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ART 305.01 19th Century Art

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Mucha and Bringing Posters to the Rank of High Art

The 19th century was a time of innovation in technology, experimentation in art, and cultural change unlike others before it. Paris, France during this period was becoming covered in posters, becoming to be known as “the city of posters”. The late 19th century Paris saw a multitude of artists' styles from painting and posters, all challenging one another and challenging what was art at the time. This time is marked by many different poster artists of the different artistic movements that found themselves in the later 19th century. However, no other artists changed and took over the poster scene like Alphonse Mucha. Mucha’s commercial work began to combine what critiques called high and low art, elevating the quality and status of posters during the late 19th century and onward.

To understand how Mucha changed poster art, we must know where it has been. Leading up to the 19th, many prints were made by woodblock and were generally black and white prints and was a very slow process (Chapin 13). However, posters have been a part of city life for centuries, dating back to handwritten proclamations and woodblock prints (Chapin 13). Louis-Sébastien Mercier wrote that the poster “covers, colors, dresses Paris one may say...And Paris may be denominated Poster-Paris, and be distinguished by this costume from any other city of the world” (Mercier). Posters the biggest change being the invention of the lithography by Alois Senefelder in 1796-99. Senefelder created a process where a planographic printing technique

based on the principle of the repulsion of water and grease (Chapin 13). He originally created this process for sheet music, but it would be adopted by Parisian publishers for illustrated novels and small posters (Chapin 13).

This technology would be taken even further by Jules Chéret, “The Father of the Poster”, he would revolutionize the visual aesthetic of posters and make new innovations to make the printing process faster (Rymer 13). Chéret pioneered posters by bringing them to a level of respect in the art world that will be carried on by other artists of the time. Helped by the rise of leisure and an economic boom, Chéret was employed more and more along with other artists to flood the streets of Paris with posters, and art critique Emile Straus said it “gave Paris a museum of pictures, an open-air



Figure 1 Jules Chéret "La Loie Fuller" 1897

exhibition...Here is the true museum for the masses...awakening the joy of an everlasting art” (Chapin 17). Paris was exploding with posters with a wealth of different artistic styles, leading to a relative newcomer onto the scene: Alphonse Mucha (Chapin 22).

Alphonse Mucha is a Bohemia and Czech artist born in 1860 in the Austro-Hungarian Empire, what is now known as the Czech Republic. He began his training in Vienna and worked as a set decorator for the Burghardt Theater Design Company while enrolling in evening art classes (Mucha Trust). However, through a major fire that burned down the theater, he had to be let go due to financial loss for the company (Mucha Trust). Mucha would travel around Europe, taking commissions to make ends meet and eventually joining the Munich Academy of Arts and later moving to Paris in around 1890 (Chapin 28). While in Paris, he began to primary work on

book illustrations, teaching drawing lessons, and met some contemporaries such as Paul Gauguin with whom he shared a studio space (Mucha Trust). However, his rise to fame in Paris happened by chance during the holiday season of 1894 when the actress Sarah Bernhardt required a new poster for her play, *Gismonda* at the Théâtre de la Renaissance.



Figure 2 Alphonse Mucha, "Gismonda" 1895

The story goes that all the regular artist at the Lemercier print house was on holiday and Mucha was there correcting proofs for a friend when the famous French actress Sarah Bernhardt came in for a last-minute poster for his play. Jumping to the opportunity, Mucha volunteered to create a last-minute poster for the actress in 1894 for its 1895 release (Mucha Trust). It is here that Mucha made the “*Gismonda*” poster that came to 6 feet in size and many themes that Mucha would come to be known for are present in this such as the long, elegant gowns that fold and flow throughout the poster, vegetal and organic forms that wrap around the subjects, soft color palettes with the occasional pops of metallics, and the mystical feel of his depiction of the female form along with many themes reminiscent of the Byzantine era which the play took place in (Thompson 163).

The poster itself was a huge success and embedded “The Divine Sarah” mystique for Bernhardt. She fell in love with how Mucha depicted her slight and long figure was placed within a tall, narrow format that aesthetically enriched the composition (Thompson 163). This landed Mucha a 6-year contract with the actress to design posters, stage sets, and costumes for her and/or her company (Thompson 163). During his 6-year contract with Bernhardt, he also signed a contract with the Champenois Printing house to print exclusively with their company and created 6 more posters for the actress; *La Dame aux*

Camélias (1896), *Lorenzaccio* (1896), *La Samaritaine* (1897), *Médée* (1898), *La Tosca* (1898) and *Hamlet* (1899), keeping the same formula that made *Gismonda* so popular (Rymer). Mucha was a relative latecomer to the poster scene when compared to his contemporaries, however, his posters changed the format of how posters were made (Chapin 28). He became an overnight celebrity and was described as a new force in the Parisian affiche illustrate (Chapin 28).

