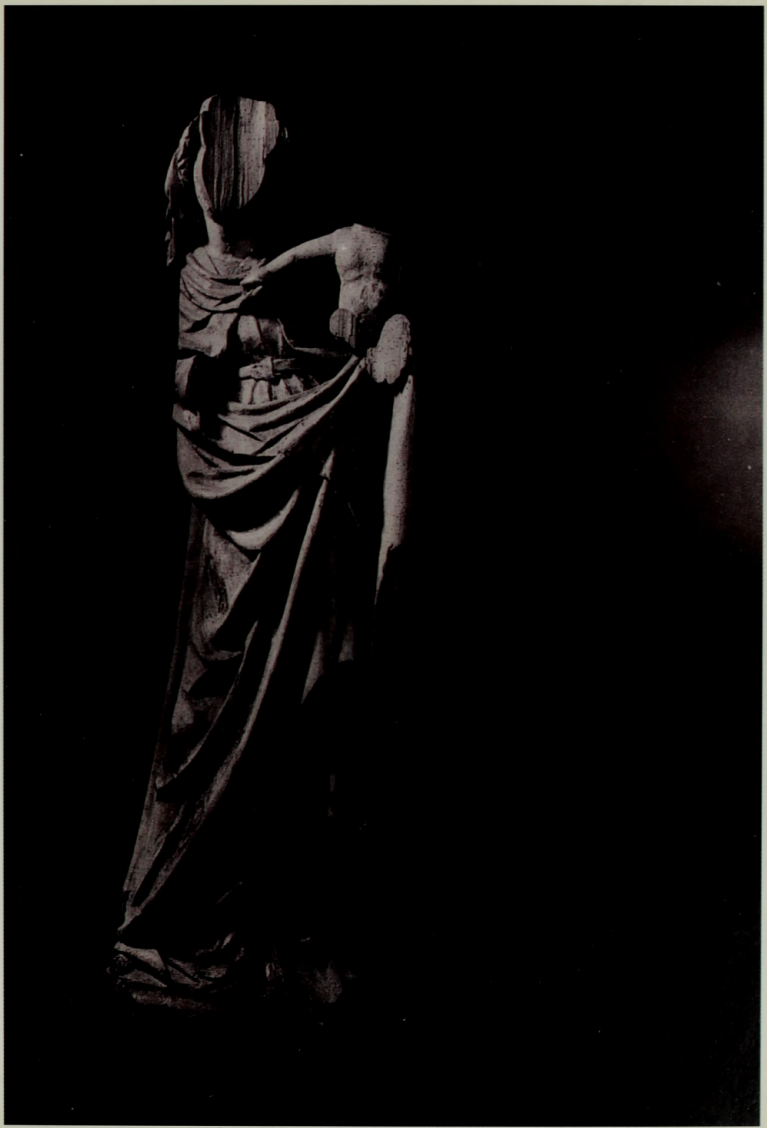
Milena, negative 1942, print 1952. This is a pigment print. In this process, a layer of specially treated tissue is laid over an ordinary silver print and then exposed to the light. The tissue takes up the image and, after a while, it is removed and applied to a paper base. Sudek often made pigment prints long after the taking of the picture – ten years in this case. It looks, at first sight, like an art study from the nineteenth century. It is oddly specific, too, about Milena's skin: pitted on the forehead and roughening under the eyes. To some degree, her glance is hidden or veiled, which means that she keeps a kind of reserve leaving us, as viewers, to scan the dermatological evidence to hand. Sudek reflects on the difference between spirit and the material in which it is lodged.



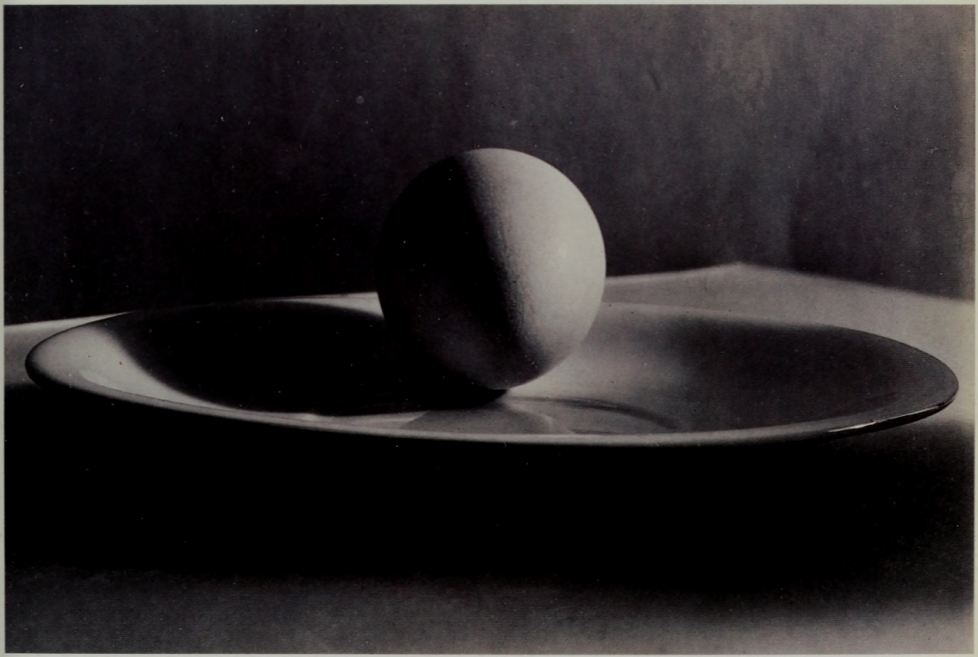
Anna Marie, 1943. Perhaps this picture should be read as nothing more than a portrait of a handsome model, posed in low light in a studio. She has been placed so that the light touches her cheekbone and the tip of her nose, barely revealing her eyes. It does, however, show up quite intensely on what might be her shoulder. Sudek's idea, in this case, is to relate seeing to sensing. Working out the image you too become a portrait, open to enquiry and physical manipulation.



