



Portrait of a lady with a Picasso. Nicole Stava and her flight through the world of art

Nicole Stava. The woman of this surname was surprised that someone wanted to write about her. Yes, the investment issue would miss the former youngest boss of the prestigious Christie's auction house for Central Europe. It would be possible to omit the owner of the Bechyně estate, who later became independent in the art business and has great credit in the field. All this could be missed. But it would be stupid.

Investing in general, and therefore also investing in art, is like swimming in Luznice river, which winds in a captivating scene under the Bechyně chateau, and its calm flow breaks the raft there at one point.

"It depends on whether you're sailing upstream or downstream," says Nicole Stava in the kitchen in the private quarters of the former aristocratic residence, which now belongs to her family. Its window frames the described scene with the river into a painting that could probably be an oil painting in the style of Romanticism, or, when fog falls over the water, an impressionist work. With current or against current? Both have have something into it. Getting carried away means less effort and a bet on security, going in the opposite direction costs significantly more effort, the risk of failure is greater, but at the same time there is hope for a better profit. It cannot be said that one way is better than the other; it depends on the nature of a particular person, his abilities and courage. In any case, he must be able to swim.

And if he can't, it's not prudent to throw himself into the water without the supervision of an instructor, namely a woman, whose distinctive laughter sounds in the kitchen at Bechyně chateau. Nicole Stava is not only a highly respected and sought-after consultant on the art market in the Czech Republic, who cooperates with the most prestigious auction houses Christie's or Sotheby's. She claims that investing in art almost always pays off. Whether you swim downstream or against.

Under the promontory, on which the chateau in Bechyně towering impressively into the region, not only the Lužnice flows: the river Smutna flows into it, the name of which forms a sharp contrast with the merriment (above the Lužnice) gushing from the energetic woman.

To claim that Stava would never be serious would be very misleading, a portrait drawn in this way would be a forgery. In the long passages in which she talks about responsibility, the art trade, the care of valuable collections, but also the care of the family estate, automatically brings her face to a maximally focused expression, and sometimes even pauses as she searches for the right words, exact wording. She is focused and serious, absolutely trustworthy. However, her laughter, which balances her serious position, almost necessary for business, is also credible, sincere and refreshing.

This laughter was filled with Vok's wedding hall, a representative room with a coffered ceiling and wall frescoes, and the decibels added to the acoustics flowing from the vastness of the hall. All this happened during a short excursion during which Mrs. Nicole took on the role of a guide: during the tour she pointed out several of Karel Skreta's paintings, later talked about a family art collection including works by old masters and modern art, including ones such as Picasso, Miró, Le Corbusier or Klee. "My advantage is that I'm first at the source, so when I come up with something I like, it happens that I keep it and don't let it go," admits Nicole Stava, adding that the collection of modern art is mostly located in Zurich, Switzerland.

The land below the Alps is the birthplace of the chateau lady. Nicole Stava is the daughter of Josef Stava, who, at the request of his mother, fled from what was then Czechoslovakia at the age of eighteen after "friendly" tanks invaded the country in the sixties. In his new homeland, he later founded the pharmaceutical company Diag Human, whose name resonates in the Czech Republic for many years: the media-watched and complicated dispute between Diag Human and the Czech Republic has dragged on indefinitely since 1996, there are many billions in the game. Interested in the case, but logically, Nicole does not have to and does not want to have any comment on it.

She adds another story about her father: "Already in the 1970s, my father met Alfons Paar, a descendant of the aristocratic family to which Bechyně belonged before the post-war nationalization. When the restitution came, my father, together with Alfons Paar, regained Bechyně in the restitutions, the property was transferred to a joint venture, from which Alfons Paar was gradually paid out, until the castle and the whole estate of five thousand hectares were owned by our family. My sister and I have moved here and we manage the estate, our main business is forestry and timber production."

The forests are mainly taken care of by a sister Silvia. Nicole found herself in the Czech Republic at the age of fourteen and it was a problem for her to hear the surname Štávová, she will be Frau Stava for ever, by this name she started her career in the art world at the age of 22. She also develops the cultural side of the Bechyně, estate where she takes care of the operation of the chateau, in which park are sculptures by David Černý, including the famous walking trabant and an erect middle finger pointing still as an ambiguous message to the Prague Castle. She also takes care of hotels that belong to the family's property, manages her team that conducts conferences, social events and the like. "Recently, the Czech Golf Federation had a congress here, because we also have a golf course. For several years, I annoyed people from the federation to organise the annual conference at our estate, so in the end they did it, probably so that they could finally have peace from me," she says with exaggeration.

However, it took Nicole Stava several years to be in her current position. Before she started to administer the South Bohemian estate of her family - historically for the first time since the establishment of the fortified settlement in the 9th century - opened it to the public in 1998 and invested over 200 million crowns in its reconstruction. Before she found herself permanently in a mansion that had belonged to Czech kings in ancient centuries, Stava first threw herself into her own royal story. Or at least to the prince, because her story is inextricably linked to the prince.

Downstream or against? No one asked the Burlaks on the Volga. The inhuman toil of the tsarist slaves who drew boats against the flow of the Russian river was captured in his most famous painting by the famous painter Ilya Repin. From the Volga to the Vltava, to Prague's Smíchov: there Stava invited an expert to the old lady's apartment and the expert opened his mouth in

amazement while looking at the framed work above her couch. Yes, Repin was hanging there. Not Burlace on the Volga, of course, but still: "The painting sold for about £ 500,000, at a time when one pound was equal to forty crowns," Stava recalls.

