

“I grew up near the town of Kutná Hora. When I saw the Gothic church there as a young boy, I stared at it like a young hare at the first snow. I wasn't particularly well educated – I grew up surrounded by Gothic and I didn't even know...” (Josef Sudek).

1922–1924

Sudek studied photography at the State Graphic School. He took part in excursions to St. Vitus Cathedral with the Director of the School and President of the Society for Old Prague, Dr. Bělohávek. The cathedral was under reconstruction and intensive building work was going on.

“And one morning I went in and stared: everything was... an amazing atmosphere. It was the first time I had seen architecture on such a large scale. [...] And suddenly I knew that here was something. You know, I had the impression of a still life rather than of architecture.” (Josef Sudek).

1924–1928

Sudek photographed of St. Vitus Cathedral from his own personal interest. First the busts on the triforium, then construction still lifes from throughout the cathedral, overall views, genre photos of the workers, etc.

1928

To mark the tenth anniversary of the foundation of the Czechoslovak Republic, the publishing house Družstevní Práce published the monumental album entitled ‘Svatý Vít’ [St. Vitus] in the form of a collector's item with fifteen original gelatin silver prints by Josef Sudek and a foreword by the poet Jaroslav Durych, in an elegant large-format design by Emanuel Frinta. The planned print run of 120 copies was evidently not finally produced by Sudek.

“Pages with a special magic and tenderness – but they also genuinely document a great human work, St. Vitus Cathedral. They contain all the photographer's intelligence, honest work, and many years of preparation. Josef Sudek waited with the patience of a Japanese for sunshine and shadow, visiting the cathedral again and again – over weeks and months. This one-armed man clambered over scaffolding and towers, and broke some of his plates, only to come again with a fresh batch to look and record.” (Jaromír Funke, review of the album for the magazine Panorama, 1928).

1929

As part of the series of publications ‘Československo: Praha’ [Czechoslovakia: Prague], the Melantrich publishing house published a book devoted to St. Vitus Cathedral with sixteen photographs by Josef Sudek, which were most likely created specifically for this commission. (At this time Sudek was working for Melantrich publishing house.)

1930s

Sudek only took a few individual photographs of the cathedral, in the style of constructivist aestheticism. One photograph was published e.g. in a calendar for the Orbis publishing house for the year 1931.

“As soon as they stopped working there, as soon as they cleaned up the dear church, I could no longer see anything there. It wasn't until the time of the Protectorate that I started to see something there again.” (Josef Sudek).

ca. 1938– ca. 1944 The second phase of Sudek's systematic photographing of St. Vitus Cathedral, was most likely the result of a commission for a pictorial monograph on the cathedral to be published by Melantrich. Some of the photographs taken at this time were included by Sudek in his cycle of photographs Kontrasty [Contrasts].

“... this time it was commissioned by Melantrich. A publication covering the whole of St. Vitus' Cathedral was supposed to be published. I almost have it finished, but it won't be published. No, that wouldn't be kosher.” (Josef Sudek).

1943

Sudek included one of his photographs of St. Vitus Cathedral in his freelance work in the album Moderní česká fotografie [Modern Czech Photography], published in 1943 with an introduction by Karel Teige.

1945–1948

A few of the photographs from the second phase of photographing were published in the monographs ‘Pražský hrad. Výtvarné dílo staletí v obrazech Josefa Sudka’ [Prague Castle. The Artwork of Centuries in the Images by Josef Sudek] (Sfinx, 1945) and its English version ‘Magic in Stone’ (London: Lincoln-Pragers, 1947), in the calendar ‘Kulturní ztráty 1939-1945’ [Cultural Losses 1939–1945] (Václav Poláček publishers, 1946) and in the monograph ‘Náš hrad’ [Our Castle] (J. R. Vilímek publishers, 1948).

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1978

Two year after Sudek's death the Institute of Art History of the Czech Academy of Sciences, received, as a gift from Božena Sudková and on the recommendation of Anna Fárová, part of Sudek's archive, consisting of 900 of his negatives and positives of St. Vitus Cathedral, dating from the second phase in the 1940s. His other photographs were gifted to the Museum of Decorative Arts in Prague and the Regional Museum in Kolín, and today many others are scattered all over the world.