

## AN INTRODUCTION TO THE WORK OF ALFONS MUCHA AND ART NOUVEAU

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### SOME PRELIMINARY OBSERVATIONS

"If anyone is destined to become an artist and follows this career led by a mysterious and irresistible force, then it is Mucha. . . . He submits without argument, as he himself says, to the commands of this watchful, protective force which propels him through life as if he were sleepwalking, placing before his feet at decisive moments the steps to success." (Victor Champier, quoted Mucha 95)



There is no doubt that of all modern Czech visual artists Alfons Mucha (1860-1939) enjoyed and continues to enjoy the most international recognition, influence, and popularity (in marked contrast to his reputation within his own Czech homeland). Those factors alone would be sufficient reason to make a study of his work a central part of our studies in this course. However, many details of this artist's life also offer important insights into some of the more complex issues facing Czech citizens generally, and artists in particular, in the past century and a half, for he was inevitably caught up in and influenced by many of the drastic changes which characterize the recent history of the Czech people. While these details may not be necessary for study of his artistic work (although some of them are extremely relevant), nonetheless they are useful for our purposes, since one of our concerns in this course is to explore as fully as we can in a very short time some of the cultural elements involved in the emergence of the Czech Republic.

### EARLY LIFE AND CAREER

The major details of Mucha's early life can be summarized fairly quickly. He was born in 1860 in Ivancice, a small town in southern Moravia (near Brno), when what is now the Czech Republic was part of the Austrian empire (which became the Austro-Hungarian Empire in 1867). His surroundings here were hardly cosmopolitan, for the area was, in many ways, very traditional and, in comparison with large cities like Prague or Vienna, behind the times. Hence, Mucha at an early age was deeply influenced by traditional folk lore in a small community, by eastern religious traditions, and by Slav nationalism (growing in intensity under the determined efforts of the Habsburgs to "Germanize" the Czech people, while at the same time permitting, or at least not repressing, the rising expression of ethnic cultural interests, especially traditional Bohemian and Moravian folklore). This environment helped develop in the young Mucha an intense spirituality which was to mark his character all his life (often in some decidedly unconventional ways), along with an abiding commitment to Slav nationalism. Early on Mucha displayed a talent for music. The fact that he became part of the cathedral choir in Brno indicates his considerable ability as a young boy, at least until his voice broke.

Mucha also clearly had a great natural gift for art, especially for drawing, his interest being aroused primarily by the art works in the local churches. He was, however, rejected by Prague's Academy of Fine Arts, and so in 1881 he moved to Vienna in order to work professionally as a scene painter in the theatre. Unfortunately his employer went bankrupt soon after that, and Mucha lost his position. He was, however, fortunate enough to attract the attention of a patron, Count Carl Khen, who commissioned Mucha to work on his castle, restoring portraits and decorating rooms with murals. Khen encouraged the young artist to acquire some formal training and provided financial help, one of the first of several truly lucky turns of fortune Mucha experienced in his life.

Mucha's first formal art training took place in Munich (in the mid-1880's) and from there he moved on to Paris (in 1887), taking further training and trying to support himself as a working artist producing magazine pictures, designs for costumes in operas and ballets, and book illustrations. Count Khen's financial help was discontinued (in 1887) and, at 27 years old, Mucha was left penniless in Paris, often with barely enough money to feed himself.

Mucha did, however, manage to survive these lean years on income earned from his art work, none of which at this period was particularly original or remarkable—he was a working artist taking small commissions to support himself as best he could. His reputation was growing very slowly (at least in Paris) and by the early 1890's he had had some clear indications of success, but there was nothing to indicate that his entire life was about to be transformed by a single fortuitous event. Mucha's son, Jiri, sums up this period of his father's life as follows:

The poor, insignificant painter whom Gauguin had known at Madam Charlotte's in 1891 was safely on the way to success when they met again two years later. He still drew his main income from illustrations for Armand Colin, but he had started on his first lithographs: an 1892 calendar published by Messrs Lorilleux, which consisted of twelve circular representations of children playing with the symbols of the zodiac and twelve figural, richly-decorated frames for the dates. He received 2,500 francs and a considerable amount of publicity, as Lorilleux was an important paint manufacturer and the calendar went to painters, art schools, theatres, and periodicals. There was, however, nothing striking about the work. The technique was traditional, using Renaissance motifs and a profusion of allegorical figures. (54)

### THE BERNHARDT CONNECTION

All this changed overnight in December 1894. Around Christmas Mucha happened to drop into a print shop where there was a sudden and unexpected demand for a new poster to advertise a play starring Sarah Bernhardt, the most famous actress in Paris. Mucha volunteered to produce a poster within two weeks, and on January 1, 1895, the advertisement for *Gismonda* appeared on the streets of the city. It was an overnight sensation and announced that this hitherto largely unknown artist from a remote part of the world had delivered a new artistic style to the citizens of Paris.



