Mucha, Father of Art Nouveau

Life 4
Paris 8
Prague 16
Sarah Bernhardt 24
Advertising 26
Le Pater 32
Alphonse Maria Mucha first name from the Czech Alfons (24 July 1860 – 14 July 1939), was a Czech Art Nouveau painter and decorative artist, best known for his distinct style and his images of women. He produced many paintings, illustrations, advertisements, and designs.
Alphonse Maria Mucha was born in the town of Ivancice, Moravia (today’s region of the Czech Republic) on 24 July 1860. Although his singing abilities allowed him to continue his education through high school in the Moravian capital of Brünn (today Brno), drawing had been his first love since childhood. He worked at decorative painting jobs in Moravia, mostly painting theatrical scenery. In 1879 he moved to Vienna to work for a leading Viennese theatrical design company, while informally furthering his artistic education. When a fire destroyed his employer’s business in 1881 he returned to Moravia, to do freelance decorative and portrait painting. Count Karl Khuen of Mikulov hired Mucha to decorate Hrušovany Emmahof Castle with murals, and was impressed enough that he agreed to sponsor Mucha’s formal training at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts.

Mucha moved to Paris in 1887, and continued his studies at Académie Julian and Académie Colarossi. In addition to his studies, he worked at producing magazine and advertising illustrations. Around Christmas 1894, Mucha happened to drop into a print shop where there was a sudden and unexpected need for a new advertising poster for a play starring Sarah Bernhardt, the most famous actress in Paris, at the Théâtre de la Renaissance on the Boulevard Saint-Martin. Mucha volunteered to produce a lithographed poster within two weeks, and on 1 January 1895, the advertisement for the play Gismonda by Victorien Sardou appeared on the streets of the city. It was an overnight sensation and announced the new artistic style and its creator to the citizens of Paris. Bernhardt was so satisfied with the success of this first poster that she entered into a 6 year contract with Mucha.

Mucha produced a flurry of paintings, posters, advertisements, and book illustrations, as well as designs for jewellery, carpets, wallpaper, and theatre sets in what was initially called the Mucha Style but became known as Art Nouveau (French for ‘new art’). Mucha’s works frequently featured beautiful, strong young women in flowing vaguely Neoclassical looking robes, often surrounded by lush flowers which sometimes formed haloes behind the women’s heads. In contrast with contemporary poster makers he used pale pastel colors. The 1900 Universal Exhibition in Paris spread the “Mucha style” internationally, of which Mucha said “I think [the Exposition Universelle] made some contribution toward bringing aesthetic values into arts and crafts.” He decorated the Bosnia and Herzegovina Pavilion and collaborated in the Austrian Pavilion.
Marrying in Prague and going to the USA

Mucha married Maruška (Marie/Maria) Chytilová on June 10, 1906, in Prague. The couple visited the U.S. from 1906 to 1910, during which time their daughter, Jaroslava, was born in New York City. They also had a son, Jiri, (born March 12, 1915 in Prague; died April 5, 1991 in Prague) who later became a well known journalist, writer, screenwriter, author of autobiographical novels and studies of the works of his father. In the U.S. Alphonse expected to earn money to fund his nationalistic projects to demonstrate to Czechs that he had not “sold out”. He was supported by millionaire Charles R. Crane, who used his fortune to help promote revolutions and, after meeting Thomas Masaryk, Slavic nationalism.

