

# The Intimate World of Josef Sudek

June 7 — September 25, 2016

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#Sudek



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Exhibition organized by the **Canadian Photography Institute of the National Gallery of Canada**, in collaboration with the **Jeu de Paume** for the presentation in Paris.



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The exhibition will be presented at the National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa from October 28, 2016 to March 19, 2017

The Jeu de Paume receives public funding from the **Ministère de la Culture et de la Communication** and its main corporate sponsors are **Neuflyze OBC** and **Manufacture Jaeger-LeCoultre**.

• **Cover :**

**Josef Sudek, *Royal Garden*, c. 1940–46, pigment print using carbon tissue, 16.1 × 11.7 cm**  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek

# The Intimate World of Josef Sudek

June 7 — September 25, 2016

## CURATORS

**Vladimír Birgus** (director of the Institute of Creative Photography, Silesian University, Opava),  
**Ian Jeffrey** (art historian) and **Ann Thomas** (curator of photography, The Canadian Photography Institute of the  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa)

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## EXHIBITION HIGHLIGHTS

- “Josef Sudek: The World at My Window” is the first exhibition in France since 1988 to cover Sudek’s entire career and spotlight the different phases of his work. Coming in the wake of several exhibitions at the Jeu de Paume devoted to Eastern European photographers of the early twentieth century, among them André Kertész and François Kollar, this one comprises some 130 vintage prints by the Czech artist. Bringing to bear a vision at once subjective and timeless, Sudek captures the ongoing changes in Prague’s natural world and landscapes.
- His early profession as a bookbinder came to an abrupt halt when he was conscripted into the Austro-Hungarian army in Bohemia and sent to the Italian front. After the First World War he came back to Prague wounded; the loss of his right arm meant abandoning bookbinding, and he turned to photography. After revisiting the battlefield in Italy once more he returned, in despair, to Prague: “I found the place,” he recounted, “but my arm wasn’t there. Since then I’ve never gone anywhere. I didn’t find what I was looking for.”
- A study grant enabled him to train at the state-run school of graphic arts in Prague, where he mixed with practitioners of Pictorialism, a photographic movement aiming at achieving colour and texture effects similar to those of painting. He started concentrating on architectural details, always waiting until the light was absolutely perfect. Little by little he gave up the Pictorialist ambiances of his views of St Vitus’s cathedral, opting for a pure, straightforward approach which the American photographer Alfred Stieglitz summed up as “maximum detail for maximum simplification”.
- During the Second World War Sudek began photographing the window giving onto his garden, the result being the celebrated *Window of My Studio* series. He then shifted his focus to the accumulated jumble of objects in the studio, producing a further series titled *Labyrinths*. Light was an inexhaustible theme in his work, orchestrating the seasons, making the invisible visible and transporting us into another world.
- As if to escape the leaden context of the War and then of Communism, Sudek took refuge in music, especially that of his compatriot Leoš Janáček. A true music lover, he gradually built up a substantial collection of recordings which he played to his friends during improvised concerts in his studio.
- The second half of his career saw Sudek abandon photography’s traditional subjects as he explored the outskirts of Prague with his black view camera on his shoulder. Known as “the poet of Prague”, he became an emblematic figure in the Czech capital. Discreet and solitary, he gradually withdrew from the city’s art scene, leaving his studio only to prowl the streets at night with his imagination as his guide.
- Sudek’s photographs rarely include people; his focus was more on empty urban and rural spaces. Fascinated by the streets of Prague, the city’s deserted parks and public gardens, and the wooded Bohemian landscapes his mastery of light rendered sublime, he preferred the un-enlarged contact print as a means of preserving all the detail and authenticity of the places he roamed through.
- His work moved towards experiments with light. In photographs shot through with simplicity and sensitivity, Sudek foregrounds a kind of poetry of the everyday, using the interplay of light and shade to achieve a kind of fluctuation between interior and exterior.



