

Trail #4 - “Cultural harvest” along the Danube: art, music and architecture – a look at formative eras and their influence, wealth, splendour and landmarks

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Vienna is undisputedly something like a magnifying glass if we're looking for an overview of all cultural developments and phenomena in the Danube region. However, this trail along the upper half of the Danube follows a history that starts out from prehistoric traces, continues through the Middle Ages and the Baroque era to the 19th and 20th centuries and shows that everything originated along the Danube that is, or at least reflects, the very essence of Europe. The journey launches out in Ulm and continues via Regensburg, Linz, Krems and Vienna to Hungary, Romania, Serbia and back via Croatia to Murska Sobota in Slovenia. Nowhere else have so many ethnic groups lived together, and still do, whose reciprocal fertilisation, even if under compulsion, bequeathed a cultural richness that has made the Danube into a treasure trove of human culture and ways of life – whether for reasons of religion, or individual identity, or simply for the demonstration of power, as has haunted us alarmingly once more particularly in modern history in the figures of Stalin or Tito.

Starting in Ulm, where the so-called “Lion Man” sculpture suggests a kind of mysticism or perhaps even a religion of more than 30,000 years ago, in the Middle Ages we subsequently encounter the “Holy Roman Empire”, which was founded on a Catholic universalism initiated by Emperor Charlemagne. The latter gave rise particularly in the Danube region to secular, ecclesiastical and monasterial structures and architecture which, in combination with Jewish influences reverberating from Regensburg to Hungary, shaped the region's identity and can still be seen today.

Furthermore, painting in the time of the Renaissance – even inspired by Chinese traditions – revolutionised the depiction of landscape in the form of the so-called “Danube School”. This arc was spanned further to include later art movements – Baroque, Belle Époque, Historicism, Art Nouveau and so forth. In Vienna, “blueprints” were created for the corporate architecture of the Habsburg Empire.

Hot spots of cultural history have always dynamised the Danube region down to the present day. Examples include media arts in Linz, the new Museum Mile in Krems, and the European capital of culture in Serbia, Novi Sad. Vienna continues to radiate its brilliance – the works of Sigmund Freud, philosophers and scientists, the First Viennese School in music, composers such as Mahler, Bruckner and Johann Strauss in the 19th century ... all of these prove that here the multi-ethnic heritage of the Danube region continues to yield a rich harvest.

Hungary as well can present a magnifying-glass view of Europe and the Danube – with the conversion to Christianity around 1,000 years ago, the constant partitions and fusions between Islam and Christendom, and the consequences of the Cold War, where Stalinist architecture, above all, left its traces.

Serbia and Romania were in their turn marked by the repeated fusions and divisions of Orthodox Christianity and Islam and affected by crucial impulses from Jewish life. Orient meets Occident: this defines many phenomena, whether architecture, cuisine, music or literature. The people and the ruling élites along the Danube were networked in all

directions, hence the attributes that are attached to distinctive places: Belgrade as “Paris of the Balkans”; Sremski Karlovci as “provincial Rome” for the Serbs living in the Habsburg Monarchy; Petrovaradin as “Gibraltar on the Danube”, and Novi Sad situated opposite as “Athens of Serbia”.

Accordingly, a trip from the source of the Danube to the far reaches of the Balkans is a demonstration of the resilience of cultural achievements, but also a fascinating manifestation of what can be brought about by fusion and re-invention over the centuries when catalysed by so many diverse influences.