

Biography of Peter Paul Drgac

Peter Paul Drgac (pronounced "Der-gatch") was born on July 21, 1883 in New Tabor, a small farming community in Central Texas near the town of Caldwell. New Tabor had been settled by his parents and other immigrants from Czechoslovakia in the mid 1800's. Pete Drgac attended school through the seventh grade. As was common in rural families, Pete left school to work on the family farm. New Tabor was a tight knit ethnic community. Czech was spoken in the home and traditions of religion, music and food were strong and vibrant. The young Drgac grew up with strong ties to his family's past. But it appears that Pete Drgac was also influenced by the entrepreneurial spirit of the new country to which he had been born. After marrying Francis Mrnustik in 1905, he left the family farm to open a small grocery store and bakery near New Tabor, eventually leaving his hometown in 1922 to relocate his family and business to the larger town of Rosenberg. There, he and his wife lived a life of hard work, typical of small town Texas. The long hours of operating a successful small family run business, which included the grocery store and bakery, was natural for the industrious farm raised Pete. It is said that he even sewed his wife's clothes. The couple, though, had no children. Of course, the Drgacs were well known in Rosenberg. He was an affable and social man with a good sense of humor and business. He was a favorite among the community's children, loved by his own many nieces and nephews and known to all as "Uncle Pete". He was also known for speaking Czech and keeping many Czech traditions alive in his store. The business was a prosperous one and the couple was able to retire in 1955 and return to Caldwell. Ever industrious, the now retired Drgac became renown as an exceptional gardener. Going back to his farming heritage, he was especially known for his fruit trees, vegetables and flowers. Stories are told of seven pound turnips and a grafted fruit tree that produced both pears and apples.

Francis Drgac died in 1962. Married for over fifty years, but without children, Pete found himself without his one true partner. He was almost eighty years old and the experience of his wife's death was difficult. However, after a few years of bereavement, the energetic and creative aspects of Pete Drgac's spirit were revived, not in the form of gardening, but of painting. The oft told story of the genesis of Drgac's late life painting career begins with his having built a flower box. After adding some decorative painted flowers, he was not satisfied with the results. He then set out with his usual determination to become a better painter. He was quoted as saying, "Now some folks might laugh at this, but I felt assurance that if I would practice, I would be able to draw those flowers and anything else I wanted." Having stayed deeply connected to his Czech heritage seems to have provided a stylistic basis for his painting. The use of bright primary colors and strong graphic images have much in common with earlier decorative Czech art forms found in paintings, ceramics and textiles, as seen below Drgac's own floral image at the left. Drgac's painting also has cultural references and influences found in the beautifully ornamented Czech painted churches of Central Texas. Though he would deny awareness of any higher motivations or purposes in his art, it clearly served to connect his deeply cherished Czech traditions of language and craft with the present. His almost abstract stylistic and graphic representation of his subjects is what pushes the boundaries of these

traditions. The painting featured at the lead of this article is quintessential Drgac. Painted with enamel on poster board over a white wash, Drgac's particular style was to present a seeming visual inventory of the essential elements of the scene he was painting. The barnyard animals and garden roses are separated from their natural landscape, which is replaced with a small abstracted green band to suggest the ground, and the composition is completed with decorative polka dots.

Pete Drgac continued to paint prolifically for the rest of his life. He was featured in the local Caldwell paper which led to a degree of local and regional notoriety, but Pete was steadfastly modest about his painting. He gave many away to family and friends, selling others to visitors for only the price of the materials he estimated was involved in their production.

After his death in 1976 at the age of 93, his work was subsequently exhibited in 1995 in "Tree of Life", the inaugural exhibition of The American Visionary Art Museum in Baltimore, Maryland, and in the 1997 exhibition "Spirited Journeys" which featured self taught artists of Texas.