

## Náchod SWING magazine - January & February 2025

Kateřina Šotolová: "Everyone has to be creative in their own way."

*The personality of Swing will be Kateřina Šotolová from Náchod. You can recognize her on the streets by her wide American smile and always positive mood. And how could she not, since she lived half of her life across the pond in Boston. I chatted with her not only about America, but especially about her passion, which is painting. She specializes in portraits of pets, mostly dogs, but she has also painted the legendary Micka for Eva Pavlova (= the president's wife). She is the chairwoman of the Náchod Atelier of Painters and Graphic Artists, but you can also meet her in the Puppet theatre To Children for Joy in Náchod.*



**Kateřina Šotolová decided to explore the world as an au-pair after graduating from the Náchod Business Academy. After a year in the UK, she also went to look after children in the United States, where she extended her stay to twenty years. Not only did she study there, but above all she was offered a tempting offer to run a private art gallery. She was so absorbed by the interesting work that she began to paint herself and now makes a living painting and teaching English. Now, however, back in her hometown of Náchod.**

**I have a feeling that as soon as you came back from America, Náchod was suddenly full of you. Do you feel the same way?**

It's been exactly six years since I returned home, and yes, I feel that a lot has happened. I immediately became a member of two associations - the Puppet theatre To Children for Joy and AMAG, the Atelier of Painters and Graphic Artists. During my first four years here I had three exhibitions of paintings, and I participated in various events together with AMAG. Newspapers Hradecká Drbna and Mladá Fronta Dnes wrote about

me and I was also invited to a live broadcast on ČT1 TV. And I appreciate all this immensely and I am sincerely happy about it.

**But let's go back to life across the big pond. When did you go to America and why?**

In January 1999 I flew to Boston as an au-pair to look after children in a family. It was very popular at the time, the year before I had done the same in England. I wanted to improve my English and see the world. It was a year-long program. I was homesick at first - email wasn't as common, smart phones didn't exist and I wasn't in touch with my parents as much as it is common these days and as much as I would like to, but I soon grew to love it.

**And then you got a wonderful job offer.**

Yes, I did. I ended up extending my stay, going to school there for a couple of years, and then I was able to find a job. Thanks to one of the families I babysat for, I started running a private art gallery and picture framing business. It was a unique opportunity that impacted me greatly and one that I will cherish forever. We had a new show of paintings every month, I learned how to frame everything for both the painters and the customers, I was responsible for all the operations, marketing, events and in short, everything that goes into running a gallery. I soon felt part of the

community there, I belonged there, people knew me and accepted me as one of them. I met a lot of great people and artists and became more interested in painting.



### **Have you always been close to fine art? When did you become active in painting?**

I have to smile when I hear that question. When I was in elementary school, I went to the liduška (afternoon art school, once a week art lessons for kids) on Komenda St, but that's all I devoted to painting. Two years after I started working at the gallery in Boston, I signed up for an evening oil painting class because customers kept asking me if I was painting and if I was exhibiting there, too. I started to really enjoy painting simple still-life paintings. For several years I painted with various painters in their studios or in courses, including portraits of people.

### **What art technique did you start with and what was your path to animal portraits?**

I didn't even try acrylic or watercolour paints, I just dove straight into oil painting and I still work with it today. Sometimes I painted little still-lives for my friends and I really enjoyed framing the pictures myself, too. Framing paintings and pretty much anything for customers became both my job and my hobby. And then one day, more or less by accident, I painted a

portrait of my friend's pooch, who had tears in her eyes when she got the picture, and that prompted me to paint more dogs. My paintings were then seen by other people in our gallery and I, very slowly but surely, got my first commissions.

### **How does such animal portraiture work?**

I always write to people mainly for a good photo. I paint from photos - pets don't sit as a live models for me, which is something people often ask me about with a smile (laughs). Because I don't usually get to know the pets personally, I put a lot of emphasis on people to choose a photo that really captures the character, soul and nature of their pet. A photo that they can really say "That's really it, that's what it is like." Then I paint from the photo I see on the computer. I start with a pencil drawing and then I jump into oil paints. I always start with the eyes, they are the most important. Occasionally, I paint a different collar tag, or I just leave out an unimportant detail.

### **You specialize in dogs. Why is that?**

I specialize in them because people like it, that's the only reason. I'm sure "dog people" will agree with me when I say they have more pictures of their puppies on their cell phones than they do of their relatives. I can understand that when a dog becomes a member of the family, due to its relative short life span - compared to human life, someone wants to have it painted and have it on display all the time, at least in a painting.

### **Any of your models stuck in your mind?**

I have a few pets that have stuck in my mind. Like my very first dog of my friend's, or my "colleague" at work, the boxer I have on my business cards, or the local police dog, or the cat that won me a prize at an art show. But my favorites also include two chickens. One was "murdered by a coyote" I was told, and the other was the pet of a 13-year-old girl whose parents surprised her with a portrait of her chicken friend. And on my trip to Switzerland, for example, I had the opportunity to photograph a beautiful cow, which I then had to portray with my brushes at home. And I was also very happy when I was asked to paint a cute little rabbit here in Náchod.

### **What do you like about portraying animals?**

What I enjoy, and what pleases me most of all, is that people tell me that I really capture their particular pet, that it really is it and not any other. Humans and pets have a uniquely specific relationship with each other, there is a loyalty and emotional support, and I can see that my pet portraiture is really special and extremely important to some.



**Has it ever happened to you that the client of a portrait was not satisfied with the result?**

I'm glad it hasn't happened to me yet. Only once I had to change the whole background of a painting because I painted a colourful, quite distracting carpet that the dog was sitting on, but the owner didn't like it in the painting, he just wanted a simple color, so I redid it.

