

## ALPHONSE MUCHA (1860 – 1939)

Alphonse Maria Mucha was born in the town of Ivančice, Moravia (today's region of the Czech Republic). Although his singing abilities allowed him to continue his education through high school in the Moravian capital of Brunn, 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. 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 jewelry, carpets, wallpaper, and theatre sets in what was initially called the *Mucha Style* but became known as *Art Nouveau* (French for 'new art'). 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." His Art Nouveau style was often imitated. The Art Nouveau style however, was one that Mucha attempted to distance himself from throughout his life; he always insisted that rather than adhering to any fashionable stylistic form, his paintings came purely from within and Czech art. He declared that art existed only to communicate a spiritual message, and nothing more; hence his frustration at the fame he gained through commercial art, when he most wanted to concentrate on more lofty projects that would ennoble art and his birthplace.

Mucha married Maruška (Marie/Maria) Chytilová on June 10, 1906, in Prague. The couple visited the U.S. from 1906 to 1910. In the U.S. Alphonse expected to earn money to fund his nationalistic projects to demonstrate to the 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. 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.