

Exploring the art, architecture, and history of Europe

Millie Burdett

Introduction

I wanted to challenge my self intellectually as well as learn how to be independent and organised while travelling on my own for the first time. I did the project during the summer after my A levels and wanted to go to European cities that I had never been to before. The aim off my trip was to immerse myself in the culture of these new places, find out more about their history as well as their art and architecture.

I am going to read Architecture at university next year, so wanted to do a trip where I could enhance my knowledge and see some of the buildings I have studied in my History of Art Pre-U and previously read about.

As there is so much to talk about, I will just explain a few of my favourite sites and museums from each place, as well as talk about the challenges I faced during this trip.

Report

The first place I went to was Budapest, as I arrived I was amazed at the contrast between old and new architecture. There is an eclectic mix of Baroque, Renaissance and Classical architecture, but one building in particular that stood out to me was the Neo-Gothic parliament building facing the river Danube.

On my first day I walked down to the river and had a tour of the parliament building. Its sheer scale is breathtaking - there are over 690 rooms! but after having been shown around I began to notice the immense detail that has been given to this building, with ornately carved sculptures and decorations. I would definitely recommend seeing this building, even if it is just from the outside, in the evening they lit up the exterior and its reflections against the water were stunning.

While in Budapest I also visited a museum called the House Of Terror, I didn't know what to expect before I went inside, the name sounded more like a theme park ride than a museum... However it was definitely worthwhile. The museum commemorates the victims of both the Communist and the Nazi regimes in Hungary. The building served as the former headquarter of the Nazi party in 1940, and its basement was used as a prison. During Communism, the building was taken over by the State Security. It was used

by both the Nazi's and Communists as a place to imprison and torture hundreds, and perhaps thousands of people- hence the name 'House of Terror'.

You are allowed down into the cells while in the museum. They were only a meter or so wide and about 2 meters long, and were extremely dark with tiny slitted windows at the top. There was one even smaller cell they locked people in which was so narrow you couldn't sit down in. Although it was uncomfortable to walk round these cells I couldn't even begin to imagine what it would have been like for Hungarians sent here 50 years ago.

As well as showing you the cells used by the Nazis and Soviets, the museum has a lot of historical information about how Budapest was affected by both the Nazi and Soviet regimes in peoples everyday life, which I found really interesting.

My next stop was Krakow. As I entered the suburbs of city on the train, I saw a lot of high-rise tower blocks and it seemed to be quite a deprived area. However the 'Old Town' or city centre was a huge contrast to this, and was probably the most beautiful of any of the cities I visited. The main square which is over 700 years old, is a world heritage site as well as one of Polands official national historic monuments. The hostel I was staying in was in a great location, less than a few minutes walk from the square.

While in Krakow, I saw a lot of historical museums including the Schindler museum. I hadn't seen the film Schindler's List before, so I found the museum really fascinating and moving. As well as talking about how Schindler saved hundreds of Jews from death camps it also explains the Nazi take-over of Poland and life in the Ghettoes in Krakow. As I continued my trip and began to notice more and more the huge impact the Second World War had had on each city and how it had changed the architectural landscape as well as affecting entire communities and cultures.

I also decided to visit Auschwitz, which is about an hour drive away from Krakow- the hostel I was staying in ran guided tours of the camp. It is hard to even describe what it was like to go there, I felt sickened by some of the things I saw and angry that people could actually do such things. Even after walking round the different camps, and listening to the guide talk about stories and events that happened within the camp it was so hard to come to terms with the atrocities that had happened there. Although it was an extremely harrowing place to visit, i'm glad I went because I think its so important for people to know what happened so that it is never repeated again, and so the lives of these people are never forgotten. They showed us inside the one remaining gas chamber and the crematorium next to it. At Auschwitz there were four gas chambers, one was blown up by a resistance movement within the camp near the end of the war, and two others were

blown up by the Nazi's to try and destroy any evidence of the holocaust at the end of WW2. It was very hard to comprehend the sheer scale of what had happened at Auschwitz and how actual human beings could have done what the Nazi's did. It gave me a huge sense of perspective on life, and made me realise how fortunate I am.

