

The Women's Darkroom + Gallery

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TOYEN: fragments de rêves



Toyen photographed by Jindřich Štyrský, Praha, 1934-35,
2 1/4 x 2 1/4", gelatin silver print.

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The Women's Darkroom + Gallery is proud to present ***Toyen: fragments de rêves*** an exhibition of out-of-print books, catalogs, and ephemera from Toyen's oeuvre which includes a rare photograph of Toyen taken by Jiindřich Štyrský in Prague in 1934-35, *The Shooting Gallery / TIR*, which is a cycle of twelve drawings originally made by Toyen in 1939 and created in dry point made for Éditions Maintenance with Radovan Ivšić, 1973, and a 1974 copy of *Specter's of the Desert*, published by Black Swan Press, Chicago, among other works.

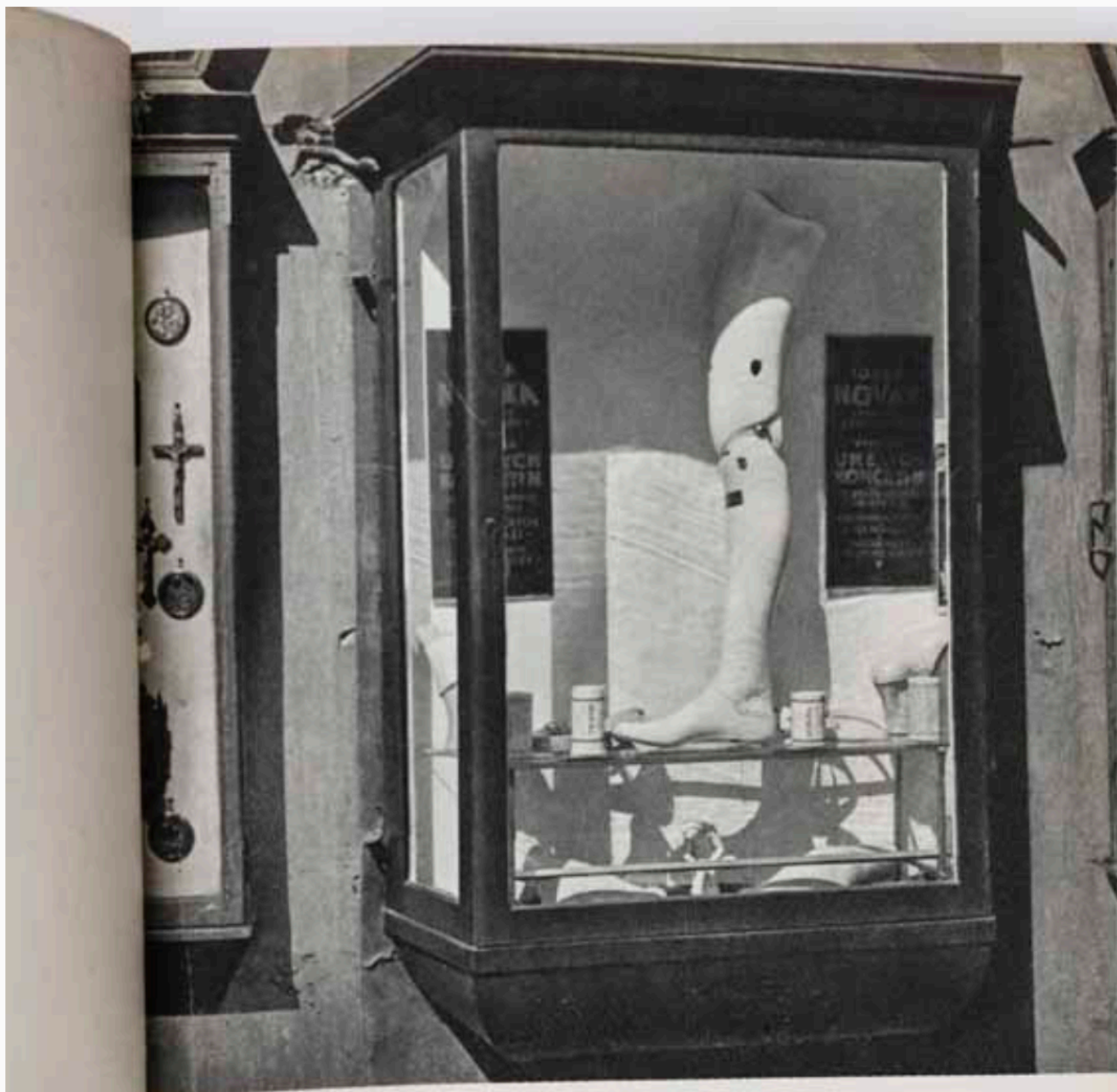
Toyen: A Very Brief History of Encounters and Collaborations

Meghan Forbes

The story of the artist **Toyen (1902–1980)** is a tale of two cities. Toyen began their artistic career—which would include painting and illustration, book design, and collage—in Prague, the city of their birth, coming of age with the avant-garde artists' group Devětsil. The group's formation came from the wellspring of optimism that flowed from the Russian Revolution and the end of WWI, which its young members believed would usher in better days. By 1925 Toyen had begun traveling to France, and their most constant companion was the artist Jindřich Štyrský. Together they exhibited their Artificialist paintings in Paris and in 1927, with the journalist Vincenc Nečas, produced a guidebook for Czech tourists.

