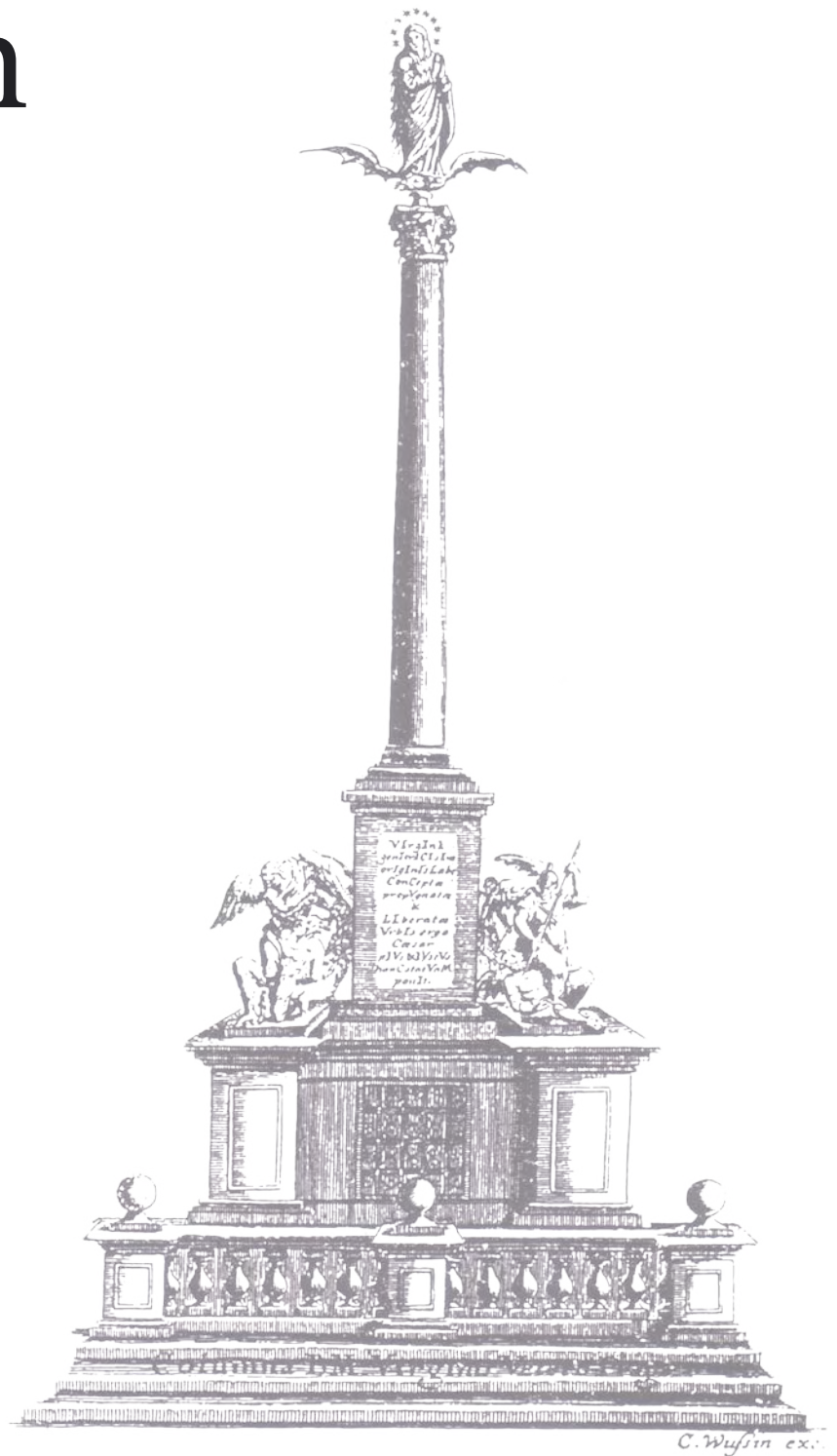


# The Virgin Mary Column in Prague

*The Voyage of  
the Stone*



# A short history of Virgin Mary Column in Prague

*From the Middle Ages on, in villages, by the side of roads and elevations, there were devotional pillars, chapels and crosses erected in memory of crucial events. The Christian thinking put effective belief in God's help and protection in them. From the 17th century the columns against the black death were built, devoted to saints. Of a special significance were the columns with the Virgin Mary Immaculata – intermediary of all grace. In Bohemia, the oldest and artistically most significant column with the Virgin Mary by then-famous sculptor J. J. Bendl has been erected at the Prague's Old Town Square.*



