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Artifact

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Alfons Mucha, *F. Champenois Advertising Poster*, 1897

Alfons Mucha - Master of Art Nouveau at Paris

Philipp Grieb

The exploration of Gustav Klimt (1862-1918) in Vienna last fall awakened my memories of another outstanding representative of Art Nouveau: Alfons Mucha (1860-1939). A comprehensive retrospective in Munich in the winter of 2009/2010 had remained in my memory. The exhibition at that time was a joint project of major European art houses, the Belvedere in Vienna, the Musée Fabre in Montpellier (France) and in the Kunsthalle in Munich, each of which hosted this unique Mucha show for four months.

Apprenticeship Years in Vienna, Munich and Paris

Alfons Mucha was born in Moravia, which was then part of the Habsburg Empire of Austria-Hungary and is today part of the Czech Republic. He began his career as an autodidact and was successful enough to obtain a position in a renowned Viennese studio for stage painting and to be entrusted with works for the Vienna "Ringtheater". In December 1881, during a performance, the theater caught fire, caused by a fault in the lighting system, which at the time ran on gas. It resulted in a devastating catastrophe with hundreds of casualties. The theater was completely destroyed and Mucha lost his work place.

At first he made a living as a draftsman and portraitist. In this



Gismonda, 1894

way he got to know Count Khuen-Belasy. During 1882 the Count's family engaged him to decorate and paint a chateau in Moravia and thereafter the ancestral castle in South Tyrol. In the course of these works he was able to win the favor of the family, which supported his studies at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich from 1885-1887.

From Munich he moved to Paris in 1888, attended the Académie Julien, later the Académie Colarossi. He produced works in the style of traditional academic history painting and his first illustrations for magazines as well as occasional prints. He briefly shared a studio with Paul Gauguin. In 1892 he illustrated the comprehensive work "Scènes et épisodes de l'histoire d'Allemagne" written by Seignobos and designed his first advertising poster.

Breakthrough with Sarah Bernhardt

Sarah Bernhardt was the most famous western actress at the time. Shortly before Christmas 1894, she was looking for an artist who could design a poster for the play "Gismonda", as her usual contractors were not available. Mucha learned of this by chance while visiting a print shop and offered his services. He got the order, and two weeks later his posters, which were to make him world famous, were hanging everywhere in Paris. They were so sought after

that most of the posters in the public domain were stolen by art lovers. Sarah Bernhardt was convinced and signed a six-year contract with him.

Mucha became one of the most sought-after poster artists of the 'Belle Époque', those good and peaceful years around 1900 when business, industry and culture prospered. During this period, the middle and upper middle classes in particular benefitted from technical and economic progress and enjoyed their prosperity.

Not only Mucha designed the posters but also the stage sets and costumes of Bernhardt's Théâtre de la Renaissance until 1901. His overwhelming success brought him social prestige. For many years the theater defined and inspired his work. The "Gismonda" poster was not only the starting point for Mucha's rise, it also revolutionized poster design. Long, narrow shape, subtle pastel colors, and the halo effect around the subject's head remained characteristic of his posters.

Alfons Mucha's art was aimed at seduction. He wooed the viewer with idealized, juvenile and elegant female figures, subtle colors and perfectly shaped decorations. His masterful draftsmanship seemed to ignite his imagination to ever new sweeping forms, elaborate patterns and compositions.



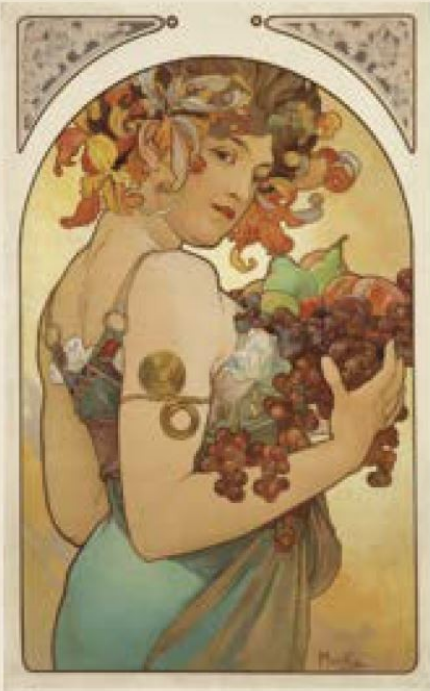
La Dame aux Camélias, 1896

He was not only a draftsman and painter, he also applied his skill and imagination to commercial art, jewelry design, and interior design. His fame was based on his decorative graphics, posters, magazine and book illustrations. The reproduction processes already available at that time ensured a wide distribution and boosted his popularity.

Inundated with commissions, from designs for advertisements, theater posters, documents of stocks and securities, to extensive projects such as the design of the pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina for the World's Fair in Paris in 1900, his fame was approaching a peak. At the gigantic show, he was represented by his own prints, bronze sculptures, and jewelry works for the Parisian jeweler Fouquet. For the latter's store in the Rue Royale, he subsequently designed the entire interior, which was to become the perfect interior of Art Nouveau.

Admiration in the USA

In 1904 Mucha went to the USA for two years, where the New York Times welcomed him with a special supplement of several pages. He taught as a lecturer at the Academies of Fine Arts in New York, Philadelphia and Chicago. Later followed a commission to design the interior of the

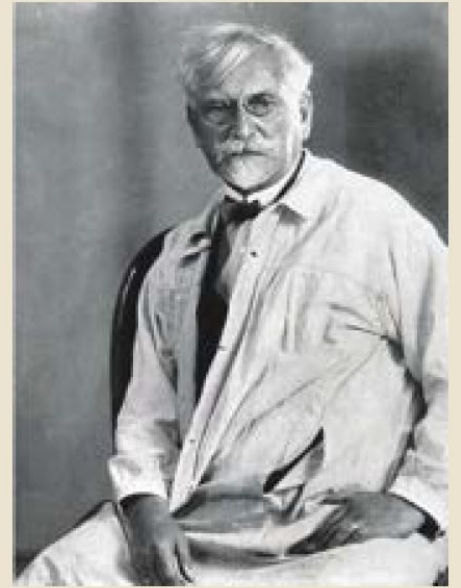


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newly built German Theater in New York.

End of the Glory Period and Retreat

The First World War (1914-1918) was a rupture for all of Europe. Mucha's success also waned. He went to the young Czechoslovakia, where he continued to be creatively active. Among other things, he designed stamps, banknotes and national awards for the government. He disengaged himself from Art Nouveau and continued to elaborate the monumental epic on the history of the Slavic people, a cycle of 20 huge paintings in the historicist manner, which he donated to the city of Prague after its completion in 1928. Financially independent, he



Alfons Mucha: *Photographic Selfportrait, 1928*

spent the rest of his life with his family near Prague.

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