

A L P H O N S E  
M U C H A

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SEDUCTION,  
MODERNITY  
AND UTOPIA

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SELECTION OF  
COMMENTED WORKS  
AND  
EXPLANATORY TEXTS  
USED IN EXHIBITION SPACES

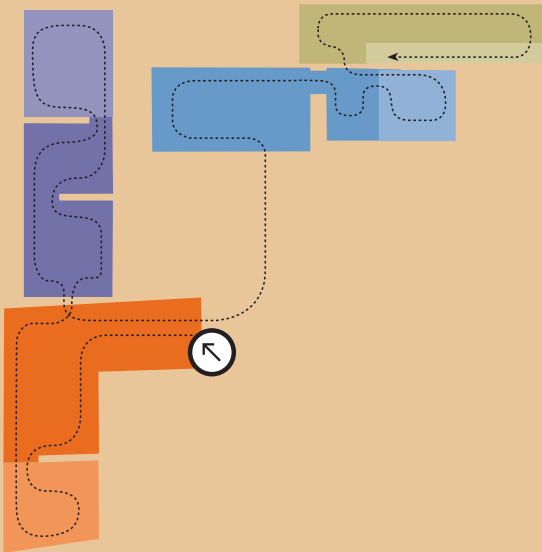
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ENGLISH

This dossier includes a selection of works chosen by Àlex Mitrani, the exhibition curator, with his explanatory comments.

The wall labels of the works for which commentary is provided contain a pictograph with the corresponding number.

Distribution of areas in the exhibition space



THEATRE  
The Transfiguration of Reality

The Metropolis as Stage

BEAUTY  
Woman as Muse and Icon

Photography as a Tool and as Art

MYSTERY  
In Pursuit of Dreams and Ideals

The Slav Epic: A Vision

MODERNITY  
Mucha and the Genesis of Advertising

The Spread of 'Le Style Mucha'

# THEATRE

## THE TRANSFIGURATION OF REALITY

1

Poster for *Gismonda*, 1894

Just before Christmas 1894 the printer Lemercier received an urgent order to produce a poster for the play *Gismonda*, starring Sarah Bernhardt. The poster needed to be ready in 15 days. The only employee available to take on the job was Alphonse Mucha. It was his first poster. Mucha's employer was not happy with the result, but Sarah Bernhardt loved it and signed an exclusive contract with the artist, setting them on the path to shared fame.

2

Poster for *La Dame aux Camélias*, 1896

In the posters he designed for actress Sarah Bernhardt, Mucha deployed a series of characteristic elements: an extremely long format, soft, nuanced colours, including metallic tones, and an iconography – flowers and stars – that he would explore in diverse ways in his later work. Through all these elements Mucha achieved a very high degree of aesthetic refinement.

3

Poster for *La Samaritaine*, 1897

The most original aspect of the artist's first poster, executed for the play *Gismonda*, was the atmosphere of sophisticated Orientalism it created, which Mucha solemnly and elegantly combined with Slavic and Byzantine elements. In the poster for *La*

*Samaritaine*, Mucha used elements drawn from the classical world (the male figure seen in profile, like a Greek relief) together with stylised Hebraic lettering.

4

Poster for *Hamlet*, 1899

Over the course of her career, Sarah Bernhardt played a number of male roles. Mucha was able to capture the elegance and expressive dignity of these figures. In the poster for *Hamlet* he incorporated intertwined lines of Celtic inspiration.

5

Poster originally designed for the Sarah Bernhardt Day banquet held at the Grand Hotel in Paris (on 9 December 1896), reproduced in the January 1897 issue of *La Plume* magazine.

This poster is based on a study for a play entitled *La Princesse Lointaine*. Comparison with the promotional photograph high-lights the unity between the costume, designed by Mucha, and the image used on the poster. Mucha also stylises the tiara in a naturalistic way and re-creates Bernhardt's hair with elaborate graphic artifice.