Broken Madonna and Child, c.1947. Iconoclasts have disposed of the head of the Saviour and the face of his mother. Sudek took other photographs of this statue, one of which appeared in the magazine *Blok* in 1948. Sudek was a Catholic at the outset, then a lapsed Catholic during his modernist years before returning to religion in the 1960s. 176 of his photographs of sculpture appeared in a book of 1958, *The Lapidarium of the National Museum*. This picture, it seems, preceded that project and had some personal significance for the artist.



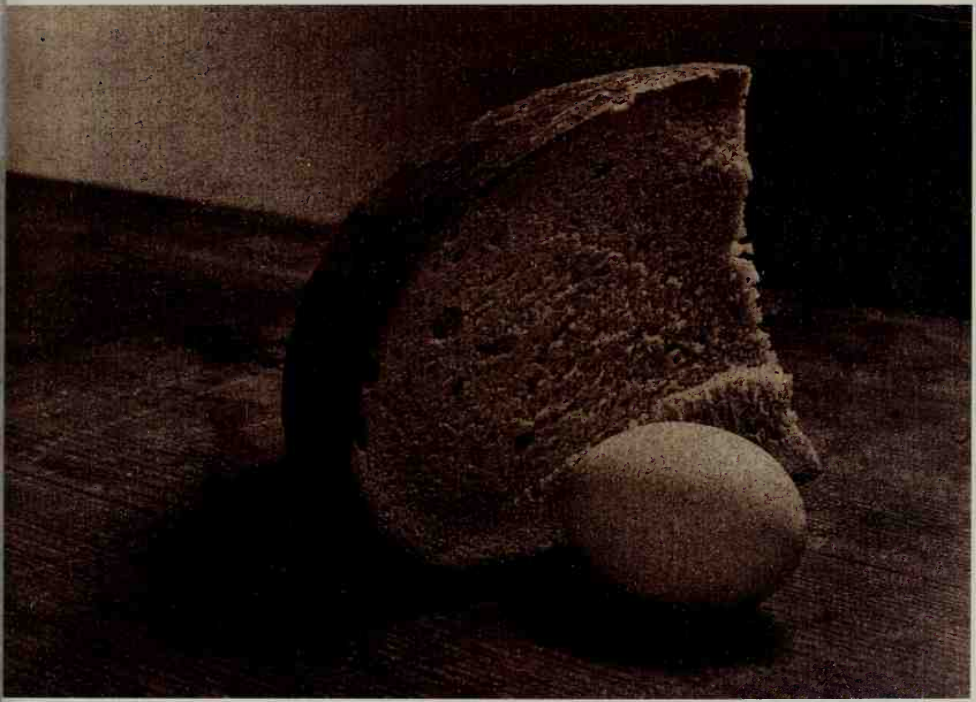
Egg on a Plate, 1950. Sudek made other prints of this subject, some of them by the pigment process. He varied the lighting, and his own angle of approach, although never by very much. He sometimes used a wood-grained table-top in his studio but seems here to have covered it with paper or a tablecloth. Perhaps he meant to register and to study very small differences in placing and spacing: the rim of the plate, for example, just coincides with the edge of the table. The egg, placed on the far side of the indented base of the plate, might have caused it to tilt and lift from the surface of the table. In any case, it is an arrangement which has to be construed with the greatest care.



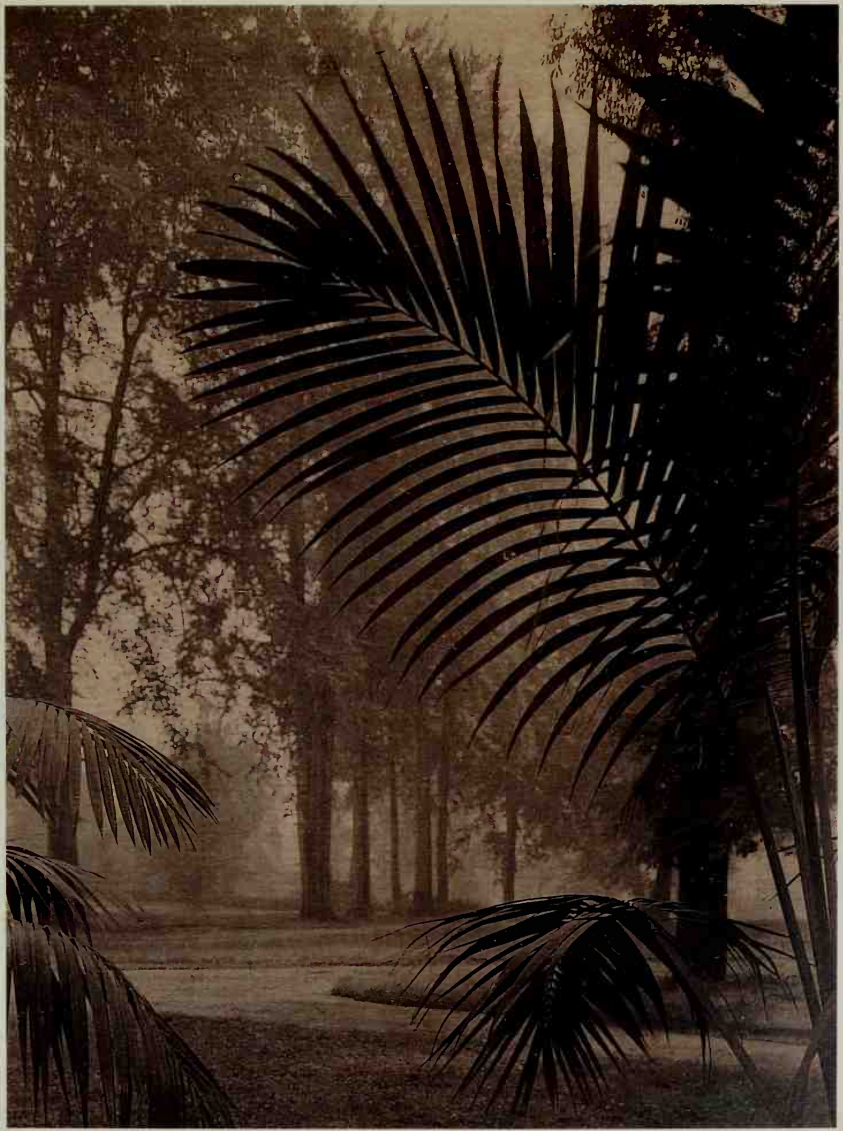
Window of my Studio with Blossom, 1950. Sudek began to take such pictures in the early 1940s. In this case he has included the blossom and the background, the sprig of blossom aligned with the maimed apple tree. In a memoir published in 1978, his studio assistant Sonja Bullaty describes Sudek in his later years as coming out of semi-hibernation and as gradually awakening with the approach of spring: 'Sudek never seemed to age; he just rested between the various cycles of his creativity.'