**Josef Sudek, *Prague at Night*, 1950–59**

gelatin silver print, 12.2 × 17.3 cm

National Gallery of Canada. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek

# THE EXHIBITION

Entitled “The Intimate World of Josef Sudek”, this exhibition is the first of this scale to revisit the life and work of Josef Sudek (Kolín, 1896 – Prague, 1976) within its sociogeographical and historical context: Prague during the first half of the twentieth century, at a time when the Czech capital was a veritable hub of artistic activity. The exhibition features a selection of 130 works spanning the totality of Sudek’s career, from 1920 to 1976, and allows the public to examine the extent to which his photography was a reflection of his personal relationship to the surrounding world. On display are works that are the result of Sudek’s photographic experiments carried out within the privacy of his own studio, images of the garden seen from his window, and photographs of adventures further afield. The artist enjoyed meandering through the streets of Prague and its surrounding suburbs, and made frequent excursions to the nearby countryside. Sudek’s enduring fascination with light, and its absence, is at the root of some of the most haunting photographs of the twentieth century. Nature, architecture, streets and objects are magnified by his sensitivity and mastery of the effects of light, contrasting with the impenetrable cloak of darkness.

As a photographer, Sudek was particularly concerned with the quality of the photographic print, an essential component in terms of the expressive potential of an image. His mastery of the pigment printing process enabled him to produce highly atmospheric and evocative images, thereby reaping all of the reflective and descriptive power of the gelatin silver print.

The exhibition presents work from Sudek’s early career, but also features photographs from a pivotal period of experimentation and innovation, beginning in the 1940s. Focusing on the technical and formal aspects of the medium of photography, Sudek created pigment prints, halftone prints, *puridlos* (photographs between two windows) and *veteše* (photographs inserted into old frames), techniques which allowed him to transform the objectal quality of photography.

The loss of his right arm during the First World War and the difficulties he now encountered in transporting his view camera did not dampen his passion for photography.

Sudek’s studio window became an object of abiding fascination—rather like the surface of a canvas—reflecting moments of exquisite tenderness and hope when a flowering branch brushed against its pane, or of poignant melancholy when he observed the world beyond his window transformed by the playful infinity of mist. His room with a view allowed him to capture, on film, his love of Prague. His photographs demonstrate both a precision and a depth of feeling, fitting odes to the rich history and architectural complexity of the Czech capital.

Like many artists of his generation marked by their experience of war, Sudek expresses a particularly acute awareness of the dark and tormented aspects of human existence—feelings that would inspire some of his most melancholy and most moving pictures. A photograph taken at night, through the glass pane of his window, shows a city plunged into darkness during the Occupation of the Second World War, and communicates a sentiment of unspeakable despair—a dramatic illustration of Sudek’s technical ability to transcend the literal.



Josef Sudek, *Last Rose*, 1956, gelatin silver print, 28.2 × 23.2 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
© Estate of Josef Sudek

The first part of the exhibition features images that herald the photographer's later work, showing his early landscapes, portraits of fellow patients at Invalidovna, the Prague hospice for war invalids like Sudek, his hesitant foray into modernism, and his interior shots of St. Vitus Cathedral.

Through images that recount the narrative of his life, the viewer gains access to Sudek's inner world, and an insight into his immediate environment, the views and objects he loved, his studio and garden. His endless walks in Prague found expression in the views of the city and its surroundings, as well as in photographs of its more sordid "suburbs", a subject explored by other Prague artists.

The eastern and northern areas of Bohemia, the Beskid Mountains and the Mionší forest were other destinations close to the photographer's heart.

The exhibition "The Intimate World of Josef Sudek" provides a fascinating panorama of the work of this unique artist.

