**PRESS RELEASE**

Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939) was one of Europe's most renowned artists in the late 19th and early 20th century. Combining images of seductive women with innovative typographical compositions and layouts, he created highly original posters and gave birth to the new genre of visual art that blossomed in the Paris of the *Belle Époque*. The Mucha style soon came to indicate a whole range of graphic works and decorative objects that furnished the homes of art lovers in Paris and other countries, becoming an icon of Art Nouveau. He was hailed by the press as the world's greatest decorative artist during a visit to the United States in 1904.

The growth of Mucha's renown in the world of international art was paralleled by his growing desire to contribute to the political independence of the Czech lands and the neighbouring Slav regions, divided for centuries by the colonial powers. Despite the superficial opulence and modernist vision of the 1900 World's Fair in Paris, political tension was mounting in East and Central Europe. A believer in the universality of art and its powers of inspiration and communication, Mucha advocated the creation of a spiritual union of the Slav peoples and ultimately of all mankind. The artist dreamed of a better world where ethnic minorities of all cultural backgrounds could live in harmony without being threatened by the more powerful nations. Mucha's love of his homeland and utopian ideals are manifested in his masterpiece the *Slav Epic* (1911–28).

Under the auspices of the **Istituto per la storia del Risorgimento italiano** and the patronage of **Regione Lazio** and **Roma Capitale**, the first major retrospective dedicated to the Czech artist Alphonse Mucha is organized and produced by **Arthemisia Group** in collaboration with the **Mucha Foundation**.

Curated by **Tomoko Sato**, curator of the Mucha Foundation (which has produced many exhibitions of Alphonse Mucha) since 2007, the exhibition that opens at the **Vittoriano - Ala Brasini** from **15 April** to **11 September 2016** consists of **over 200 works** including paintings, posters, drawings, decorative works, jewelry and preparatory drawings of the vessels of the Fouquet Boutique to retrace the inner creative process of the greatest representative of Art Nouveau.

The event sees **Generali Italia** as sponsor, **Ricola** asspecial partner, **Trenitalia** and **la Rinascente** as technical sponsors and **Vogue Italia** as media partner.

The event is recommended by **Sky Arte HD**.

The catalog is published by **Skira** for Arthemisia Group.

**THE ARTIST**

One of the most celebrated artists in Europe in the late 19th and early 20th century, Alphonse Mucha is known all over the world as one of the fathers of Art Nouveau, the artistic movement characterized by the use of soft lines, floral forms and plant motifs that blossomed in the Paris of the *Belle Époque* and then spread throughout Europe. He was in reality a multi-faceted and versatile artist as well as a great experimenter with different styles and approaches, firmly convinced that the value of art derives from reflection that does not refer exclusively to the aesthetic sphere but rather finds completion there.

Born in 1860 in Ivančice, a town in southern Moravia then under Austrian rule, Mucha grew up as a fervent patriot and firm believer in the political freedom of his land and the spiritual unity of the Slav peoples. His convictions were so deeply rooted that he devoted a great deal of his time, energy and work to celebrating these values of unity, freedom and fraternity.

After training as a painter in his native land and then in Munich, Mucha moved in 1887 to Paris, the very heart of European art and culture, where he met Gauguin and came into contact with Paul Sérusier and the Nabis, group of Symbolist "prophets" gathered around him. Paris also saw a crucial encounter that was to change his life and artistic career.

It was Christmas 1894 and Sarah Bernhardt was about to open in a new play entitled *Gismonda*. None of the various posters designed for her by different commercial artists had met with her approval and there was now no one left in the city apart from Alphonse Mucha, who produced one in great haste. The printer was bewildered. He had never seen anything like it. In its original fusion of Byzantine influences and Art Nouveau stylistic devices, the poster looked frighteningly modern and he was sure that the actress would reject it. Bernhardt instead immediately asked to meet Alphonse in her boudoir. No sooner had he entered than she sprang to her feet, embraced him and told him that her had made her immortal. From then on she would allow no one else to portray her.

This work made Alphonse Mucha the greatest poster designer of his time and people in France began to use the term "Mucha style" for his unmistakable images. The same period saw the creation of the "Mucha woman".

When he was invited to take part in the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900, he was at the peak of his fame. His creations were plastered across all the walls and the Mucha style was chosen for all the major advertising campaigns. Despite the apparently modernist vision expressed by the Expo, however, political tension was mounting in East and Central Europe, and the Czech lands and neighbouring Slav regions yearned for independence. Mucha also longed to contribute to the liberation of his people.

The artist designed the Pavilion of Mankind, one of the event's main attractions, but attached more importance to his commission to decorate the Pavilion of Bosnia-Herzegovina. As the stated later, "I would never have expected to find among the Balkan Slavs what I was seeking so desperately. I poured the joys and sorrows of my country and all the Slav peoples into the representation of their history." The idea for the *Slav Epic* was thus officially born and never to be abandoned by Mucha.

In 1904, during the first of the numerous trips to the United States that continued until 1910, he was hailed by the press as the greatest decorative artist in the world.

While he mixed there with the upper echelons of politics and society, but his interest in fame, splendour, wealth and important contacts was geared solely to finding financial support for the celebratory series of works devoted to his homeland and the Slav peoples that he had been planning for some time.

