

**POSTER**



**Past  
Exhibition**

**HOUSE**

# Alphonse Mucha

Art Nouveau / Nouvelle Femme

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June 20–October 6, 2019

The stylized, confident women of **Alphonse Mucha**'s posters changed the landscape of modern advertising and made him the most important graphic designer of the Art Nouveau period. When he arrived in Paris at the height of the **Belle Époque**, the city was the center of a rich industrial economy, where women were exploring new social independence and agency.

**"A good poster cannot  
just be an enlarged illustration."  
—Alain Weill**

The image of this **Nouvelle Femme** (New Woman) became a staple in Mucha's work, replacing the submissive advertising ladies of previous years who enticed the viewer with girlish, passive sexuality. His method of presenting self-satisfied, strong females can be traced back to his collaborations with Sarah Bernhardt, the most famous actress of that time. Together, she and Mucha crafted her public image of a successful, independent woman many times over, ultimately bringing that practice into his other commercial work.



**Alphonse Mucha**

*Image courtesy of Barchive / Alamy Stock Photo*

Defined by bold, sinuous lines inspired by nature, Art Nouveau celebrated the feminine unbound. In the wake of the Industrial Revolution, “le style Mucha” came to dominate the European and American aesthetic landscape between the 1890s–1910s, and Mucha is credited for bringing the bourgeois sophistication of the Art Nouveau movement to the streets and democratizing it. No longer was this wild, haughty beauty confined to the upper classes. In fact, the women he conjured were so compelling and his technical skill as a lithographic artist so admired that his advertisements were reprinted as home decor, blurring the line between fine and commercial art. This show explores that watershed moment when a new type of woman burst into the advertising scene, and how Mucha became the premiere practitioner of the style.

**#PHMucha**

This exhibition is made possible through a loan from the **Richard Fuxa Foundation**, a charitable organization dedicated to the preservation and promotion of Czech cultural heritage, and the steward of the largest collection of the works of Alphonse Mucha. Unless otherwise noted, all works in this show belong to the Foundation.

# Alphonse Mucha

& Sarah Bernhardt

**“I predict you will be famous.”**

—Sarah Bernhardt

From 1876 until she died in 1922, Sarah Bernhardt was the most famous performer in the world. She was not only talented, but also a savvy marketer, constantly embracing new technologies to stay in the spotlight. She frequently staged photographs of herself (once in a coffin!) and experimented with early silent film. She was also the first Modern star to use posters to promote legitimate theater, as opposed to the bawdy cabaret shows celebrated by Toulouse-Lautrec and Chéret.

In fact, prior to meeting Mucha, Bernhardt had already hired famous poster artists like Eugène Grasset, but was never satisfied with the results. Mucha created a bold, unprecedented style for his collaborations with Bernhardt, much different from his previous work, which was more painterly. For Bernhardt, he employed strong lines, an unusually elongated vertical format, and subtle coloring to create countless identities for the actress over the five years they worked together (1895–1900). This aesthetic changed the face of advertising and launched Mucha into superstardom.



**Sarah Bernhardt**

*Image courtesy of TCS 2. Houghton Library, Harvard University*

## Mucha's First Poster for Sarah Bernhardt

Mucha had been working as a struggling illustrator in Paris for a few years, living in relative poverty. On Christmas Eve in 1894, he was in the Lemercier printing firm correcting proofs when the manager told him that Sarah Bernhardt needed a new poster for her play **Gismonda**, which was reopening on New Year's Day. Mucha had already seen the play, and he was also the only available artist in town on such short notice. What resulted is a poster that captivated Paris.

At first, the printer did not like the design because it broke with typical poster "rules" which utilized bold colors and simple, vibrant images. Bernhardt, however, loved it—and so did the public, who began clamoring for their own copies. Always one to capitalize on a publicity stunt, Bernhardt ordered 4,000 more posters to be printed for private sale. Only 3,450 were delivered to her, though, causing her to sue the printer, whom she never worked with again.



“The public reaction was instantaneous...  
nothing like it had been seen before.”

—Jiří Mucha

### Gismonda, 1894

**Gismonda** is the story of a Byzantine Duchess who makes a promise to marry whoever saves her child from a tiger pit. When a commoner completes the task, she tries to get out of her vow. Shown is the final scene on Palm Sunday when she agrees to marry the hero, whom she now loves, after she has killed her son's would-be murderers.