From Krakow I then travelled to Berlin. One challenging aspect of the trip was the language barrier I had with locals - this was more of a problem in Poland as I found not as many people could speak English here. The train journey took me 13 hours in total and I had to change trains half way. Not being able to understand polish made it a slight challenge to work out the next train I was meant to be getting. Luckily I met a very friendly Polish man who lived in Berlin and showed me what train to get. It turned out he was on this train too and on our way to Berlin he gave me a few recommendations.

Berlin is the only city I had been to before, I went once a year before the trip for two days to visit a building by the architect Daniel Libeskind that I was studying for an extended essay. Although I had been before there was still so many things I wanted to see that I hadn't seen last time.

On my first day here I visited the KW Institute of Contemporary art. Many of the works were installations and sculptures which pushed the boundaries of what we call art, including a massive hanging ball of cardboard by an artist called Bopape. My favourite work was by a Nigerian-American artist Okwui Okpokwasili who had influenced me in my A level art coursework. She had set up an interactive installation within the exhibition of dancing figures behind a white screen. The movement and sound within the installation created an amazing calming atmosphere. I particularly liked the blurred shapes of figures behind the white fabric and the way the fabric gently moved and rippled.

By the end of the trip I didn't have that much money left, so it was a challenge to try and budget myself so that I had enough to last me until I got back. The hostels I booked were fairly cheap, and I found that food wasn't too expensive either. The most expensive part was paying for museum entry and tours of different buildings I visited. I found that Amsterdam was probably the most expensive place as it is a very popular tourist destination. Krakow was very cheap in comparison, as well as Budapest.

My next stop was Prague. When I arrived I decided to explore Prague Castle which is on a hill overlooking the city. It was a long and steep climb up to the top, but the views across the city were worth it. Next to the castle is St. Vitus Cathedral which had some beautiful coloured stained glass windows, filling the interior of the cathedral with colourful light. The detail in the glass

windows was very impressive, each pane was made of so many different sections, each a slightly different colour.

One building in particular that I had wanted to see in Prague was The Dancing House by Frank Gehry. The building was fascinating to see in real life as it looks as if it is twisting and contorting, due to the deconstructivist style it is built in, and is a stark contrast to the Baroque buildings which surround it. It was originally named Fred and Ginger after two famous dancers, and when I saw it, I could see how the two sections of the building looked like two dancers. There are clearly separate parts as one is made of concrete and the other is glass but in my opinion the two sections work in harmony with each other.

I decided to walk to most places I visited instead of taking public transport which meant I saw loads of different parts of each city that I otherwise wouldn't have seen and it was also a good way to save money.

My last stop was Amsterdam. I loved the small streets and canals which connect the city, the centre had a very quaint atmosphere unlike some of the other cities such as Berlin. I really wanted to visit Anne Franks house when I was there but unfortunately all the tickets were completely sold out so I only managed to see it from the outside. The Van Gogh museum was also all sold out but they released some extra tickets that morning so I managed to get one luckily!

Van Gogh is one of my favourite artists, he has influenced so much of my art work and I have studied his life and works in detail in my History of Art Pre-U. I had seen some of his work before in exhibitions in London which I hugely enjoyed, so I was very excited to see this exhibition. Van Gogh's paintings have a thick impasto quality to them, something that you can't see in a photo so it was amazing to see them in real life. I particularly liked his self portraits as they showed some much emotion through the brush marks and vivid colours.

My reflections of the trip

I would definitely recommend doing a trip like this for people who don't want to go as far afield as South America, Asia or Australia, which are popular destinations for gap year travelling. I wanted to do a trip in Europe, as there is so much variety and culture, it also prepared me for other travelling I may do in the future. If I had more time I would have loved to visit some Italian and Spanish cities too. Travelling on your own may seem daunting at first but I met so many other young friendly people in the hostels I was staying in so I didn't feel isolated at all. I would also make sure you carefully plan your trip before hand and if there are any particular museums you want to see them

book them in advance, I found especially in Amsterdam museums were very fully booked. It is also a great idea to take a sketch pad if you like drawing as there is so much artistic inspiration around