Back to the Czech lands

Alphonse and his family returned to the Czech lands and settled in Prague, where he decorated the Theater of Fine Arts, contributed his time and talent to create the murals in the Mayor’s Office at the Municipal House, and other landmarks around the city. When Czechoslovakia won its independence after World War I, Mucha designed the new postage stamps, banknotes, and other government documents for the new state.
The rising tide of fascism in the late 1930s led to Mucha’s works, as well as his Slavic nationalism, being denounced in the press as ‘reactionary’. When German troops marched into Czechoslovakia in the spring of 1939, Mucha was among the first persons to be arrested by the Gestapo. During the course of his interrogation, the aging artist fell ill with pneumonia. Though eventually released, he never recovered from the strain of this event, or from seeing his homeland invaded and overcome. He died in Prague on July 14, 1939, of a lung infection, and was interred there in the Vyšehrad cemetery.
Mucha moved to Paris in 1887, and continued his studies at Académie Julian and Académie Colarossi. In addition to his studies, he worked at producing magazine and advertising illustrations.
In the Autumn 1887, Mucha sets off for Paris with his painter friend Karel Mašek. With tuition fees and living expenses paid by Count Karl Khuen-Belasi, Mucha joins the Académie Julian where he studies under the academic painters Lefèbvre, Boulanger and Laurens. Founded by Rodolphe Julian in 1877, the Académie Julian offers students an academic training in drawing and painting through life classes with a nude model. It is popular with both French and foreign students, and is one of the rare schools to admit women.

While Mucha is there, a group of young painters called the Nabis forms around fellow student Paul Sérusier. The Nabis believe that art stands on an equal footing with design, and they work with designers and publishers to produce set designs, wallpaper, textiles, ceramics and stained glass.

The next year, Mucha joins the Académie Colarossi and moves into lodgings at no. 1 rue Bara in the Latin Quarter. The Académie Colarossi is founded by the Italian sculptor Filippo Colarossi. Located at 10 rue de la Grande-Chaumière, just a few streets away from Mucha’s lodgings, the Colarossi, like the Académie Julian, provides students with an alternative to the conservative education of the École des Beaux Arts.

Mucha is forced to leave the Académie Colarossi one year after, when Count Khuen-Belasi’s sponsorship suddenly ceases. In need of an income, he secures a number of commissions to produce illustrations for French and Czech publishers.

In 1890, through the Polish painter Władysław Slewinski, Mucha is introduced to Madame Charlotte Caron’s Crémerie, a café directly opposite the Académie Colorossi where hard-up students are able to eat on credit and pay with their paintings. The same year, Mucha moves into a room above the café at 13 rue de la Grande Chaumière. Over the years, the Crémerie is frequented by numerous artists, musicians, composers and writers, including Paul Séruisier, Paul Gauguin, the Polish artist Stanisław Wyspiański and the Swedish dramatist and writer August Strindberg.

Then, Mucha is taken on as an illustrator for the Paris-based publisher Armand Colin. Founded in 1870, Armand Colin was one of the first publishers to produce high quality school manuals just as primary education became mandatory in France. Furthermore, he begins giving drawing lessons in his studio. These classes, which become known as ‘Cours Mucha’, are...
Having tried his hand at photography on a borrowed camera while living in Vienna, Mucha decides to buy a 10 x 13 cm rectangular-format camera. From this point on, photography becomes an essential part of his life, both in preparing his compositions, and as a support in its own right.

Mucha moves to a studio at No.6, rue du Val-de-Grâce. The studio benefits from a large window and a glass ceiling, and this extra light improves conditions not only for painting, but also for photography. As a result, Mucha’s photographic output increases significantly.

“Mucha’s photographic output increases significantly.”

so successful that he is later asked to teach at the Académie Colarossi. Mucha exhibits, for the first time, at the Paris Salon held at the Palais des Champs Elysées. He receives a ‘mention honorable’ for a selection of works illustrating Xavier Marmier’s Les Contes des Grand-Mères (1892).
As public institutions begin to lose their monopoly on the arts, independent groups of artists are looking for ways to promote and circulate their work. Created in 1889 by the writer Léon Deschamps, La Plume is a monthly publication which features poems, short stories, exhibition reviews and illustrations by avant-garde artists. It counts Bonnard, Grasset, Toulouse-Lautrec and Ensor among its contributors.

The magazine also organises regular exhibitions, known as the Salon des Cent, at its premises. Mucha is invited in 1896 to contribute to La Plume and to design a poster for the 20th Salon des Cent. Both La Plume and the Salon des Cent are instrumental in promoting the poster as a medium in its own right.

