



# CZECHMATES

A PRIVILEGED PEEK INSIDE THE HOUSE THAT'S HOME TO TREASURES OF THE CZECH AVANT-GARDE. MARY AND ROY CULLEN INVITE US IN. CATCH MORE OF THE SURREALIST HITS AND GORGEOUS GLASS FROM THE CULLEN COLLECTION AT THE MUSEUM OF FINE ARTS, HOUSTON, THROUGH MARCH 11, 2012.

**D**ays before their splendid works on paper, canvas and glass were carted off for exhibition at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, our features editor, photographer and I descended on the pedigreed River Oaks domicile shown on these pages that's the abode of Mary and Roy Cullen. Our purpose? To document these treasures and their owners amongst them.

To call this couple assiduous collectors would be an understatement, as there's something more at play here than mere acquiring. The Cullens (yes, *that* Cullen family) are preservers of the past, archivists of artists and revivers of lost or nearly forgotten talent — resurrecting creative voices, resuscitating visionaries, recording

their nuances, lives and concerns while illuminating a period in 20th-century history that deserves to be more widely known and understood. The story of this house is the tale of a time and place far from our own: Czechoslovakia in the years before and after World War II. While literally peeking into the Cullens' interiors, we are also peering behind the Iron Curtain at those who created and even, against all odds, occasionally thrived despite its stern, unwavering grip.

The Cullens' perhaps unlikely fascination with Czech history began in 1989, more than a decade before they built this house. It was prompted by a landmark exhibition organized by the MFAH and co-curated by Alison de Lima Greene, "Czech Modernism: 1900 – 1945." That exhibition opened

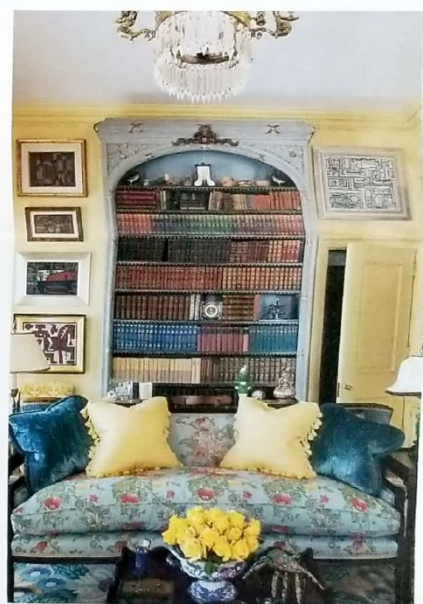
doors that evolved into a floodgate, launching a collection that would go where only the bravest curators dare to tread. The Cullens' obsession involved tracking down arcane Czech treatises, sleuthing out artists from behind the Eastern bloc, unearthing forgotten or nearly vanished figures from the halls of art history and intrepidly plunging into the annals of Cold War Europe. Yet another tantalizing, serendipitous occurrence landed them front row and center at the Velvet Revolution: Through a personal connection, they were in Prague, then met Vaclav Havel and attended his presidential inauguration in 1989. In a nutshell, you have the background of this couple's all-consuming pursuit.

The Cullens were well into their Czech quest when they built this house

from 2003 through 2005. They tapped New York- and San Francisco-based Ike Kligerman Barkley as their architects — a bicoastal firm, known for its sensitive, seamless borrowings from the past, which sought inspiration in the circa-1808 Nathaniel Russell house in Charleston, South Carolina. Fortuitously, the Cullens' next-door neighbor, Michael J. Siller — who lived with his partner, Larry Hokanson, in a home of a similar blueprint by the same architects, but one with imperial Russian proclivities — was enlisted as their designer. In fact, when the Cullens first glimpsed the Siller-Hokanson home, they implored the men to sell it to them. When Siller and Hokanson declined, the Cullens located an adjoining plot of land and cajoled its owner to part with the prime parcel, and

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Siller graciously made the introduction to their architects. The resulting Cullen commission puts forth a refined appearance, its dignified facade making a perfect pendant to the equally stately, Russian-inspired residence next door, both lining a busy River Oaks thoroughfare. And as you'll glimpse, the Cullen home's late-18th-century-style interiors live up to the grand promise of its exterior.

Besides highlighting their burgeoning Czech collection, the Georgian revival house manifests the couple's commitment to vertical living and downsizing. They moved from a 1930s-era house, also in River Oaks, that they had called their Texas home throughout most of their 40-year marriage. (They've also lived, on and off, in a loft in Chicago, Mary's hometown.) Conscious of the architectural riches they were leaving behind, and mindful that the new owners might tear down the property, they struck a deal to take the embellishments of their former casa with them. Ornate mantelpieces, a pair of elaborate built-in corner cupboards in the dining room, highly carved pediments, moldings, window frames and even the front-door surround found new life in their refined new brick-and-limestone edifice.

Besides the recycling of its architectural elements, the Cullen house is most noteworthy for giving a new home to priceless and rare examples of Czech avant-garde art — paintings, works on paper, magazines, books, treatises and other ephemera — and glass, all of which span the early years of the 20th century to the 1960s, and miraculously survived two World Wars, revolution and the clench of Communism to somehow make its way to Houston, mostly due to Mary's exhaustive investigative research. The many gems include in-depth works by names that were new to me and will be to many readers. This collection is a revelation indeed about Czech movements including Surrealism, Artificialism, Devetsil, Skupina 42 and all their practitioners, including those of whom Mary speaks with warm familiarity. She relays lively anecdotes and associations that would be only known to family or friends about headliners Karel Teige, whose sexy collage of an airplane buzzing stockinged legs graces the exhibition catalog cover; Jindřich Štyrský, considered one of the avatars of the avant-garde; Jindřich Heisl, who still made photomontages despite being hidden in a bathroom during World War II; and especially Toyen, whose 1936

surrealist masterpiece *The Message of the Forest* says it all about life at the time.