Window of My Studio with a Blossom, 1950. A signed pigment print. In 1950, this was an old-fashioned technique, and one which Sudek would have despised in his modernist days, for he would have associated it with the working habits of the old school. By 1950, however, he followed his own interests, indifferent to fashion. The apple blossom refers to springtime, and the old apple tree in the background might be Sudek himself, a veteran gnarled by time.

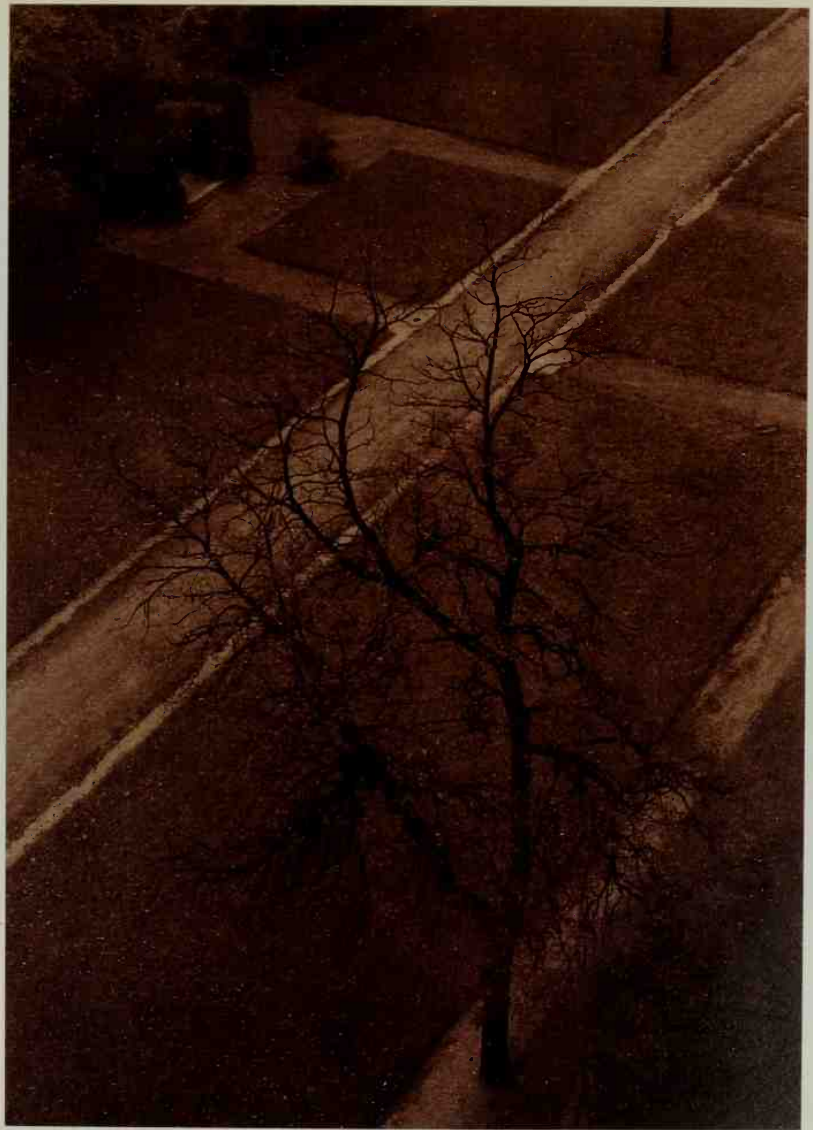
Bread and Egg, 1950. As a pigment print, this is an image on tissue applied to a paper base. The photographer might be reflecting on his own humble lifestyle, for between them the egg and the cut loaf suggest the bare necessities of life. It is more than likely, though, that his subject was the visible difference between egg and loaf. The egg, for example, takes the light by very slow degrees to give an ideal or consistent appearance. The loaf, placed as it is, offers its sliced side as a map in low relief of a substance moulded and cut: a surface, that is, with a history, if you care to look at it for long enough.



Palm in Prague Castle Gardens, 1950–54. These very beautiful botanic gardens feature a range of unfamiliar plants and trees, crossed by paths and frequented by the people of the city. Sudek photographed them often as prospects, and in particular as interrupted spaces to be negotiated by sight: the grid formed by the fronds of the palm and, beyond, the alleyway of mature trees obscured by haze. It was a matter of course, in his later years, to point out that views were seen from particular vantage points, through screens and across atmosphere. Pigment prints, of which this is one, were also screens of a sort: transparent tissue in which an image had been lodged, to be made visible only by application to a luminous paper background.