6

[Documentary photograph]

Bracelet inspired by the poster for *Médée*, 1899

Mucha also designed sets and costumes for Sarah Bernhardt's plays. The fantastical jewellery he drew for his posters had a huge influence on precious metal work in the Art Nouveau style. Some of the items were actually made, as in the case of this extravagant bracelet in the form of face-to-face snakes, which evokes the disturbing sense of danger associated with the turn-of-the-century femme fatale.

7

Stage design for *As You Like It* by William Shakespeare, 1908

Mucha designed these sets for the German Theatre of New York. When the institution went bankrupt in 1909, Mucha's contribution to theatre in the United States was cut short.

8

*Tragedy*, 1908. Study for the decoration of the German Theatre of New York

The commission to decorate the interior of the German Theatre of New York, destroyed in 1929, was the most important one Mucha received during the time he spent in the United States. The work consisted of five large decorative panels, including *Tragedy* and *Comedy* (each over seven metres high), which flanked the stage. For Alphonse Mucha theatre is a reflective art form of great symbolic value and a way to gain a deeper understanding of life.

9

Leslie Carter. Poster for the play *Kassa*, 1908

The poster Mucha executed for actress Leslie Carter echoed the style of those he had created for Sarah Bernhardt in Paris, which remained popular in the United States. The acidulated colours create an effect of unreality that appears to point the way to psychedelia.

10

Maude Adams as Joan of Arc, 1908

This lithograph was probably published for a performance of Friedrich von Schiller's *The Maid of Orleans* at the University of Harvard. Mucha executed a large-scale version of the work in oil. He also worked on the sets and costumes. Mucha depicts the moment when Joan of Arc hears the divine voice of Michael the Archangel.

## THE METROPOLIS AS STAGE

11

[Documentary photograph]

Paris 1900: the *trottoir roulant*

One of the most celebrated attractions at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle was the *trottoir roulant*, a forerunner of the conveyor belts now used in our airports. The energy of the metropolis and the popular appeal of innovation were reflected in Art Nouveau.

12

Design for the menu of the Bosnia Pavilion restaurant at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900

Among many other things, Mucha decorated the interior of the Bosnia-Herzegovina pavilion at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. The commission prompted him to return to his cultural roots and focus on creating works that would contribute to his nation and people.

13

Design for the menu of the official banquet of the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900

From the end of the 19th century, world's fairs became a showcase for the new economy, based on global trade and the rise of new technologies. With its reinterpretations of the past, focus on beauty, and formal innovation, Art Nouveau created the imagery that would accompany the change of era.

14

*New York Daily News* supplement published on 3 April 1904

When Mucha got to the United States his goal was to stop working under contract

and find financial backing for his project to create a series of monumental paintings depicting the history of the Slavic peoples. On reaching New York, he was received as an international celebrity. The impact of his arrival is reflected in the cover of the cultural supplement to the *New York Daily News*, an allegorical representation of the friendship between France and the United States.

15

Design for the poster for an exhibition on Mucha staged at the Brooklyn Museum of New York (January-February 1921), c. 1921

The retrospective of Mucha's work staged at the Brooklyn Museum of New York drew 600,000 visitors. Alphonse Mucha opted to allow free entry rather than charging each visitor 50 cents. At the time money collected for admission went to the artist, and for Mucha it would have amounted to a very substantial sum.



6 Poster for *Médée*, 1899 (fragment) © Mucha Trust, Prague

# BEAUTY

## WOMAN AS MUSE AND ICON

16

*Rose*, 1898. From the decorative panel series 'The Flowers'

The association between woman and nature is one of the fundamental poetic elements in the iconography of Alphonse Mucha. This analogy, which has a long history, was obsessively reworked by the artist. His women melt into a floral ecstasy and transport us to a lyrical, unreal environment full of beauty.

17

*Spring: Woman among Flowers*, 1916

Starting with rococo elements, reworked in a rich graphic style, Mucha created a canon of female beauty that became a trademark of Art Nouveau. The seductive sensuality of his women is associated with the vigour of vegetation. The weightless quality of the figures depicted reflects the conception of eroticism as something ethereal and intangible.