Photos

Street food market in Budapest



The Fishermans Bastion in Budapest



Baroque and Romanesque architecture in the streets of Budapest



The street from my hostel to the main square in Krakow



Auschwitz I



Auschwitz II (Birkenau) Sleeping conditions in the bunkers



Street art in Berlin

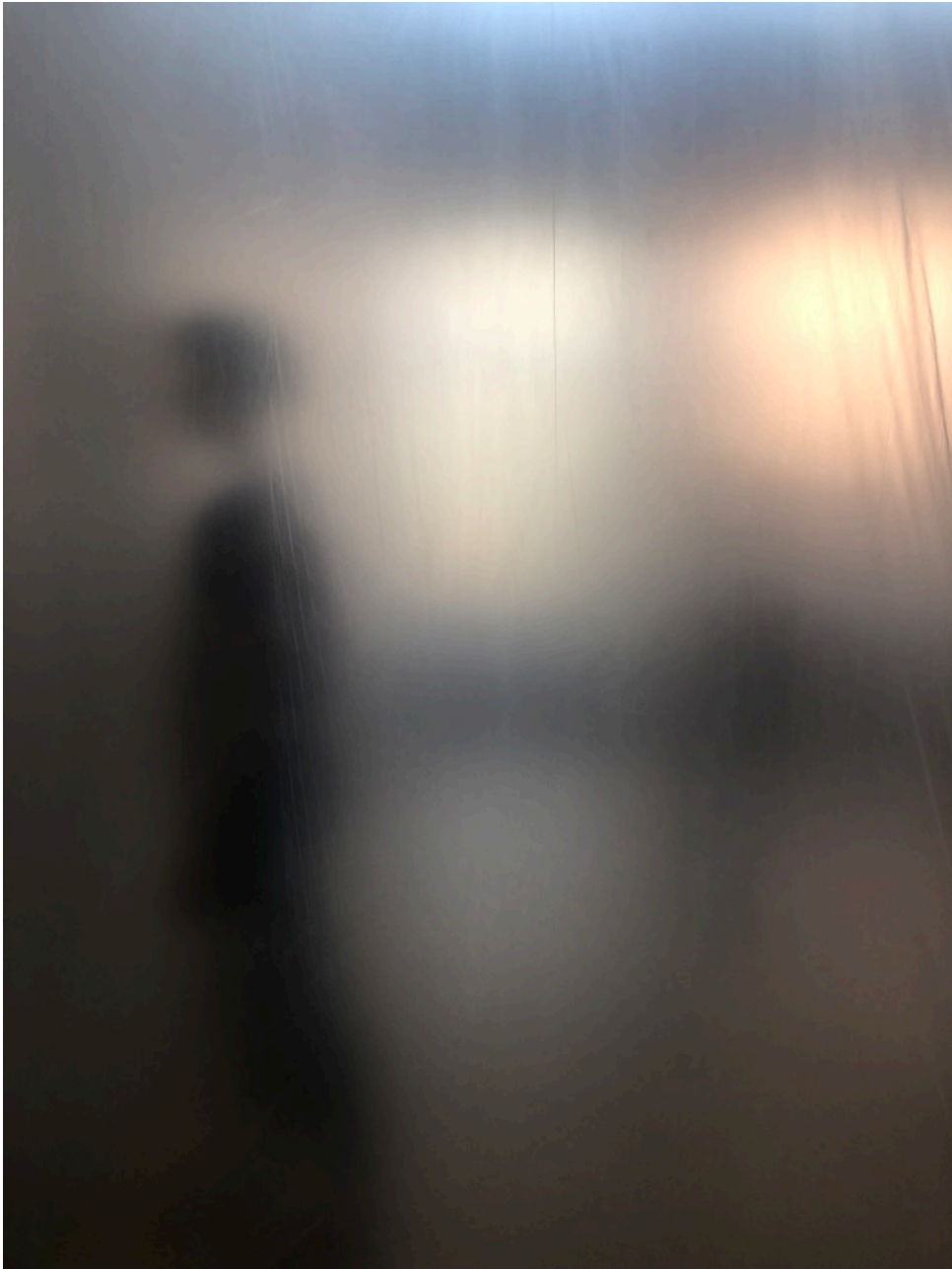


The KW Institute of Contemporary Art



Instillation by Okwui Okpokwasili

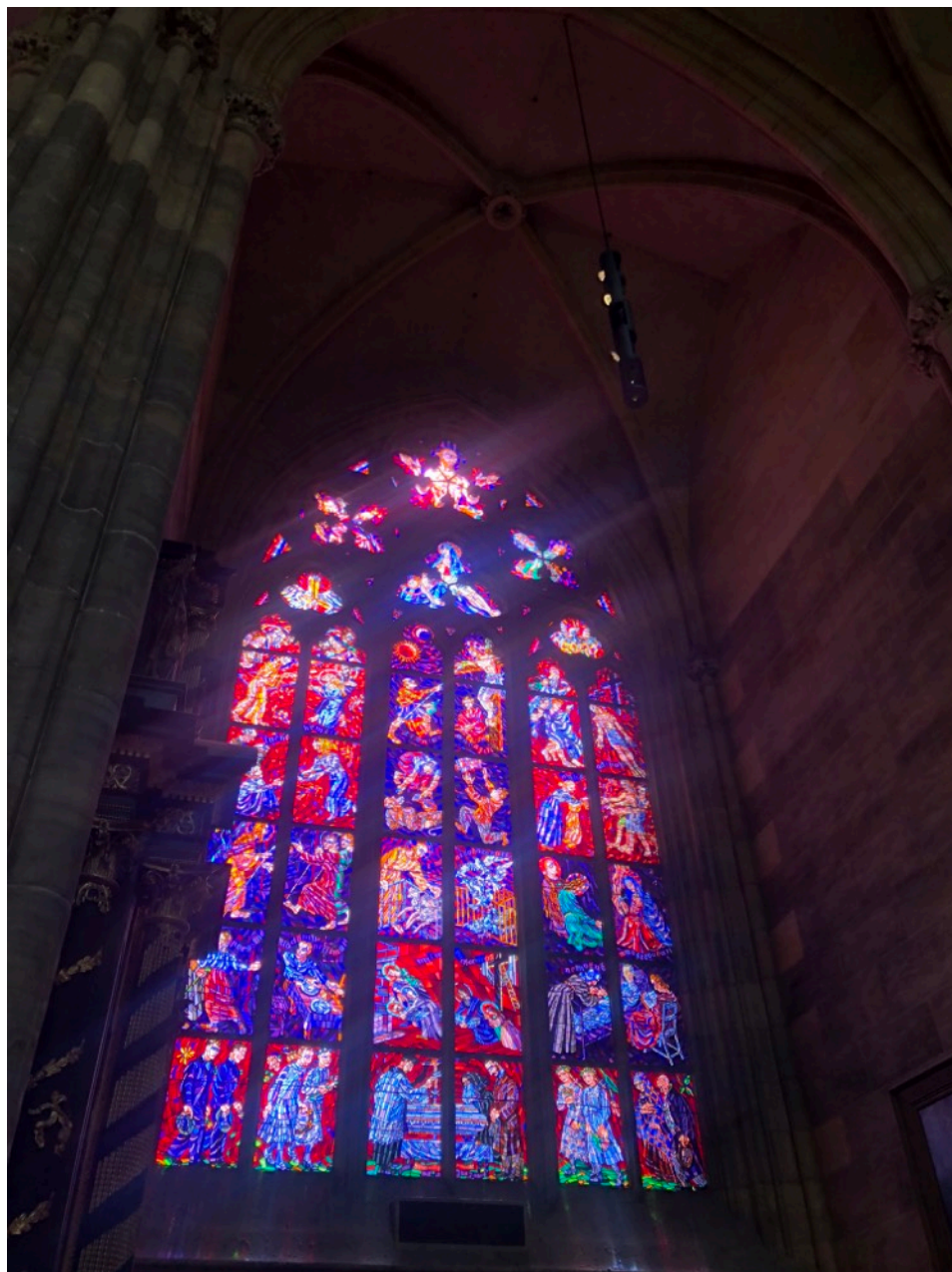


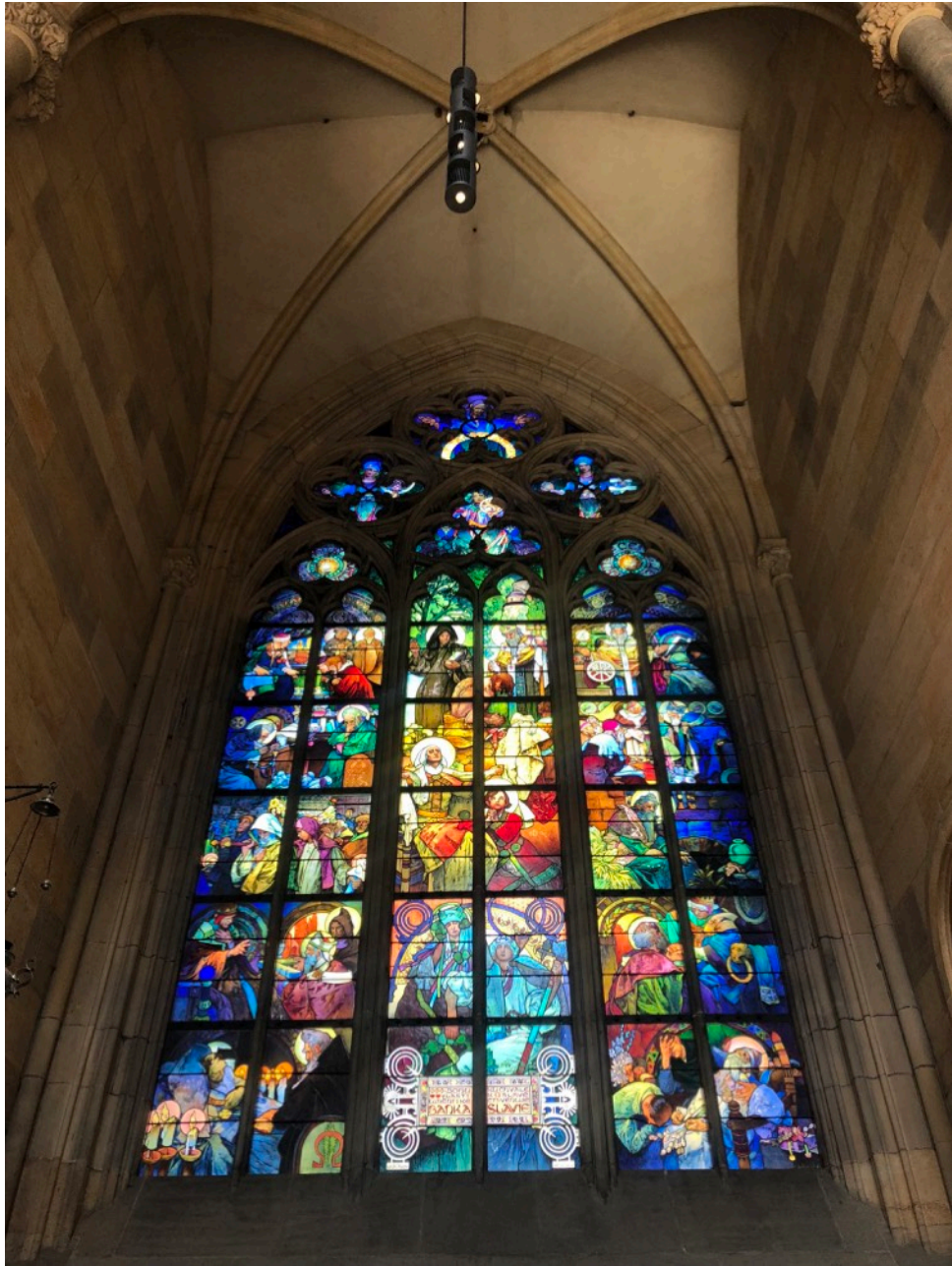


Memorial for the murdered Jews of Europe



Stained glass windows in St. Vitus Cathedral in Prague





Exterior of St. Vitus Cathedral



View across Vltava river at night



Sunflowers in the Van Gogh museum Amsterdam



'Shoes' by Van Gogh 1886



Anne Frank House Amsterdam