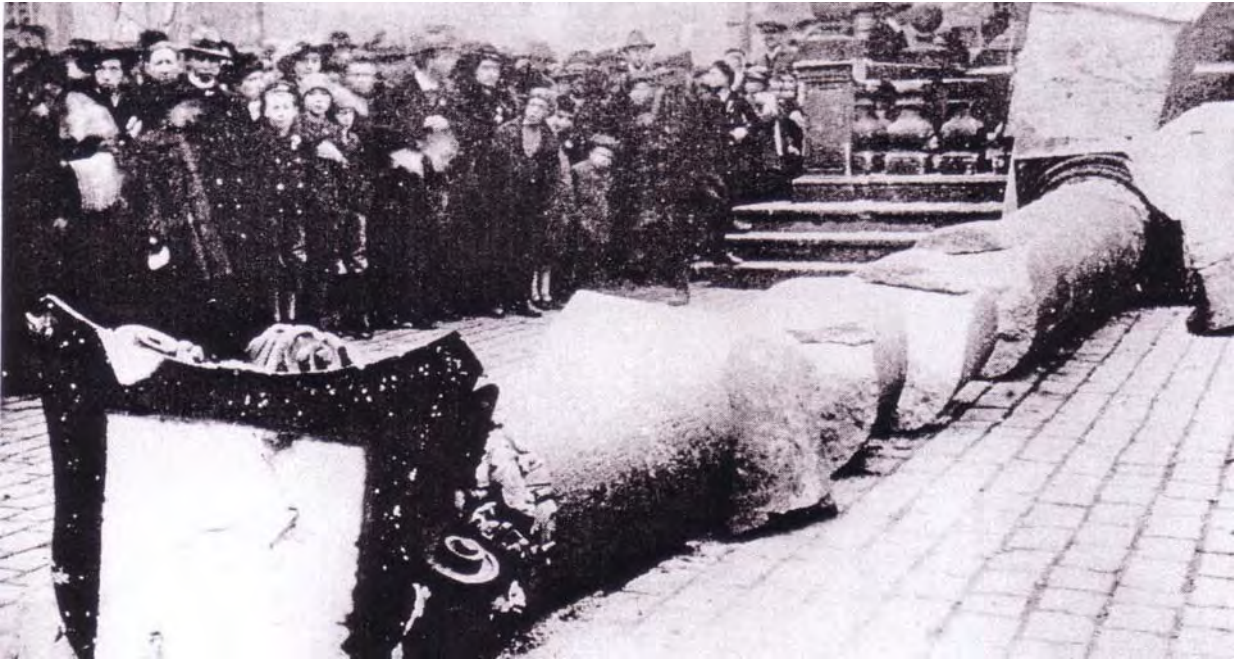
## Timeline

**1648** – Prague besieged by Swedish army in the closing months of the Thirty Years' War

**1650** – In memory of successful defense against the siege by the Prague garrison and citizens, who confided themselves in the protective powers of Virgin Mary, the column was erected.

**1652** – The column consecrated.

**1918** (3 November) – The column, ignorantly thought of as a symbol of just fallen Habsburg monarchy and the defeat of Czech armies in the Battle of the White Mountain in 1621, torn down by the crowd of bewildered citizens.



**1918** (19 November) – The remnants of the column’s structure cleared away before the first Czechoslovak president T. G. Masaryk arrived

**1923** (19 November) – The ”Division for renewal of the Virgin Mary column“ founded. From the funds raised by public collections twelve churches have been built in the Prague’s surroundings.