18

*Morning Awakening*, 1899. From the decorative panel series 'The Times of the Day'

Mucha's work reached a mass audience thanks to his decorative panels. His series of lithographs were sold to collectors of posters and prints, and used for decorative purposes on walls and folding screens. The artist usually executed a number of different versions of the same theme, which were published in different media and sizes.

19

Ornamental chain with pendants, 1900

Between 1900 and 1903, Mucha worked with jeweller Georges Fouquet on the design of some of the most spectacular jewellery to emerge from Art Nouveau. The pieces were usually one-of-a-kind items that were created based on an almost sculptural conception and did not fit into traditional categories. The artist's jewellery designs incorporate eclectic and eastern elements in a way that yields novel results.

20

*Blonde*, 1897. From the decorative panel series 'Tête Byzantine'

Nature and culture converge in the famous hair of Mucha's women, which is imbued with plantlike vitality and graphic values. Often the woman's hair is adorned with jewellery, the most sophisticated form of ornamentation, which fits into the same aesthetic scheme.

21

*Reverie*, 1897. Decorative panel originally designed for a calendar

Mucha's work highlights the peculiar symbiosis between ornamentation and modernity that is characteristic of Art Nouveau. This was one of his most successful prints. It was used by a number of advertisers, including the chocolate maker Amatller of Barcelona (the posters can be seen in the last section of the exhibition).

22

*Ilsée, Princess de Tripoli*, 1897

Alphonse Mucha began his career in Paris as an illustrator, influenced by Gustave Doré. Later, when he had developed his own style, he was involved in a number of publishing

projects. The text of *Ilsée, Princess de Tripoli* celebrates the poetics of femininity and beauty in Mucha's work. The work stands out for the diverse graphic techniques employed and the fusion of image and ornament.

## 23

*Painting*, 1898. Study for the decorative panel series 'The Arts'

Like other artists of the late 19th century, Mucha was a devotee of the cult of art and beauty. In this allegory for painting, the woman appears as a muse, with her senses open to the light. A halo frames the figure and lends it a sacred quality.

## 24

Portrait of Jaroslava, the artist's daughter, c. 1935

Alphonse Mucha often used his daughter Jaroslava as a model. She personified an archetype of Slavic beauty, a look she inherited from her mother. In a language that borrows nothing from avantgarde movements, Mucha imbues her figure with great intensity and reflective depth. Instead of the graphic elements that typically surround his women, the young woman's headdress in this case concentrates her strength and lends the figure sculptural monumentality.

## PHOTOGRAPHY AS A TOOL AND AS ART

## 25

Woman at a window, Munich, c. 1886

Mucha produced his first photographs during his stay in Munich, before moving to Paris. In addition to his interest in this new technique and enthusiasm for capturing the world around him (including mundane

aspects of his surroundings), he had a romantic and evocative sensibility and was fascinated by the mystery of light.

## 26

Self-portrait: Mucha in a Russian shirt at his studio in rue de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, c. 1892

Mucha took many photographic self-portraits, as if he felt the need to construct a certain character and pose questions to himself about his status as an artist.

## 27

Paul Gauguin playing the harmonium in Alphonse Mucha's studio at rue de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, c. 1895

Mucha practised photography every day at his Paris studio. Some of his images document the happy bohemian life of an artist in his studio. Mucha was a close friend of Paul Gauguin, and this is reflected in photographs and in jokes they shared. A questioning of life and a fascination with women and nature are features of the work of both artists.

## 28

Annah 'la Javanaise', Gauguin's mistress, in Alphonse Mucha's studio at rue de la Grande Chaumière, Paris, c. 1894

The woman known as Annah 'la Javanaise' was Paul Gauguin's companion for a brief time during this period. In this photograph Mucha captures her exotic and enigmatic appearance.