Sculpture and pastel

The sculptor August Seysses has a studio in the same building rue du Val-de-Grâce, and it is after meeting Seysses that Mucha begins to experiment with sculpture and pastel.

Mucha is commissioned by Champenois to create a set of decorative panels on the subject of the seasons. Decorative panels have become increasingly popular as lithographic printing techniques improve. They are used to decorate walls and screens in private homes. Mucha’s Seasons series is so popular that he is asked by Champenois to produce at least two more sets based on the same theme in 1897 and 1900.
Georges Fouquet is the son of one of Paris’ most successful jewellers, Alphonse Fouquet. In 1895, he takes the reins of the family business and sets about exploring new and inventive forms of expression in jewellery. For the 1900 exhibition, Fouquet is determined to create a truly innovative collection. In order to achieve this, he decides to enlist the help of Mucha who had demonstrated a talent for drawing jewellery in his posters.

The collaboration is a great critical success and the start of a three-year partnership. Together, Mucha and Fouquet redefine jewellery design. For the first time, materials are chosen for their aesthetic, rather than monetary, value.

Designed for the leading Parisian jeweller Georges Fouquet, the spectacular piece of jewellery “Ornamental Chain with pendants” is displayed on Fouquet’s stand at the International Exhibition in Paris 1900. Mucha combines elements from eastern and western art to create this opulent design.
When the Parisian jeweller decides to move his boutique to the luxurious Rue Royale, he calls on Mucha to design all aspects of his shop - both exterior and interior, and the contents including the furniture, light fittings and showcases.

Mucha conceives the shop as a complete work of art, providing a harmonious environment for Fouquet’s jewellery.

Mucha draws inspiration from the natural world, and pride of place is given to two spectacular peacocks set against glowing designs in stained glass.

In 1941 Fouquet gave each piece of Mucha’s revolutionary design to the Musée Carnavalet for safekeeping. In 1989 the Musée Carnavalet completed the painstaking job of reconstructing the boutique. It remains one of the most spectacular examples of Art Nouveau decorative design.

Mucha holds his first solo exhibition in 1897 at the Galerie de la Bodinière, 18 rue St Lazare. 107 works are included in the show, and the preface to the exhibition catalogue is written by Sarah Bernhardt.

His next solo exhibition is held, at the Salon des Cent, featuring 448 works. The exhibition is held at the premises of La Plume, 31 rue Bonaparte in the 6th arrondissement. To mark the occasion, La Plume dedicates a special issue to the exhibition.

The Austro-Hungarian government commissions Mucha to produce decorations for the Exposition Universelle to be held in Paris in
1900, for the Bosnia-Herzegovina Pavilion. (In preparation for this work, the Austrian government sponsors Mucha to travel through the Balkans. It is while on this trip that the idea of the Slav Epic is born.) His decorations for the Bosnia-Herzegovina Pavilion win silver prize, and he is made a Knight of the Order of Franz Josef I for his contributions to the empire. Mucha is awarded the Légion d’honneur by the French government for his contribution to the Paris Exhibition. The same year, he is elected a member of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts.

**Museums**


**OPENING HOURS**
Tuesday to Sunday 10am to 6pm, except public holidays, Easter Sunday and Whit Sunday. Ticket office closes at 5.15pm. Some galleries are open in alternation. A schedule is available daily at the museum reception desk.

MUSEE DES ARTS DECORATIFS

**OPENING HOURS**
Arts décoratifs, Mode et Textile and Publicité Museums:
- Tuesdays to Sundays from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m.
- It is open until 9 p.m. on Thursdays.
- Closed on Mondays.
1910, Mucha Works in Prague

Alfons Mucha returned to Prague in 1910 and set about finding a studio large enough to house the pictures in his Slav Epic, the largest of which measures eight by six metres, and settled upon Zbiroh Castle, not far from Prague.

