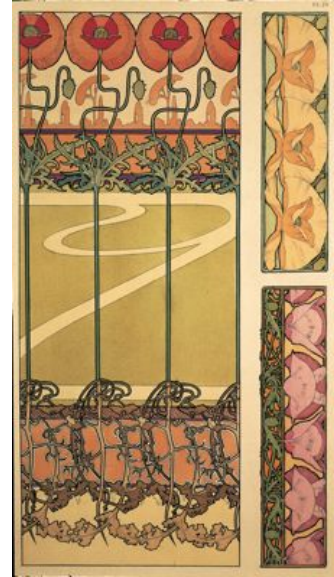




## A Mucha Foundation Exhibition

### In Quest of Beauty: ALPHONSE MUCHA 1860 - 1939

*“The aim of art is to celebrate beauty”.*  
- Alphonse Mucha from *Lectures on Art*



LEFT TO RIGHT: 'Amethyst' from *The Precious Stones* (1900); Self-portrait with Sarah Bernhardt posters, Paris (c.1901); Plate 29 from *Documents décoratifs* (1902)

### SYNOPSIS OF THE EXHIBITION

The definitions of beauty and its values have changed and evolved over time, with the many societies and civilisations that have come to pass. And yet beauty has always been one of the defining factors of art, in forming artistic ideals and techniques. As many philosophers have observed from ancient times to today, an appetite for beauty is one of the human instincts. In fin-de-siècle Europe, where the concept of art went through revolutionary changes with the advent of Modernism, the classic notion of beauty since the Renaissance was challenged and expanded to embrace new ideas. In such a time of changes, Alphonse Mucha was one of those who pursued the unchanging, universal value in art. In this pursuit, Mucha came to believe that the ultimate objective of art was the expression of beauty, which was, in his view, a harmony between the internal world (the spiritual world; moral integrity) and the external world (the material world; appearance). As glimpsed through his lecture notes, which were compiled posthumously as *Lectures on Art* (published in London and New York in 1975), as well as in his unpublished manuscripts preserved in the Mucha Foundation archives, Mucha believed that the role of the artist was to inspire people with the message of beauty, and he aspired to contribute towards the betterment of society, using his art.

Born in 1869 in Ivančice, a south Moravian town in today's Czech Republic, Mucha trained initially as a scene painter for theatre in Vienna, but he subsequently received formal artistic training in Munich and Paris (Munich Academy of Arts 1885-87; Académie Julien and Académie Colarossi, 1887-89). During the early 1890s, Mucha enjoyed modest success as a book illustrator, but his first poster design for Sarah Bernhardt, *Gismonda* (1894), changed his life forever. The poster, featuring the full-standing figure of the actress, appeared on Parisian hoardings on New Year's Day 1895, and made a great sensation in the Parisian art world; the success transformed him overnight into one of the hottest new talents, sought after by major publishers and art galleries. Mucha became Bernhardt's exclusive designer and artistic advisor; he designed all her iconic posters, which established her image as 'the Divine Sarah'. In collaboration with Champenois, he created over 100 designs for posters, decorative panels, calendars and postcards between 1896 and 1904. Coined '*le style Mucha*', his designs became a hallmark of Art Nouveau.



*Gismonda* (1894)

Mucha's style has two distinctive features: the single image of a beautiful woman as a central part of the composition and the rich use of flowers and other motifs from nature as a key conceptual and structural part of the work. Combining those factors, Mucha created an innovative 'visual language', which would communicate with a wider audience, beyond the conventional connoisseurs of art. In advertising posters, Mucha's women stood as icons that symbolised the earthly pleasure of material life, alluring Belle Époque consumers. In decorative panels (*panneaux décoratifs*), a new, affordable form of art that Mucha pioneered with Champenois, they became the muses, conveying Mucha's message of beauty, distributing aesthetic pleasure to the homes of ordinary people. Thus, Mucha's art became one of the most popular and influential streams of Art Nouveau, which is regarded today as the first modern style of the twentieth century. After 1900, Mucha's visual language evolved further as a means to convey his spiritual and philosophical messages. As demonstrated in his later masterpieces, especially *The Slav Epic* (1911-28) and other works produced after his return to his homeland, Mucha's pursuit of beauty evolved into a vision for uniting his fellow Czechs and Slavs, in order to achieve the independence of his homeland from the Austro-Hungarian Empire, as well as the global peace of mankind, an ultimate state of beauty.