**1938** – The ”Czech Academic League“ applies to the town council for renewal of the column.

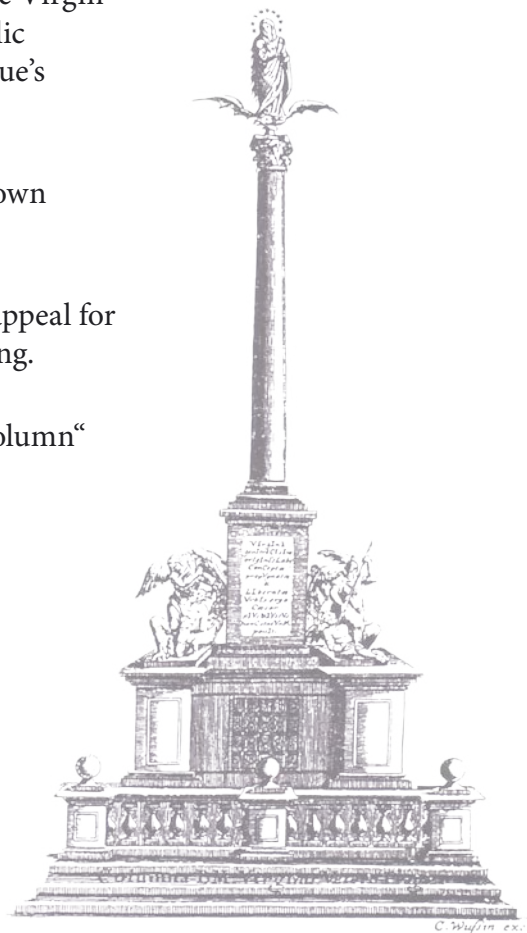
**1949** – Czechs exiled by the Communist coup d’état appeal for building a Virgin Mary statue as symbol of homecoming.

**1990** – The ”Society for renewal of the Virgin Mary column“ founded.

**1995** – Nationwide collection of funds for renewal proclaimed.

**1997** – Casting of preserved remnants of the original statue has been made.

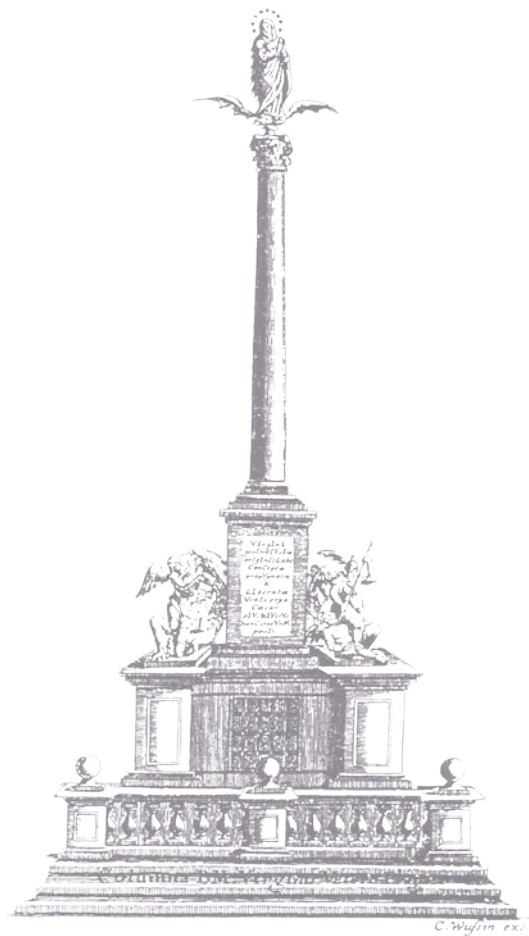
**1998** – Architectural plans finished, the making of stone architecture of the column begins.



**2000** – Sculptor Petr Váňa begins work on the statue

**2001** – A six meter column from the sandstone brought from India has been made and placed at preliminary location in the garden of Merciful Sisters of St. Charles Borromæus hospital in Prague just at the foot of Petřín hill.

**2002** – Sculptor Petr Váňa finishes the statue. It now can be seen at its preliminary location by the side of Týn Church in Prague near the Old Town Square.



