

Dnes

The Ark Speaks to People: During the day it is an enormous four and half meter tall ship. At night it becomes a three-dimensional projection screen where the great story of the Jews is played out.

The art installation was created by the Canadian artist Melissa Shiff in celebration of the centennial of the Jewish Museum in Prague. The history of the museum served as inspiration as did the words of the German writer W.G. Sebald who noted in his novel *Austerlitz* that objects can only speak when given a voice by people.

The History in a Nutshell

“The idea of the ark as a metaphor for the museum, a repository safeguarding Judaism and Jewish culture and treasures came to me almost immediately when I began to think about this special centennial project,” says the video sculpture’s creator. “It is also an ark in the sense of an archive, which helps to preserve the cultural memory of a people,” Melissa Shiff points out.

References to Biblical mythology, the Flood, and the construction of Noah’s Ark appear in the thirty minute film which is projected [on to the sides of the ark] from the inside of the installation. First and foremost, however, we are reminded of the great flood in Prague in 1890, followed by the onset of the reconstruction of Josefov [the Jewish quarter], and the subsequent establishment of the Jewish Museum. The film also depicts the Holocaust period and the rescue of the art treasures as well as the Communist putsch in 1948 which resulted in the nationalization of the Jewish Museum and the Communist government’s confiscation of important artifacts from the museum’s collections. While the film doesn’t mention the opening of the Monument to the Victims of the Holocaust and its closure nine years later in 1968, the story continues through the Velvet Revolution, the return of the Jewish Museum to the Jewish Community, and the flooding in Prague in 2002. The ark’s voyage ends with the celebration of the museum’s centennial.

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“In her installation, the artist adopts a postmodern approach and thus creates a multilayered narrative which is relevant to us today regardless of our cultural distinctiveness and experience,” says the exhibition’s curator Michaela Hajková who asked Melissa Shiff to create the artwork. The artist spent several months researching for the installation. “The museum’s collections are very inspiring. It is history and as an artist I feel it is my duty to talk about and bring it to the present,” the artist adds. “We live in a very visual culture, a technologically advanced age in which we speak a certain language. It is therefore important to use this language.”

Leo Pavlat, the museum’s director, is also enthusiastic about her work and artistic approach. “Already in our first meeting, where the ark project was being discussed, it was clear that her type of presentation situated as it was in the public space would be effective in communicating its concept to the broader public. Not everyone visits our museum, but everybody knows our synagogues. This is why we wanted to commemorate our centennial close to one of these [buildings],” explains Pavlat.

Tradition and the present

Melissa Shiff uses new media in the ark project as she did in her first exhibition in Prague last spring. In an installation displayed in the Spanish Synagogue, she used video technology to contrast an exhibition mapping the conventions of the traditional Jewish wedding with an instance when the ritual was transformed, her own wedding as a matter of fact. “This is my method as an artist – to reflect upon and remodel religious rituals so they speak to people today. On one hand, the tradition of Judaism and on the other, its transformation,” explains the artist who grew up in a liberal Jewish family. Even though she identifies strongly with Jewish culture, in searching for new impulses she introduces certain changes into ancient customs. “Melissa Shiff is close to liberal and reform Judaism which modifies Orthodoxy in a particular way,” Pavlat notes. “The [Jewish] tradition enables one to live in any time period as the foundations of traditional Judaism are constant and its symbolism remains the same. These art works, however, illustrate how individuals perceive the development of Jewish traditions.”