In the subsequent decade, Toyen and several compatriots formed the Czech group of Surrealism, initiated in 1934 in part out of an enduring exchange with the French Surrealists. At the invitation of the newly founded Czech Surrealist group, André Breton, his wife Jacqueline Lamba, and Paul and Nusch Éluard visited Prague and Karlovy Vary in the spring of 1935. Following this trip, the Czech Surrealists were then officially invited by the French group to Paris, which led to a visit in the summer of 1935 (to coincide with the first International Congress of Writers in Defense of Culture). The delegation included Toyen and Štyrský, with Devětsil's ringleader, Karel Teige, and the preeminent Surrealist poet Vítězslav Nezval. Nezval later published a travelogue, *The Street Gît-le-Coeur*, which recounts their adventures and includes a photograph Nezval took of Toyen seated between Štyrský and the French Surrealist Benjamin Péret.

Another 1935 photograph, this one from Prague and taken by Štyrský, is uncanny in its composition: Toyen stands in profile outside a shop window, facing the knee of a prosthetic leg, a can at its heel labeled in capital letters "IDEAL." We can also see the reflection of the photographer in the glass, between the leg and Toyen's torso. The photograph is arresting in its own right but made all the more remarkable in that it captures the same window display that would reappear in print in a far more famous photograph by Štyrský. In this version Toyen is absent, but the two photographs were likely taken during the same shoot; the shadows cast against a white background in both are nearly identical. The photo of the shop display without Toyen was published in *On the Needles of These Days*, a book which nevertheless was dedicated to Toyen. Each set of facing pages pairs a photograph by Štyrský accompanied by the poetry of Jindřich Heisler. The book was first published underground during WWII in 1941 and then through official channels in 1945.



Na jehlách těchto dní (On the Needles of These Days), Text: Jindřich Heisler (1941), Photo: Jindřich Štyrský (1935), Edition: 2nd (First edition published secretly in 1941) Typography: Karel Teige, Intaglio: Neubert a synové, Publishers: Fr. Borový in Prague, December 1945. © 2026 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris

Heisler was another close colleague of Toyen. He was Jewish, and during part of the war he hid in Toyen's apartment. By then, all hope for a new world without war had dissipated and Toyen produced one series after another depicting parched landscapes of destitution. In 1939 Toyen published a series of drawings, *The Specters of the Desert*, printed in Paris, featuring Heisler's poems and dedicated to Teige. In the same period Toyen produced *The Shooting Gallery* (1939–1940) and *Hide, War!* (1944, later printed as a set of nine lithographs in 1946 by the same publisher as *On the Needles of These Days*). All of these projects portray a barren earth of cracked soil, lacking in vegetation, and devoid of life, save for a few desperate-looking birds or a cavernous child.



Toyen and Radovan Ivšić: *TIR (Shooting Gallery): Cycle de douze dessins (Cycle of twelve drawings) 1939-1940*, dry point on Rives wove paper, 18 x 13 1/4 inches, Éditions Maintenant, Paris, 1973.

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After the war finally ended, Toyen immigrated to Paris for good, living for some time at 42 Rue Fontaine, the apartment of Breton and Lamba. In Paris, Toyen continued to paint while also working in close collaborations, in particular with Annie Le Brun and Radovan Ivšić. Together they sustained the tradition of producing artists' books (often under the Éditions Maintenant imprint) well into the 1970s. Toyen's drawings and collages in these later decades evoke a mysterious sensuality that extends a throughline from their earliest work—a constant across regime change and geographic translocation.

TOYEN - 1938

by Jindřich Heisler - Prague 1946

Hands on the table and eyes on the table like fruit

All that follows takes place in the dullest greyness
and in the presence of the real shrapnel

All freedom seems to flow only about this table
Nothing adheres to its edges
and from its stains arise figures
which unfold

Beyond this table
there is no groove
nor curving crack
through which one might look elsewhere

Everything folds into smooth planes
and plane upon plane
coincide in each other

Sad fields of spreading smoke
flowery sleeves and plains
long plains on which many boots had to be put on
 suddenly
and on which many boots
lost their feet

copied from: *Toyen*, 1953, Editions Sokolova, Paris (translation in English from the catalog)

Meghan Forbes works as an independent writer, curator, and gardener. She is the author of *Technologies for the Revolution: The Czech Avant-Garde in Print* (Artefactum/Karolinum University Press, 2025). In 2024, Dr. Forbes was co-curator of the exhibition *Lucia Moholy: Exposures* at the Kunsthalle Prague and previously held fellowships at The Museum of Modern Art and the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. She has written previously on Toyen for the exhibition catalogue *Toyen: The Dreaming Rebel* (National Gallery Prague, 2021; Hamburger Kunsthalle, 2021-2022; Musée d'Art Moderne, 2022) and more recently as part of a longer catalogue essay for the the New Museum in New York (2026). Other recent writings on art have appeared in exhibition catalogues for the Archiv der Avantgarden in Dresden, Centre Pompidou in Paris, Kunsthalle Prague, and Museum Susch in Switzerland. Additional writings have appeared in *Art Margins*, *Hyperallergic*, *Literary Hub*, *post* (MoMA), *Los Angeles Review of Books* and elsewhere. She is the editor of the volume *International Perspectives on Publishing Platforms: Image, Object, Text* (Routledge, 2019). Dr. Forbes received her PhD from the University of Michigan, Ann Arbor.

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