

# PRAGUE

Dazzling Showcase  
of Art Nouveau



# Destinations



Acclaimed for its Art Nouveau style, Prague is a spellbinding destination for tourists passionate about architecture, art and culture.



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### Dazzling Showcase of Art Nouveau

By Judy Polan with Marilyn Fish

Glorious Prague, capital of the Czech Republic, is considered by many to be one of the most magnificent cities in Europe, and by some to be the most beautiful city in the world. Due in part to its unique, exotic location (poised at the crossroads of East and West) and in part to the vagaries of history (it was the only great European city that remained relatively unscathed by Nazi or Allied bombings during World War II), it has retained its stature as the elegant embodiment of a gracious world long gone, replete with architecture ranging from the Gothic to Modernist.

Of all Prague's architectural and design styles, the most acclaimed is Art Nouveau. This internationally popular genre (called Jugendstil in German, or *secese* in Czech) reached its zenith throughout Europe at the beginning of the 20th century. It is characterized by highly-stylized sinuous and undulating lines, often featuring floral and other organic motifs. In its deliberate rejection of pompous historicism and emphasis on decorative and artistic unity, Czech Art Nouveau is linked both to the ideals of the British Arts and Crafts movement and the Vienna Secession. But, as elsewhere throughout the Art Nouveau world, references to local folklore and architectural tradition set this nation's style apart. While Czech architects and designers gained inspiration from their avant garde contemporaries in Paris, Vienna, Berlin and Glasgow, they also expressed a firmly-rooted attachment to their own national and cultural identity.

Obecní Dům (the Municipal House) stands today as Prague's iconic Art Nouveau masterpiece. The stated purpose of the building, as specified in a 1903 architectural competition, is "to foster cultivated social life and to support musical and fine arts, as well as to provide worthy and specifically designed halls for ceremonious representation of the Czech public."

This veritable palace of the people was designed by noted architects Osvald Polivka (1859-1931) and Antonin Balsanek (1865-1921) and built in 1905-1911, on the very spot where the royal court—seat of the 14th and 15th-century kings of Bohemia—was once located. Situated just east of Wenceslas Square (the bustling area that marks the boundary between



*Opposite top* The splendid city of Prague (Praha) straddles the River Vltava, with Staré Město (the Old Town) and Josefov (the Jewish Quarter) on the east side; Hradčany (the castle/cathedral complex) and Malá Strana (the Lesser Town) are on the west. A series of bridges connects the two halves of this very walkable city. *Photo courtesy of Czech Tourism, [www.czechtourism.com](http://www.czechtourism.com)*

*Opposite bottom* Obecní Dům's glittering Americký bar draws cosmopolitan patrons from all over the world. *Photo courtesy of Obecní Dům, [www.obecnidum.cz](http://www.obecnidum.cz)*

*Above top* Obecní Dům (Municipal House) is the pièce de résistance of Prague Art Nouveau design, both inside and out. Karel Špillar's semi-circular mosaic *Homage to Prague* graces its upper façade, just above the main entrance. Inside are many dazzling public spaces designed by Alfons Mucha and many other notable Czech artists of his era. *Photo courtesy of Obecní Dům, [www.obecnidum.cz](http://www.obecnidum.cz)*

*Above bottom* Smetana Hall, inside Obecní Dům, is the largest concert hall in a city whose musical heritage is highly revered. Its many arches and curvilinear shapes, semi-circular ceiling murals, and spectacular lighting are all elements of Czech Art Nouveau. *Photo courtesy of Obecní Dům, [www.obecnidum.cz](http://www.obecnidum.cz)*

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the city's Old and New Towns), Obecní Dům is a destination venue comprising exhibition halls, salons, the spectacular Smetana Hall (home to the Prague Symphony Orchestra), several restaurants, and a stunning and famed *kavárna* (café).