# The Voyage of the Stone

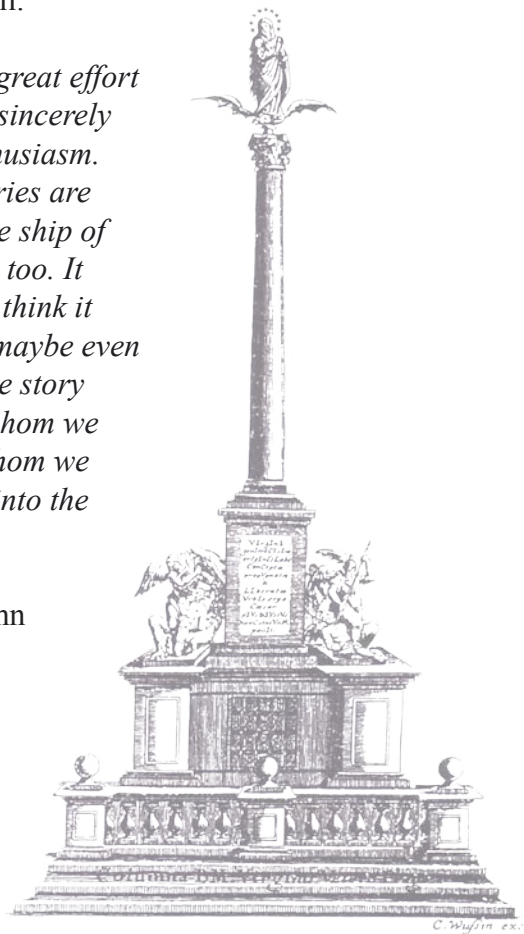
## The Story of the Stone

*In the year 1650 a Virgin Mary column was built by baroque sculptor J. J. Bendl at the Prague's Old Town Square. On 3 November 1918 the column was torn down. In October 1997 I have signed a contract with the Society for renewal of the Virgin Mary column to create a new one. This new artifact should be a copy of the original after the preserved fragments of Bendl's work. I feel very much bound by this task and this is not only a job, this is a story. The story of the renewal of the Column still goes on and I am now fully pulled in. I have boarded this ship and I hope that one day we set the anchor in that harbour, which is our destination.*

On the project, i.e. the stone architectural piece and the statue of Virgin Mary itself a team of five is now working – four stonemasons and a sculptor. We work separately but, we feel ourselves like being one workshop. The sandstone blocks are from the quarry near Božanov in eastern Bohemia. This material is the most suitable for substitution of original sandstone from the now extinct quarries in the vicinity of Kamenné Žehrovice. Until present the project has been financially secured by private donations from members of the "Society for renewal of the Virgin Mary column". Before the half of the year 2000 those donations covered the production of the staircase and baluster rail.

*I know that every thing worth treasuring comes out at great effort in conditions and circumstances not that simple. But I sincerely hope that every such thing comes out with joy and enthusiasm. That way the stories are coming into life and those stories are being told. Still more and more people are boarding the ship of our story, and they are becoming the part of that story, too. It seems to me that the story is no longer ours only and I think it will be beautiful if other people living in this country, maybe even those living across the border in the old Europe find the story interesting enough. Maybe it will address even those whom we will meet during our journey through the world and whom we will be telling the story. This idea can be transformed into the tongue of the stone.*

The leading idea has been, and remains, that the Column should be carved special – the part that grows from the ground (i.e. the stairs, the railing, plinths for the angels and the central plinth with mouldings) would be made of Czech sandstone, the centerpiece of the plinth of European sandstone and the column itself, bearing the statue of Virgin Mary, would be made of sandstone from another continent.



We endeavoured to think these ideas to the end and to find sandstones, which would by their structure, colouring, hardness and frost-resistance fit the local climate. It was also necessary to find materials which would create one unit with similar features of individual components but still gently suggest the idea. First we considered African sandstone for the column. After examining the samples we have found out that neither its structure nor its composition would fit. After a long-time search we managed to find contacts to sandstone quarries in Australia with stone of colouring and roughness similar to the Czech sandstone from Božanov. Even a location in that quarry has been found, where this unusually large block could be broken off. To our disappointment, after thorough testing of the samples, this sandstone has been found to match not the frost-proof demands of our local climate. A new round of searching was performed and, as chance would have it, we have finally found a quarry in India, where such large block could be broken off. The testing of the samples in the state construction testing authority confirmed the good quality of the stone meeting all standards required for construction works in our country.

