

Alphonse Mucha

Alphonse Mucha was born in 1860 in Ivancice, Moravia, which is near the city of Brno in the modern Czech Republic. It was a small town, and for all intents and purposes life was closer to the 18th than the 19th century. Though Mucha is supposed to have started drawing before he was walking, his early years were spent as a choirboy and amateur musician. It wasn't until he finished high school (needing two extra years to accomplish that onerous task) that he came to realize that living people were responsible for some of the art he admired in the local churches. That epiphany made him determined to become a painter, despite his father's efforts in securing him "respectable" employment as a clerk in the local court.

Like every aspiring artist of the day, Mucha ended up in Paris in 1887. He was a little older than many of his fellows, but he had come further in both distance and time. A chance encounter in Moravia had provided him with a patron who was willing to fund his studies. After two years in Munich and some time devoted to painting murals for his patron, he was sent off to Paris where he studied at the Academie Julian. After two years the supporting funds were discontinued and Alphonse Mucha was set adrift in a Paris that he would soon transform. At the time, however, he was a 27 year old with no money and no prospects

For five years he played the part to perfection. Living above a Cremerie that catered to art students, drawing illustrations for popular (ie. low-paying) magazines, getting deathly ill and living on lentils and borrowed money, Mucha met all the criteria. It was everything an artist's life was supposed to be. Some success, some failure. Friends abounded and art flourished. It was the height of Impressionism and the beginnings of the Symbolists and Decadents. He shared a studio with Gauguin for a bit after his first trip to the south seas. Mucha gave impromptu art lessons in the Cremerie and helped start a traditional artists ball, Bal des Quat'z Arts. All the while he was formulating his own theories and precepts of what he wanted his art to be.

The breakthrough came in December 1894. Mucha became famous with a commission for a poster for the actress Sarah Bernard. On January 1, 1895, he presented his new style to the citizens of Paris. Called upon over the Christmas holidays to create a poster for Sarah Bernhardt's play, Gismonda, he put his precepts to the test. The poster, at left, was the declaration of his new art. Spurning the bright colors and the more squarish shape of the more popular poster artists, the near life-size design was a sensation. Sarah Bernard was a very famous actress and celebrity of her time. His poster design for the play Gismonda became a sensation in Paris. Sarah Bernhardt was delighted. He received an exclusive contract for six consecutive years by the actress. In the following years, he not only designed all her posters, but her theater decorations and costumes as well. From now on the artist was swamped with commissions for all kind of commercial print advertising.

Art Nouveau ("New Art" in French) can trace it's beginnings to about this time. Based on precepts akin to William Morris' Arts and Crafts movement in England, the attempt was to eradicate the dividing line between art and audience. Everything could and should be art. Burne-Jones designed wallpaper, Hector Guimard designed metro stations, and Mucha designed champagne advertising (at right) and stage sets. Each country had its own name for the new approach and artists of incredible skill and vision flocked to the movement. Overnight, Mucha's name became a household word and, though his name is often used synonymously with the new movement in art, he disavowed the connection. Like Sinatra, he merely did it "my way." His way was based on a strong composition, sensuous curves derived from nature, refined decorative elements and natural colors. The Art Nouveau precepts were used, too, but never at the expense of his vision.

His fame spread around the world and several trips to America and resulted in covers and illustrations in a variety of U.S. magazines. Portraiture was also commissioned from U.S. patrons. At the end of the decade he was prepared to begin what he considered his life's work. Mucha was always a patriot of his Czech homeland and considered his success a triumph for the Czech people as much as for himself. In 1909 he was commissioned to paint a series of murals for the Lord Mayor's Hall in Prague. He also began to plan out "The Slav Epic" - a series of great paintings chronicling major events in the Slav nation. Financing was provided by Charles Crane, a Chicago millionaire. Mucha had hoped to complete the task in five or six years, but instead it embraced 18 years of his life. Twenty massive (about 24 x 30 feet) canvasses were created and presented to the city

of Prague in 1928. Covering the history of the Slavic people from prehistory to the nineteenth century, they represented Mucha's hopes and dreams for his homeland. In 1919 the first eleven canvases were completed and exhibited in Prague, and America where they received a much warmer welcome.

Alphonse Mucha with his decorative posters has become a kind of trademark and synonym for the Art Nouveau movement. In the sixties his poster reproductions had a revival and were popular again among the flower-power and hippie generation. Alfons Mucha - his Academic Training Alfons Maria Mucha was born in Ivancice, a small provincial town in the Czech Republic.

In 1990 the artist had his first one man show in Paris with 448 works on display. His art work was not confined to the printing media. He designed tissues, stamps and even bank bills. In 1900 he received a commission by the Austrian government to decorate the Austrian pavilion for the World Fair in Paris of 1900. He became also active in designing jewelry. Between 1904 and 1921 Mucha traveled frequently to the United States. He took commissions in the US and taught art at art academies in New York and Chicago. In 1939 the German Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia. The popularity of the artist made him a number one target for the Gestapo, the Nazi secret police. He was arrested, interrogated and released. Shortly afterwards, Alphonse Maria Mucha died on July 14, 1939 in Prague. The city of Prague has dedicated an Alphonse Mucha Museum to the artist.

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