

Budapest: six hours of art full speed

One of the most enchanting cities in the world, occupying both banks of the Danube, which separates Buda from Pest, and connected by seven bridges. For over a thousand years, the capital city of Hungary has suffered perpetual attacks: lootings, destruction and bombings. Nevertheless, it has managed to preserve some of the world's most beautiful architecture. Its *Art Nouveau* is stunning and one of its best examples can be found in the Gresham Palace, built in 1907 and for the past nine years the Four Seasons Hotel, across from the Chain Bridge; opposite stands the Royal Palace housing the Art Museum, covering the history of Hungarian painting.

Our tour commences at the Kovacs Gabor Art Foundation, not usually included in museum guides. Kovacs, a young Hungarian banker, has brought together a fabulous collection of Magyar art in the lapse of only 22 years; it is exhibited in a gorgeous palace on the main avenue of the city: Andrássy 112. The collection starts with a still life with animals by the brilliant Jacob Bogdani (1658-1724), a favorite of British collectors, and continues with over three hundred paintings, including the Hungarian "Caravaggio", the incomparable Tibor Czernus (1927-2007). French influence in Austrian and Hungarian art is quite significant. The Barbizon school left its mark on 19th century artists as well as on the Fauvists at the start of the 20th century. Sandor Ziffer was one of the main exponents of this trend which unfortunately lasted only two years (1905-1906), leaving some of the best works by Derain, Vlaminck, Braque and Matisse, among others. The Kovacs Foundation has also undertaken to bring together the works of the artist whom Picasso considered "the best draftsman in the world", Lajos Szalay (1909-1995), an outstanding Hungarian who lived in Argentina for fourteen years. At first he taught at the University of Tucuman, together with Spilimbergo and Pompeyo Audivert. Later he worked and taught in Buenos Aires and had Paco Virasoro as his patron. Apart from the superb paintings and sculptures, Kogart House also offers a good restaurant where you can enjoy lunch, accompanied by some superb drinks; its Hungarian sparkling wine and Chardonnay could be the envy of any winery.

Three blocks from the Villa we arrive at Heroes' Square and the magnificent Museum of Fine Arts, with its magnificent architecture. It offers high quality shows like the one exhibited at present: "Egon Schiele and his Age". The Museum also houses a fabulous collection of works by El Greco, which includes the singular painting *The Penitent Magdalen*. Other works comprise the *Madonna and Child with the Infant St John*, by the genius Raphael. Renaissance iconography was full of signs and symbols. One theory held that there had been two Jesus infants, one born in Nazareth and the other in Bethlehem. For this reason, two children were often portrayed, despite the objections of those who entrusted the works. One appeared clothed in a lamb's skin and the other with a cross, mingling both the iconography of Jesus with that of his cousin John the Baptist. These and other fascinating stories are expressed in Javier Sierra's book, "El Maestro del Prado", published by Editorial Planeta, which has sold 200,000 copies in only six months. It is an excellent read. Other Old Masters included in the museum's collection are: Diego de Velasquez, a Virgin by Zurbarán, a beautiful Sebastiano del Piombo and a self-portrait by Dürer as well as works by the Impressionists.

From there we must take a tram, bus or taxi to get to the Hungarian National Gallery and the Budapest History Museum, both housed within the Royal Palace in one of

Buda's hills. It is believed that the first Palace was built at the end of the 13th century by King Bela IV. The castle was destroyed many times, the last time during the Second World War. Nevertheless, in 1966 it was reconstructed with parts of the 15th-century Gothic palace remains. My favorite Hungarian artists are very well represented: Mihály Munkácsy, an intimist painter of extraordinary quality who reminds us of the best works by Mariano Fortuna, Karoly Ferenczy and one of the best portrait artists of the 20th century, the sublime Philip de Lázló, of whom two beautiful portraits can be seen at the Hirsch Salon of our National Museum of Fine Arts: the portraits of Alfredo Hirsch and his wife, Lisa Gottschalk Hirsch. Together with Zorn and Boldini, these artists can be considered the Holbeins of the 20th century. The Gallery also undertakes important exhibitions like the one held at present dedicated to Impressionism, with works which have hardly been shown before and come from the Jerusalem Museum. Pictures by Pissarro, Monet, Renoir and other key figures, opposite their Hungarian contemporaries. This show has been cleverly and instructively put together, demonstrating that this artistic movement, 140 years old, is perhaps the most seductive of all the schools of painting.

To recover from so much beauty the next best thing to do is to enjoy a bowl of goulash, with some bread to dip ... delicious!

(Translation of "Cómo recorrer Budapest a través de sus extraordinarios museos". In *El Cronista Comercial*, 19/08/2013.)