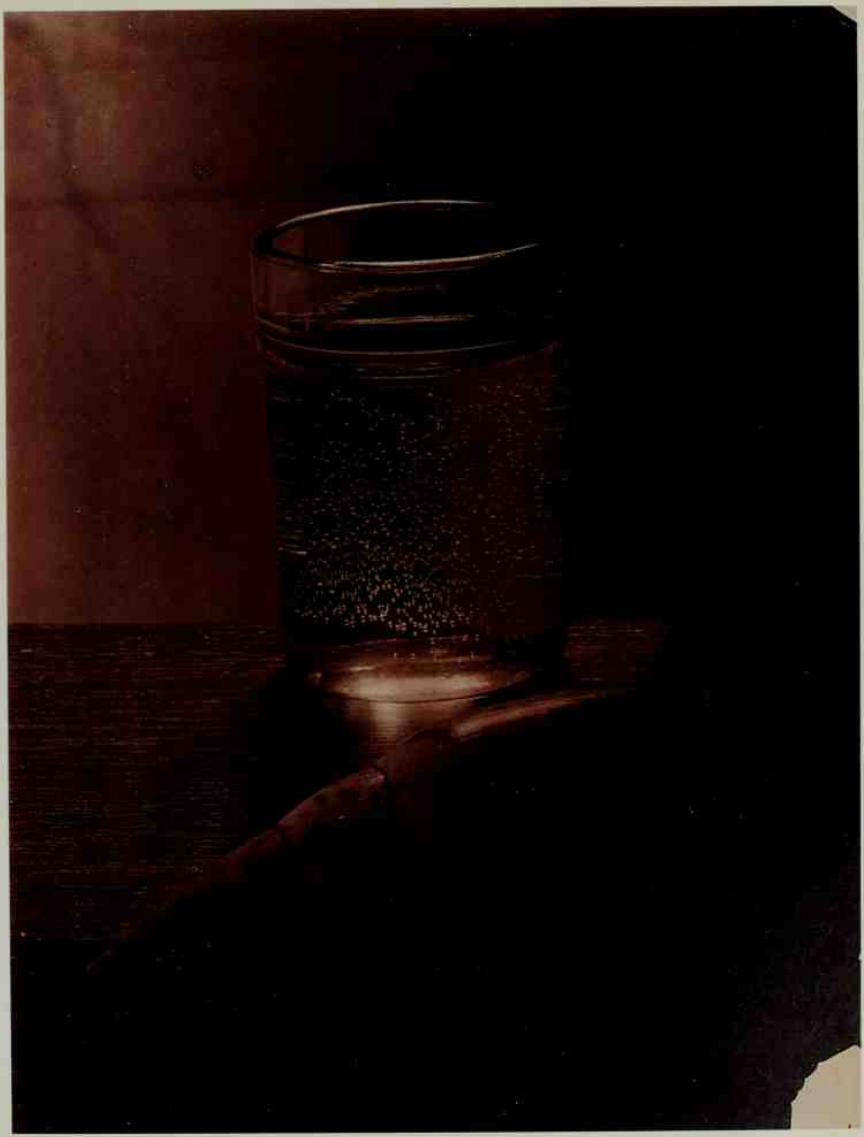


Prague Gardens, 1950–54. Sudek made several pigment prints of this picture, one of his most enigmatic. The tree in the foreground appears to be coming into leaf, which points to early springtime. Only a frequenter of Prague's parks would be able to identify exactly where this is, for it looks like any number of places. Experience of Prague was always one of Sudek's topics: familiar routes and stopping points in a territory which had become second nature. This sense of a city as knowable, down to particular park benches and isolated trees, is only matched, if at all, in the photography of Eugène Atget in Paris earlier in the century.

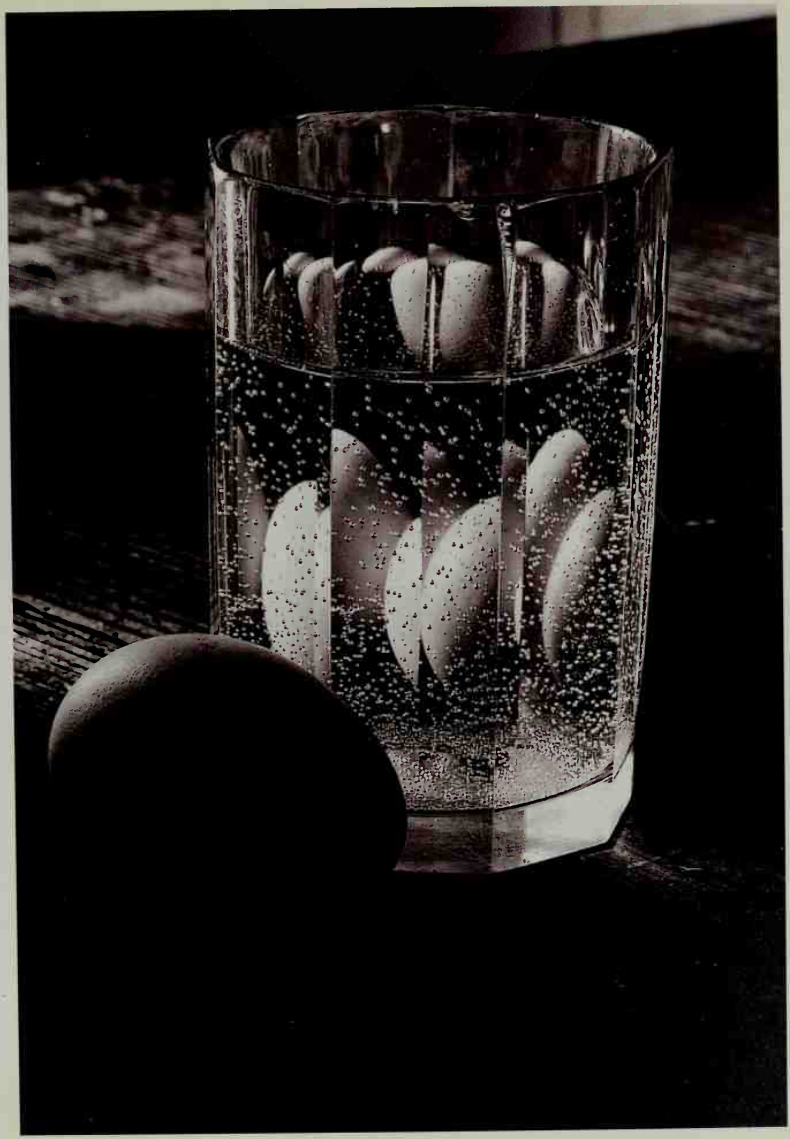


Shell, 1950–54. Shells were a feature of artists' studios in the modern age. They recalled the spiralling energies of the Creation. The glass ball would have been another desirable plaything. Together, these three items suggest a classical relic re-enacted, something like the eye of the Minotaur. It is more likely that Sudek, who was never a fanciful artist, was simply interested in light, reflected and refracted in the glass ball in the socket of the shell. The lines of the two shells have been taken up and balanced in that carefully placed central motif. He was always appreciative of the action of natural light.