Today, when we are much more familiar with designs like this, we may not sense the full impact of Mucha's poster, an effect heightened by Bernhardt's shrewd business sense—the work earned her a small fortune (Bernhardt always had a keen eye for business, even though she later refused to sell her amputated leg to

Not until recently have posters attracted the same critical attention as in the Paris of the eighties and nineties. . . . Now, when Art Nouveau posters are a staple of fashionable interior decoration, it is difficult to appreciate the impact of Mucha's *Gismonda*, in many ways the most impressive poster he ever produced. In 1895 its distinctive shape, muted colouring and exquisitely simplified draughtsmanship, allied to a Byzantine richness of decoration, were completely novel. The poster's obvious merit, together with the publicity value of anything or anybody connected with Bernhardt, ensured that within a week, Mucha was the most talked about artist in Paris. (Henderson 10)

Anna Dvorak makes a similar observation:

. . . he succeeded in creating a poster so different from others on the billboards, both in design and colouring, that from the beginning he was considered not a follower but equal to the best artists of the period. For the life-size figures of his Bernhardt posters Mucha chose an extremely elongated shape, and in contrast to other poster designers he used very pale colours—whites, beiges, mauves, dull purples, reds and greens, with decorative touches of gold and silver. His unusual posters were uniquely appropriate to the famous actress of whom Charles Hiatt wrote that she had the ability to touch even a classical French drama with the oriental, the strange and the exotic. (134)

The amazing success of this poster led to a lucrative long-term contract with Bernhardt. He produced posters, costume designs, jewellery and set designs—and his fame brought in an enormous number of commissions. Under contract to the printer Campenois as well, Mucha produced some of his best known works in the form of *panneaux décoratifs*—illustrated posters on high-quality paper or fabric (like silk) used to decorate homes and stores. The popularity of these designs led to the production of postcards and calendars. And he continued to create advertising posters which have become famous and which remain today very popular works of art (at least to judge from the number of internet sites devoted to selling them). An important part of this remarkable achievement is Mucha's work with lavishly illustrated books, *Ilseé* (1897) and *Le Pater* (1899), in which every page is a carefully worked out artistic totality, there is virtually no empty space, and everything has been brought into a dynamic linear harmony.

Looking at a selection of Mucha's work from this period, one gets a sense of why his art was so instantly popular. Rooted as it is in the folk traditions of his home land, the style is very accessible, requiring little familiarity with artistic traditions or modern conventions. The designs combine dynamic lines in the geometric patterning with dramatic figures whose impact is heightened by the way they emerge from or blend with that pattern. The colours are generally understated, and the effect is carried by the superb linear design and the harmony established between that and the human figure. Many of the pictures radiate a sexual energy which emerges as wholly natural and appropriate. Mucha's portraits of women and girls typically locate them in a design strongly evocative of nature or natural patterning, and there is nothing about them of the high-society decadence which we see, for example, in the work of his contemporary Gustav Klimt. Most of them seem, by contrast, robust country girls, brimming with health and natural vigour and conveying an inborn self-confidence and directness which has no malicious intent. It's not surprising his designs were so successful as advertisements for a largely urban population and as decorative elements in the home (especially in an age with an increasingly romantic view of nature).

This phase of Mucha's career, a period of extraordinary success with an enormous output, culminated in his contributions to the Paris Exhibition of 1900, for which he designed and worked on the Bosnia-Herzegovina Pavilion and contributed to other areas, including his best-known sculpture. He also designed his most famous piece of jewellery for Sarah Bernhardt.

When we consider this amazingly rapid and wide spread success, we cannot attribute it simply to Mucha's artistic genius or to the commercial power of Sarah Bernhardt. For it's clear that from that first Bernhardt poster, which marked such a radical break with what he had been doing before, Mucha had the supreme good fortune to tap into the artistic spirit of the age—to be, as it were, the right man in the right place at the right time. Although he himself constantly asserted that he belonged to no artistic school and followed his own creative impulses, which he saw as a natural evolution of traditional Czech art (Dvorak 135), there is no doubt that his success was closely associated with the growing popularity of the new trends in art sweeping across Europe, a movement that has come to be called Art Nouveau. And so we need to interrupt our quick survey of Mucha's artistic career to make a short excursion into the wider artistic world of Art Nouveau.

#### ART NOUVEAU

Before attempting to clarify somewhat this ambiguous term, I must establish two points. First, Mucha never points associated himself with what was called Art Nouveau. As Henderson points out, he disliked the name of the "movement," arguing that art was eternal and therefore could never be merely "nouveau." And he always insisted he followed his own sense of the important spiritual purposes of art, deriving his main inspiration from Czech traditions, rather than subscribing to the doctrines of any particular school. So even though many others associated his work so closely with Art Nouveau that they sometimes called it *le style Mucha*, that was not something which Mucha himself ever strove for or admitted.

Second, we must be careful in using the term Art Nouveau not to overdetermine what it means. The term is a useful way of indicating a spirit of reform, rebellion, and freedom which swept through the art world at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, originating, as all such artistic changes do, in a strong reaction against the prevailing styles in conventional art, especially as these were taught and practised in the schools, promoted in the Salons, and celebrated in public architecture (in particular, the Historical Style, which made a great deal of art and architecture rather tired, if often very grand, tributes to earlier styles). But we must not expect the term to denote a carefully adhered to specific program of action or clear rules for style among all those artists we might want to place in this rubric. The "movement" contained artists whose work at first glance seems entirely different, and in different countries the changes were carried on under different banners with different priorities.

These movements were all based on what was fundamentally a common inspiration, though there were some striking differences between individual artists and countries. Art Nouveau was at once homespun and exotic, literary and plastic, mystical and erotic, futurist and traditional, functional and fantastic. It was a perfect illustration of the Hegelian system of contraries, extolled by Oscar Wilde, whereby an artistic truth is only valid if its opposite is equally true. (Challié 9)

What these various movement did have in common was a sense of trying something new, something which marked a decisive break with the traditional style in art, in an atmosphere of giddy new freedoms, a reinvigorating sense that art could and should matter—it should infuse the often very decadent and tired emotional climate of the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with a new sense of energy and spiritual purpose. In some places, the new art movement went hand in hand with powerfully new political movements aimed at doing away with an old, oppressive, and tired imperial order (this is especially true in places where ethnic minorities were still under the thumb of the German-speaking Austro-Hungarian empire—e.g. in Prague).