The interiors of Obecní Dům are every bit as sumptuous as its extravagant exterior. An entire generation of Czech artists was involved in the creation of these rooms, most notably Alfons Mucha (1860-1939), the much-celebrated muralist, theater painter, interior decorator, illustrator and stained glass artist. He designed a multitude of resplendent fittings for Obecní Dům, from Bohemian crystal chandeliers to mirrors, curtains, and bar fixtures. Mucha achieved international recognition through his creative association with illustrious

actress Sarah Bernhardt; they collaborated on posters, costumes, jewelry and set designs for her many performances throughout Europe and America. The *Mucha Museum*, located in the heart of Prague and within walking distance of Obecní Dům, is a must-see for those interested in this extraordinarily prolific superstar of Art Nouveau design.

*Josefov* (the Jewish Quarter) is a wildly popular section of the city, due—in addition to its historic and cultural importance—to its splendid Art Nouveau architecture and ambiance. *Pařížská ulice* (Paris Street), which runs through Josefov, is one of Prague's most exclusive boulevards. It is lined with luxurious shops and restaurants inhabiting magnificent buildings erected in the 1890s. Prague's *Museum of Decorative Arts*,



Hotel Central, classified as an historical monument, is one of the oldest Art Nouveau buildings in Prague. It is constructed with traditional materials—plaster bricks and stucco; its mauve-white hue was a popular one in fin-de-siècle Prague. The organic, tree-inspired stucco pattern, the typography chosen for the hotel's name, and the continuation of design motifs onto the sidewalk are details indicating that the building was created in a harmonious totality, in the Art Nouveau style. It is located in Staré Músto, the elegant Old Town section of the city. *Photo courtesy of Hotel Central, Prague.*

## THE HIGHLIGHTS OF PRAGUE'S ART NOUVEAU TRAIL

### Obecní Dům

Náměstí Republiky 5; +420 222 002 101  
[www.ObecniDum.cz](http://www.ObecniDum.cz); [info@obecni-dum.cz](mailto:info@obecni-dum.cz)

### Mucha Museum

Kaunický Palace, Panska 7; +420 221 451 333  
[www.Mucha.cz](http://www.Mucha.cz); [info@mucha.cz](mailto:info@mucha.cz)

### Museum of Decorative Arts (UPM)

17 Listopadu 2; +420 251 093 111  
[www.upm.cz](http://www.upm.cz); [info@upm.cz](mailto:info@upm.cz)

### Hotel Evropa café

Vaclavske namesti 25; +420 226 201 910-13  
[www.pragueholiday.cz/evropa.php](http://www.pragueholiday.cz/evropa.php)  
[evropa@prague-holiday.cz](mailto:evropa@prague-holiday.cz)  
The Evropa is arguably the most lavish and fashionable of Prague's famed Art Nouveau cafes. (Expect torpid service and a large helping of attitude from your waiter!)

### Wilsonova Railway Station (Hlavní nádraží)

Wilsonova Ulce 8, New Town; +420 221 111 122  
[www.PragueExperience.com/places.asp?PlaceID=1005](http://www.PragueExperience.com/places.asp?PlaceID=1005)  
This vast 1901 station was constructed in the tradition of the great European railways. A massive glass dome caps a splendid Art Nouveau interior; a lengthy undulating wrought iron balustrade suggests both growing vines and streamlined speed—the latter a harbinger of the Art Deco style.



*Above and right* Built in 1913-1914 by the architect Jaroslav Benedikt, with magnificent ceramic interiors designed by Jan Benes, the luxurious Prague Imperial Hotel sparkles with late Art Nouveau mosaic. In the hotel's Café Imperial (shown here), rich floral and animal ornamentation recalls oriental and Moorish arts. Extensive restoration undertaken from 2005-2007 has brought the hotel back to its pre-WWI splendor. *Photos courtesy of Prague Imperial Hotel.*

a 19th-century neo-Renaissance building regularly exhibiting first-rate works from the heyday of Czech Art Nouveau, is also located in this section of town.

It is virtually impossible to make a wrong turn in Prague. No matter where you find yourself, it is bound to be a stunning or magical place. For Art Nouveau aficionados, or lovers of the arts in general, Prague—known in some circles as “the Great Seductress”—is simply *the* place to be.

*Award-winning writer and musician Judy Polan writes about the arts and design for Style 1900, Modernism, Berkshire Living, Home+Garden, and Pakn Treger magazines. Email her via her website, [www.JudyPolan.com](http://www.JudyPolan.com).*

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