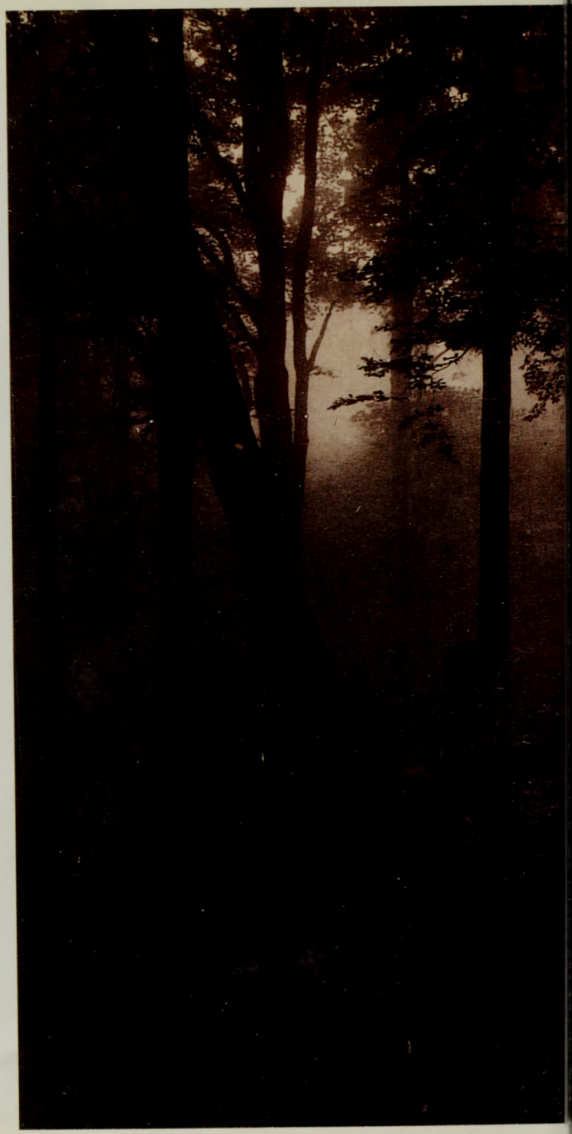
Shell and Glass, 1951. The picture, a pigment print, seems to have an aquatic theme; the mouth of the shell, gaping into the shadowed edge of the picture, looks somewhat like that of a predatory fish. The shadow thrown by the glass points to a light source somewhere in the darkness, or even two light sources, one to each side of the glass. Refracted and transmitted, whatever light remains is just enough to describe the shell and even to trace its protruding lip. Many of the pigment prints, in particular, have to be read with this degree of care, as fastidious exercises in representation. It is no surprise that Chardin was one of Sudek's favourite painters.

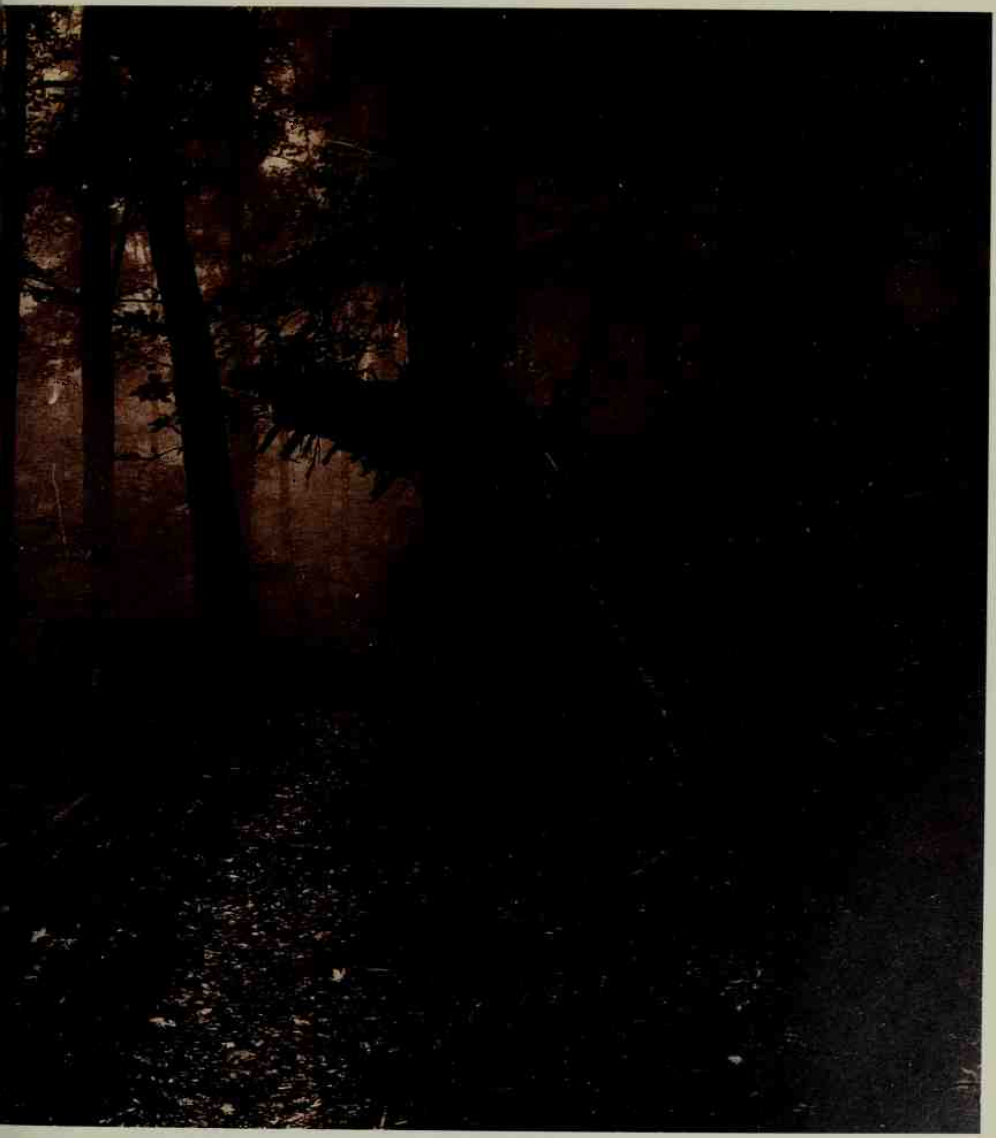


Egg and Glass, 1952. It looks like a robust glass, worn by years of service. Functioning here as a prism, it reflects and subdivides the surface of the egg. New art in the 1950s was intrigued by optics of this kind, but preferred to mediate light and its effects through purpose-built structures. In this instance, as was typical of him, the artist has used everyday materials. Light creeps in from the left-hand edge of the picture. Bubbles drift and cling to the glass. The image of the egg distorts and diminishes. Sudek's was a vision attentive to deceleration and to entropy in general.