With these important caveats in mind, we can discuss in summary form some of the more common elements running through the Art Nouveau movement in its various manifestations.

The first important principle of the Art Nouveau movement was a desire to get rid of the distinctions between high and low art or major and minor arts. For many artists the essential thing was for art to affect and unify the lives of the people, not just in expensive oil paintings on rich people's walls or in institutional salons, but in the essential objects of their daily lives—their homes, furnishings, cups and saucers, advertisements, wall hangings—everything from door handles to lamp posts and sewer gratings and toilet seats. Even purely functional objects now largely machine made and mass produced should be shaped by the decorative powers of art. Hence we see many Art Nouveau artists, and Mucha in particular, demonstrating an astonishingly wide range of artistic interests (in his case from posters and paintings to lottery tickets, jewellery, police uniforms, designs for money, stamps, wall hangings, and so on).

This emphasis on uniting beauty and utility was at the heart of the most important social "message" of the new art (something which earned it the name *Art Social* in some quarters). It was inspired, in part, by a strong reaction against the ugliness of much of the manufactured material which was increasingly dominating people's lives and making the very idea of the traditional artist-craftsmen obsolete (a response very strong in the English Arts and Crafts Movement in the 1860's, inspired by John Ruskin and William Morris, who looked back with delight to the ideal guild craftsmen of the Middle Ages).

Sometimes the social component of this program was strongly emphasized, as in the project for an International Exhibition of Art and Popular Hygiene, which would seek to link the most mundane public institutions and facilities (railway stations, public houses, toilets, and so on) with the spiritually energizing and healing powers of art. Not surprisingly, in some places the new movement was quickly adopted by the socialists and the free thinkers (Mucha 126) as a way of producing a truly international style for all the people, while being fiercely opposed by the Catholic Church and movements to preserve traditional morality.

A major formal inspiration for Art Nouveau was the idea of nature as an endless source of design ideas, especially in its flora and fauna and, above all, in its sinuosity, its development of asymmetric, flowing lines which subvert attempts at static rectilinear structures (a feature which brought it very close in some respects to aspects of Mucha's inheritance from Moravian folklore).

The principal ornamental characteristic of Art Nouveau is the asymmetrically undulating line terminating in a whiplike, energy-laden movement. . . . And yet this undulating line is only an external and limited aspect of Art Nouveau. However fascinating the ornamentation may be, it contains a deeper interest when seen in a larger context—in relation to an actual surface or to a three-dimensional object. In the latter case the ornament may flame, grow, coil, or nestle caressingly round the object. The style, in fact, has a tendency to engulf and transform the object and its material, until this material becomes an obedient mass in the thrall of linear rhythm. . . . The ornamentation is always alive, restless, and at the same time balanced. . . . Unlike the static ornamentation of nearly all other stylistic periods, in Art Nouveau it is always at one and the same time moving and in a state of equilibrium. Deep down there is a striving to subdue movement by means of well balanced harmony. . . . (Madsen 15)

The term 'flowering' aptly describes an art that was fundamentally inspired by nature. Hence, the cultivation of a sense of intimacy in the second half of the nineteenth century by means of sombre wall-hangings, curtains overlaid with trimmings, heavy upholstery and indoor gardens full of green plants, finally gave way to the need to observe the outside world. All decoration was henceforth inspired by the forms of branches, flowers and leaves. The straight line disappeared giving way to entanglements of convolvulus an divy, to bouquets of iris and cow-parsley. Sculptors responded joyfully by intermingling the female body with forms of plant life and only tolerating a flat surface if it could be decorated with marquetry, depicting a landscape

or flowers with the vividness of a painting. There was a sense of breaking free, of rejecting all styles derived from the past, of renouncing tired formulas that had been practised for too long. A new type of furniture appeared, like some mysterious plant springing up from the vegetation. Objects such as lamps and vases assumed the forms of the tulip, cyclamen and iris. Fabrics and wall-papers brought the colour and gaiety of flowers into the interior of the house, newly opened to the light of day. Such was the infatuation with nature that fashionable ladies were seen to appear sporting complete gardens on their heads. . . . (Challié 7)

This emphasis on ornamentation and linear patterning was not merely decorative. For many Art Nouveau artists the essence of the style was the symbolic content in the pattern, which emerges as a visual metaphor charged with spiritual energy and meaning:

Optimism and fatigue are symbolized by two movements, an upward one and a downward one, which occur together in serpentine sinusoids between two poles which attract alternately, thus formulating the profile of the movement which can be seen in all structural and decorative elements. The two mutually complementary poles are connected with specific human destinies. Another aspect of this characteristic is Art Nouveau's relationship with music which acts as a catalyst of human experience. Music breeds rhythmic movement and heartbeat. Art Nouveau is primarily a mimic art which evokes, assumes, and in the end leads to a certain way of human behaviour. (Franco Borsi, quoted Mucha 126)

How useful such a comment is for understanding particular works is open to debate, but it is a reminder that, at least in the eyes of its practitioners, Art Nouveau was never about mere decoration. Given its sense of having an important social and political purpose and the emphasis on symbols of spiritual energy, most Art Nouveau stands diametrically opposed to the notion of Art for Art's sake. It placed an enormous emphasis in the possibilities for spiritual renewal through the new art and hence was for many people, not simply a particular style, but a way of life. One of the most eloquent and original embodiments of this vision is the Bilek Villa in Prague, built in 1912 by the sculptor Frantisek Bilek according to a design based explicitly on the creator's very personal spiritual symbolism.

