

Bohemia Recherché

by Kathleen Watt

THE “BOHEMIA” OF Giacomo Puccini’s *La bohème* is not that ancient kingdom of Eastern Europe now called the Czech Republic—it’s the bustling Paris of 1840. But there is a connection.

Medieval Bohemia’s population included large numbers of gypsies—dark-skinned nomads so named because they were once erroneously believed to have come from Egypt. In fact, these tribes migrated originally from India, calling themselves “Romas,” from the Sanskrit word meaning “man of the low caste of musician.” These gypsies were the Bohemians who wandered into France in the 15th century as itinerant blacksmiths and entertainers, forging traditions that continue today in Roma tribes strewn worldwide, still subsisting on society’s fringes by luck and sharp wits.

In France, the word “*bohémien*” became synonymous with “gypsy,” and not in a flattering way, invoking the vagabond Romas—musical and clever, disheveled and furtive—a dangerous urban proletariat. By the early 19th century, Bohemia had come to describe not just the geographical homeland of vagrant foreigners, but the figurative home of any disenfranchised counterculture—like the communities of students and artists that crowded into Paris after the revolutions. Writing in 1834, Félix Pyat found the penchant of those young people for exoticism and ostentation to be “outside the law, beyond the reaches of society....They are the *bohémiens* of today....” Gypsies. They could be wealthy or destitute, revolutionary or apolitical, French or not. The constant

among them was the impulse to challenge mainstream culture. And wherever they congregated was this figurative “Bohemia.”

In “Bohemia”, too, self-definition was elusive. The artists and writers of early Bohemia had chosen to live outside social convention, not because of economic or political disenfranchisement, but to avail themselves of the new “cult of the individual.” Most of them had come from the *bourgeoisie*, but found on society’s margin a better vantage point from which to comment on bourgeois strictures and materialism. Their commentary appeared freely, even recklessly, in their poems, on their canvasses, and in their personal lives, which they often pursued alarmingly publicly.

But the cult of the individual could be costly. In the post-Revolution arts, noble patronage had given way to the marketplace, and no one’s fortune was sure. If artists wanted to pitch the quest for individuality toward iconoclasm, they would also have to consider marketability. Finding camaraderie and inspiration in their collective adventure, these early bohemians nevertheless retained a foothold in the bourgeoisie, and therefore some choice about suffering, and about limitations they would set themselves. Where would they draw the boundaries? “Bohemia was not a realm outside bourgeois life,” suggests historian Jerrold Seigel, “but the expression of a conflict that arose from its very heart.” In the sociology of nineteenth-century Paris, Bohemia and the bourgeoisie were more foil to each other than adversaries. Each knew itself better for its reflection in the other.

Bohemia’s principle chronicler, Henry Murger, arrived in Paris as a second-generation bohemian whose comrades had emerged, like himself, from the laboring

classes in the provinces, with no solid foothold in the urban bourgeoisie. These bohemians were conscripted by their circumstances, without education or means, prospering only by their wits. But they knew they might survive, even thrive, in Bohemia, where wits were coin of the realm, and nothing was more highly prized than creative scavenging. Demonstrable artistic talent was incidental for these bohemians, for, as Murger wrote, "...their everyday existence was a work of genius."

Murger himself was never more than a mediocre writer, but he was able to wring a career from the Bohemia phenomenon itself. His series of stories, *Scènes de la Vie de Bohème*, described his own life in mid-century Paris. When recycled in 1849 as the play *La Vie Parisienne*, it became popular enough to hoist Murger out of poverty. In 1896, thirty-five years after his death, his characters would reappear in Puccini's immortal *La bohème*. Murger's stories had romanticized a life defined by passion and youth—if not carefree, at least unfettered. In *La Vie Parisienne*, Murger and his collaborator, vaudevillist Théodore Barrière, sweetened the portrait of Bohemia even further, to ensure box office success and Murger's own escape from Bohemia. But this version so distorted the reality of Bohemia's bitter privations that new waves of wastrels from the provinces began heading for the bohemian gaiety of Paris. When his stories were later collected into book form, Murger added an extended preface, dimming the rosy glow of his Bohemia. He cautioned against a life lived too long there, where "... the best natures become the worst....[in] a charming and a terrible life...on which one should not enter, save in resigning oneself in advance to submit to the pitiless law: *væ victis* [woe to the vanquished]."

Claiming a distinguished pedigree for all fellow bohemians, Murger writes that “...[bohemians] have existed in all climes and ages...from ancient Greece, to modern time.” And so they have, even to a cultural apogee in the “charming and terrible” American counterculture of the 1950s ‘60s. But Bohemia will flower anew wherever ardor is invoked by opportunity. For despite its usefulness as a social and cultural paradigm, Bohemia is fundamentally a state of mind, with all its power to seduce and transform. And as fleeting, after all.