A Walk in the Kinsky Gardens, 1952. These gardens, on the Petřín Hill in Prague, were no distance from Sudek's studio. Some of the leaves in the foreground seem to be moving slightly in the breeze; all the rest is blossom, with buildings vaguely visible beyond. The early 1950s were difficult years for Sudek; he was out of favour officially and quite impoverished. He photographed locally on the Petřín Hill and on Střelecký Island in the river Vltava, and persevered with pigment printing, of which this is an example, as if determined to ensure that some of his art might survive such difficult times.





(previous page) Ancient Woodland, 1952. Sudek took many pictures of forest landscapes during the 1950s and 1960s. These were included in a series called 'A Walk through Mionší'– an ancient forest in the Beskid Mountains on the north-eastern edge of the Czech Republic. He may well have thought of old and disfigured trees as metaphors for himself. Some of these forest scenes are dimly lit, as here, like the photographer's own studio at No.432 Újezd. He was increasingly attracted by the idea of light finding its way, with difficulty, into and through a darkening world.

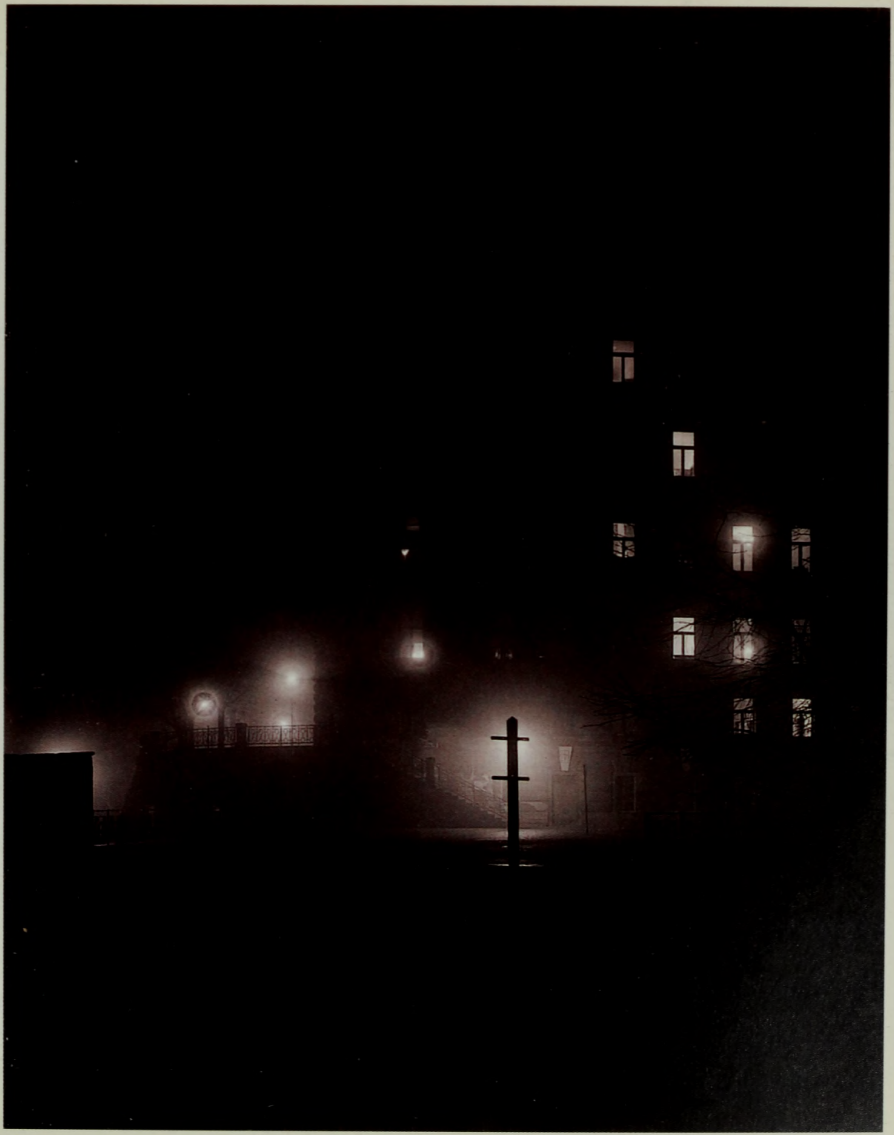
Relief, 1953. Hercules struggles with and gets the better of a centaur. Sudek earned what modest living he did in the 1950s as a photographer of artworks, in particular of sculptures in the National Museum; 176 of these were published in 1958 in a book on the Prague sculpture museum. This relief also appeared in 1982 in Mrázková and Remeš's book on the artist. Perhaps it was a subject close to Sudek's heart; his memoirs dwell on the labour and sheer hard work involved in photography, the transport and positioning of cameras.

Towards Evening in the Magic Garden, 1954–9. Otto Rothmayer's white-painted metal chairs were Sudek's original subjects in the architect's 'magic garden'. Rothmayer envisaged the garden as a stage set which could be altered at will, and Sudek became an enthusiastic collaborator; some of Sudek's notes and plans for the arrangement of objects survive. The chairs themselves were used less as pieces of furniture than as space 'frames', somewhat in the style of the handcarts and trestle tables which feature in the early street pictures of the 1930s.

(previous page) Fürstenberg Palace, Prague, 1956–9. The palace lies near to the Castle in the Malá Strana ('Lesser Side') area of Prague. This picture is No.63 in *Praha Panoramatická* (1959). It is springtime, for we see a flowering horse chestnut to the left, but otherwise it is difficult to make sense of the labyrinthine configuration of the place. To a long-term resident, such as Sudek, Prague would have been a city of niches and a world apart. To some degree the Prague panoramas seem to be intended as tests of orientation; and none more so than this one.