[Parenthetically, we should observe that, for all his sturdy assertions of independence, Mucha, along with other Art Nouveau artists, was very drawn to Henri Cazalis and his organization Societe Internationale de l'Art Populaire, a group committed to infusing art with a strong sense of social purpose. As Jiri Mucha observes, "Now, with . . . occultism on the one hand and Lahor's Art Social on the other, his craving for ideal motives was at least partly satisfied" (123)]

As Madsen goes on to point out, this emphasis on dynamic patterning of lines and natural shapes sometimes led to a very abstract and structural-symbolic art, sometimes to a very floral and organic art (especially in France) or to linear two-dimensional art, and sometimes to a constructive and geometrical art (18-20), so that there is an enormous range included under this one label. Art Nouveau furniture or glassware, for example, ranges all the way from elaborately patterned and deliberately floral designs to much sparer geometric forms, with no immediate reference to the sensuous particularity of nature. And in architecture the term Art Nouveau includes everything from the excessively dynamic designs of the famous Spanish architect Antonio Gaudi, who turned several buildings in Barcelona into a showcase of his unique style, to the much "cleaner" Sezession-style buildings of Jan Kotera in Prague (more about this later).

This new style was given many different names and nicknames (often derogatory) in different places. The following is a partial list (from Madsen and others): *Paling stijl* (eel style), *Schnörkelstil* (scroll style), *Bandwurmstil* (tape worm style), *gereizter Regenwurm* (popping up earthworm), *Moderne Strumpfbanlinien* (modern suspender line), *Jugendstil* (young style), *Neu Stil* (new style), *Neudeutsche Kunst* (new German art), *Sezessionstil* (secession style), *Stile floreale* (floral style), *Stile Inglese* (English style), *Liberty Style*, *Yachting Style*, *Style Métro*, *Noodle Style*, *Lilienstil* (Lily style). The name *Art Nouveau* itself derives from the name of a shop in Paris owned by Samuel Bing, who in 1895 renamed the store Art Nouveau. The popularity of the style and the store helped to make the name apply more widely than originally intended (at least in France). Bing commented later:

At its birth Art Nouveau had no pretensions to being a generic term. It was simply the name of an establishment opened as a rallying point for youth keen to show their modern approach. (quoted Madsen 28)

This emphasis on the energetic and dynamic patterning of lines was fuelled, too, by the revival of interest in Celtic art and the passion throughout Europe and America for Japanese art, especially its decorative elements, its exoticism, and its conception of space (see Madsen 58 ff)—all these seemed to offer artistic inspiration to those wishing to turn away from conventional 19<sup>th</sup> century art and to find ways of bringing fresh and exciting and morally purposeful visual beauty into an age increasingly dominated by the industrial city and the machine.

These various trends are well illustrated in the way in which Art Nouveau pictured women—and portraits of women are astonishingly frequent in the new art (especially in Mucha's work). Here again, there is a wide range of treatment, but one common image in Art Nouveau is a single woman as the focus of the patterned lines, so that the figure or the face is an integral part of the pattern and derives from it a particular focus, strength, and intensity. Many of the best known paintings from Art Nouveau (including Mucha's work) feature portraits of women

There is a often a powerful sense of sexuality in these pictures—from Beardsley's decadence in the illustrations for Salome to the robust health and charm of Mucha's country girls to Klimt's open eroticism. However much we might want to delve into the psychological pressures promoting some of these visions of women, what I find particularly interesting about many of these portraits is the directness of the gaze and the confidence in the posture—these women are indeed sexual, but they don't strike me as mere playthings or objects, nor do they offer us demure Victorian rectitude. They have about them a sense of themselves, of their own passionate natures and their own power. The energy latent in the patterning serves to charge them with a sometimes disturbing power and independence.

Klimt created an ideal type in his Viennese woman: the modern female, slender as an ephebe—he painted creatures of an enigmatic charm—the word 'vamp' was not yet known but Klimt created the type of a Greta Garbo, a Marlene Dietrich long before they existed in reality. (Bertha Zuckerkanndl, quoted in Frodl 77)

Parenthetically, one might note here the importance of these female illustrations in advertisements (a particularly marked element in Mucha's posters). Here, for almost the first time we have major artists creating, as part of their most lucrative and famous work, sexually charged portraits of women to sell market commodities (from cigarettes and liquor to train tickets and bicycles). Again, this is something we have grown accustomed to (depressingly so), but much of Mucha's popularity rested on the power of these fresh images in his advertisements (a reminder of how capitalism can simultaneously serve to liberate people from old ideas and traditional images and attitudes, while at the same time creating new problems).

Another area where Art Nouveau had a direct and lasting impact was in architecture, particularly in its tendency to develop the structural elements in the construction (especially iron) so that they served also as ornamentation for the building, an "architectural symbolism of structure" (Madsen 104). In addition, in some Art Nouveau architecture, especially with its most famous (or notorious) practitioner Gaudi, the body of the building is developed as something very dynamic, sinuous, and rhythmic, often with rounded corners and very non-traditional designs.

Art Nouveau architecture expresses a radical division at the heart of the movement's desire to reject conventional historical models and return to nature, a paradox emerging out of precisely what "appealing to nature" or "returning to reality" involved.