What's on view at the MFAH now through March 11 testifies to the couple's confident collecting, passionate pursuit and absolute dedication to their subject. Reflecting back on the unveiling this past November, Mary Cullen said, "When the exhibition opened, many people asked me if I wasn't thrilled about having my collection at the museum. My answer was that what I was *really* thrilled about was to have all these great Czech artists having their moment in Houston, and in such an amazing museum as the MFAH."

The final alignment: Surely it was a happy coincidence that Roy Cullen's grandson, collage master Dana Harper, married a Czech artist, Hana Hillerova, in 2007, their wedding celebrated in Prague. And fittingly, the couple's daughter, born last year, is named after the celebrated Czech Surrealist Toyen. Life, art and the collection have come full circle.

**"New Formations: Czech Avant-Garde Art and Modern Glass from the Roy and Mary Cullen Collection" at the Museum of Fine Arts, Houston, through March 11, 2012.**

Previous page: The collectors at home, Roy and Mary Cullen with son Meredith Cullen. "The Cullen Collection is unique in its sophisticated overview of both avant-garde art and modern glass ... You sense the passion that inspired artists and glassmakers during this revolutionary era of liberation and innovation," says MFAH curator Alison de Lima Greene, co-organizer of "New Formations," which highlights the pioneering couple's advocacy for Czech modernism.

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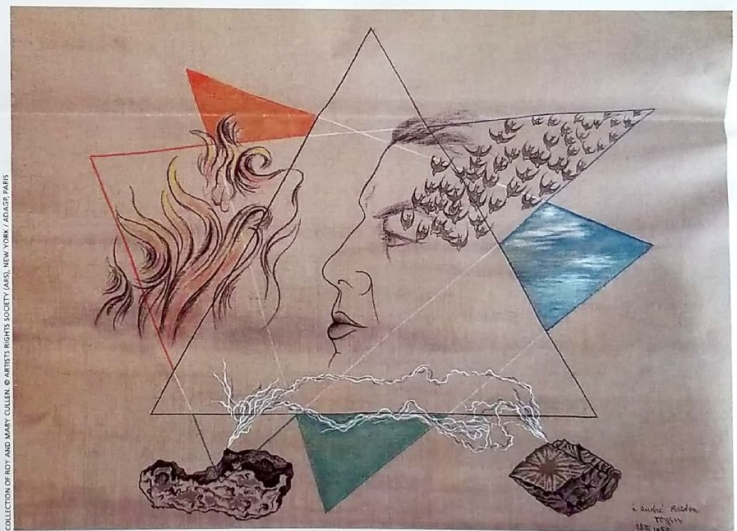
The dramatically spiraling three-story stairway is the heart of the house. An Austrian chandelier illuminates its organic curves. Carpet by Hokanson.

The library manifests the Cullens' dedication to the printed word. These walls star Latin American modernists including disciples of influential Uruguayan Joaquín Torres-García's School of the South.

Karel Teige's *Untitled*, 1947.

In a nook of the living room, a wooden sculpture by Mexican-American artist Tom García (Mary Cullen's brother), titled *Harlow*, 1967. On the lower right wall, an oil on canvas by Czech artist Zdeněk Rykr, *Tvar*, undated.





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— Mary Cullen, reflecting on the Cullen Collection's unveiling at the MFAH

Clockwise from top left:

A vignette in the library showcases a 1929 ceramic vase by Austrian talent Gudrun Baudisch, resting on a rare Cubist table by Vlastislav Hofman, circa 1912. Above, a gouache on cardboard by Brazilian Hélio Oiticica, Seco # 15, circa 1956, signals the Cullens' other interest: Latin American modernism.

These impressive doors in an upstairs hallway were gleaned from an auction in Chicago, then silver- and gold-leafed.

Toyen's *Portrait d'André Breton*, 1950.

The downstairs salon transports us to turn-of-the-century Prague and Vienna, starring a suite of Czech furniture upholstered in a Josef Hoffmann Wiener Werkstätte-design fabric.





Above: The couple's bedroom offers an ode to mostly female Surrealists, featuring a collaboration between Leonora Carrington and Edward James (to the right of the Scalamandrè curtain), while a Carrington drawing, *Map of Down Below*, circa 1941, is immediately to the left of the bed. Other headliners are works by Aube Elléouët, the daughter of André Breton, as well as British artist Emmy Bridgwater. Also shown: Scalamandrè fabric-covered French armchair, a Venetian chest of drawers and an 18th-century canopy topping an 18th-century architectural embellishment over the bed made up with Pratesi linens. Designer Michael J. Siller praises his clients' "impeccable taste and incredible eye for detail," and notes that in the process of working on this commission, "I gained some lifelong friends."



Left: The living room mixes Georgian-style furnishings with the Czech avant-garde, including *Portrait of André Breton* by Toyen, 1950 (left of the door, top row, left), which was lost for half a century behind Breton's bookcase, and an untitled 1947 collage by Karel Teige (right of the door, top left), which served as the slightly racy image for the exhibition catalog cover. The chandelier was purchased in the town of Nový Bor, Czech Republic. Mary Cullen says of their collecting mania, "Czech art is still not fully integrated into the history of the 20th century." Their collection and its accompanying exhibition will assist in remedying this.