The Slav Epic

The Slav Epic consists of twenty pictures, and Mucha spent eighteen years painting it, but being a hardworking man, he continued painting posters and portraits, and worked on countless other projects. Mucha contributed his time and talent to create the murals in the Municipal House. When Czechoslovakia won its independence after World War I, Mucha designed the new postage stamps, banknotes, and other government documents for the new state.

Alfons Mucha completed the Slav Epic in 1928. It was presented as a gift to the city of Prague. It was ridiculed by many artists at the time, and was generally poorly received. Because of its nationalist and Slavic tendencies, it was hidden away during the 1930s, as relations with Germany became strained.

Mucha spent many years working on The Slav Epic cycle, which he considered his life’s fine art masterpiece. He had dreamed of completing a series such as this, a celebration of Slavic history, since the turn of the 19th century, however, his plans were limited by financial constraints. In 1909, he managed to obtain grants by an American philanthropist and a keen admirer of the Slavic culture, Charles Richard Crane. He began by visiting the places which he intended to depict in the cycle, such as Russia, Poland and the Balkans, including the Orthodox monasteries of Mount Athos. Additionally, he consulted historians about the details of historical events in order to ensure an accurate depiction. In 1910, he rented a part of the castle in Zbiroh and began working on the series.

Mucha continued working on the cycle for 18 years. He gradually handed over the finished paintings to the city of Prague. In 1919, the first part of the series, comprising eleven canvases, was displayed in the Prague’s Clementinum.
Mucha spent many years working on what he considered his life’s fine art masterpiece, The Slav Epic (Slovanská epopej), a series of twenty huge paintings depicting the history of the Czech and the Slavic people.
In 1921, five of the paintings were shown in New York and Chicago to the great acclaim of the audience.

After finishing the work in 1928, the complete cycle was displayed in the Trade Fair Palace in Prague. It was the first exhibition of the work in the Czechoslovak capital.

Alfons Mucha died in July, 1939. Shortly before his death he was interrogated by Gestapo

“Mucha was considered a decadent and bourgeois artist”

as an important exponent of public life in Czechoslovakia. During World War II, the Slav Epic was wrapped and hidden away to prevent seizure by the Nazis.

Following the Czechoslovak coup d’état of 1948 and subsequent communist takeover of the country, Mucha was considered a decadent and bourgeois artist, estranged from the ideas of socialist realism. The building of a special pavilion for the exposition of the cycle became irrelevant and unimportant for the new regime. After the war, the paintings were moved to Moravský Krumlov by a group of local patriots. The cycle went on display in the chateau in 1963.
Perhaps the richest legacy from Mucha to the city of Prague is his Slav epic. Mucha himself considered this as one of his masterpieces. The Slav epic is a series of twenty paintings that depict the history of the Czech Republic and its Slavic people.

It is ironic that his work was considered outdated at the time of his death. The Czech critics had no interest in his art and the Slav epic remained rolled up and hidden away from the public for twenty years. Mucha’s son John Mucha devoted his life to establishing his father’s work. The Mucha Museum opened in Prague long after Mucha’s death.

Prague is a city of complex ironies. Alfons Mucha who was not well revered in his days is celebrated throughout the world today for his artistic contribution especially in the field of Art Noveau. The Slav Epic by Mucha is yet to find a final permanent destination in Prague.

Prague, 1910-30s. After Mucha’s contributions to the 1900 Exposition Universelle helped to spread his successful style across Europe and the USA, he returned home in 1910. Here he developed a nationalistic iconography for more artistic projects such as the monumental Slav Epic – a history cycle in 20 paintings, finished in 1928. His 1931 design
for a stained glass window in Prague’s Gothic St. Vitus cathedral belongs to the same atmosphere. In an explosion of light, colour and activity, Mucha surrounds St. Wenceslas, patron saint of the Czech people, with scenes from the lives of Slav Saints. The window’s centre from top to bottom compiles 1000 years of national history.

Above, Cyril and Methodius, 9th century Christian missionaries to the Slavs, baptize a disciple. The middle focuses on ‘Good King Wenceslas’, who as a child was raised by his Christian grandmother St. Ludmilla, against the will of his tyrannical pagan mother. Both are looking upward absorbed in prayer, doused in the golden and red tones of holiness and later martyrdom at the hands of treacherous kin. Below them, typical ‘Mucha women’ personify the young Czech and Slovakian peoples.