The interest of the modern movement in the world of plants and nature in general had, without doubt, a deeper symbolic meaning. It appears that this was an expression of the romanticism of the time, a visual representation of the myth of nature as a paradise, which was seen as a place of refuge by the same people who only a few years earlier dreamt about the bygone world of the Prague Gothic, Renaissance, and baroque. . . . But the wider contemporary concept of nature as "life" and "reality," including the reality of physical laws to which nature is subject and which modern architecture—albeit timidly at first—tried to express, suggests also a different interpretation of naturalism in the modern movement. Already in 1899, the critic K. B. Madl considered modern architecture to be a "realistic architecture" that sought a precise form for "the support and weight, their differences, transitions, and dimensions," and whose decorative aspect, spare, precise and atmospheric, "found its point of departure in the real world." It appears that the early modern attitude toward nature, or rather toward reality, was characterized by a certain duality: in it romanticism mingled with realism, dreams with actuality. (Svacha 61)

This perceptive observation helps to account for the co-existence within Art Nouveau of some of the features we have mentioned earlier, elaborately naturalistic floral designs together with increasingly pure geometric form. And it enables one to understand how the reactions against Art Nouveau, particularly the emphasis on certain forms of ornamentation, could arise from the within the most cherished ideas of the "movement." For some of the harshest attacks on Art Nouveau were inspired by a strong reaction against the way some forms of it promoted excessive ornamentation (which, in turn, was often associated with sexual decadence). The following excerpt (which may reveal more about the writer than about Art Nouveau) comes from a well-known and often quoted essay ("Ornament and Crime") by Czech-Austrian architect Adolf Loos (b. 1870), who was determined to show that anyone with "an inner urge to smear the walls with erotic symbols" was hopelessly depraved:

It is natural that this instinct become unleashed and evokes such displays of degeneracy mainly public facilities. We can measure the culture of a nation according to the degree of wall scribbling in the the lavatories. With children it is a natural phenomenon, their first artistic expressions are erotic symbols scribbled on a wall. But what is . . . normal with a child becomes a manifestation of degeneracy in modern man. I have come to the following conclusion which I am donating to mankind as a present: the development of culture is concurrent with the removal of ornaments from objects of daily use. . . . the first ornament born, the cross . . . is of erotic origin. The horizontal line is a lying woman, the vertical one, a man penetrating her . . . (Adolf Loos, quoted Mucha 128).

Madsen lists some other important features of Art Nouveau architecture, as follows (in brief): an emphasis on asymmetry and flattened arches, a tendency to merge one room into another, so as to create a more organic sense of the division of space (which was accompanied by an organic principle in the ground plan—the attempt to make the building seem to rise from the ground), and the use of the façade as a decorative surface to celebrate the "symbolic value of ornament."

Prague is famous for its Art Nouveau architecture, and many of the most important buildings from the turn of the century are excellent tributes to the style. In some famous examples, the Art Nouveau elements are combined with traditional historical styles to create florid dramatic architectural statements, for example, the famous [Municipal House](#), in which new style serves to heighten the appearance of a design still deeply rooted in the late Renaissance and baroque (see Svacha 39). The similarities between the new style and some elements of the Gothic and the baroque made such combinations attractive to those promoting developments in the prevailing historical styles, projects designed to meet the demand for new buildings that would contribute to the rich architectural traditions of the city.

A transition away from Art Nouveau was realized in the work of Jan Kotera, who became Prague's most famous Art Nouveau architect and, at the same time, shifted the emphasis from the natural lyricism most closely associated with the new style into something that more obviously anticipated future directions in modernism.

Against the "aesthetic of impression" he posed the demand for truthfulness. . . . Against excessive respect for tradition and mere combining of historical features he posed the demand for creativity, a characteristically modern argument, as the modernists did not recognize the return to tradition as a creative act. Finally, against the primary interest in the facade and its decoration, he articulated the need to start with the purpose of the building, with the space and its constructive expression. . . . In his analysis, Kotera described architects' work as "creation of space," then "construction of space" based on "the eternal natural theme of support and weight," and, finally, he mentioned "decoration, adornment," the function of which was to articulate and enhance "mass defined in clearly constructive terms." (Svacha 48)

In Kotera's work and in the work of his pupils (as Svacha points out) Art Nouveau architecture moved seamlessly from sensuous and ornamental tributes to nature (at least in the exterior appearance of buildings) to "a world of rationally abstracted tectonic forces, and the softly shaped silhouette was replaced with a solid, geometrically defined body."

It is not my concern here to trace the history of Art Nouveau (since our main focus is on Mucha, to whom we shall return in a moment). But it's interesting that this explosive, visionary, and widespread movement died off even more quickly than it had at first appeared. By 1905, the popularity of the style was largely over in Paris. The movement was kept alive by a few artists, at least until the outbreak of war in 1914, but that ended it. Given its significant popularity in all sorts of artistic fields, one might well wonder why Art Nouveau disappeared so quickly.

Because Art Nouveau was highly individualist, based above all on the artist, its practitioners could not solve the problem of machines and the mass production of common consumer objects. Hence, Art Nouveau style "never became a style for the masses, but remained an 'artist's' style for the select few . . . . To a large extent it was a jewellery style, a deluxe furniture style, a style for connoisseurs of glassware and elegant textiles" (Madsen 234). Once the initial artistic excitement and feeling of liberation had passed, there emerged a sense that Art Nouveau artists had not really jettisoned the traditional notions of ornament but had simply created a new style of ornamentation—and a very expensive style at that.

