

THIS! IS A TREASURE HOUSE OF SLOVAK ILLUSTRATION

from the collection THIS! is a Gallery

We remember it like this:

"...There's no way it can work. You two can't imagine what it takes to run a gallery like that. How are you going to pay for it all? Where will you do it? And on top of that – you want to show just illustrations. How many exhibitions do you think you can get out of that? Do you have a plan?" That was how Miloš Kopták reacted to the other two of us – Mária Rojko and Ida Želinská in May 2014. In July we signed a lease for a former shop on the corner of Moskovská Street and Poľná Street in Bratislava. In September 2014, we opened our first exhibition. We jointly bought the first illustrations for it from Jana Kiselová-Siteková.

It was our dream to have a gallery.

There are times in life when things like that happen. You get an idea into your head, and you do whatever it takes to make it real.

Even so, exhibiting illustrations and "owning" them was far from all we wanted.

We felt frustrated by the gap between the strong international reputation of Slovak illustration and how illustrators and their works were treated (and – let's not get over-excited – still are treated).

We hoped that if we put on a lot of exhibitions, it would return illustration to its rightful place in history and culture. We wanted to do it as a "topography" – not in the field but in the library. We would find an illustration and say: "Here's a good one!" and then another from the illustrator, then to research all the things that they published and exhibit the best of them.

When we started putting illustrations in frames and looking at them closely, we realised that they are not different from other types of fine art – pictures, prints or objects. They are just as beautiful and intense. You can look at them forever.

But let's speak plainly: eight years ago, when TOTO! je galéria was founded in 2014, not everybody would acknowledge that. Illustration was a "lesser" art, almost one of the applied arts. Not many people considered putting them up on their walls. A lot of people in our trade (antique-shop owners, collectors and art historians) turned their nose up at the very idea. "Paper? Bright watercolours, felt tips, wax crayons, pencils?"

Why not?

Illustration is a dance in a tight space.

Illustrators are boxed in even before they start thinking what to do with a story. They have to deal with the text. And the publisher's ideas. The dimensions, the colour scheme and the paper type are fixed in advance.

There is such a tendency to look down on illustration.

At the same time, illustrations are often the first work of art we encounter when we are children. They are our gateway to the work of stories, whether imaginary or real. We learn how wonderful it is to long for discovery after discovery, to look for connections, to discover that things and stories have logical connections. The heroes of books even make us think about values: why we, as people, ought to be good, brave, honourable. It is not for nothing that books are regarded as "national treasures".

So, it is strange that the names of those who co-created these books are not remembered: they don't appear in the curriculum of primary and secondary education. They are not taught as part of our cultural history. And yet, can you imagine how interesting it would be to learn how the illustrations were made, both by what techniques and under what conditions? If, for example, in history, literature, social science and art lessons, children and young people studied which books and which publishing houses had the "first" Slovak illustrations? How and why did they start experimenting with the form (even in children's books) in the 1960s? Which artists were forbidden to exhibit their works in the 1970s but found "asylum" (as Robert Brun called it) in illustration, and why? Why did the book market almost collapse in the 1990s with the result that many more or less finished books remained unpublished?

Illustrations are an endangered species of art. When we go looking for them, we often find them very badly preserved. There can be creases or spill marks, and collage elements may have come unstuck. When they are left in the light too long, they fade. When they get wet, the colours disappear.

The worst thing is that they don't get into state collections. Galleries effectively stopped buying them in the 1990s, so they are left "at home" with the artist's heirs, or they are given away or sold off. Or they just get lost here or there.

People often ask us how we acquire them.

Hm. Sometimes it's easy – we know the artists. Or their children. Sometimes it takes a long search. We spend hours on the computer searching marketplaces and auctions. We spend hours more in second-hand bookshops and antique shops. Sometimes people bring things into the gallery. Other items we acquire thanks to

the snowball effect. By following trails of information and contacts.

If we didn't collect these little pictures, many of them would just disappear.

When you look at our collection of more than 400 illustrations by Slovak (and Czechoslovak) artists, you can feel how it was made – from passion, love of reading and delight in discovering and learning new things. It is essential, with a deep, inner value. It is still not complete (and probably never will be) and we keep adding new works to it.

This collection has been a history lesson for us (and now it will be for you too). It gives us an overview of the combinations of types and techniques, lets us see how fine artists gave shape to books, and shows us how they thought. If you look carefully, the text and the pictures will form a sort of bridge in your memory – you will suddenly recall where and when you met. Between the lines. As Mária Rojko once said: "You may forget the story, but the pictures will remain."

— Miloš Kopták, Mária Rojko and Ida Želinská —
THIS! is gallery



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