Mucha's talent for complex visual storytelling is best seen in these posters, when looking at *Hamlet* from 1899 many things are being told by just the poster. The decorative panels surrounding the figure hold many abstract forms reminiscent of Viking or Celtic knots, establishing the setting of the play which we know to be Denmark by the title on the top reading "*Tragique Historie d'Hamlet: Prince de Danemark*" or the Tragic History of Hamlet: The Prince of Denmark in English. Behind Sarah Bernhardt's *Hamlet*, the contrasting blue semi-circle has the ghost of the late King of Denmark, illuminated by the pale moonlight. Hamlet himself takes center stage in the poster, as is a common motif throughout the posters made for Bernhardt. He clutches his sword close to his heart while staring off to the right, a departure from the other posters Mucha created. Below Hamlet, in the other blue box, we see his tragic lover, Ophelia, lying horizontally as if the box containing her is her coffin, foreshadowing her tragic death at the end of the play. This partnership with the highly influential Sarah Bernhardt launched Mucha and he began to venture out beyond theater posters.



His first big commission came from the Champenois Printing House during his 6-year contract with Bernhardt, the artist was commissioned to design decorative panels, a growing fad

in the late 19th century for homes to collect art at a cheaper cost (Mucha Trust). His theme was “seasons” and he created four decorative panels, each female subject representing the four different seasons in an ethereal feel. The vegetal and flower forms help frame the female subject who begin to resemble natures, perhaps alluding to the nymphs of Greek mythology, the female personification of nature. The theme of the personification of the seasons wasn’t new at the time of its creation, however, through Mucha’s beautiful rendering of the female form he gave the classic theme a breath of fresh air, reviving it once more. It was such a huge success he was asked to make two more in the same theme along with the theme of Art and Flowers for the print company to sell as decorative panels (Mucha Trust). The imagery of elegant women is used across all of Mucha’s work, art historian Jan Thompson described the “women in his poster are amazingly coiffed with extremely abstracted curls, rendered in energetic curves and in improbably fashion... it shows a manner of stylization” (Thompson 162).

Mucha’s style became synonymous with the Art Nouveau movement, however, Mucha himself didn’t care for the term as to him it represented a uniquely contemporary movement rather than art being timeless (Pounds). Nonetheless, many of the themes found in Mucha’s work coincide with the Art Nouveau movement as stated by Jean Schopfer when describing the movement’s positive principles;

1. *Every copy is a negation of art*
2. *The invention and cooperation of the workmen have been accepted as essentials by all those interested in the Art Nouveau*
3. *The Art Nouveau has reverted to Nature, that it might discover new beauty*
4. *The Art Nouveau favors beautiful materials*
5. *The Art Nouveau includes the entirety of the decorative arts and has revived some branches long since dead*

6. *The Art Nouveau is absolutely free.*

Mucha's work indeed reads as a celebration and return to nature in all his floral themes as his style was of elaborate ornamentation and an eschewing of any hint of contemporary Parisian life (Chapin 28). He celebrates the softness of the seasons in his posters and the flowing beauty of the female's hair. In relation to Art Nouveau including the entirety of the decorative arts, Mucha also branched out into other mediums than posters art, designing packaging, perfume bottles, and jewelry in his unique style. An example of his packaging is his design for Houbigant Jeanette Perfume, every inch of the bottle is delicately decorated from the logo to the flowing glasswork that surrounds the cap of the bottle, arguing that everyday objects should be decorated.



Figure 3 Alphonse Mucha "Coeur de Jeannette Houbigant" 1900

He also considered his work to be the people's art stating "I prefer to be someone who makes pictures for people, rather than one who creates art for art's sake" (Mucha). Mucha brought a new level of detail and care into poster art, looking back at years of art history and literature in his work, creating complex backgrounds of intricate design. His aim was to bring in the level of "high" art in all his commercial work as his life's goal was to create a series of epic history paintings celebrating his Slavic roots, but as life turns out he was launched into making poster art.

However, Mucha argued that Art Nouveau was "new art" nor "free" as all of his work has callbacks to older art movements. One could argue that there is no such thing as "new art" as art is an ever-evolving line of cause and effect, action and reaction. Despite all his protests, it is undeniable that he is the pioneer and champion of the Art Nouveau style (Chapin 28). Especially

in his depiction of women, becoming “the Apostle of the Beautiful and of the Ideal” according to critic P. G. Huardel (Chapin 28).