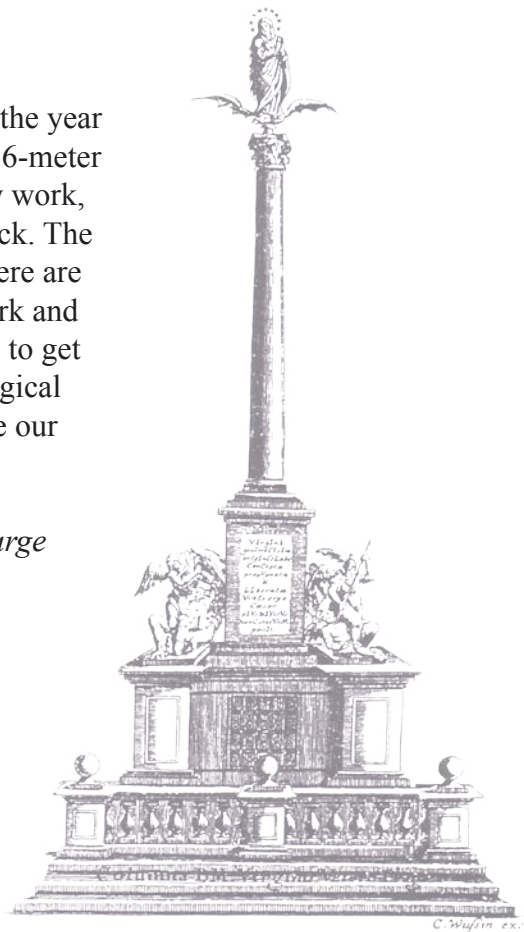
*Sometimes it seems that we are at the end of our dream voyage already and we start to lower the sails. In such moments I have always encountered somebody who gave me new direction and another idea or even a solution. I have met countless numbers of such people and so, thanks to all those, I can now propose this project of a voyage which is a common expression of thoughts about a story with which we perhaps, at the turning point of two millenia, sail from the World to Europe and home to Bohemia and reach the Old Town Square.*

## The Story of the Voyage

We are working on the stone parts of the column from the year 1997. The bulkiest part of the entire architecture is the 6-meter column. On 24 February 2001, after a long preparatory work, we flew to India to manage the cutting of the stone block. The stone is cut manually in Indian quarries. The people there are of different thinking, eat different food, the time of work and life runs differently. But we have had only three weeks to get the work done. Despite all organizational and technological hindrances the stone block was cut off four days before our scheduled departure.

*Those were only a few steps of the story but for me a large piece of life.*

In March the stone journeyed by railway to the Bombay harbour and at the beginning of April it was embarked on a ship sailing for Europe. In the course of these two months I endeavoured together with brothers Petr and Matěj Forman (sons of the famous director Miloš Forman) to collect financial resources for sailing of their theatre ship "Mystery" from Prague to Hamburg.



We dreamed about carving the stone right on the deck on our way back. On 8 May the ship from India reached Hamburg. The "Mystery" was still in Prague, though.

*The stories contain not only journeys and adventures. There are also many situations which tell us some more. I have found out that the reality is different from the initial dreams. On the other hand, the story has its sense, its happy end, and I believe in it. The obstacles we encountered in implementation of our dreams were actually helpful in the end.*

The stone reached Hamburg in a container which was to be returned empty in four days. With the Formans ship still stuck in Prague, I have decided to ship the stone to Bohemia by freight train. The discharge of the stone, the transport to Bohemia as well as all necessary official formalities were generously handled by the company "České přístavy" (Czech harbours). At the same time we have been offered by that company an area in the Mělník harbour on the Elbe to carry out the hacking of the stone. On 8 May, that very same day the ship from India has cast the anchor in Hamburg, the stone reached Mělník. At 1:00 AM we have put the 18-ton stone out of the container.

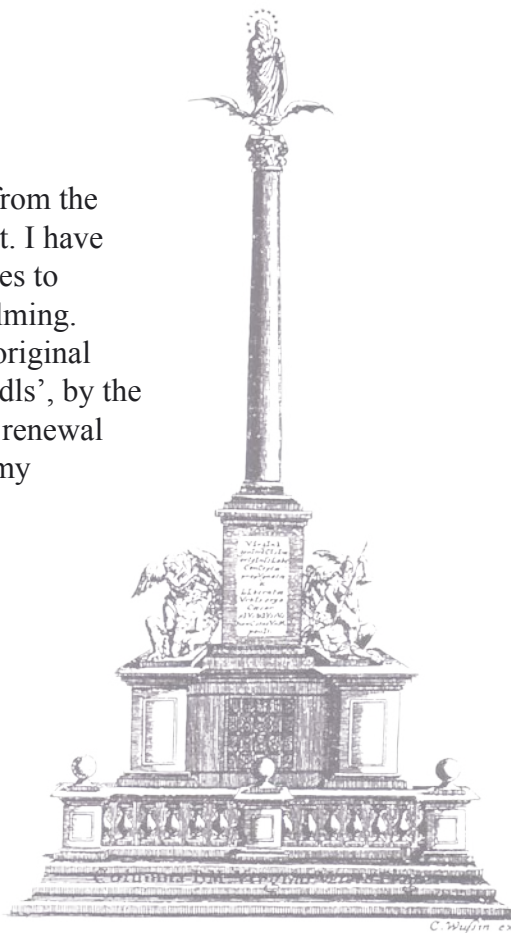
*The twenty-first day of May, the marking day of The Voyage: eventually we could grab our hammers and chisels and start to carve. We have slept and dined next to the stone, just like the members of medieval stonemasons' lodges. Another dream come true.*

On 30 June the ship "Mystery" reached Mělník on its way back from Litoměřice. The finished column was embarked and the ship sailed off to Prague.