*A 300-page catalogue has been published to coincide with the exhibition.*

*A Jeu de Paume / National Gallery of Canada, Canadian Photography Institute / 5 Continents co-publication, the catalogue includes 250 illustrations (approx.) with texts by Vladimír Birgus, Peter Bower, Petr Helbich, Vojtěch Lahoda, Jan Mlčoch, Jan Strimpl, Ann Thomas, Christophe Vischi. Available in French and English, €40.*



Josef Sudek, *Statue*, c. 1948–1964, gelatin silver print, 9 × 14 cm. National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
© Estate of Josef Sudek

# EXHIBITION LAYOUT

## • BEGINNINGS

Sudek's first photographic prints – small and largely assembled in albums – were mainly views of the countryside taken along the Elbe River when he travelled from Prague to Kolín to visit his mother between 1916 and 1922.

Using processes such as gelatin silver and bromoil he showed a talent for printing his pictures in a style that favoured soft edges and broad swathes of tone. Here Sudek was not so much studying the effects of light as he was observing the conventions of Pictorialism, a photography movement that straddled the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first decades of the twentieth century, and was based on a strong Romantic ethos. Pictorialist photographers enhanced atmospheric effects with such processes as carbon and gum bichromate. Sudek began using the carbon process regularly and in a personally expressive manner in the late 1940s.

His *Invalidovna* and *St. Vitus Cathedral* series in Prague, begun in the first half of the 1920s, show him exploring interior spaces where light emphasizes both the profane and the sacred. The play of bands of sunlight and darkness is a central feature of the composition and, indeed, of the life of the photograph.

## • THE WORLD FROM MY WINDOW

Sudek was not content with making single, unrelated images. He generally worked in projects or series, creating extended visual explorations of the phenomena and scenes he viewed – often from the closed window of his studio, which separated his private studio-home from the exterior world. In the series *From My Window* it was the endlessly varying states of transformation of droplets of water that he watched streaming down his windowpane. His images invite us to contemplate, with great fascination, the physical cycles of water and the phenomenon of rivulets coursing down a surface – like human tears. Reminding us even of Verlaine's "There is weeping in my heart like the rain upon the city..."

Sometimes the melancholy mood of these images is leavened by a rose in a vase on the windowsill or tendrils of leaves announcing the arrival of spring.

## • NIGHT WALKS

Sudek's preoccupation with darkness dates to the Nazi Occupation of Prague from March 1939 until the end of the war. Experiencing his city plunged into nights of enforced darkness Sudek explored the absence of light in his pictures. We know that this was more than a technical exercise, for he wrote "Memories" and "Restless Night" on the verso of one nocturnal photograph dated 1943.

The curfews imposed on citizens at the time made it unlikely that Sudek ventured out into the city after dark during wartime. Neither agile nor inconspicuous with his large-format camera slung over his increasingly hunched back, Sudek would have risked his life had he done so. The small courtyard of his studio on Ujezd street was hidden from the road, however, and one or two lights in neighbouring apartments served as beacons. Well after sundown he would photograph the syncopated play of blurs of light against the wall of impenetrable blackness.

## • FRIENDS AND ARTISTS

Sudek's best portraits were made when his emotional connectedness to the sitter prevailed over the sometimes awkward or artificial moments that constitute a formal posing session. This is certainly true of his portraits of artist friends such as the Cubist painter Emil Filla (1882–1953), painter František Tichý (1896–1961), photographer Jaromír Funke (1896–1945) and the intimate study of dancer and actress, Milena Vildová whom Sudek would photograph with tenderness in different poses, and on many occasions. Made for personal use rather than commerce, Sudek's portraits were largely intimate studies of people he knew and cared about.

## • THE SPIRIT OF PLACE

Sudek visited and photographed places that held either personal or spiritual significance for him: the landscape along the Elbe River, Invalidovna, St. Vitus Cathedral, his studio, Prague's complex streets and open squares, the majestic Prague Castle, the city's surrounds, and Frenštát pod Radhoštěm where he spent summers with friends. Hukvaldy, home of Leoš Janáček, the composer whose music he loved, was a particularly favoured haunt. This was true also of the ancient Mionší Forest where he navigated his way through dense brush and forests by way of shortcuts that he created and playfully named. The Beskid Mountains also served as spiritual retreat. Although he was an urbanite in many respects, Sudek's love of nature and sense of despair for its desecration is strongly expressed in *Sad Landscapes*, his series of images made in the Most region where industrialization ravaged the countryside in the 1950s.