Another client believed that she had an original photograph of Franz Kafka. It was indeed a difficult process to research, but the photo was verified as true and: "The photo was auctioned for some seventy thousand pounds and the lady had built a chapel for the money she earned."

Nicole Stava experienced great stories in her leading position at Christie's. Stories that have a direct impact on business, because the prize for a work of art is co-determined by a story that is more closely connected with it than the unfortunate burlation of a ship. The emotions that individual art pieces evoke make the art market exciting, unique, always different, to some extent unpredictable.



"I got the green light to offer you a job at Christie's!"

The story of a girl who found herself in the Czech Republic at the age of fourteen is also unpredictable. During her studies of political science, the young lady attends a lecture organised

by Christie's, meets the head of the Vienna branch, receives a coffee invitation a year later, and Karel Schwarzenberg, now her neighbour at Orlik estate, then a member of the supervisory board of the famous auction house. They talk, then the prince says goodbye, glances at the lady from Vienna, and Nicole immediately learns what the aristocrat's cap decided: "I've been given the green light to offer you a job at Christie's!"

That's how it all started, and although it took some time for Nicole to announce her arrival due to various ups and downs, at the age of twenty-three she sat in the chair of Christie's head of Prague's office - none of the regions was led by a younger person. In a year, in addition to Czech Republic, Slovakia fell into her business region, and after another two years, the whole of Central and Eastern Europe. In short, her task was to open new business opportunities, search for clients, care and communicate with them, organise social events, parties and lectures, and so on and so forth. The result Nicole Stava? "When I took over the office, there was a turnover of tens of thousands of pounds a year, in the end it was millions."

The Vltava is being replaced by the Danube for a year, the Lužnice has yet to wait, after Prague there is a one year stay in the Vienna office. From the Danube, Stava moves to the Thames, leading its region directly from London, where she is also studying at King's College, but the Royal College is slowly completing her royal life cycle. "In London, I ceased to be myself, forty other people trying to get my job, I became a slave to the system. It occurred to me that it was time to keep the promise I had made to my sister that I would one day help her with the Bechyně estate. So I said goodbye and built my own business, which basically followed up on what I did for Christie's."

It's going well. For the past five years, Stava has focused more on private sales from client to client than auctions, and even covid has not slowed down her business, on the contrary: people in lockdown have probably been bothered by the sight of bare walls, which has stirred and accelerated the market, as well as the gallery's simultaneous reaction to online presentations, to digital showrooms; also Stava has such, albeit private, and describes its own business as follows: "If someone wants to buy or sell something, they turn to me, I make a presentation, get a certificate of origin, which is absolutely essential, I recommend the method of sale, ie whether it is more advantageous to sell at auction or a private transaction. I will also recommend a place where it is best to sell a certain details, whether to sell in spring or autumn. If someone sells through an auction house, I don't want a commission, we will share it with that house. If someone buys, I travel with them at standard auction times, I provide them with all the service around. I'm a private art dealer. The competition is great because the art market is small, but yes, I'm doing well, thank you for asking! "

"I'm sorry, but this really isn't Renoir..."

Those mysterious phone calls in a low voice. Almost conspiracy like, with a splash of a sensation. Those secretive hints without saying a specific name. "You know, I'd rather not, I can be eavesdropped on," Stava hears on her cell phone from time to time, "I'll come and show it to you in person. I won't send a photo, I'm not crazy, this is a big deal!" So the arrival, the car brake in front of the castle gate, the opening of the trunk and Nicole Stava's voice: "I'm sorry, but this really isn't Renoir... "

Of course, Repin can hang over your sofa, of course you can own an original photo of Kafka. Miracles happen, but that's why it's the miracles that rarely come. "When I explain the reality to people, some shrug in peace, but some blame me for not understanding," Stava says. "I will direct anyone who thinks he has van Gogh and it is out of my power to refute him or her, I refer them to experts who issue expertises, a proof of origin, without which every work of art is practically worthless. I can't judge whether some fraudsters are knowingly trying on me like that, I don't want to judge. I don't wonder if the man is just mistaken for the supposed van Gogh, or if it's his intention. But the art market is, in a way, so mysterious that, of course, it also attracts fraudsters. "

In general, however, according to Nicole Stava, the art market is of particular interest to three categories of people. Of course, collectors, as well as investors, while - because art evokes emotions and emotions are uncontrollable horses without reins - they can turn one of the works

into collectors, resign themselves to further appreciation and keep it for themselves. The last class is people who, with a rare and therefore expensive work of art, establish their own social status: they want their surrounding to see that they have bought Picasso, that they can afford it, it is another level to show their social status, like showing their car and watch.

"This category is growing in numbers to the east and exists here as well. I don't look at them through my fingers, but I have my limits. I will not offer an exceptional painting to just someone, but only to those for whom it makes sense to me." In this, Nicole Stava's work differs from auction houses, which follow the simple rule of "higher takes". Not that the concept of "à la Bechyně" would be unsympathetic.

So we know the principles of a woman who guides collectors and investors around the world of art. This guide is partly similar to the guide to the castle in Bechyně, where the public and private spaces of the family are separated by a simple screen: it leads through various "rooms" in which there are not only paintings, but also furniture, watches, statues, antiques and newer things. We know the principles, so now...

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