

1945

Josef Čapek (1887 – 1945)

Man Wearing a Hat, 1914

The Karlovy Vary gallery holds high-quality examples from the oeuvre of Josef Čapek, an outstanding personality of Czech classical Modernism of the 1st half of the 20th century. The body of five paintings is complemented by more than twenty prints, mostly linocuts and lithographs. His graphic works are not usually on display, the long-term exposure to light does not suit them, but the paintings are on display in the permanent exhibition very often.

His stylized and decoratively undulating skirts in the painting *Girls Going to Get Milk* (1933) and the couple of lovers dancing or in embrace under the shining starry sky in *Blue Nights* (1933–1937) are among the sought-after gems of our permanent exhibition of the 20th-century Czech art. By far the most significant Čapek's piece, which has always held an honorable place in our exhibition (since 1958, when it was purchased), is one of his rare purely Cubist portraits, entitled *Man Wearing a Hat* (1914). The special charm of the work lies in the simple, yet impressive execution inspired by Cubism. The artist observed his "model" from all sides, worked with elementary geometric forms, then using precisely defined color surfaces and geometric elements to create an extraordinary image of an unknown man – perhaps a magician, perhaps an actor, perhaps a contemporary dandy... The canvas is characteristic of modest color scale brightened with white. A significant role played by light and shadows amplifies the unique atmosphere of the remarkable portrait.

An interesting aspect of the work is on its reverse. It hides another painting, entitled *Boy with a Ball* (probably also dating to 1914), which in its subject relates to memories of an idyllic and happy childhood. The dominating color here is blue and the scene is illuminated by white clouds and a white house in the background, while a colourfully striped ball almost pops out of the corner. However, Josef Čapek was apparently not satisfied with this work and decided to execute the Cubist portrait of the man, making it the obverse. The boy playing with the ball thus remains forever hidden from the viewers' eyes...

Now, we already know the story of the painting. What remains is to briefly summarize the sad fate of the artist. Josef Čapek, a painter, writer, and journalist, a democratically and free-thinking man, was arrested by the Gestapo during the arrival of fascism to Czechoslovakia, on 1 September 1939, and ended up in a concentration camp. His anti-war paintings from the series *Fire* (1938-1939) and *Desire* (1939), as well as his anti-Nazi newspaper articles, proved fatal to him. Čapek passed through four camps and died of typhoid fever in Bergen Belsen sometime in mid-April 1945, without seeing the country' upcoming liberation...

