

BOHEMIAN Rhapsodies

You'd expect Prague's arts scene to be as classical as its architecture but there's a contemporary edge to it too, as **David Ryan** reports



In downtown Prague, on the banks of the Vltava river, there's an office building that looks like Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Nicknamed the Dancing House, this warped, cartoonish construction stands in stark contrast to the medieval, Baroque and Renaissance architecture for which the city is justifiably renowned. When it was built between 1992 and 1996, with the enthusiastic backing of Czech president Václav Havel, it caused great resentment among the locals. As a small, defiant symbol of modernity surrounded by old-fashioned pretty stuff, it's tempting to think of it as a metaphor for the Prague arts scene.

That's not to disparage classical culture, by the way. Indeed, the National Gallery – home to Van Goghs, Renoirs and Cézannes, an acclaimed exhibition of Czech cubism and a whole room devoted to Picasso – comes highly recommended. The same can be said of the Prague Spring Festival of music, which this year (12 May - 4 June) will celebrate Gustav Mahler with the help of Sir Simon Rattle and the Berlin Philharmonic. If you're interested in the classics, they're here in abundance.

There's just one snag, though, at least as far as the city's reputation is concerned: Vienna has an enormous head start and is only 250km away.

So where does Prague slot into the international culture circuit? "It's starting to become a point of interest among the contemporary artistic community," says Markéta Faustová, who handles PR for the city's Vernon Gallery. "In Vienna everything is in the classical style, but here we have much more of an alternative scene." She mentions the Dox Centre for Contemporary Art, a 3,000m³ 'superstudio' that opened in 2008. "We also have the MeetFactory, an old factory outside the centre of town where young artists from all over the world have residencies and there's a large exhibition space. It's not a well-known city for big exhibitions but there are a lot of squats and places where young art is developing."

"The scene is developing a lot," adds Martina Vávrová, director of public relations at the city's Four Seasons Hotel. "The problem is that it's not promoted as well as Vienna's. Here you have to come and explore it. In Vienna, it's just there."

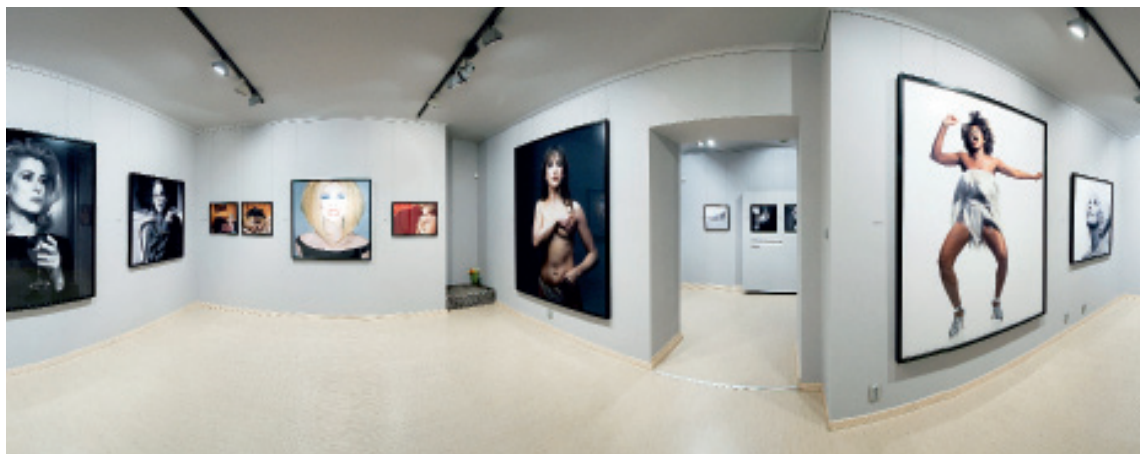


"There are a lot of squats where young art is developing"

We're standing in the Municipal House, a magnificent Art Nouveau building close to the tourist haunts of the Old Town Square. It's one venue at least that visitors don't have to go looking for, and, on the floor below, young hopefuls are belting out the *Flashdance* anthem *What a Feeling* during auditions for the *Pop Idol* clone *Cesko Slovenská SuperStar*. The Vernon Gallery, which organises contemporary art displays throughout the world, is showing off its touring collection of Modigliani paintings and touting a new exhibition, at the photography-oriented Leica Gallery, that's devoted to



Clockwise from far left: the Dancing House; the Old Town Square; the Prague Spring Festival; the Lobkowitz Palace; and Michel Comte's exhibition at the Leica Gallery, featuring shots of Catherine Deneuve, Geraldine Chaplin, Carla Bruni, Sophie Marceau, Tina Turner and Sophia Loren, among others



eye-catching shots of famous women by Switzerland's Michel Comte.

"There's a very big desire to have exhibitions, especially from the hotels and tourist businesses," explains the gallery's director, Monika Burian Jourdan. "They are missing the European weekend tourists, who might stay in Prague for only a day and then move on to Vienna."

Across the river, in a wing of Prague Castle known as the Lobkowitz Palace, William Lobkowitz – or 'the Prince William' – is equally keen to attract art connoisseurs, only this time with more traditional tastes. Until the Velvet Revolution of 1989, Lobkowitz was a Boston, Massachusetts real-estate broker from an exiled aristocratic family. Since

then, his life's work has been to reclaim and where necessary restore the family's heirlooms, including castles, a brewery, 65,000 rare books and more than 20,000 pieces of art and furniture.

Predictably, this has left him heavily in debt, which is one reason he opened a museum in 2007. Being so new, it hasn't garnered much of a reputation yet, which is a shame, as many of the exhibits are stunning. From portraits of his royal ancestors to Canaletto's magnificent depiction of London in 1748, the paintings are particularly memorable. Lobkowitz also stages lunchtime classical concerts in the palace, incorporating Bach, Vivaldi, Mozart and, of course, the father of Czech music, Bedrich Smetana.

On the surface at least, Prague comes across as a classy, cultured and for the most part unadventurous city, an impression confirmed by *Swan Lake* at the State Opera House. In a tiered, gilded auditorium that would be kitschy if it weren't so venerable, the dancers perform with exquisite grace. Forget Natalie Portman's brooding histrionics in *Black Swan* – this is as fairytale as Tchaikovsky's ballet gets, and the closing applause is so rapturous that the cast return for five curtain calls. What a feeling? Absolutely. *The National Gallery* (nprague.cz); *the Prague Spring Festival* (prague-spring.net); *the Vernon Gallery* (galerievernon.com); *the Lobkowitz Palace* (lobkowitz.cz); *the State Opera House* (opera.cz)