**Where are your dog portraits hanging?**

I'm really happy about where my paintings are. In the US they are in about twelve states, in Europe in five countries and in the Czech Republic in many towns and cities.

**Do you paint anything other than dogs?**

I've always liked to paint simple still-lives, like pieces of fruit. But after I came back to the Czech Republic, I came to like Czech cakes and other delicacies, and I attempted puppets, too. In the summer I like to go painting in the countryside, but I take my watercolours with me, and I often go with my friend Mirka Samkova from AMAG. I enjoy

sitting outside and trying to capture what is in front of me. I have a lot to learn, but I enjoy it.

**What advice would you give to someone who wants to paint but has some concerns?**

I am worried that I can't paint the beautiful landscapes in nature like some of the great painters whose paintings I admire. That's why I don't go painting in busy places with lots of people looking over my shoulder - I would be embarrassed. My advice to those who are afraid to start painting is to find that comfortable place where they feel at peace, where they won't get stage fright, and most importantly, to take their time and not do it "on the fly". Everyone needs to follow their vision and be creative in their own way. I believe that every artist can find their admirers.

**Is there anything you would like to paint in the future?**

I would like to try to paint copies of world famous paintings, I can learn a lot from that, too, I have never tried that before. I just keep telling myself that I should...

**After returning from America, you became the chairwoman of the Náchod Atelier of Painters and Graphic Artists.**

Immediately after returning home in the spring of 2019, I became a member of AMAG and after five years, exactly one year ago, its chairwoman. During that time, I think, I have established good relations with the town management and the employees of the municipal office, which I very much appreciate and want to continue. We got a space in the Community House, and thanks to that we can keep AMAG active. Through my work at the gallery I learned everything associated with managing a retail operation, including planning exhibitions and events for the public, so I hope my experience will be beneficial to AMAG. And I firmly believe that with all the members of the association, we will work together on all matters as a good team of friends.

**What does AMAG have in store for this year?**

We are planning two exhibitions. The first one will be in April at the Museum of Náchod as part of the Art Spring series. We would like to maintain contact with the Museum and the Town Library and would like to exhibit at both places on a regular basis. The second exhibition will be held at the Jaroměř Town Museum throughout the summer from June to August. We were given this opportunity several years ago and this year we will take advantage of it. With these two exhibitions, we would like to commemorate a milestone of our association, because this year it

will be ten years since the establishment of the officially registered association AMAG, which has otherwise been operating since 1948.



**You have also been involved in the activities of the Puppet theatre To Children for Joy. How did that happen and what do you do there?**

My father, Jarda Šotola, was a member for almost fifty years, and his father before him, too, so that's why I wanted to follow in his footsteps immediately after returning home from America. When I was a child, I used to go and watch fairy tales with him, but I didn't learn how to lead the puppets. That didn't happen until now. I enjoy puppeteering, and I also help with promotion. We don't have many members, so we're always looking for new enthusiasts.

**How do you remember your life in America? How long were you there?**

I lived there for exactly twenty years, I can't believe it sometimes. I actually spent half my life there and I'm so glad I did. I think back on everything in good ways. I really met nice and good people there and I think it opened my eyes a lot. My parents and sister came to visit me many times and were always so excited about everything. I lived in a nice place on the outskirts of Boston close to the ocean. I often think I was very lucky; I'm grateful to my boss at the gallery

- this beautiful job opened a lot of doors towards people and opportunities for me.

**Did your stay change you in any way?**

I definitely got better at travelling and discovering new places, I think I won't get lost and I'll be able to communicate everywhere. I would probably have a bit different character if I had lived my whole life only in the Czech Republic, or rather in Náchod. I discovered humbleness and respect in people, warmth and the skill of enjoying life and the little things. I think I learned to express gratitude and thank yous, people there are polite and appreciate appreciation. I appreciate these qualities and skills as well.

**Why did you decide to return to Náchod?**

I guess it all came at the right moment. I had no commitments in America and I was asked to move out of the house I had been renting there for a long time. And so I simply told myself that I would not look for a new place to live, but that it was time to return home to Náchod after twenty years.

**Is there anything you miss here?**

Definitely sunny days. The sun shone there all year round. Even when it got really cold and snowed, the next day the sky was clear; it was constantly nice there. And in the area where I lived everything was well-maintained, good roads and sidewalks, nice houses, shops, parks and greenery and nice people.

**What do you think Americans should learn from Czechs and what should Czechs learn from Americans?**

I miss smiles. Everywhere, anywhere and anytime. So that's what I would recommend to Czechs - to smile more at people around them and not frown, there is a lack of positive thinking here. Americans don't have a good public transportation system and health care is one big expensive business. The Czechs have a good life! The United States is a huge country and a huge variety of

people live there. Czechs should not judge America and its people as a whole just by something little they heard somewhere and throw everything into one bad pile.

**What brings you joy in your life?**

I love cycling here in our region, I love the hills and the panoramas. And I love cycling in new places even more. I was extremely excited to ride in Tuscany, in the mountains of Sardinia, in France, in Denmark, and I want to ride more and more. I'm gradually getting to know Europe and I'm looking forward to more trips.

**It's January. What are your plans for 2025?**

I don't have big plans for this year. I would definitely like to go to new places in Europe and definitely cycle, too. And what made me happy recently, and I don't take it as a mere coincidence, but rather that it was just meant to be, is that I'm back in my business - picture framing. I have started a cooperation with My Gallery in Komenského Street in Náchod, so I hope that 2025 will bring new work opportunities. And of course more intense experiences.

**Thank you for the interview.**