## • THE LIFE OF OBJECTS

Sudek collected everything. Today he would be known as a hoarder. But his obsession served him well, for out of the chaos of his small studio and living spaces he carefully selected a variety of these objects to photograph. From delicate feathers to crumpled paper and tinfoil, multi-faceted drinking glasses, flowers, fruit, seashells, envelopes, flasks, frames, prisms, candelabras, string and shoe moulds, the subjects ranged from the mundane to the exotic. Once chosen, the set-up was lovingly composed – often in subtly changed configurations with other objects – and carefully lit before being memorialized in either pigment or gelatin silver prints.

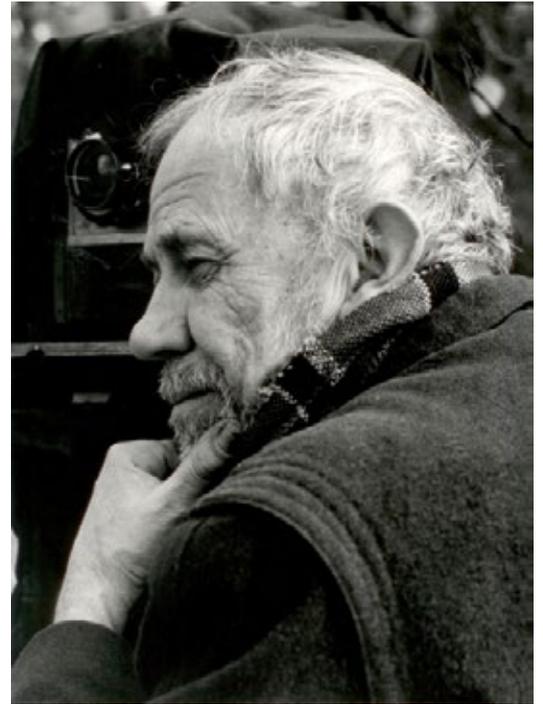
## • NEW WAYS OF SEEING

Although more influenced by prevailing photographic conventions in the beginning, Sudek came to show an openness to experimenting with new ways of composing and printing his images. In the late 1920s, Sudek photographed objects designed by modernist Ladislav Sutnar, thus creating angled views of furniture with reflective surfaces and ceramics of pure form.

Sudek's most successful foray into modernism is his experimentation with grotesque (surreal) subjects such as mannequins, decaying sculptures and the accoutrements of the architect Otto Rothmayer's garden. There is little doubt that in the fragmented figurative sculptures Sudek was recalling some of the human devastation that he witnessed on the battlefields of the First World War.

# JOSEF SUDEK

- 1896** 17 March: Josef Sudek is born in Kolín (Austria-Hungary) to Václav Sudek, a house painter, and Johanna Sudková (née Svobodová).
- 1910–1913** Three-year apprenticeship with Prague book binder František Jermann. Begins taking photographs.
- 1913** Works as a bookbinder in the town of Nymburk.
- 1915** Begins his military service in the Austro-Hungarian Army.
- 1917–1918** Loses his right arm on the Italian Front; moves to a Prague home for disabled soldiers.
- 1920** Turns down a secure office job, preferring to pursue art.
- 1922** Studies with Karel Novák at the State School of Graphic Art in Prague (graduates in 1924). First photographs in his series *From the Invalidovna* (1922–27). Joins the new anti-conservative Fotoklub Praha (Prague Camera Club).
- 1924** First photographs of the restoration of St. Vitus' Cathedral at Prague Castle. Expelled from the Fotoklub Praha. Co-founds the Czech Photographic Society.
- 1924–1929** Participates in 36 exhibitions abroad.
- 1926** Makes modern advertising photographs for Družstevní práce publishing house in Prague (until 1936).
- 1927** Moves to a wooden studio at 30 Újezd Street, Prague.
- 1928** Receives license for photography business. Družstevní práce publishes the portfolio *St. Vitus*.
- 1929** Melantrich publishes his first book, *Praha* (Prague).
- 1930** Participates in *New Photography*, exhibition of avant-garde photographers in Prague.
- 1932** First solo exhibition in Prague.
- 1936** Participates in the *International Photography Exhibition* at the modern Prague gallery of the Mánes Association of Fine Artists.
- 1938** Exhibits 86 works in Mánes photography exhibition.