### Médée, 1898

- Medea (Médée) features in the Greek myth of Jason and the Argonauts. She was so in love with Jason that she helped him retrieve the Golden Fleece, allowing him to become king. When he leaves her for another woman, Medea takes revenge on him by murdering his children.
- Rewritten by Catulle Mendès, this 1898 version of the classic tale was the first to depict Medea as a sympathetic figure driven to desperation by a heartless man.
- Bernhardt loved the snake bracelet Mucha designed for this poster so much that she had the jeweler Fouquet recreate it as part of her costume; it also worked to hide the arthritis in her wrist.





Left: **Hamlet**, 1899

- The play was an adaptation of Shakespeare by Eugène Morand and Marcel Schwob, written in contemporary French.
- The bottom panel shows a dead Ophelia, while the background behind Bernhardt depicts Elsinore at night during the ghost scene.
- This was the last theatrical poster Much created for Bernhardt.



Right: **Lorenzaccio**, 1896

- Bernhardt frequently played male roles on stage.
- The play, written in 1863, is about Lorenzo the Magnificent, a powerful Medici ruler, who must protect Florence.
- The dragon in the upper left above the coat of arms of Florence represents those threatening the city.



### Tosca, 1898

- Mucha used the photograph on this wall of Bernhardt in costume to design this poster.
- It is the smallest theatrical poster he created for her.
- This Tosca, written by Sardou in 1887 for Bernhardt, predates the Puccini opera by 13 years.



**Sarah Bernhardt as Floria Tosca**

*Digital image courtesy of the Getty's Open Content Program and TCS 2. Houghton Library, Harvard University*

## The Art of Hand-Lettering

Mucha elevates his posters above those of his contemporaries with his deft use of lettering. Text is an integral part of his compositions, and the forms his letters take reflect his drawing style.

Mucha resurrected uncial forms from Ancient Rome in order to achieve letters that have the fluidity of a woman's hair or a swirl of smoke. For instance, see the curled d, rounded e, small h, and rounded m and n in various posters. This is not a mixing of capitals and small letters, but Mucha's intentional revival of a 4th-century calligraphic hand. However, Mucha is not writing but drawing the letters and has made them more sinuous, more organic, more Modern than the ancient forms.

The popularity of Art Nouveau as a style with its radical new letterforms caught the attention of several European type foundries at the turn of the 20th century. While some simply asked their punchcutters to copy the new style (e.g. Berthier's *Métropolitaine* derived from Hector Guimard's Metro station signage), others took the opportunity to hire the artists themselves to design typefaces that were then reproduced pantographically.

The pioneers of this trend were the *Rudhardsche Schriftgiesserei* in Offenbach and *Fonderie F. Peignot et Fils* in Paris with typefaces designed by (and named after) Otto Eckmann and Eugène Grasset in 1900, and by Peter Behrens and George Auriol in 1901. The Grasset typeface, despite its designer's reputation as an Art Nouveau artist, is actually closer in appearance to the new types that emerged from the contemporaneous English Arts & Crafts movement.

—Paul Shaw, Design Historian



Left: **La Dame aux Camélias**, 1896

- As her most popular role, Bernhardt would perform this part over 3,000 times starting in 1880.
- Mucha designed the costumes for this new production, putting her in contemporary dress—a highly unusual and ambitious move.
- Bernhardt loved this design so much that she would use it on programs for other shows at her own theater.

Right: **La Samaritaine**, 1897

- *La Samaritaine* was one of many plays written by Edmond Rostand for Bernhardt, and focuses on a young Jewish woman who converts her entire tribe to Christianity; it premiered during Easter week.
- Bernhardt's mother was Jewish, and she was especially fond of portraying Jewish characters in Biblical plays.
- The Hebrew lettering behind her head spells out *Jahweh*, while the text beside the small male figure next to the vase says *Shaddai*, another name for God.



Bernhardt's fame relied on the consistent public distribution of her image through posters and photographs.

**Judith, 1904**

*Original gouache and ink drawing on paper*

This is a preliminary costume sketch by Mucha; Bernhardt never performed the role, though she enjoyed acting in Biblical stories.



“The posters, designs, and illustrations... had made him in five short years the most admired and fashionable decorative artist in Paris.”

—Jiří Mucha

### Sarah Bernhardt / La Plume, 1896

- While not advertising the play *La Princesse Lointaine*, this poster shows Bernhardt in the costume from Act Three of the production.
- As Mucha was designing the costumes and sets for *La Princesse Lointaine*, while also serving as a co-producer, he did not have time to create a full-sized poster.
- There are three versions of this design: the first announces a banquet given in Bernhardt’s honor at the Grand Hotel, the second announces the December 15, 1896 issue of the literary magazine *La Plume* dedicated to the actress, and the third (shown here) was created without text to be sold to collectors.