This judgment is undoubted too severe, for Art Nouveau made important contributions to the development of some areas of modern art and architecture—particularly in its break with prevailing styles—and is historically an important transition point in the development of modern art:

Even though the Art Nouveau style in architecture and painting points the way to the twentieth century, this is not where it belongs. Nor does it belong to the nineteenth century. Art Nouveau is an independent transitional phenomenon, a separate style which had deep roots in the nineteenth century as far as theory of art, art history, and the history of style are concerned, but whose entire aim was to shake off its stylistic heritage and create something completely new. Just as certainly as it had its roots in Historicism, so Art Nouveau foreshadowed the Modern Movement. In many respects, it led the way into the twentieth century, clearing the ground and preparing for the artistic development we have all experienced. (Madsen 238)

It may be true also that Art Nouveau never really resolved the central dilemma of form and content in its art and hence was overtaken by the inevitable developments of artistic modernism, the trend towards increasing abstraction in art and purism in architecture. The following comment on the work of Gustav Klimt might well be applied to the entire movement:

Torn between content and form, he embraced the latter, only to find that it led him nowhere. Klimt was not able to make the great leap: to perceive form as content and thereby progress toward true abstraction. He was thus ultimately unable to solve the riddle of *fin-de-siecle* art, for the alternative path—content as form—would be explored not by him but by the Expressionists. The great paradox of Klimt's career was that, while he failed to effectively link up with later modernism, he nonetheless anticipated its two principal trends: abstraction and Expressionism. (Kallir 11)

Jiri Mucha suggests also that the rapid decline of Art Nouveau had less to do with the artistic style itself than with the "idealistic sermons and theological messianism" that often accompanied it. As the politics of the early twentieth century became increasingly cruel and confused, people turned away quickly from what seemed to many a strange, naïve, and ornamental irrelevance.

#### MUCHA AND SLAV NATIONALISM: THE SLAV EPIC

As mentioned above, Mucha did not see himself as a follower of Art Nouveau, nor did he seem to take much interest in its theoretical principles. However, his art was certainly influenced by the spirit of the time, a force that fed his naturally passionate convictions about the vital spiritual purpose of art, a belief that led him to devote considerable energy attempting to promote reforms in the teaching of art in France and to publish books illustrating his design principles.

What sets Mucha apart from almost all other artists in the "movement," however, is another passion which increasingly dominated his personal and working life—his commitment to Slavic culture. He was deeply convinced, no doubt on the basis of his own experience, that art should not concern itself with what was merely new but should develop itself out of old ethnic and national traditions: "The Ecole Estienne," he wrote (in his reform proposals for Paris art schools) "is standing guard over a corpse . . . . It is good to cultivate tradition in art, but at the same time . . . the tradition must be that of the art of your ancestors and one must wish to conserve life by helping forward its organic evolution (quoted Mucha 181). Given such a nationalistic view of art, Mucha had little time for the notion of an art which sought to transcend ethnic and national boundaries, "There is therefore no such thing as international art. Such art can always only be the victory of the stronger and the absorption of the weaker."

In 1900, at the height of his fame as an internationally known artist, Mucha decided to prepare for his commission to create the Bosnia-Herzegovina pavilion for the World Exhibition in Paris by touring the Balkans. On this trip Mucha was inspired to commit himself and his art to his Slav heritage. The decision was accompanied by a sense of disillusionment with the style which had made him famous and rich (perhaps the disillusionment prompted the visionary insight). Upon returning to Paris he wrote to a friend about what had happened:

It was midnight, and there I was all alone in my studio in the rue du Val-de-Grace among my pictures, posters and panels. I became very excited. I saw my work adorning the salons of the highest society or flattering people of the great world with smiling and ennobled portraits. I saw the books full of legendary scenes, floral garlands and drawings glorifying the beauty and tenderness of women. This was what my time, my precious time, was being spent on, when my nation . . . was left to quench its thirst on ditch water. And in my spirit I saw myself sinfully misappropriating what belonged to my people. . . . I was midnight and, as I stood there looking at all these things, I swore a solemn promise that the remainder of my life would be filled exclusively with work for the nation. (quoted Sayer 19)

While this experience did not lead to an immediate change in Mucha's artistic output or style, the newly acquired commitment to his countrymen led Mucha to spend a major part of the rest of his life concerned with Czech art, particularly because, in his eyes, it was being dangerously corrupted by foreign, especially German influence. So he hurled his energies into advancing the cause of art in his own country.

Here, however, he ran into a difficult obstacle—the Czech people themselves, who, while justly proud of the fact that one of their countrymen was the best known and most popular artist in Paris and an international celebrity, regarded him as someone who had, in effect, "sold out" by leaving the country and becoming famous elsewhere (another example of what seems to be a pronounced tradition in Czech culture generally, up to and including Milan Kundera). In addition, defenders of what was Czech in Czech culture were often, as Jiri Mucha points out, hopelessly parochial in what they required for art to qualify as some expression of their national character (e.g., peasants in costume, sentimental images of Czech history):

This was the great paradox of Czech nationalism. In its blindness and thinly-veiled chauvinism it branded every demonstration of personality as non-Czech, since from the frog's-eye view of its own puddle such manifestations had certainly very little to do with Czech reality. (198)

When Mucha visited Prague (in 1902) he had to confront this attitude of his countrymen directly (and not for the last time). The fact that many of them considered him a Frenchman was a painful wound to someone with such faith in his Slavic identity and such a desire to put his work into the service of his country. Later, when Mucha was given the commission to design the decorations for the New Municipal Building in Prague, there was an outburst of public criticism at the choice, in spite of the fact that Mucha refused any payment for the work (other than his immediate expenses).

There is a certain irony here in the fact that an artist so committed to spiritual and nationalistic goals should have become internationally famous largely on the basis of his advertisements, posters, and decorative designs in the service of the market place. His inspiration may have been, as he constantly asserted, themes and designs from the folk lore of his Czech past, but that is not how all of his countrymen viewed his work. This tension, it seems clear, affected Mucha himself and made him sensitive to the charge that he was becoming far too commercial (as his comments quoted above appear to indicate). What compounds this irony, of course, is that the more Mucha dedicated his talent to his country, the more the quality of his art appeared to suffer, at least in the view of a number of commentators (more about that later).