## 29

Model posing with a twig in the artist's studio at rue du Val-de-Grâce, Paris, c. 1900. On the right, the decorative panels *Poetry* and *Music*

During his Paris period Mucha used photography as a source of inspiration and to study the various poses of his models, though he did not adhere strictly to his photographic reference material. His photographs thus have an aesthetic value of their own. Mucha captured the beauty of the female figure in his studio, depicting women surrounded by sumptuous, exotic objects.

### 30

Mucha and his daughter Jaroslava posing for the poster *De Forest Phonofilm* (1927), Zbiroh Castle, Bohemia, 1926

In this photograph Mucha appears as both a father who has a warm relationship with his daughter and as a scene director instructing his muse. The photograph was a test image for a poster promoting a new film sound system created by the American inventor Lee De Forest. Mucha's involvement in the project reflects his interest in cinema.



# MYSTERY

## IN PURSUIT OF DREAMS AND IDEALS

31

*The Morning Star*, 1902. Study for the decorative panel series 'The Moon and the Stars'

In this work Mucha reduces ornamental elements to a minimum and focuses on allegorical characters that refer to an oneiric, nocturnal world. The stars and the moon are sources of a mysterious light related to the clairvoyance that emerges from the realm of the occult.

32

*Madonna of the Lilies*, 1905

Mucha was commissioned to execute this work for a church in Jerusalem. Next to the Madonna, surrounded by lilies (a symbol of purity), there appears a girl in traditional Slavic dress. The girl is holding a wreath of ivy, a symbol of memory.

33

*Emerald*, 1900. From 'The Precious Stones', a series of four decorative panels

The works in the series of decorative panels devoted to the precious stones show a seductive, unsettling woman with a melancholy air. The eroticism and luxury symbolised by the stones are part of the femme fatale image defined by Charles Baudelaire. The panel entitled *Emerald* is highly explicit, with the figure of the snake suggesting sin, and a monster with its obscene jaws red and gaping.

34

Poster for the Mucha exhibition at the Salon des Cent, Paris, June 1897

Mucha publicised his second solo exhibition in Paris with a poster in which the female figure depicted, far from displaying the sensualism seen in his advertising work, appears with a gesture of interrogative reflection, covering her mouth with one hand and pointing to a symbolic emblem. Her typical Moravian headdress reflects Mucha's growing interest in his cultural roots.

35

*Head of a Girl*, 1900

Mucha executed this figure for the stand of the Houbigant perfumery at the 1900 Paris Exposition Universelle. The lilies in the crown suggest the floral fragrances of Houbigant. The figure's closed eyes and expression of concentration evoke the powers of dream.

36

*Le Pater*, 1899

In *Le Pater*, Mucha expresses his longing for transcendence, linked to the ideology and symbols of Freemasonry. The book presents a version of the Lord's Prayer with commentary on light and divine revelation written by Mucha. In the pages of this work, art and human knowledge form an indivisible whole.

37

Self-portrait in formal Masonic regalia as Sovereign Grand Commander of Czechoslovakia, c. 1925

From his initiation in 1898 to his appointment as Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia, the ideals of the Freemasons played a central role in the artist's life and work. There was a transcendent dimension to his notion of progress. Mucha did not want his art to be confined to the



realm of the aesthetic: his aim was to contribute to the spiritual and humanist enlightenment of society.

38

Self-portrait: Mucha asleep on a sofa in his studio at rue du Val-de-Grâce, Paris, c. 1897

Mucha photographed himself sleeping, as if he were an apparition. This work appears to explore the magical aspects of sleep, a direction the Surrealists would later pursue.

39

*Girl in the forest*, study, c. 1900

Mucha came to feel trapped by his many professional commitments. In this more intimate work he displays his inventiveness and a free approach to form. The artist appears to take a break from linearism to explore textures and atmospheres associated with a personal iconography that is dark and enigmatic.