The new advertisement idea of the “pretty girl” sale would be used countless throughout his work, Thompson points out that in the 1890s, “woman was the focal point of advertising campaigns” and is best seen in Mucha’s poster for the cigarette paper company, *JOB* from 1896. Smoking at the turn of the century was considered a masculine activity and sexes still would separate after meals so men could smoke tother (Mitchell 30). At the time of its debut, it

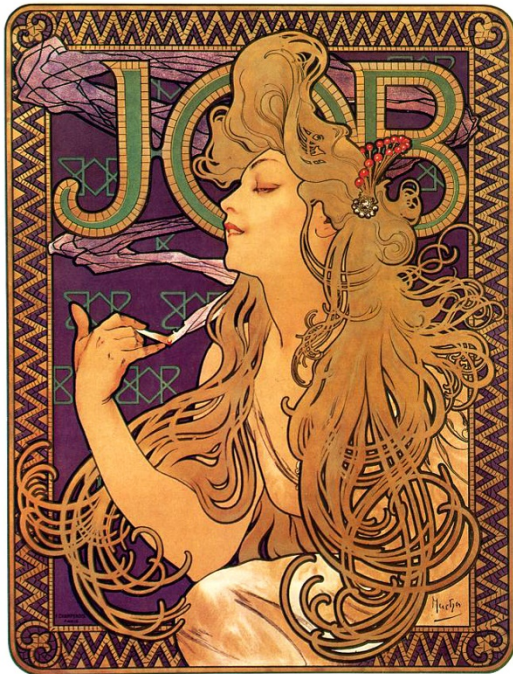


Figure 4 Alphonse Mucha "JOB" 1896

would have been startling to the public, however, its undeniable beauty made it one of the artist’s most iconic works to date.

Mucha’s use of mosaics is seen again in the lettering drawn large and clearly behind the female figure. He interwove the letters J-O-

B to produce a harmonious, patterned background to the lovely woman, making every use of the space to advertise the cigarette

paper company (Chapin 29). The female figure’s hair takes over the entire right side of the canvas, art historian Thompson

describes it best “the hair assumes a decorative importance, the intertwining tendrils stretching into fantastic shapes almost on their

own initiative” (162).

The depiction of the “new woman” or its contemporary name “Mucha Women” was highly commercialized and was a reaction against a highly “masculinized” culture dominated by anonymous industrialization (Rymer 39). Jiri Mucha, his son, said about his father’s depiction of women as “a woman, for him, was not a body, but beauty incorporated in the matter and acting through matter. That is why all his female figures, however solid, are not really of this world.

They are symbols, unattainable dreams, like Sarah when she came on to the stage or died in the role of La Dam Aux Camelias” (Mucha). This is evident in his series of The Flowers (1898) where he created decorative panels of the flowers as women's personifications. Each of the chosen plants is represented growing around a woman whose appearance harmonizes with the virtues of each flower (Thompson 167). However, he begins to strip back much of the overzealous decorative style that he was known for at the time, instead of letting the flowers become the central focus along with the female subject. This is maybe an influence from the import of Japanese woodblock prints, a growing fad in Paris commonly called Japonisme.

Art Nouveau soon drifted out of style and was considered outdated by the 20th century as the world began to shift into the more structured nature of Modernism. Modernism at the turn of the 20th century as it “rejects both the ‘reflective’ emphasis of realism and naturalism on the one hand, and the natural-mystical, ‘utopian’ emphasis of romanticism on the other” (O’Brien 17). Mucha also stopped making posters at the turn of the century, returning to painting after looking for a patron in America to finally create his Slav Epic (Rymer 39). His poster-making career was very short-lived, only working from 1894 to about 1904 when he traveled to America and returned to his homeland in 1910 (Pound).

Alphonse Mucha would pass in 1939, falling ill after the invasion of his country by the Nazi party and being interrogated as a known nationalist. During the rise of fascism and communism, much of his work was buried by the overruling governments, as they saw his work as part of the bourgeoisie. His work wouldn't see light again until 1960 when the city of Prague finally hung up his artwork again. For a while after his death, Mucha was lost to history and only was recently celebrated once more due to the work of Liri and John, his son and grandson, who kept up records of Alphonse Mucha's work and started the Mucha Foundation. However, the

posters he created in his short period became highly influential, inspiring other artists and changing the formats of posters. His work saw a revival in the 1960's psychedelic rock era as artists such as Wes Wilson, Alton Kelly, and Stanley Mouse all took notes from the Art Nouveau artists to create mind-melting pieces of art. Sometimes, Mucha's work was taken straight from his posters and given a new life as the duo Kelly and Mouse reworked many different graphics into new posters. Most notable of these appropriations by the duo is "The Girl with Green Hair" from 1966 and the "Big Brother and the Holding Company" from 1967 by John Lichtenwalner.



Figure 5 John Lichtenwalner "Big Brother and the Holding Company" 1967

To say Mucha had an impact on poster art is an understatement. His work completely defined an art movement, even if he didn't associate with it in his lifetime. He helped elevate posters to be on par with paintings in the 19th century and onward, having many of his posters in museums such as the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) and having many traveling shows thanks to the Mucha Foundation such as the North Carolina Museum of Modern Art's (NCMM) Alphonse Mucha: Art Nouveau Visionary. While he didn't start off his art career as he thought, Mucha made the most of his situation and carefully crafted an entire style that would satisfy both his want to spread and celebrate his national pride of Slavic art and the ability to sell products using his art.

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