

King of the Apes on Top of the Skyscraper

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Opposites at first divide things, distance them from each other, but then ultimately join them in a perfect harmonious union. That is the case, too, for Petr Kavan, a sculptor essentially Czech yet living in distant, exotic India and finding his personal expression there. Kavan once carved puppets for a production of Faust and similar theatre pieces in the spirit of Matuj Kopeck* and itinerant Czech fairground entertainers. Can there be anything more Czech in essence than that activity and accepting that firmly rooted tradition? But then, unexpectedly, came the journey to India and an encounter with another world.

Kavan first came to India as a curious tourist, visiting Bombay, Dharamsala, and wandering along the Ganges. Perhaps chance, perhaps fate led him to Mahabalipuram, a harbour with many sights and a tradition of stone masonry. In Bohemia Kavan had worked with softwood, mostly lime, carving it, smoothing it down, and sometimes even colouring it in a bright, almost mountebank style, in keeping with his love of traditional puppet theatre. Wood submitted to the carver's hands, and, one might say, the malleable soul of the wood even collaborated on the final form of the work. In India, however, Kavan was faced with a new, unknown material, namely, black granite, hard as steel. Work with that kind of stone is not easy; it usually requires the experience that has been acquired over many years and passed on from one generation to another. His fascination with the new material was so strong that Kavan stayed in India for another two months, and since that time has kept coming back. With the help of local stonemasons, who have known how to handle stone since they were little boys, he made his first series of small granite sculptures, objects, and knick-knacks.

In Mahabalipuram there are hundreds of masons and craftsmen for hire, but the material now has to be brought in from elsewhere. But that's also the case in, say, Pietrasanto and Forte dei Marmi, Italy, towns surrounded by gigantic stores of stone. There, only some of the marble worked on is Carrara; other blocks are imported from as far away as South America, Africa, and Scandinavia. Stonemasonry is among the oldest crafts of mankind; the dialogue with stone was going on in the first pictographic language and symbols. Kavan humbly became intimate with the region of India, studied the craft and the language, and shared in the local customs and practices. He changed his diet, changed his style of dress, and, as is evident from the photographs, even changed his appearance, the human form of the artist. Only this sort of merging with the different culture and everyday life of a country makes sense and can yield positive results.

Ancient India is usually considered one of the birth places of European civilization, a common basis of what are now utterly different cultures. Many of the connections were forgotten long ago, but the archetypes, as discussed by Jung, remind one that such links do exist. Few people are still aware that there might be a connection between an Indian pagoda and a skyscraper in New York or Chicago; yet there is. Even secular buildings are temples or indeed cathedrals, though they are intended for other cults and idols. The last of Kavan's series of granite skyscrapers with exotic trappings not only suggest mysterious connections, but, in fact, also physically and directly demonstrate them.

Kavan's erect monoliths are carved 'artlessly', but with an incredible precision, perfection, and subtlety. This work is not done using laser-beam technology, but by the human hand, and that also introduces a scarcely noticeable quiver to the geometric order. If there is any sphere of activity where the role of handiwork is now appreciated again, it is art. It seems that the direct application of modern technology has its limits, exceptions, and even fundamental reasons for being rejected.

Kavan has entered upon an expression of time in space different from what we in Europe are accustomed to. He doesn't hurry, he submits to psychological and biological rhythms, he refuses 'creative stress', his work matures, becomes complete, culminates, slowly makes itself at home in the world. Perhaps that is why his things are suddenly so intimately close and comprehensible to us, despite the opposites of different cultures and distant civilizations.

Modern Czech art was for the most part always searching for some sort of peculiarly Czech identity of its own. It rejected cosmopolitanism, not to mention exoticism. Terms such as 'Czech Secession', 'Czech Cubism', 'Czech Surrealism' are still continuously being bandied about. Nevertheless, in Czech art, too, certain tendencies heading towards distant cultural horizons have existed from the beginning. The painters Nejedl* and Hnuvovsk* visited India and Ceylon before the First World War, a reproduction of Gauguin's Noa Noa was published in Moderni revue in 1919, and the restless globetrotter Emil Orlik set off for distant Japan in 1902. The Cubists were interested in black- African sculpture, and the Poetists of the Czech group Devutisil, between the two world wars, dreamt of harbours that smelled of cinnamon, tar, and exotic fruit. Kavan is surely the heir and successor of these artists who dared to cross the threshold and seek inspiration in the far ends of the earth. And today he is no longer alone: Ota Placht lives in Peru, Jaroslav Róna travelled through Mexico, and Ivan Theimer often visits India.

Exoticism or, as the case may be, 'Primitivism' is an integral part of modern art. Its influences are found in the work of Picasso, Derain, Giacometti, and artists working today. With the globalization of our world the possibilities, of course, expand even further. Petr Kavan places the Czech identity into the broader, global context ? which begs the question, whether this isn't about something different from Exoticism, something different from the European romance with exotic countries. The unarticulated language of signs and symbols, the tongue of shared archetypes, becomes fused in the authentic din of our world at the turn of the millennium.

Neither trendy Buddhism nor Indian philosophy were the reasons for Kavan's journey to India. An interest in things spiritual came only later. Kavan, too, went along some sort of Buddhist path to knowledge, meditation, and awakening. And his work gradually shed superfluous details and reached a synthetic simplicity, the logogram, or symbol. Kavan's skyscrapers are, in this sense, now a minimized form with maximum semantic content. No matter whether it is called a skyscraper, 'flatiron for clouds', a pagoda, an obelisk, a sun needle, or a sacred monolith, it is always the Absolute expressed in the most economical way.

Along the walls of Petr Kavan's skyscrapers crawl snakes and lizards; on the top of the Empire State Building sat the king of the monkeys, Hanuman. In fact, such is the picture of the year 2000, in the chaotic time of an interim. The elegant Functionalist constructions of Western architecture sag under the heavy application of ornaments and decoration of the once exotic Orient. We are looking for our place, and art, real art, is the very essence of that search.