



Wooden Churches in Slovakia

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Venue:	Exhibition Centre in the Ringturm Schottenring 30, 1010 Vienna
Opening hours:	Monday to Friday, 9 am to 6 pm, free admission (closed on public holidays)
Press tour:	Wednesday, 12 October 2016, 10 am
Speakers:	Peter Kresánek (art historian) and Adolph Stiller
Official opening:	Wednesday, 12 October 2016, 6.30 pm (invitation only)
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Wooden Churches in Slovakia

Built in the vast forests of the Carpathians between the 15th and 20th centuries, the 60 wooden churches still standing today in Slovakia form a valuable cultural legacy. Eight of them have been included in the UNESCO World Heritage List. Embedded in a multi-confessional and multi-ethnic region, two European cultures with distinctive religious traditions – Western (Latin) and Eastern (Byzantine) – have had a mutually beneficial influence on one another. The outcome is outstanding constructions with a significance that extends far beyond the region itself. Books by Gábor Méry and Marcell Jankovics (who both live in Budapest) on late Gothic altarpieces in the Spiš region will also be presented as part of the exhibition, which is a joint initiative of the Slovakian and Hungarian Ambassadors to Austria.

Located in the heart of Europe, between the Danube and Tisza rivers and the arcing Carpathian Mountains, Slovakia is characterised by diverse terrain and a climate that varies sharply from region to region. Climatic conditions left their mark when the country was first settled, and later also influenced ways of life as well as the variety of settlements and their urban and architectural design. The Carpathians stand out for their particularly extensive woodlands, where beech, fir, spruce, yew and larch all flourish. So it is little wonder that wood served as a raw material for building.

Over the centuries, two European cultures with contrasting worldly and spiritual traditions – Western or Latin and Eastern or Byzantine-Russian – had a mutual impact on one another in the mountain range's extensive forests, which were home to numerous devoted followers of these two strands of Christianity. Roman Catholics and Orthodox Christians lived here along with Protestants, Lutherans, Calvinists and Greek-Orthodox Uniates. Such religious diversity was unique to the Carpathians, and up until the first half of the 20th century was supplemented by a large Jewish population.

This singular multi-confessional and multi-ethnic community is reflected in the region's wooden churches. The differing views of the substance of Christianity were reflected in the design and architectural language of places of worship. The architectural solutions adopted in these constructions are based on long-standing traditions of church-building, as well as on "imported" models. Builders passed on their skills and expertise from one generation to the next, and in many cases, the styles adopted in the various major architectural epochs were influenced by the works of untrained architects.

The 60 churches still standing today in Slovakia form a valuable cultural legacy. In terms of religious confessions, they can be divided into three groups. The first includes Roman Catholic churches: Gothic-style constructions from the 15th to the 17th century and more modern churches built in the 19th and 20th centuries in the Tatra Mountains. The oldest were erected in an age when faith determined people's lifestyles, and designs were typical of those in the Gothic era. Builders took their cue from existing stone designs, implementing them in a simplified form. These churches were typified by their high gable roofs, predominantly westward-facing towers and longitudinal alignment, with a clear separation of the nave from the sanctuary by means of a triumphal arch. The interiors featured stencilled ornamentation from the Middle Ages, and wall paintings with religious motifs were also popular – their function was to portray incidents from the Bible, "telling" the stories to those who could not read. Churches built more recently in the Tatras form a distinct category. They bear the creative signature of Spiš architect Gedeon Majunke. The construction of these churches was closely linked to the growth of spa tourism in the High Tatras.