Given Mucha's commitment to the spiritual function of art and to the Slavic people, he found it relatively easy to move on away from Paris into other projects. Hence, his career was not adversely affected by the rapid loss of interest in Art Nouveau. His post-Paris career began with one of many visits to America (in 1904) in search of inspiration and (of course) more money—Mucha's spending habits left him in constant need of fresh commissions, and America seemed a lucrative market.

Mucha did get work in America and in fact, while there said farewell to a purely Art Nouveau style—according to Jiri Mucha, the decoration for the German theatre in New York was the last work he did in this style—and committed himself to a single project that would take him most of his life to complete—his series of monumental paintings on the history of the Slav people, a work known as the *Slav Epic*. In America he also had another great stroke of good fortune: he met the man who was prepared to provide the funding for this massive project. This patron was the rather odd and (in some people's eyes) sinister American millionaire Charles R. Crane, who had made a fortune in plumbing. He used his money to promote political upheavals and revolutions around the world (among the Chinese, Kurds, and Turks, for example). A meeting with Thomas Masaryk, a professor of philosophy at Charles University (and later the first president of an independent Czechoslovakia) had aroused Crane's interest in promoting Slav nationalism. In Mucha he believed he had found an artist whose passionate imagination could lend fire to the movement.

At any event, with Crane's backing, Mucha returned to Prague in 1910 to work on his *Slav Epic* paintings (the largest of which was eight metres by six metres). While he continued to work on portraits and posters and other commissions, this massive project remained the centre of his creative life for over twenty years, and he often worked nine or ten hours a day on the series (Mucha 277). The paintings, some of which had been on display in America and Chicago earlier in the 1920s, were officially handed over to the people of Czechoslovakia on 1 September 1928, a free gift from Mucha to the newly independent Czech nation.

[*The Slav Epic*] has twenty paintings, ten on Czech subjects, ten on broader Slavic themes. The first depicts "The Slavs in Their Original Homeland . . ." and carries the subtitle "Between the Knout of the Turks and the Sword of the Goths." The last is "The Apotheosis of the History of the Slavs." In between this somber beginning and translucent ending, Mucha paints an odyssey that runs from paganism through "The Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy (Praise God in Thy Native Tongue)" . . . to "The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia, 1861. . . ." He depicts the Bulgarian czar Simeon (888-927), the coronation of the Serbian czar Stephen Dushan (1346), and the defense of Sziget against the Turks by the Croatian hero Nicholas Zrinski (1566). But it is his choice of Czech subjects which is most interesting. Six of the canvases are on broadly Hussite themes ("Jan Milic of Kromeriz 1372," "Master Jan Hus Preaching in the Bethlehem Chapel 1412," "The Meeting at Krizky 1419," "After the Battle of Vitkov 1420," "Petr Chelicky at Vodnany 1433," and "The Hussite King Jiri z Podebrad 1462"). Two more ("The Printing of the Kralicka Bible at Ivancice 1578" and "Jan Amos Komensky--Last Days in Naarden 1670") invoke the legacy of the Union of Brethren and the tragedy of Czech Protestant exiles after [the Battle of White Mountain]. Premysl Otakar II, perhaps the most famous of the Premyslidkings, is also included for "Unity of the Slav Dynasties 1261." (Sayer 152)

The reaction to the paintings was mixed (and remains so up to the present time). Jiri Mucha comments that the press was generally receptive and favourable but that the paintings did attract a wide range of negative comments as well. To the socialists and communists, the work was "a tool of the reaction . . . the banner of those who most impede and prevent the development of art" (*Rude pravo*, the official publication of the Communist Party, quoted Mucha 277), and the works were no more popular at the other end of the political spectrum: J. R. Marek, a writer for the extreme right-wing group commented on "an insoluble contradiction between the beautiful and certainly ardently felt contents, and an externally theatrical execution" (quoted Mucha 277).

It's important to remember the charged political climate of the time, with Fascists, Communists, Social-Democrats, Slav Nationalists, ethnic Germans and Czechs, among others, all competing for the political soul of the new Czechoslovakia. Where one stood on the question of the country's most internationally famous artist and his vision of the national soul was an important indication of one's political convictions. And, of course, for those experimenting in new styles in art in a new cosmopolitan and international spirit, the *Slav Epic* was a useful example of everything they considered wrong with traditional art, not merely in terms of aesthetic style but also in its inspiring idea, Slav nationalism, which for many was by now a sentimental illusion.

In modern times, the mixed response remains. Jiri Mucha quotes the following passage (written by Jana Brabcova in 1980):

The public of Mucha's homeland received the Epic with mixed emotions, one can even say with disfavor for the most part. They looked at it as a work whose ideas and intentions were out of tune with the time of its origin. But they were aware of the sincerity and the honest effort that went into the creation of the whole series. It came to be viewed as one of those controversial artistic errors which make us feel both respect and pity for the amount of work expended on it. (277)

Even Jiri Mucha himself, a tireless champion of his father's work (without whose intense efforts we might not know much about Alfons Mucha), expresses his own reservations about some of his father's later work (including, one assumes, aspects of the *Slav Epic*):

A certain negative reaction which I share to some of father's later work cannot be ascribed to the message which he put in it but to its insufficient artistic execution. Like Tolstoy, he sacrificed form to didactic content. His professional skill was such that he no longer needed to solve any problem of colour or line but just keep pushing his fixed idea on the people: solidarity between nations whose historic misfortunes had been the result of permanent discord. He believed that the time had come for the Slavonic element to steer the course of history. . . . He was, to me, a sinister warning against the mistake an artist should never commit. But I must stress that I am speaking here only of one aspect—of a few of his pictures from his later period. (286)

