

# Alphonse mucha art style overview



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Alphonse Mucha is best known for his luxurious poster and product designs, which encapsulate the Art Nouveau style. Interest in his work was revived in 1980 when it was shown at an exhibition at the Grand Palais in Paris.

Alphonse Mucha was born in South Moravia. In 1882 he started to earn a living by painting portraits in Mikulov. The following year Count Khuen commissioned Mucha to decorate his castle at Emmahof and his brother Count Egon Belasi became his patron. He was educated at the Munich Academy of Arts and at the Académie Julian in Paris and after completing work for Count Khuen began work as an illustrator in 1889.

His first work was a theatre magazine entitled *Le Costume au Theatre* and in it his first drawing of Sarah Bernhardt as Cleopatra appeared in 1890. By 1895 he had signed a six year contract with Bernardt to produce stage and costume designs as well as posters. At the same time Mucha joined the *Salon des Cent*, a Symbolist group that included Bonnard, Mallarmé and Toulouse-Lautrec. He designed a poster for their 20th exhibition in 1896 and the next year he exhibited many of his works at this exhibition as well as at his own one-man show at the Topic Gallery in Prague.

Between 1903 and 1922 Alphonse Mucha made four visits to the United States where his work proved particularly successful. Charles Richard Crane, a Chicago industrialist and Slavophile, agreed to finance Mucha's series of 20 huge paintings entitled 'Slav Epic' (1909-1928). He continued to work on a number of projects, however, including the design of new postage stamps for Czechoslovakia in 1918 and producing a number of posters and designs for public buildings besides the 'Slav Epic' for example, 'Allegory of Prague'

(1911) for the Prague Town Hall. He completed the full cycle of the ' Slav Epic' finally in 1928 and it was exhibited at the Trade Fair Palace. Just three years later he was commissioned to produce a stained-glass window for the St. Vitus Cathedral, then in 1938 embarked on yet another mammoth project involving a triptych, ' The Age of Wisdom', ' The Age of Love' and ' The Age of Reason'. Sadly they were never completed as he died in 1939.

“ For the Slavs, the plastic arts are a common striving towards a symbolic manifestation... a taste for symbols is part of the inheritance of all Slavs... That is why the language of symbols is the surest way to communicate our feelings to our brother Slavs.” Alphonse Mucha.

Alfons Mucha was born in Southern Moravia on July 24, 1860. At the age of seventeen the artist left his home, to work as a painter of stage decorations at the Vienna “ Ringtheater”. When there was a fire at the theater, Mucha lost his job. He found new employment at the Vienese castle with Count Khuen, who became his patron and sent him to the Munich art academy a few years later. From there, Alfons Mucha went on to Paris in 1887 to continue his studies at the “ Académie Julian” and then at the “ Académie Colarossi”.

Due to a lack of financial support from Khuen, however, the student was forced to leave the academy and earn a living as an illustrator. During this time he produced a large number of sketches and drawings. These were studies for illustrations, which were later published in “ Figaro illustré”, “ Petit Parisien illustré” and other journals.

This early work and the prints for illustrated books like “ L ’éléphant blanc” by Judith Gauthier, at which Alfons Mucha worked during this time, still reflect the usual academic historic style of the time. By coincidence, thanks to an employer of Lemercier printers, Mucha was commissioned to design a poster for Sarah Bernhardt in 1894. This provided the launchpad for Mucha’s future success and importance as an influential designer of French “ Art Nouveau”.

Sarah Bernhardt was impressed by the artist’s work. From then on, the famous actress not only had Mucha design her posters but also her costumes and stages. The public also liked Mucha’s works very much and he became a famous, widely talked about and celebrated master almost over night.

Around 1900 Alfons Mucha reached the peak of his fame. Mucha’s theoretical theses “ Documents Décoratives” and “ Figures Décoratives” influenced the applied art of the time significantly. From now on, people talk about “ Mucha style” whose typical elements like the arabesque hair and the aureole surrounding the female profile, were often copied.

In 1900 Alfons Mucha took part in the Paris World Exposition, evoking general attention with his wall decorations in Bosnia and Herzegovina’s pavilion. In 1904 Alfons Mucha went to America, where he produced wall decorations, stages settings and portraits during a prolonged stay in New York. Alongside he taught drawing and composition at the Chicago Art Institute.

After Mucha’s return to his home country, shortly before World War I, he dedicated considerable time to lithographic work. Then he became increasingly occupied by a series of 20 pictures entitled “ Lépopée Slave”,

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the “ Slavian Epos”. Mucha finished the large format continuation (6 x 8m) of the decoration of the Bosnian pavilion in 1928 and donated it to the city of Prague.

Alfons Mucha died in Prague shortly before the invasion of Czechoslovakia by German troops on July 14, 1939.

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.

The images on this page are link-sensitive and take you to other articles or web sites in which you might be interested.

### Alphonse Mucha – his Academic Training

Alfons Maria Mucha was born in Ivancice, a small provincial town in the Czech Republic.

He started his artistic career as an autodidact. Alfons Mucha had a vocational training in stage decorations in Vienna from 1879 to 1881. In the evening he attended a class in drawing. After a few occasional commissions for decorative paintings, he went to Munich in Southern Bavaria. Here he studied at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts from 1885 until 1887.

After Munich, Mucha moved to the “ mecca” of arts, Paris. Here he studied with different teachers. He lived in modest conditions and could survive with

small commissions for book and newspaper illustrations. For a short period he shared a studio with Paul Gauguin.

### The Breakthrough

In December 1894 Mucha became famous with a commission for a poster for the actress Sarah Bernard. Sarah Bernard was a celebrity of her time. His poster design for the play Gismonda became a sensation in Paris. Sarah Bernhard 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.

### His Style

By this time Mucha had developed his own personal style – characterized by art nouveau elements, tender colors and byzantine decorative elements. And all these elements were ranked around images of fairy like young women with long hair and splendid, refined costumes. In the coming years, this type of female images should become his trademark.

Mucha used lithography as the printing technique for his posters. The posters are usually signed in the block. Some of his posters were produced as sets like The Four Seasons. Complete sets count among the most searched for of his works.

### Public Recognition for Alphonse Mucha

In 1890 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.