Mucha owes his fame to those first seven posters he made for Sarah Bernhardt.

#### Sarah Bernhardt / Lefèvre-Utile, 1903

- This was created around the time when Mucha was turning away from commercial design, wanting instead to be more of a portrait artist.
- Bernhardt is seen in costume for *La Princesse Lointaine*, the same as the piece to the left.
- This is one of the first instances of sanctioned celebrity endorsement in advertising history, Bernhardt's hand-written testimonial saying, "I haven't found anything better than a little LU —oh yes, two little LU."
- LU became the nickname for this brand of biscuits after Mucha shortened its full name in his first poster for the company, on display in the next section.

# Alphonse Mucha

## & Product

After his first poster for Bernhardt appeared on the streets, there was a rush to enlist Mucha to advertise all manner of products with his signature flair and emboldened women. Between 1896 and 1902, he created his most memorable posters for products ranging from cookies to bicycles. In this realm, Mucha's masterful understanding of how women can persuade without being demure or passive intersected with a society opening up to women as an audience with new freedoms and purchasing power.

Mucha portrayed women boldly smoking cigarettes or leaning against a bicycle—the latest invention which allowed for women's increased independence and mobility—and brought a new self-assured power to the female siren in advertising as the Nouvelle Femme. These women relish in their own enjoyment, unconcerned with who might be looking at them.

The products were, in fact, secondary to the women themselves. Mucha felt that if the design was eye-catching, one did not need to show the product—he was selling a sumptuous, elegant, expensive aura, which Paris and his clients ate up with gusto. These posters were markedly different than anything else out there, bringing elements of fine art to outdoor advertising. A design revolution was underway.

## Posters for Lefèvre-Utile

Founded in 1846, Lefèvre-Utile is a successful French cookie company, known for its prolific ad campaigns of the 1890s and beyond. The brand's marketing was highly innovative, capitalizing on the modern interest with celebrity through all manner of advertising techniques—from collectable actor portrait cards to celebrity endorsements.

Mucha used his persuasive female characters to advertise LU cookies (a nickname he coined and which is still popular today), showing them partaking of the libations, not serving them. Mucha further elevated the product by creating elegant environments around the women. In this way he rebranded the cookies as a luxury commodity.



**Lefèvre-Utile, 1897**  
by **Firmin Bouisset**

Poster House Permanent Collection

- This poster was created at the same time as Mucha's designs for the company.
- Unlike Mucha's elegant environments, Bouisset plays up middle class elitism represented in the boy's private school uniform, complete with a good behavior medal.
- While Bouisset's design is a classic still used by the brand today, comparing his poster to Mucha's sensuous fantasy emphasizes how radical and evocative Mucha's posters were for the time.



### Flirt, 1900

- Like his first poster for Lefèvre-Utile, this is a point-of-sale poster meant for indoor display.
- The LU logo appears at least three times in this piece—how many can you find?
- While first printed in 1899, it was reprinted a year later to indicate that it won the Grand Prize at the Exposition Universelle in 1900.



**Left: Biscuits Lefèvre-Utile, 1896**

- This design was reissued a few times with alternate text in the bottom fan, sometimes containing a yearly calendar featuring the various Saints' days.
- Note how her hair and dress are adorned with sickles and stalks of wheat, pointing to the origin of the product.
- A box top from one of the cookies featuring the same woman's head is on view in the display case.

**Right: Lefèvre-Utile / Biscuits Champagne, 1896**

- This is the first of many posters Mucha would create for the cookie company Lefèvre-Utile.
- Mucha would often hide a brand's logo within a poster. There are at least three LUs in this piece —find them!
- This poster was never actually on the streets —it is a point-of-purchase poster meant for display behind a counter or in a shop window.



Mucha's roundel is a rhythmic compositional structure that serves as the backbone in many of his posters.

**Lefèvre-Utile / Gaufrettes Vanille, ca. 1900**

Private Collection, New York



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**Lefèvre-Utile Album, ca. 1903**

Poster House Permanent Collection

One of Lefèvre-Utile's brilliant marketing ideas was the creation of collectible cards featuring prominent celebrities and "testimonials" about their love for the brand's various products. Albums like this were created so that you could build your collection with each new cookie purchase.

Left: **F. Champenois / Rêverie, 1897**



- This is one of Mucha’s most reprinted advertising designs.
- It was originally printed as a promotional item for the Champenois printing firm as a means of celebrating the New Year.
- As Mucha’s popularity grew, his printing firm also sold this design without text under the title Rêverie. Read more about this sales tactic in the Cellar Level Gallery.