The final word here on these extraordinary paintings should come from Derek Sayer's perceptive observations, which seek to place them in the grander narrative of modern Czech culture:

That Mucha freely mingles pagan, Orthodox, Catholic, and Protestant references in a paean to Slavism is interesting. On one level his indiscriminate plundering testifies to just how secularized religion had by then become. But it equally witnesses the ascension of the national and the ethnic into the realm of the sacred. . . . The paintings . . . are not historical illustrations but the exact opposite: history serves in them as itself the illustration of the national and Slavonic Idea that animates them. But Mucha paints with such power and beauty that this space, and the idea which structures it, becomes real; very much more real, in its immediate and imposing presence, than the distant history it reorders (and disorders). . . . an ideal coherence is hypostasized out of fragmented, fluid, and localized particulars, then variously reified and compellingly re-presented. Henceforth it is only within the semantic space thus reconstructed that these particulars—a girl's dress, a nursery rhyme, a legend, a date, a manner of speaking—come to signify at all. (153)

In addition to this extraordinary gift to the Czech people, Mucha worked tirelessly and without commission on a large number of special projects for the newly created government, designing everything from bank notes and stamps to the national emblem and the police uniforms. One interesting tale from these projects concerns the design of the new Czech money in 1918. The demand for a design was so urgent that an earlier portrait of Mrs Josephine Crane Bradley, representing the traditional figure Slavia, was the main symbol on the 100 crown note (Mucha 236).

When the Nazis occupied Czechoslovakia and divided the country up into Bohemia and Moravia and Slovakia (in 1939) Mucha was one of the first of those arrested by the Gestapo. He was released shortly afterwards, but became ill with pneumonia. He died on July 14, 1939, just before his seventy-ninth birthday. In July 1939 his countrymen gave him a hero's funeral as a "a great Czech" (quoted Sayer 22) in a large public ceremony in Vysehrad Cemetery in Prague, where the most important creative artists among the Czech people are buried. His eulogy, Sayer notes, was delivered by Max Svabinsky on behalf of the Czech Academy of Arts and Science. It ended as follows:

Maestro! You have brought to an end a great work and are departing to eternal sleep. The Czech nation and Prague are burying you in the most sacred place, in Vysehrad, in the most noble place, in the Slavin [burial vault for great Czech artists]. In Vysehrad, seat of the Princess Libuse [a mythical Czech heroine], you will talk with Bedrich Smetana, with Antonin Dvorak, with the great Mikolas Ales, with Jaroslav Vrchlicky, with Josef Myslbek, with the young Jan Stursa and with the whole company of our great minds. You will look at Hradcany and Saint Vitus Cathedral. Dark autumn clouds will scud above your head and winter will cover Slavin with ermine snow, but spring will come again, the meadows and woods will flower in the Czech land, in Vysehrad the lilac will bloom and the honeysuckle will bloom on Ales's grave. In Vysehrad nightingales will sing. Rest sweetly in eternal peace! The Czech nation has never forgotten its great sons and never will forget them. Let it be so! (quoted Sayer 20)

The tribute here (as Sayer reminds us) is more a product of the historical moment, however, than a tribute to the popularity or national significance of Mucha's art. For the funeral of Alfons Mucha was, first and foremost, an assertion of the Czech identity in the early months of a brutal Nazi occupation—a moment of popular passive resistance, an act of defiance against the occupying authorities who had banned all public demonstrations (22). Once the historical situation changed, the work of Alfons Mucha was shoved aside, and no government officials after World War II bothered about finding a suitable place to house his massive gift to the nation (it remained rolled up in storage for more than twenty-five years, before being put on permanent display in the remote town of Moravsky Krumlov, near Brno). To judge from the lack of interest in exhibiting his work or celebrating his memory inside Czechoslovakia, particularly in contrast to the frequent displays of and interest in his work in the West, one would have to conclude that his impact on his countrymen's sense of themselves and their culture has been insignificant (see Sayer 249 ff). But then again, that may well be the result of one more of the twisted ironies of Czech history rather than anything to do with the formal properties of the works themselves:

The reasons why Alfons Mucha was all but obliterated from official national memory after 1948 . . . cannot have been those for which his work was criticized earlier by his more modernistic Czech contemporaries. . . . the media through which art was made public were controlled by the state, that is to say the Communist party of Czechoslovakia. . . . If an artist of Mucha's stature was "forgotten" it was not by accident. Nor will it have had overly much to do with questions of aesthetics. Alfons Mucha was an incidental causality of a much wider war for the soul of the nation. (Sayer 257)

That "war for the soul of the nation" is not over, of course, and, judging from the many unexpected turns of Czech history, it would be unwise to declare any cultural door permanently closed. Mucha's work is still extremely popular in the West (especially with the renewed interest in Art Nouveau), and there is now a modest Mucha Museum in Prague itself (operated by the artist's grandson). His dream of Slav nationalism is long out of date, of course (as it was at the time he donated his mythical re-interpretation of Czech history to his countrymen). No doubt, there is much irony in the story so far. Now that so many Slavic people have gained political and national independence and the Czech Republic has become truly a Czech nation, Mucha's vision of the emancipation and free expression for Slav people is a reality in his own land. On the other hand, one does wonder what he would think about the spiritual consequences of those trends propelling his country more and more into the sphere of Western corporate capitalism, the greatest homogenizing force the world has ever seen. With his own commercial work in the service of that economic enterprise still very popular and his *Slav Epic* an increasingly sought out tourist destination for Western visitors, the ironies of Mucha's position in the history of modern Czech culture are evident enough.

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