In the Magic Garden, c.1957. Sudek was interested in the town gardens of Prague, in particular that of the architect Otto Rothmayer, whom he first met during the 1940s. Rothmayer invited Sudek to photograph his garden chairs, which were of his own design. Sudek admitted that it was really the garden that interested him. Many of these garden images look like abandoned stage sets or installations. And the chairs, which come in a variety of shapes and sizes, seem to have been drawn over the darkening landscape of the garden itself.

A Night-time Walk, 1958. Much of Sudek's Prague was only accessible on foot. It must always have been a matter of interest to see which windows were lighted and who was still up and about after nightfall. The photographer, under these terms of reference, was a detective of sorts, watching from the shadows. This was also how Bill Brandt imagined London in the 1930s and 1940s, as a community of secret individuals – private lives in private spaces.



Prague Panorama, late 1950s. The picture was taken from the east bank of the Vltava, from Smetanovo nábřeží, and is one of a series, several of which appear at the beginning of Sudek's famous *Praha Panoramatická* of 1959. Prague Castle can be seen on the hill to the right. What exactly did he have in mind with panoramas? With their unexpected emphases, they show the city oddly, often making it necessary to look for landmarks which have been rendered obscure or marginal. They stress his viewpoint: that of a laborious pedestrian, faced by the width of the river, by cobbled pavements and strenuous inclines.

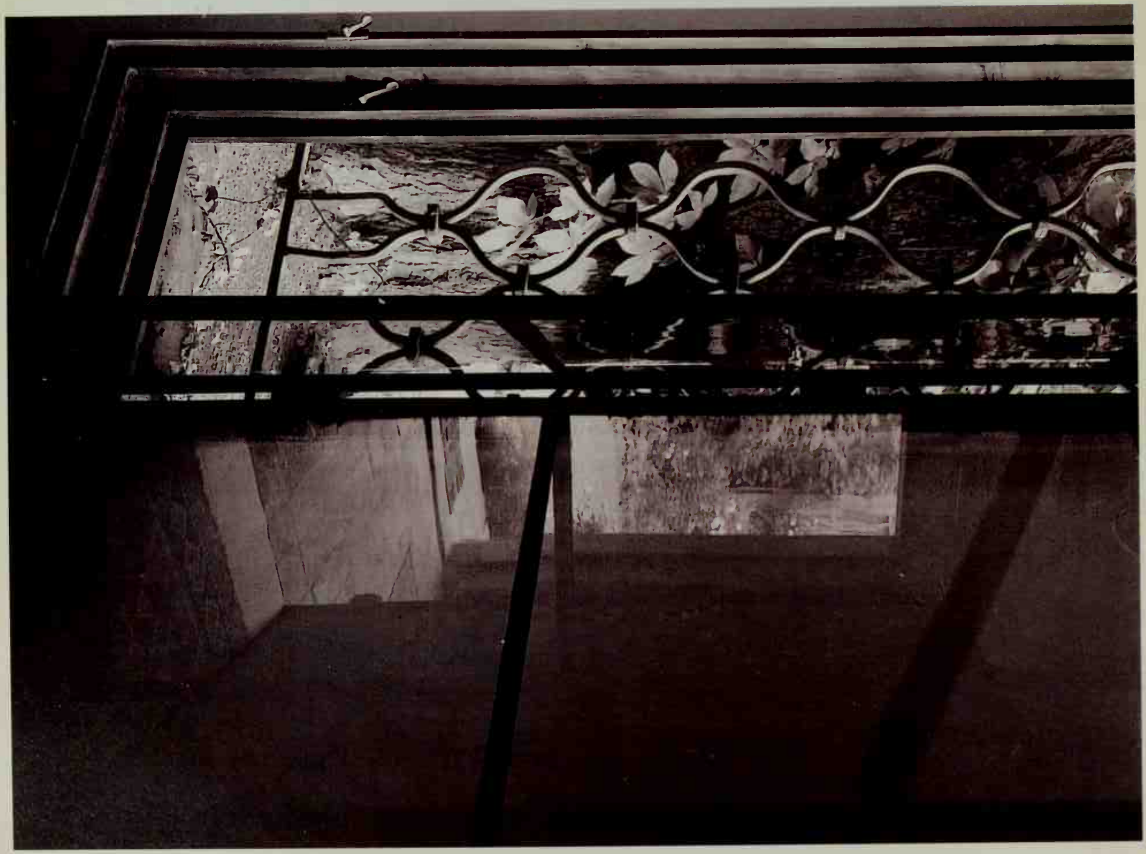
Morning in the King's Park, late 1950s. This image is No.191 in *Praha Panoramatická*, where it faces a picture of a pavilion and refreshment room in the same park – known as Stromovka. In this instance Sudek appears to have been making a distinction between the experience of public and private life. The two pictures also distinguish between morning and evening. Light in this image seems to be coming into being; in the counterpart picture of the pavilion the setting sun casts shadows across a foreground thronged with passers-by. He was rarely so schematic in his arrangements, although in that book he does make other comparisons of morning and evening, and of the seasons.

Mannequin, c.1960. Living statues figured in the art of Jean Cocteau, Max Ernst and René Magritte; and after the war, Sudek was certainly interested in Surrealism and the inner vision. This figure seems to have recoiled from a perceived threat, despite being very thoroughly blindfolded. Sculpted heads with closed eyes appear in the series 'Memories' from around 1960, and it is possible that this, too, refers to recall. The torso has been artificially whitened, perhaps to make it register in the low light that Sudek has applied here.

Springtime in Prague, c.1960. This may be a view down through the woodland and orchards on the Petřín Hill, not far from Sudek's studio. Empty benches often figure in his Prague parkscapes; in part, because they are commonplace, but also because they indicate the act of seeing – as a stationary process of assimilation of the whole scene, along with its atmosphere and odour. Sight, according to his scheme of things, traversed landscape, felt its way through wood and scrub and across the undulating ground of tracks. The idea was to imagine the business of seeing with your own eyes. To have included seated onlookers would have turned the picture into a mere illustration of seeing, a picture of a landscape already seen by someone else.