Closely studying Mucha's idea of beauty, the core principle of his artistic philosophy, the exhibition will look at how Mucha's distinctive artistic style evolved and what was the message behind his works. Drawing on some 100 works from the collection of the Mucha Trust, the exhibition will show posters, drawings, paintings, books and magazines, as well as decorative designs and objects. The display will also include a selection of Mucha's photographic works, which form an important part of his artistic legacy. The exhibition will be arranged thematically. A DVD presentation will supplement the display to provide an overview of Mucha's life and work.

## STRUCTURE OF THE EXHIBITION

### 1. Women; Icons and Muses

The exhibition will start with Mucha's collaboration with Sarah Bernhardt, featuring the posters he produced for the actress and other works associated with her. During this period, Mucha developed a distinctive graphic art style, which was to be known as '*le style Mucha*', and it would be disseminated internationally, through advertising posters, decorative panels and the motifs decorating household utensils and other decorative objects.

This section will look at, in particular, Mucha's use of the images of women, as icons and muses, in the context of the development of his artistic theory.

### 2. Flowers and Nature

As sometimes referred to as 'floral style' or '*Stile Floreale*', the Art Nouveau style is characterised by the extensive use of decorative patterns of flowers and other organic forms from nature. Mucha was one of the most prominent artists who explored the creative potential of those forms. Like his contemporaries, Mucha drew his inspiration from nature, but, as evident in his numerous surviving studies, he developed a highly individual style from his close observation of nature. Also, in the design process, he was particularly inspired by the folk art tradition of his native Moravia.

This section will examine how Mucha applied those organic forms to his works. Mucha's ideas for organic designs culminated in the Parisian jeweller, Georges Fouquet's shop (1900-1901), where Mucha designed the interior, the furniture and the shop-front as a 'united whole'. Furthermore, Mucha published two, highly influential design manuals, *Documents décoratifs* (1902) and *Figures Décoratives* (1905), where he illustrated his ideas for harmonious designs using female figures and motifs from nature.

LEFT TO RIGHT: Poster for *Monaco-MonteCarlo* (1897), advertising P.L.M.Railway; 'Spring' from *The Seasons* (1896)



LEFT TO RIGHT: 'Lily' from *The Flowers* (1898); Plate 60 from *Documents décoratifs* (1902)



Interior of Boutique Fouquet (reconstructed at Musée Carnavalet, Paris)

### 3. Beauty, Truth, Love



The 7<sup>th</sup> allegorical page from *Le Pater* (1899)

In 1898, Mucha was initiated into the Paris Lodge of Freemasons as an apprentice, and, after the independence of his homeland, he became Grand Master of the Freemasons of Czechoslovakia. Mucha's freemasonry was an outcome of his pursuit of Spiritualism since the early 1890s. Through this spiritual journey, Mucha came to believe that the three virtues - Beauty, Truth and Love – were the 'cornerstones' of humanity and that the dissemination of this message would contribute towards the improvement of the political status of the Slavs and, eventually, the progress of mankind.

This section will look at how Mucha's Spiritualism is reflected upon his stylistic formula, which had evolved through his Art Nouveau works, and now developing into a medium to express the three cornerstones of humanity. The display will feature *Le Pater* (1899), his personal interpretation of the Lord's Prayer, as well as posters, paintings and drawings, based on Czech themes and his philosophical ideas.



*Song of Bohemia* (c.1923)

### 4. Mucha and Photography

The exhibition will include a small section devoted to Mucha's photographic works, which form an important part of his artistic achievements. Covering a period of over fifty years from the early 1880s to the late 1930s, his photographs demonstrate his inquisitive spirit experimenting with a variety of genres and techniques, as well as a passion for recording everything around him. Reflecting the themes of this exhibition, the exhibits here will focus on portraits and studies of his studio models, friends and family, as well as nature studies.



LEFT TO RIGHT: Nude in studio, Paris (c.1902); Flower study, Paris (c.1899); Lime trees, Bohemia (c.1925); Mucha and his daughter Jaroslava posing in studio, Zbiroh (c.1927)