The second group comprises Protestant and Augsburg Confession churches dating from the late 17th to the early 19th century. Faced with the threat of the Ottomans, and under pressure from the nobility to weaken the Counter-Reformation, at the end of the 17th century the Kingdom of Hungary – which included present-day Slovakia – made a number of concessions, such as granting permission for the construction of Protestant churches. In accordance with the stipulations passed by the Sopron provincial parliament in 1681, specially designated church choirs played a central role in the lives of Protestants, and Protestant communities were permitted to build new, so-called articular churches, albeit under the close supervision of royal officials. These often hastily erected, makeshift churches were predominantly made of wood. Rugged design and a ground plan in the shape of a cross of St George were the distinguishing architectural features. Galleries were also common, with a pulpit in the middle of the church as a focal point for spreading the word of God. Although the decoration was less powerful than that in Catholic churches, in some cases it was surprisingly diverse with a broad palette of colours. Passages from the Psalms and the New Testament were also prevalent, as well as quotes from biblical figures such as the prophets Moses and Aaron, Peter and Paul and the Four Evangelists. Secular motifs and the crests of the nobility – the generous benefactors of the Reformation – adorned the window ledges of the galleries and the wall panelling.

The final main group consists of wooden constructions – known as churches of the Eastern rite – built between the 17th and 20th century by Greek Orthodox and in a few cases Orthodox communities. Their typical silhouettes, tripartite layout and interior decorations reflect the spiritual roots of Byzantine and Old Russian art. This Eastern connection is expressed in stepped roofs, and towers featuring onion domes with ornate crosses, while Western influences are reflected in the Baroque spire of the dominant tower. The iconostasis – a decorative wall separating the congregation from the sanctuary – is a key element of the interior. It has three doors, the tsar doors or Beautiful Gates in the centre and diaconal doors on either side, as well as numerous small icons arranged according to a strict canon. Icons of St Nicholas, the Madonna with child (the Mother of God) and Jesus Christ form the main tier, with an icon of the saint to whom the church or cathedral is dedicated on the far right. Above this is a row of smaller icons of religious festivals (prazdnik) with one icon of the Last Supper or an impression of the face of Christ (mandylion). The middle section of the third row is dominated by an icon of Christ the Almighty (Pantocrator), flanked by icons of the twelve apostles, with six on each side. The final tier comprises icons of Old Testament prophets, with an image of the Crucifixion completing the ornamentation. The altar (prestol) stands behind the iconostasis, and there is also a smaller side altar (zertevnik) used for preparation of the Eucharist.

Wooden synagogues also shaped Slovakia's landscape for many years. However, time and history played a part in the disappearance of these unassuming buildings. They fell victim to the process of natural aging and to natural disasters, as well as human intolerance and indifference. The last of the synagogues vanished shortly after World War Two. Many wooden churches suffered a similar fate. Repairs were left undone, and construction of new stone buildings took priority. It seems as if people lost interest in the wooden churches.

Consequently, many of them were relocated from Slovakia to Moravia and other parts of the Czech Republic in the first third of the 20th century, in the time of the former Czechoslovakia. In the 1960s and 1990s others found homes in newly built museums, where they took centre stage in open-air exhibitions. Today, almost all historic wooden churches are protected, and form part of Slovakia's national cultural heritage or are on display in museums. They are valuable sacred buildings where – with a few exceptions – church services are still held. In July 2008 eight of the churches were designated as UNESCO World Heritage Sites: Hervartov, Tvrdošín, Kežmarok, Leštiny, Hronsek, Lodomírová, Bodružal and Ruská Bystrá.

They remain prized cultural relics, even though only a fraction of the original number of churches has been preserved. Their singular ambience, novel design approaches and simple, charming beauty help to create a strong and unique genius loci that kindles an impassioned dialogue between man and God.

Wooden churches included in the UNESCO World Heritage List (excerpt)



© Miloš Dudáš

Tvrdošín

Built between 1435 and 1440, the Roman Catholic All Saints Church in Tvrdošín is Slovakia's oldest wooden church. Its architecture is typical of Gothic religious buildings. The dark tones of the wood are brought to life by colourful paintings featuring wild flower motifs and saints in Heaven, and by the image of the twelve apostles on the coffered ceiling of the nave. The original Gothic altar, fragments of which are part of the collections of the Orava gallery in Dolný Kubín and the Museum of Fine Arts in Budapest, gave way to a Baroque replacement between 1766 and 1770.