40

Study for *The Three Ages: Reason, Wisdom and Love* (project for a triptych), 1936-1938

In the years that saw the unstoppable rise of fascism (of which he would become a victim in 1939), Mucha attempted to ward off the threat with a work of universal ethical value. Once again the artist proposes wisdom (along with reason and love) as the path to human salvation.

41

*War*, study, 1917

This chilling image reflects Alphonse Mucha's deep humanist concerns. The work is inspired by the disasters of the First World War, but also appears to anticipate horrors that lie ahead.

## THE SLAV EPIC: A VISION

42

Poster for the Moravian Teachers Choir, 1911

The Moravian Teachers Choir recovered and spread the repertoire of Czech folk songs. They also performed works by the composer Leoš Janáček, with whom Mucha had sung in the children's choir of Brno.

43

Alphonse Mucha sitting in front of *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* at the exhibition of the first 11 paintings of 'The Slav Epic' at the Klementinum in Prague, 1919

'The Slav Epic' is the major work created by Alphonse Mucha in his mature period. The twenty canvases that comprise the series (painted between 1912 and 1928) are impressive in scale: the first seven measure 6.10 by 8.10 metres, and the rest 4.05 by 6.10 metres.

44

Study for the painting *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* (1914), one of the works in the series 'The Slav Epic', 1914

Alphonse Mucha reconstructs a crucial episode in the history of the Slavic people on the basis of intensive documentation work. The photographs of his journey to Russia (which can be seen in the section of this exhibition devoted to photography) enabled him to bring his historical images to life.

# MODERNITY

## MUCHA AND THE GENESIS OF ADVERTISING

45

Poster for Imprimerie Cassan Fils, 1896

The true scope of Mucha's contribution to the art of his time should be analysed in relation to the development of technologies for printing and mass reproduction of images. In this poster, an enigmatic border of eyes alludes to the multiplicity of the visual.

46

Poster for Société Populaire des Beaux-Arts, 1897

Mucha was one of the founders of the Société Populaire des Beaux-Arts, which supported young artists and encouraged the culture of art among the more modest classes. The society used methods that were revolutionary at the time, including educational slide shows, an approach which helped overcome the view of art as a sacred and elitist pursuit. In this case, Mucha's allegorical language is adapted to modern, mundane content.

47

Poster for Job cigarette paper, 1896

In its time this work was one of Mucha's most famous posters, thanks in large part to its visual effectiveness. The image has the status and impact of an icon. The sensuality of the gesture and the woman's provocative expression, together with the abundant arabesque of hair, create a model advertising image aimed at seducing viewers.

48

Poster for Job cigarette paper, 1898

In this poster Mucha takes a linear graphic approach and employs vitreous effects to represent the smoke. Also of particular interest is the way the artist plays with the geometrical form of the brand name, which is synthesised in a logotype and repeated obsessively, in contrast to the sinuous curving lines of the woman's body.

49

Poster for Lance Parfum Rodo, 1896

Mucha created the advertising poster for Lance Parfum Rodo (a new spray-bottle perfume), as well as the graphic designs for the product and packaging. His role was comparable to that of contemporary designers who create a comprehensive brand image.

50

Advertising display unit for Mucha Soap, made by Armour & Co., Chicago, 1906

The launch in the US market of a product called 'Mucha Soap' underscores the artist's huge popularity. The use of the artist's name as a commercial brand marked a turning point in the way art, authorship and commerce were conceived. This small folding screen for decorating shop windows and presenting the product illustrates a major change in the way images were used.

51

Study for *Documents décoratifs* (Decorative Documents): Plate 69, 1902

Through his *Documents décoratifs*, Mucha established a repertoire of forms and models for use by graphic artists and designers. The work covered all types of objects, including jewellery, furniture and crockery. The

publication spread the Mucha style, associated with Art Nouveau, throughout the world, and directly inspired many artists and craftspeople.

## 52

Study for *Figures décoratives* (Decorative Figures): Plate 27, 1905

After the publication of *Documents décoratifs*, Mucha devoted a second book to the human figure. The work brings together his studies in this area and looks at how the human figure relates to geometrical and ornamental form. This book also had a major impact despite the fact that Art Nouveau was in decline by the time it was published.