## The Voyage of the Sculptor

And then the *Immaculata*. Of all fragments preserved from the original Bendl's statue, the face was the most important. I have worked on the statue for two years. Then finally it comes to the face. The gravity of each hammer blow is overwhelming. Everyone is well acquainted with the fragment of the original head. I must achieve the same facial expression as Bendl's, by the same means. I physically feel that people intercede for renewal of the column. This has been the strongest moment in my sculptor's life. Finished 23 May 2003.

*A voyage lasting many many days is considered to be a long one. I travel with the idea of the Virgin Mary column from the year 1997 up to this day of 2007. Many people keep asking me "What about the Virgin Mary column?". I relate the story of this being-born-again column from the point of view of a personal story. I cannot do that any other way. My hope is that it is not some petty one-track personal story but the Hope itself.*

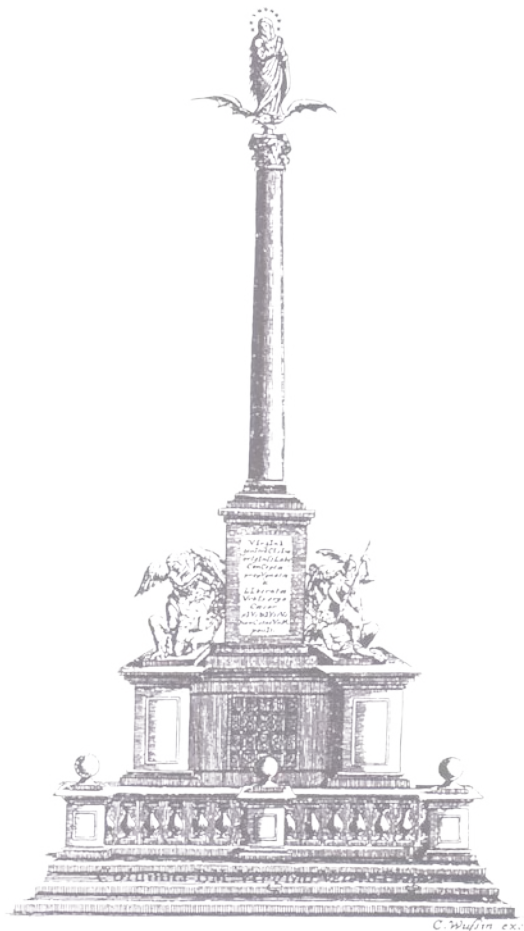


The lowest part of the monument is made from domestic sandstone, as well as the topmost – the statue of Virgin Mary itself. The column, as the most conspicuous part of the whole monument, is made from the sandstone from the far-away World. The only thing that remains to be done is to take a journey to the European neighbourhood and to find blocks to make the central linth and the four corner stones. It is important that the sandstone should be medium-grained, ochre colour, silicon-rich. The size of the blocks should be 2 cubic meters.

*The land where one was born remains close to his heart also by the fact that he knows every stone he put his feet on. If people, each and every one, will find in the story of the Column their stone, a part of something close to their hearts, they will find the story closer, more personal. I think it possible that the Column will not be the one which divides but, on the contrary, that it might become the joining story of the voyage of the people who sacrificed strength, time and energy to finally see it in place. The historical area of the Old Town Square in Prague will regain the spatial balance it once had. The horizontal of the John Hus monument will be again complemented by the vertical of the Virgin Mary column. Those two works of art were built to complement each other and each one of them was conspicuous thanks to the other one.*

Prague, March 2007

Petr Váňa, sculptor







The sandstone block in India



Working on the block in Mělník harbour



The column base finished in January 2007



Preparing the stone for the column's capital



Finished statue of Virgin Mary at its preliminary location by the side of Týn Church next to the Old Town Square