When 18, Wenceslas began to rule independently, stopped pagan persecution of Christian priests, and became the legendary founder of the (predecessor of) St. Vitus cathedral. At the same time, he united the Bohemian lands against oppression by neighbouring rulers. Political content is never far away: Wenceslas
obviously personifies the fledgling Czecho-
slovakian state created in 1918 after centuries
of ‘parental rule’ by the Habsburg Empire that
disintegrated after World War I.

Coinciding with the Millennium Jubilee of
the Czech patron saint St. Wenceslas (Duke
of Bohemia), the Gothic reconstruction work
for St. Vitas Cathedral in Prague was com-
pleted in 1929. The new stained glass win-
dow, designed by Mucha, was installed in the
north nave in 1931.

The window portrays the boy St. Wenceslas
with his grandmother St. Ludmila in the cen-
tre, surrounded by episodes from the lives
of Saints Cyril and Methodius who spread
Christianity among the Slavs. The image of
Slavia is also included below Christ, and as
an emblem of Slavia Bank who funded the
stained glass window.

The world’s first Mucha Museum, dedicated
to the life and work of the world-acclaimed
Czech Art nouveau artist Alphonse Mucha
(1860-1939), is housed in the Baroque Kau-
nický Palace in the very heart of Prague. A
selection of over 100 exhibits comprising
paintings, photographs, charcoal drawings,
pastels, lithographs and personal memorabilia
provides a privileged view into the universe
of the artist who is most widely known for the
posters he executed for Sarah Bernhardt in the
fashionable world of fin-de-siècle Paris. The exhibiton gives an extensive overview of the artistic work of Alphonse Mucha (1860 – 1939). Special attention is paid to his time in Paris (1887-1904), internationally the most celebrated period of his work. A set of posters from this period is on show, including the most important made for Sarah Bernhardt. A set of his characteristic decorative panels and a number of examples from Documents Décoratifs (1902) give an idea of Mucha’s conception of Art Nouveau.

Pages from his Parisian sketchbooks, never exhibited before, can also be seen. Other decorative objects and three dimensional works including examples of decorated books can be found in the show cases. The work he created after his return to Czechoslovakia (1910-1939) forms a special group, consisting of posters, drawings and oil paintings. At the end of the exhibition we can see a suggestion of what Mucha’s studio in Paris must have looked like, with some of the original furniture, photos of his family and a set of photographs taken in the studio.

A half hour long documentary film about the life and work of the artist is also a part of the exhibition.
Muča Museum in Prague

Muča Museum – Kaunický palác
Panská 7,
110 00 Praha 1,
Tel: +420 224 216 415,
Fax: +420 224 216 415,
web: www.mucha.cz,
e-mail: shop@mucha.cz,
Opening Hours | Mon-Sun | 10:00-18:00
Mucha happened to go into a print shop where there was a sudden and unexpected need for a new advertising poster for a play featuring Sarah Bernhardt.
In 1894, Mucha is commissioned by the publisher Lemercier to design a special Christmas and New Year supplement for Le Gaulois magazine, including a feature on Sarah Bernhardt’s portrayal of Gismonda at the Théâtre de la Renaissance, where Sarah Bernhardt was both director and actor.

Later on, on December 26, 1894, while correcting proofs for a friend at Lemercier’s printing works, Mucha is asked to undertake a last minute commission. All the regular Lemercier artists on holiday and Sarah Bernhardt requires a new poster for her production of Gismonda at the Théâtre de la Renaissance due to open just a week later.

Mucha portrayed Bernhardt as an exotic Byzantine noblewoman wearing a splendid gown and an orchid headdress with a palm branch in her hand. This costume was worn in the last act, the climax of the play, where she joined the Easter procession. Placing her life-size figure on an arched platform, Mucha rendered the beauty and dignity of her personality onstage rather than representing her realistic features or the story.