Josef Prošek, *Portrait of Josef Sudek*, 1962.  
Private collection, Prague

- 1939** Begins hosting Tuesday evening “gramophone concerts” in his studio.
- 1940** First contact prints from various large negatives. His mature work begins with the key series *The Window of My Studio* (1940–54).
- 1947** Spends the summer northwest of Prague with painter Emil Filla, marking the first of regular visits there. Starts photos for the *Memories* series (1948–75). Photographs in the Beskid Mountains and Hukvaldy. Receives an old Kodak panoramic camera. Otto Rothmayer’s garden inspires series *A Walk in the Magic Garden* (1948–64).
- 1949** The Association of Czechoslovak Fine Artists confirms Sudek’s membership, which prevents the nationalization of his studio.
- 1952** Travels with friend Petr Helbich to the ancient Mionsí Forest in the Beskids.
- 1953** Death of his mother and of Emil Filla.
- 1956** Publishes *Josef Sudek*, his first monograph, with 232 photographs from 1915–1955.
- 1957** Begins photographing in the Most region in North Bohemia, an area devastated by heavy industry and surface mining. The book is not published until 1999.
- 1959** Moves to a former shop at 24 Úvoz Street but continues to use the wooden studio as his photo lab.
- 1960** Exhibition *Josef Sudek in Fine Art* at the Fronta Gallery, Prague.
- 1961** First photographer to receive title “Merited Artist” by the Czechoslovak Government.
- 1963** Exhibition *Josef Sudek: Photographs* in Prague.
- 1971** Private exhibition of Sudek’s works in Sonja Bullaty’s New York Studio. Publication of Sudek’s *Janáček–Hukvaldy*.
- 1974** Exhibitions at the International Museum of Photography at George Eastman House, Rochester, New York, at the Corcoran Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, the Light Gallery, New York City, and Il Diaframma, Milan, making him one of the first Czech photographers to achieve international acclaim without having defected from Communist Czechoslovakia.
- 1976** Marks 80th birthday with retrospectives at the Moravian Gallery, Brno, the Museum of Decorative Arts Prague, and the Neue Galerie – Sammlung Ludwig in Aachen. 15 September: dies in Prague.

# ALSO AT JEU DE PAUME

June 7 – September 25, 2016

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# PRESS VISUALS

The copyright-free reproduction and display of the following selection of images is permitted solely as part of the promotion of this exhibition at the Jeu de Paume and only while the exhibition is in progress.



1 • Josef Sudek, *Sunday Afternoon on Kolin Island*, c. 1922-26  
gelatin silver print, 28.4 × 28.7 cm.  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased 2000  
© Estate of Josef Sudek



2 • Josef Sudek, *Prague Street*, 1924  
gelatin silver print, 8.3 × 8.2 cm  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
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3 • Josef Sudek, *Window of my Studio*, c. 1950  
pigment print using carbon tissue, 16.5 × 12 cm.  
Private Collection © Estate of Josef Sudek



4 • Josef Sudek, *Window of My Studio*, c. 1940–48  
gelatin silver print, 17 × 11.2 cm.  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa Gift of an anonymous donor,  
2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek



5 • Josef Sudek, *Window of my studio*, c. 1940–54  
gelatin silver print, 22.9 × 16.8 cm.  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
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6 • Josef Sudek, *Last Rose*, 1956  
gelatin silver print, 28.2 × 23.2 cm  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor,  
2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek



7 • Josef Sudek, *Window of My Studio*, c. 1940–50  
gelatin silver print, 28.1 × 22.9 cm.  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
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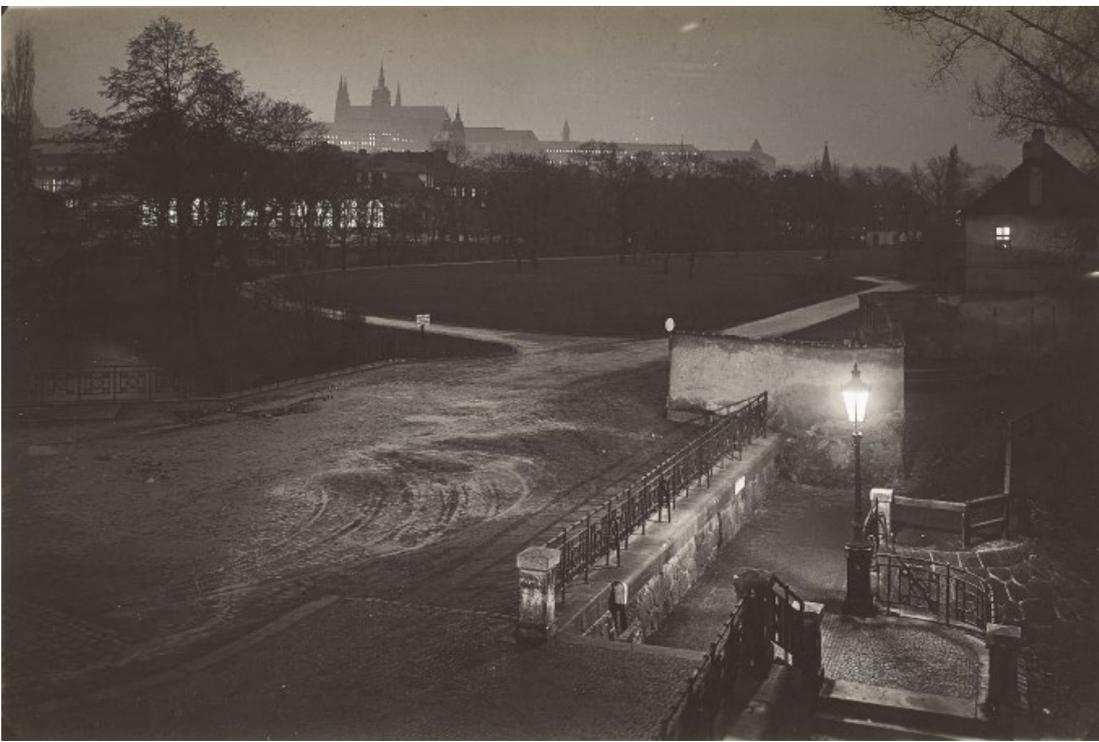
8 • Josef Sudek, *Four Seasons: Summer*, c. 1940–54, from the series *The Window of My Studio*  
gelatin silver print, 22.6 × 17.1 cm.  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
© Estate of Josef Sudek



9 • Josef Sudek, *Prague at Night*, 1950  
gelatin silver print, 22.8 × 29 cm  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased in 2003 © Estate of Josef Sudek



10 • Josef Sudek, *Prague at Night*, c. 1950–59  
gelatin silver print, 12 × 16.7 cm  
National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek



11 • Josef Sudek, *Prague at Night*, 1950–59

gelatin silver print, 12.2 × 17.3 cm

National Gallery of Canada. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek



12 • Josef Sudek, *Portrait of my Friend Funke*, 1924

gelatin silver print, 28.5 × 22.6 cm

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Purchased in 1985

© Estate of Josef Sudek



13 • Josef Sudek, *Royal Garden*, c. 1940–46

pigment carbon print, 16.1 × 11.7 cm

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010

© Estate of Josef Sudek



14 • Josef Sudek, *Mělník landscape*, 1959

gelatin silver print, 8.8 × 28.7 cm

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa, Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek



15 • Josef Sudek, *Lace in the Magic Garden*, 1954–1959

gelatin silver print, 16.9 × 22.9 cm

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek



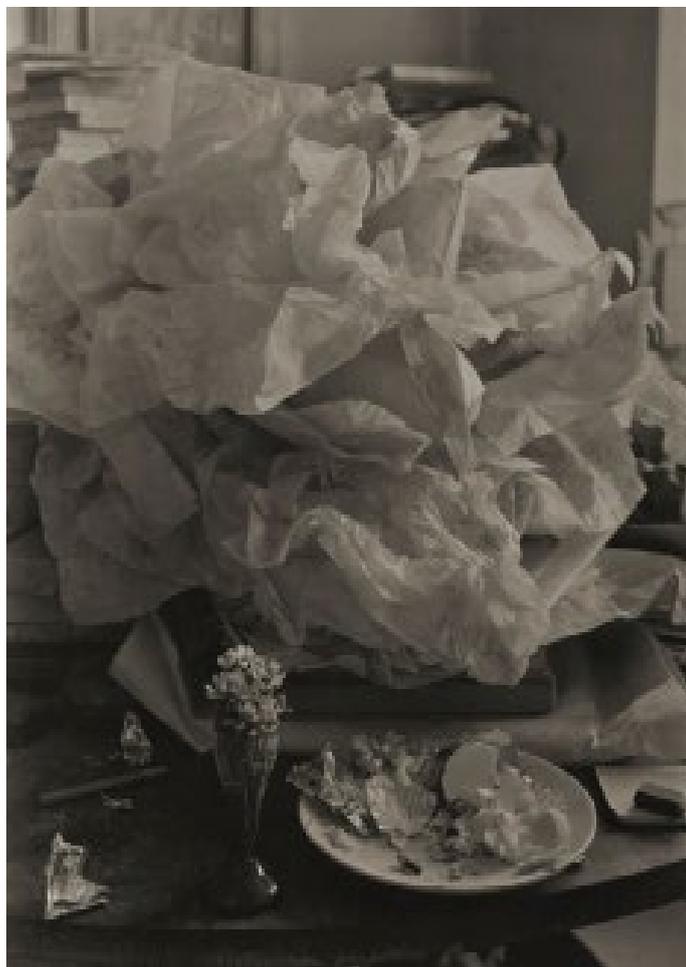
16 • Josef Sudek, *In the Magic Garden*, from the series *Memories*, 1954–1959

gelatin silver print, 17 × 23.3 cm

National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
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**17 • Josef Sudek, *Glass Labyrinth*, c. 1968–72**  
 gelatin silver print, 39 × 22.9 cm  
 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010 © Estate of Josef Sudek



**18 • Josef Sudek, *Labyrinth on My Table*, 1967**  
 gelatin silver print, 27.7 × 24.4 cm  
 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
 © Estate of Josef Sudek



**19 • Josef Sudek, *Untitled [Still Life on the Window Sill]*, 1951**  
 photographer's mount, c. 1960  
 two silver gelatin prints, glass, lead, 48.2 × 39.2 cm  
 Museum of Decorative Arts, Prague  
 © Estate of Josef Sudek



**20 • Josef Sudek, *Statue*, c. 1948–1964**  
 gelatin silver print, 9 × 14 cm  
 National Gallery of Canada, Ottawa. Gift of an anonymous donor, 2010  
 © Estate of Josef Sudek

**PRACTICAL  
INFO**

**#Sudek**

### **OPENING TIMES**

Tuesday (late-night opening): 11 am – 9 pm  
Wednesday to Sunday: 11 am – 7 pm  
Closed Monday

### **ADMISSION**

Exhibition : 10 € / Concession : 7.50 €

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