Composition, c.1960. This might have been intended as an allegory. The skull, horizontally disposed, might stand for materiality. The beautiful mannequin, reclaimed from the modernist 1930s, gestures in the style of the Redeemer blessing. At the same time, it must be remembered that Sudek was always a maker and organizer of pictures, and that this composition has been assembled from a series of rectangles, each one supporting a motif – all in the style of the larger and later pictures of Picasso and Braque. In 1959, he moved to a new studio, one which gave him the space and opportunity to compose on this scale.

Studio Garden from a Window, 1965. The window to the left stands open; chestnut leaves are framed by a wrought-iron screen. To the right there is what looks like a vestibule with a garden beyond, but it is probably a reflection carried by the inner window which has been opened into the room. The two opened catches on the frame to the left point to carefully made double-glazing, necessary in a cold climate. So it might also be a spring scene in which Sudek welcomes nature in the shape of those extended leaves. It is also a systematic exposition of Sudek's idea that to see anything was to see it through something else; mirrors, screens, fogged window panes.



Composition, c.1965. An autumnal garland is attached to the screen, so this cannot be an 'Easter Memory', which was the title of one of Sudek's series during the 1960s. Nor does the arrangement look intricate enough to be a 'Labyrinth', another of his late series titles. Paper tubes resemble telescopes or megaphones. Altogether, the assemblage looks like a collection of stage props put together hastily after the show. Perhaps this is how he reflected on his career in art, as a period on stage, deploying props. The piece of floating foil to the right, on the other hand, looks like one of his discarded sandwich wrappings, and might well be intended as a reminder of bodily needs.

Extended Still Life, 1968–72. Looking back in 1978, Sonja Bullaty, Sudek's assistant and colleague, remarked on his reluctance to move far during the winter, which was a time when 'he photographed his window and the many wonderful still lifes, his Easter remembrances, remembrances of friends, his aerial greetings'. This is one of those still lifes in which he has incorporated such winter materials as dried onions and garlic, along with some of the glasses and bottles which appear in the more compact studies. He made use of whatever came to hand, including the wrappings from sandwiches delivered by his sister, who continued to operate his old studio at No.432 Újezd as a darkroom. By this time, Sudek had moved to his new studio nearer to the Castle.

Composition, 1968–72. This is one of his later pictures, from the 'Labyrinths' series. Shells and balls from the earlier still lifes are redeployed in spaces complicated by the use of reflective and transparent surfaces. Sudek always kept track of the wider art scene and in the 'Labyrinths' pictures he acknowledges the late Surrealism which was so important in the 1950s, Matta's *Labyrinths of Glass* in particular. Here a baroque picture frame co-exists with a machined seashell, geological fragments and Euclidean segments, all suspended in a limitless space.

Mannequin, c.1970. Another spring scene, this time from late in the artist's career. The figure, a recumbent Primavera, greets the burgeoning season. She seems to rise upwards from the darkness, but gracefully and slowly, in keeping with Sudek's taste for near immobility. Reclaimed, by the look of her, from a modernist window display, she seems to refer to the smiling figure of Flora who introduces *Praha Panoramatická*. Revived and enchanted by the light of a new season, she figures as an emblem of Sudek's long-standing interest in the balance between light and darkness.

1896 Born 17 March in the town of Kolín on the river Elbe in Bohemia.

1899 His father, a house painter, dies and he is brought up by his mother (d.1953). Sudek was assisted throughout his life, at home and in the studio, by his sister Božena Sudková.

1911–1913 Apprenticed to a bookbinder. He is introduced to photography by a fellow worker.

1915 Joins the Austro-Hungarian army and is sent to fight on the Italian front.

1917 After a serious injury he loses his right arm and spends the next three years in various hospitals. Becomes one of the 'ruined generation'.

1920 Joins the Club for Amateur Photographers in Prague. Meets Jaromír Funke (1896–1945), a long-time friend and colleague.

1922 Undertakes a two-year course in photography under Professor Karel Novak at the School of Graphic Arts in Prague.

1924–1928 Sudek, Funke, Adolf Schneeburger and several others found the Czech Photographic Society, which continues until 1936. Photographs building work on the cathedral of St Vitus. Fifteen of these images are published in 1928 to mark the completion of the cathedral and the tenth anniversary of the founding of the republic of Czechoslovakia. Continues to take photographs of the Invalids' Hospital in Prague.

1928–1936 Works for the publishing cooperative Družstevní prace, which published his book on St Vitus. Becomes co-editor and illustrator of the magazine *Panorama* and the illustrated magazine *Zijeme* (*Living*). Also works as an advertising photographer, especially for the glass designer Sutnar.

1930 Becomes acquainted with the important Czech painter Emil Filla (1881–1953) who will be a lifelong friend and influence.

1932 First solo exhibition.

1933 Participates in group exhibition 'Social Photography'.

1936 Active member of Mánes Artists' Association in Prague and participates in an international exhibition at Mánes exhibition hall.

1940 Sees contact print of Chartres Cathedral and determines to work only with contact prints from then on. In occupied Prague, outdoor photography is difficult so he begins to concentrate on private subjects, particularly his studio window seen in all weathers. Starts to take many still life photographs.

1945 Begins to make series of garden images, first in the garden of sculptress Hana Wichterlová and then in that of architect Otto Rothmayer (1892–1966), who becomes a close friend and influence.

1949 Begins to take landscapes in the Beskid Mountains with recently acquired panoramic camera.

1950 Around this time, he starts to take panoramic photographs of Prague and its environs, 284 of which are published in *Praha Panoramatická* in 1959.

1952 Begins to visit the Mionší Forest on the eastern edge of the Czech lands. Takes photographs of the ancient woodland up to about 1970.

1958 Has first solo postwar exhibition in Prague.

1961 Is the first photographer to receive the award 'Artist of Merit' from the Czechoslovak government.

1963 Holds another solo exhibition, designed by Otto Rothmayer.

1971 Publishes *Janáček-Hukvaldy*, a book of 124 photographs of Leoš Janáček's homeland.

1976 Dies in Prague from cancer.

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Ian Jeffrey is an art critic, lecturer and photography historian. He has written many books, including *Photography: A Concise History* (1981) and *The Photography Book* (1997), and has curated numerous exhibitions.

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