© Miloš Dudáš

Hronsek

Protestant worshippers built this articular church close to the River Hron between 1725 and 1726. The technical construction methods – some of which were also used in timber-framed buildings – and ground plan in the form of an almost precisely equal-armed cross make this one of Slovakia's most remarkable religious edifices. The interior consists of enclosed arched vaults made from wooden planks which – like the wall coverings – do not feature any paintings. Unassuming decorations with stylised heads and ribbon-like sculptures are only found on the galleries. The Baroque altar in front of the organ is adorned with a total of six paintings displayed alternately at different times of the church year.



© Miloš Dudáš

Ladomírová

Completed in 1742, the Greek Orthodox Church of St Michael the Archangel is typical of the wooden Orthodox churches found in northeastern Slovakia. The timber-framed, wooden-floored building is easily recognisable from a distance thanks to its characteristic outline: dominant, westward-facing towers and graded pavilion roofs topped with high Baroque onion domes. Below the dome, which has the form of an eight-sided pyramid, is an iconostasis dating back to the 18th century. Eye-catching decorations in the form of vines and acanthus leaves adorn the polychrome, gold-plated and richly engraved architecture. Some of the original icons are now part of the collections of the Šariš Museum in Bardejov.



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Bodružal

Located in a community that is now home to only a handful of Greek Orthodox believers, St Nicholas Church was completed in 1658 and is one of Slovakia's oldest and best preserved wooden Orthodox churches. Its characteristic architecture, with three towers, fenced cemetery with gateway and separate bell tower, make it the dominant construction in the village. The unique wall paintings on the northern side of the nave have been preserved – they depict the Holy Trinity, as well as scenes from the Last Judgement and the Passion.

Wooden churches protected as national cultural monuments (excerpt)



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Paludza – Svätý Križ

Because the former articular prayer room could no longer be adapted to needs of the large congregation, the Protestant community replaced it with an imposing new wooden church between 1773 and 1774. It is almost unbelievable that the church was built in the space of only eight months by a single carpenter who could neither read nor write. The church was moved to the village of Svätý Križ in the 1970s due to the extension of a nearby reservoir. The interior stands out for its wooden vault and stepped galleries. The latter is the focal point for the ornamentation, which takes the form of plant and biblical motifs, as well as exceptional secular designs.



© Miloš Dudáš

Starý Smokovec

Construction of this Roman Catholic church was initiated by Archduchess Clotilde, who entrusted architect Gedeon Majunke from Spišská Sobota with the work. True to the spirit of the late 19th century, Majunke designed a timber-framed building, taking his inspiration from Anglo-Saxon tradition. Dating back to 1888, this impressive church is unconventional by Slovakian standards, but exemplifies regional Tatra architecture that was supported by the growth of tourism. In the interior, the painted coffered ceiling with plant motifs and the Neo-Gothic furnishings catch the eye. This ornamentation is augmented by paintings of the Holy Family and St George.



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Nižný Komárnik

The only Boyko-style wooden church in Slovakia was designed by a leading expert on Carpathian construction, the architect Vladimír Sičynský. Greek Orthodox worshippers built the church in 1938 on a hill close to the village of Nižný Komárnik, and dedicated it to the Mother of God. The stepped roofs are topped with polygonal domes featuring small towers and forged crosses. The bright, spacious interior includes a recently renovated iconostasis in white with gilded wood carvings. The icons of the prophets in the final tier are mounted along the lower edge of the dome – an unusual solution.



© Alexander Jiroušek

Nová Sedlica (Vihorlat Museum in Humenné)

Located close to the seat of the Drugeth family in Humenné, the Vihorlat Museum is home to an exhibition of folk architecture and houses. The Orthodox Church of St Michael the Archangel, which dates back to 1764, was moved here from its original site in the village of Nová Sedlica. With its eastward-facing polygonal towers and shingled gable roofs, the church's architecture leaves a unique impression. The partially preserved iconostasis, which also contains more recent icons, includes a door with unusual motifs: 12 medallions of a Jesse tree. The two icons of the Madonna with child are a particular highlight.