## THE SPREAD OF 'LE STYLE MUCHA'

## 53

Eulogio Varela: *Diploma of the Photographic Society of Madrid*, 1902

Eulogio Varela was the main proponent of Modernisme in Madrid. He promoted and disseminated new approaches to graphic design for application in advertising. Around 1900, the influence of Mucha is evident in his work, particularly in the female models and their ornamental derivation.

## 54

Gaspar Camps: *F. Madriguera Lithography and Printing*, 1900

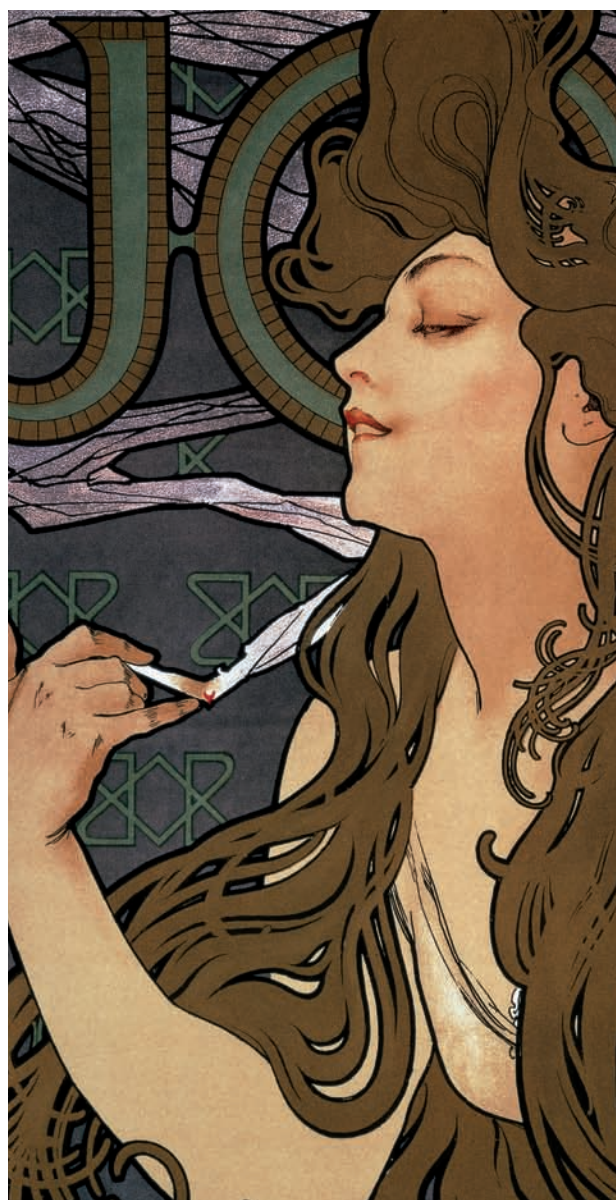
When Mucha departed for the United States, his Paris publisher Champenois turned to the Catalan artist Gaspar Camps in order to continue producing work in the Czech artist's style. At the time Camps was a clear follower of *le style Mucha*, which he disseminated through the magazine *Album*

*Salón*. Despite his evident debt to Mucha, Camps achieved notable results.

## 55

*Chocolate Amatller: Centenary of the Establishment*, Barcelona, 1900

The set of three posters for Chocolate Amatller illustrates the demand for works by Mucha and their far-reaching impact. The Czech artist produced the design for a Parisian printer, who in turn sold it to an Italian printer, who used the design for a Spanish client. This international circulation of images was a new and essentially modern phenomenon.



45 Poster for Job cigarette paper, 1896 (fragment) © Mucha Trust, Prague



Ayuntamiento de Salamanca



MUSEO  
ART NOUVEAU  
Y ART DECO



Obra Social  
Fundación "la Caixa"