With its long narrow shape, its subtle pastel colours and the ‘halo’ effect around the subject’s head, Mucha’s poster marks a radical departure from traditional poster design. The poster is so popular with the Parisian public that collectors bribe bill stickers to obtain them or simply go out at night and, using razors, cut them down from the hoardings.

Delighted with Mucha’s design, Bernhardt continued signs a six year contract with Mucha who is responsible for designing posters, stage sets and costumes for Paris’ leading actress.
Mucha produced a flurry of paintings, posters, advertisements, and book illustrations, as well as designs for jewelry, carpets, wallpaper, and theatre sets.
By the 1890s posters had taken centre stage in the visual culture of the French capital. Thanks to the advancement of printing technology, the standard of colour lithography was improving and the material opulence of Belle Époque Paris provided talented artists with great opportunities to design advertising posters. The Paris hoardings had been the official posting places for advertising posters since the implementation of the Law on the Freedom of the Press in 1881; by then they had become ‘street galleries’, influencing the commercial success of both the advertisers and the artists designing the posters. In this competitive environment the artistic quality of the posters became increasingly important.

With his design for Gismonda Mucha arrived on Parisian street art scene at an opportune moment. As Mucha later wrote, his poster was ‘a breath of fresh air’ which the public had been looking for. In addition to the work for Sarah Bernhardt Mucha began to receive commissions for advertising designs from a variety of printers including Camis in Paris and Cassan Fils in Toulouse. It was, however, after 1896, when Mucha signed an exclusive contract with the Parisian company F. Champenois Imprimeur-Editeur, that his output in this field expanded dramatically. Champenois paid Mucha on a monthly basis; this provided him with financial security and that summer he was able to rent a large apartment and studio in the rue du Val de Grâce. The majority of Mucha’s Parisian posters were produced with Champenois and it is this body of work for which he is best known and internationally recognised. Mucha’s posters reflect the rich texture of modern life in fin-de-siècle Paris. The subjects range from cultural events and railway services to diverse consumer products such as perfume, cigarette paper, beer, champagne, chocolate and biscuits, as well as bicycles. For these posters Mucha developed a new style from the Gismonda prototype, featuring a single figure or the head of a seductive woman against a halo-like disk, which is arranged harmoniously with flowers and other decorative motifs. In his design the image of a woman was used strategically as a medium for communication, first to draw potential consumers’ attention with her feminine beauty and then to send an alluring message about the product she was representing.

Mucha is commissioned to design a poster for one of France’s most popular brands of cigarette paper. The name Job comes from the initials of Jean Bardou who invented a booklet of rolling papers made from rice paper. Originally the initials ‘JB’ were separated by a diamond, but as the brand grew in popularity people began to refer to it as Job.
Smoking is very much a male activity at the turn of the century, and Mucha’s sensual woman gives the product a sense of illicit glamour.

Poster for ‘Job’ cigarette paper (1896)

This is perhaps one of Mucha’s best-known advertising posters, with numerous editions subsequently published in a variety of formats for international markets. This poster established the iconic image of the ‘Mucha woman’ with her swirls of exaggeratedly abundant hair.

“the ‘Mucha woman’ with her swirls of exaggeratedly abundant hair”

In this poster, Mucha placed the prominent female figure against a background featuring Job monograms. Holding a lighted cigarette in her hand, the woman leans her head backward sensually, and the rising smoke forms an arabesque, intertwining with her hair and the company logo.

Mucha introduced a Byzantine effect, as seen in the Gismonda poster, with the border decoration inspired by mosaic work which adds an air of dignity to a commercial poster.

In 1898 Mucha produced another design for Job which is known as ‘great Job’.

Poster for ‘Job’ cigarette paper (1898)

In this poster, Mucha’s stylised depiction of hair, known at the time as macaroni or vermi-
celli, is both decorative and sensual. With her curled up toe – a symbol of female sexual arousal – and the raised tip of her cigarette, Mucha produces a sexually charged poster. The clasp which holds the woman’s dress together, based on the Job monogramme, draws the eye of the viewer to her chest.

