

1924

Jakub Schikaneder (1855 – 1924)

Twilight, 1909

One of the most impressive paintings held in the 20th-century Czech art collection of the Karlovy Vary Gallery of Fine Arts – Schikaneder's *Twilight* – has perhaps always been part of its permanent exhibition. After all, which curator would want to be deprived of its magic? The work, dated 1909, thus became part of the selection prepared for the centenary of the establishment of the Czechoslovak Republic, although it was painted nine years earlier. It is because the exhibition concept allowed to present works by artists who were born or died within the given centenary period, which is also the case of Jakub Schikaneder (1855–1924).

Jakub Schikaneder entered the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague at the age of 15 as a very talented young man, and after graduating continued his studies at the Munich Academy. He was one of the prominent (albeit long overlooked) cultural figures of the 1890s who wanted to distinguish himself from the artists of the National Theatre generation. In 1885, he became an assistant in the studio headed by František Ženíšek (his former classmate from the Prague Academy) at the Academy of Arts, Architecture and Design in Prague. He then worked there as a professor in the Studio of Decorative Painting from 1890 to 1922. He was therefore financially secure and he also married, yet his oeuvre almost exclusively contains notes of sadness and loneliness.

Initially, Schikaneder focused mainly on figurative compositions with social subjects of often tragic nature (the three-meter *Murder in the House* captivated the audience of the 1891 Jubilee Exhibition). The 1890s then represented the artist's most appreciated position - moody nocturnes, early evening or night scenes from old Prague, niches illuminated by the glow of gas lamps, carriages and abandoned figures emerging from the misty haze and shadows, snow-covered streets of the vanishing Prague. Similarly, he worked on interiors dimly lit by kerosene lamps and sombre figural scenes. Ordinary, simple motifs filled with sadness, melancholy, silence and solitude went hand in hand with an impressive subdued color scale that enveloped the subjects and figures in a nostalgic haze on the verge between dream and reality. (It is no coincidence that Miloš Forman was inspired by the mood of these Schikaneder's paintings inspired Miloš Forman during the Prague filming of his later Oscar-winning *Amadeus*.)

In contrast to the frequent "cityscape", free landscape subjects are rather rare in Schikaneder's oeuvre, yet at the end of the first decade of the new century he produced a breathtaking landscape painting entitled *Twilight*. Indeed, the painter brilliantly captured the atmosphere of the landscape slowly falling asleep and the approaching darkness. It is a calm composition of muted colours, a dark green belt of forests with deep black shadows, the double lighter green of meadows in the foreground, red-coloured, perhaps autumn, bushes, and the bluish tinge of the sky. And above it all the glow of the rising full moon, which adds a magical effect to the shimmering landscape. Blurred colour surfaces, smoothly seeping values without visible brushstrokes, hints without details, diffused light, contours of individual colour masses, melting together only when viewed from a great distance. Then, of course, the work evokes the impression of an almost photorealistic depiction of a landscape. Silence, stillness, desolation, nostalgia, all of this is submerging into the approaching mysterious twilight. And the full moon shines, multiplying the magical powers and performing miracles – who would not have succumbed to its magic in 1909... The *Twilight* is one of the chef-d'oeuvres of the Karlovy Vary collection and many visitors return here repeatedly for it. And no wonder, since the magical spell of the full moon still works today.