His paramount interest was in devoting his energies to his country. In 1910, on his return to Prague, he undertook decorative works for key buildings in the city and worked with patriotic, political and social commitment until 1928 on what he saw as the greatest undertaking of his life and his art, namely the *Slav Epic*, a colossal series of twenty canvases measuring six metres by eight and recounting the major events in Slav history. **Ten preparatory studies** are on show here.

When Czechoslovakia became an independent country in 1918, he espoused the causes of the newly born nation, designing postage stamps, bank notes and other official documents. Presented in Prague on 14 July 1928 and hidden by Czechoslovakian patriots during the German occupation, the *Slav Epic* hung in the castle of Moravsky Krumlov until 2012, when it was moved to the Veletržní Palác in Prague.

During work on his best-loved creation, Much also produced other works that are less known but very interesting, characterized by deep philosophical reflection on the world, history and human beings. Such reflections had indeed also informed his years of greatest glory, when the works best known to the general public, the advertising posters and decorations were accompanied with imperturbable faith by deeply spiritual compositions of mystical sentiment, works of a less harmonious and linear nature than those in his Art Nouveau style but born out of a profound and painful vision of the world and mankind.

The universality of art and its powers of inspiration and communication at the service of humanity are the cornerstones of the artist's vision, his hopes for the creation of a spiritual union, of the Slav peoples but also of mankind as a whole, and his dream of a better world where ethnic minorities would be able to live without being threatened by more powerful nations.

Never as in this historical moment and social context have his art and philosophy been so in tune with developments throughout the world.

**THE EXHIBITION**

Featuring over 200 paintings, posters, drawings, decorative works and items of jewellery, the exhibition traces the artist's entire creative trajectory with an abundance of detail and works through six thematic sections that present the different stylistic nuances and spheres of action: **The Bohemian in Paris**, **The Creator of Images for the General Public**, **The Cosmopolitan**, **The Mystic**, **The Patriot** and **The Artist-Philosopher**.

**Section One – The Bohemian in Paris**

Posters like ***Gismonda***, ***La Princesse lointaine*** (1896) and ***Médée*** (1898), books and other works connected with Sarah Bernhardt greet the visitor in this initial section tracing the debut of Mucha as a bohemian artist − in both the geographical and figurative senses − on the fringes of French society and the success that followed his *Gismonda* poster for the great actress. Together with a series of playbills and other works produced for the "Divine Sarah", the section presents illustrations and some of the artist's early drawings to demonstrate his solid academic training.

**Section Two – The Creator of Images for the General Public**

The artist's approach to the production of posters and creation of the characteristic Mucha style is examined in depth through examples of commercial art and decorative panels. Among other things, the section presents the *Documents décoratifs* (1902), a practical guide to design for craftsmen intended "to help instil aesthetic values in the production of arts and crafts".

**Section Three – The Cosmopolitan**

The central elements around to which the third section develops are Alphonse Mucha's rise to fame against the background of the 1900 World's Fair through a series of works associated with the Parisian event and his collaboration with the renowned French jeweller Georges Fouquet (1862–1957). The works of Mucha's American period are also featured here with a particular focus on those revealing the artist's relations with the world of the stage, including decorations for the German Theatre in New York and the posters for the actresses Leslie Carter and Maude Adams.

**Section Four – The Mystic**

Mucha felt the attraction of spiritualism at the end of the 19th century and became a friend of the celebrated Swedish playwright August Strindberg, whose mystical philosophy influenced him deeply. Closely connected with Theosophical circles in Paris, he joined the city's Masonic lodge in 1898.

The section examines the influence of spiritualism and Masonic philosophy in Mucha's works, which is particularly evident in *Le Pater*. Published in 1899, his illustrated book constitutes a message on human progress – the way in which mankind can attain universal truth – addressed by the artist to future generations through the words of the Father and illustrations drawing inspiration from Masonic symbolism. Also featured are the artist's expressionist pastels, never exhibited before his death.

**Section Five – The Patriot**

Mucha returned to his native land in 1910. Ever since his departure from Ivančice thirty years earlier, the artist had cherished the dream of using art to work for his country, an idea that been guided him throughout his life.

This section presents the patriotic dimension of Mucha through a great variety of works produced for his homeland before and after its independence. Focusing particular attention on the *Slav Epic*, it shows how the artist arrived at the creation of this monumental work through whole variety of preparatory works including large and small studies as well as documentary and studio photographs.

**Section Six – The Artist-Philosopher**

Mucha's dream came true in 1918, as one of the consequences of World War I was the birth of Czechoslovakia. He now extended his vision of Slav unity to embrace all mankind and continued to strive in this direction until the end of his life.

In describing Mucha as a philosopher, the section examines works that exemplify his humanitarian ideals as well as his reaction to the threat of war in a rapidly changing world.

The exhibition ends with Mucha's last project, the triptych of *The Age of Reason*, *The Age of Wisdom* and *The Age of Love*, conceived as a monument to mankind as a whole. Commenced in 1936, when the terrible threat of war was taking increasingly concrete shape, the work was intended to present reason, wisdom and love as the three key principles of humanity, whose harmonious combination would foster human progress. Even though Mucha was unable to complete the project, his studies for the triptych are still enough to convey his message of universal peace.

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