02Poster for ‘Imprimerie Cassan Fils’ (1896)
In this poster for the Cassan Fils printing works, Mucha combines the real with the emblematic - the semi-naked model contrasts with the allegorical, faun-like printer who represents the printing industry. The eyes in the mosaic border could be seen to represent the readers who benefit from the printing works.

Lefèvre-Utile, a Nantes-based manufacturer of biscuits, commissioned top artists to do their publicity. In addition to posters, Mucha also designed box tops, wrappers and other printed matter for the company. The social setting depicted in this poster is intended to show Lefèvre-Utile products to be consumed in high society.

Mucha’s use of black outlines is indicative of his later style.

Lance Parfum Rodo (1896)
This poster advertises a perfume produced by the Société des Usines Chimiques du Rhône in Lyon.

Mucha’s elegant and graceful turn-of-the-century women were particularly successful in appealing to female audiences. As a result, his commercial work was in great demand from cosmetic companies. Clients included Sylvanis Esssence, Parfumerie Bleuze-Hadancourt, Savonneries de Bagnolet and Carmichael’s Bath Tablets in England.

Poster for ‘Bières de la Meuse’ (1897)
This large format poster portrays a woman
with a wreath of poppies, wheat and hops in her hair holding a pint of beer. She has Slav features and recalls the figure of Summer from Mucha’s Seasons series of the previous year.

The poster incorporates two images at the bottom of the poster that are by another artist: an image of the goddess of the river Meuse and a bird’s eye view of the brewery.
Mucha considered his publication Le Pater to be his printed masterpiece, and referred to it in The Sun of 5 January 1900 as what he had «put [his] soul into».
Mucha considered his publication Le Pater to be his printed masterpiece, and referred to it in The Sun of 5 January 1900 as what he had “put [his] soul into”. Printed on 20 December 1899, Le Pater was Mucha’s occult examination of the themes of The Lord’s Prayer and only 510 copies were produced.

He created a separate image for each line of the prayer. Mucha visualized the familiar prayer as a universal expression of humankind’s relationship with the divine, mixing traditional Catholic devotion with an Asiatic-tinged occult mysticism.

The Century magazine in 1904 described Mucha’s unique conception of God as “no longer the benign or wrathful Father, but a mysterious Being whose shadow fills the earth. Nature is personified as a luminous, adolescent giant, and Love descends from heaven in the guise of a woman.”

Mucha presented the first Le Pater issue to Charles Freund-Deschamps whose daughter he was to marry. Afterwards the work entered the French president Raymond Poincare’s collection. It appeared in the public only in 1972 when it was put on auction in Paris. Vera Neumann and her husband Lotar, also a Czech, learned about the auction ex post, but they managed to address all buyers, buy all drawings from them and reunite them in a single collection that has been presented in several world galleries since.

The story of the Neumann couple is interesting as well. Lotar, of Jewish origin, luckily survived the war under a foreign identity. In 1948 he and his wife fled the communist Czechoslovakia to Venezuela. They returned to Europe in the early 1960s and bought a chateau in Switzerland, near the Lake Geneva, where they gradually collected a unique collection of mainly art nouveau and symbolist art.

Le Pater is an illustrated edition of The Lord’s Prayer created by Mucha. Published in Paris on 20th December 1899 at the passing of the old century, it was meant to be Mucha’s message to future generations about the progress of mankind. Through the archetypal Christian prayer, he wished to present the way for man to reach the Divine Ideal, the highest state in the spiritual world.

Mucha conceived this project at a turning point in his career. According to his own account, Mucha was at that time increasingly dissatisfied with unending commercial commissions and was longing for an artistic work with a more elevated mission. He was also influenced by his long-standing interest in Spiritualism since the early 1890s and, above all, by Masonic philosophy. In January 1898, almost two years before the publication of Le Pater, Mucha was initiated into the Paris Lodge of Freemasons as an apprentice and after the independence of his homeland he was to become Grand Master of the Freemasons of Czechoslovakia. Mucha’s freemasonry was an outcome of his Spiritualism – the pursuit of a deeper Truth beyond the visible world. Through his spiritual journey Mucha came to believe that the three virtues – Beauty, Truth and Love – were the
‘cornerstones’ of humanity and that the dissem-
ination of this message through his art would
contribute towards the improvement of human
life and, eventually, the progress of mankind.

In order to visualise his vision, Mucha analysed
each of the seven verses of the model Chris-
tian prayer and reconstructed it in a set of three
pages. The first page of each set, in colour, is
the relevant verse in French and Latin, framed
in a border sumptuously decorated with flow-
ers and a symbolic female figure. The second
page, also in colour, is Mucha’s own text, inter-
preting the verse and decorated with floral pat-
terns. The third monochromatic page, printed
in photogravure, contains a full-page allegori-
cal drawing illustrating Mucha’s philosophical
response to the verse. Throughout the pages,
Mucha’s designs feature an abundance of Ma-
sonic symbols. The outcome was an exquisite

Le Pater was Mucha’s first manifest as an art-
ist-philosopher and he regarded the book as his
finest work. In 1900 Mucha exhibited the book and the preparatory drawings at the Paris In-
ternational Exhibition and was deeply gratified
when the illustrations attracted the attention of
Emperor Francis Joseph I.
Le Pater is an absolute thrill. There were only ever 510 published, on the 20th of December 1899. The first ten containing original hand-painted watercolors by Mucha himself. The second set, numbers 11 through 60 (the set I studied), are listed by the publisher as being “sur japon, avec une suite en couleurs sur papiers spécial à la forme du Marais et une suite en noir sur chine.”

Actually, there’s a great story related to draughtsmanship and Mucha: In 1898, the American (ex-patriot) artist James Abbott McNeill Whistler combined his teaching class with that of Mucha and together they taught painting, Illustration, composition and decorative drawing over the course of three years, ending amicably in 1901. According to Jiri (Mucha’s son and sole biographer); years later when a student asked Whistler why he had so many of Mucha’s posters hanging about, Whistler retorted, “So that I can show fools like you what it means to be able to draw.”
INDEX

A
advertising 5, 8, 24, 27, 28
Art Nouveau 3, 4, 5, 13, 16, 22
August Seysses 11

B
Belle Époque 27
Bernhardt 5, 13, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27
Bières de la Meuse 29
book 5, 26, 34

C
Champenois 11, 27
cigarette 27, 28, 29
collaboration 12

D
decoration 28, 30
decorative 4, 5, 11, 13, 22, 27, 29, 35
design 5, 9, 11, 12, 13, 19, 25, 27, 28
designs 4, 5, 9, 13, 26, 27, 34
drawing 5, 9, 12, 34, 35

E
exhibition 11, 12, 13, 16, 18, 22

F
Fouquet 12, 13

H
hand-painted 35

I
iconic 28
Illustration 35
illustrator 9
innovative 12, 27

J
jeweller 12, 13
jewellery 5, 12, 13, 30
Job 27, 28, 29

L
La Plume 11, 13
Lefèvre-Utile 29
lithographic 11

M
Maruška 6
masterpiece 16, 17, 32, 33
Monaco - Monte Carlo 30
Mucha 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17, 18,
19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30, 32,
33, 34, 35
Musée 13
Museum 19, 21, 23

P
painting 5, 9, 10, 16, 35
Paris International Exhibition 34
pastel 5, 11, 25
Pater 32, 33, 34, 35
Paul Sérusier 9
photogravure 34
poster 5, 11, 24, 25, 27, 28, 29, 30
printing 11, 25, 27, 29
publicity 29

S
Salon des Cent 11, 13
Sarah 5, 13, 21, 22, 24, 25, 27
sculpture 11
Slav 14, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, 30
stained glass 9, 13, 20, 21
symbols 34

V
verse 34

W
watercolors 35