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Right: **Lance Rodo, 1896**

- The bottom text reads “automatically perfumes and refreshes without wetting or staining,” indicating that the technology behind the applicator is novel.
- This is one of the earliest posters to feature Mucha’s signature wild hair and haloed background.
- It is his only poster to show a product actually being used.

## Job Posters

Job, a cigarette rolling paper company, hired dozens of artists to create posters for the brand over the years; it even hosted an annual competition to find inventive and exotic ways to promote its product. Displayed here is an array of posters created for Job by other artists from the same time period, which illuminate how different Mucha's approach was.

No one could compete with Mucha's lavish compositions, intricate lithographic details, or deft use of color. The technical detail alone is astounding, as the various color plates in Mucha's posters had to align perfectly in order to create such complex designs. Additionally, most of these other images for Job are smaller in scale, brighter in color palette, and closer in feel to caricature than the subtle, subdued, life-size portraits in Mucha's various advertisements.

**"A secular icon."**

—Jane Abdy



Left: **Job**, 1896

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Right: **Job**, 1896

- This is arguably Mucha's most famous poster.
- The brand's name subtly appears as wallpaper in the background.
- This image was so popular that it was issued in a variety of languages all around the world, including Greek and Arabic.
- The poster would find popularity again in the mid 1960s when it would be reimagined by Alton Kelley and Stanley Mouse in vibrant neon tones to promote a Big Brother and The Holding Company concert.



Left: **Cycles Waverly**, 1898

- This is one of the few times Mucha created a poster for an American brand distributed in Paris.
- The anvil represents strength, the leather bodice toughness, and the laurels the many awards won by the bicycle.
- Bicycles at this time represented a newfound freedom, especially for women, allowing them to travel unchaperoned.
- This woman is stately and lost in her own reverie, not performing for anyone's benefit.

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Right: **Cycles Perfecta**, 1902

- Although both advertising a bicycle, this poster is quite different from the one for Waverly to your left.
- Rather than emphasizing durability or sturdiness, this poster is selling a feeling of pure pleasure, with the female figure happily resting on the handlebars of her bicycle, wind billowing through her hair.



Right: **Bières de la Meuse, 1897**

- This advertises a beer region, not a particular company.
- The barley and hops in her hair are the basic ingredients of beer, while the poppies are indigenous to the North-eastern region of France around the Meuse River.
- The monochrome vignettes of the factory and river goddess are by a different artist and were not included in the before-letters version of the poster, an early printing meant for collectors that featured the artist-designed image without text.

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**The Pious Error, 1899**  
by **Adolphe Willette**

*Gift of Muriel Egan*  
*Poster House Permanent Collection*

- This print was created as a special additional plate for subscribers of *Les Maîtres de l’Affiches*, an album featuring the best advertising art of the Belle Époque as presented by Jules Chéret.
- The print shows a country girl praying before a roadside display of Mucha’s *Bières de la Meuse* poster, which she has mistaken for an image of the Virgin Mary.
- The image speaks to both the innate beauty of each of Mucha’s posters as well as to the fervor with which people collected and revered his designs.



### Monaco Monte-Carlo, 1897

- This design introduces the idea of the glamorous travel poster.
- The arrangement of the lilacs and hydrangeas echo the wheels and tracks of a train.
- The text for the PLM railroad's 16-hour service from Paris to Monaco appears almost as an afterthought, faintly printed over the design in the lower right.



### Vin des Incas, 1897

- This product originally went by the name Coca des Incas, as its main ingredient is coca leaves (the base ingredient in cocaine).
- It was sold in pharmacies to aid “convalescents.”
- The male figure is taken from a photo of a stone slab on display in the Anthropological Museum in Mexico City; interestingly, the figure is Mayan, not Incan.





At the height of his fame, Mucha's studio was a tourist attraction, with people lining up from 9am to 1am, seven days a week to meet and talk with the artist.

### Chocolat Idéal, 1897

- The steam mimics Mucha's signature "macaroni" hair treatment seen in other posters.
- Based in Strasbourg, the company went by Chocolat Idéal in France and Cacao Schaal in Germany in order to avoid alienating either audience. The area ceded from France in 1871, but would go back to being French in 1918.



Left: **Bénédictine**, 1898

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Center: **Trappistine**, 1897

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Right: **Champagne Ruinart**, 1896

- These three posters all play on the double-height format Mucha developed for Sarah Bernhardt.
- Each design reflects some aspect of the alcoholic beverage it advertises: the wild tresses bring to mind the effervescence of champagne, the sharp flat hair echoes the lines of the Maltese cross, the symbol of the Trappist monks that make Trappistine liqueur, and the ladies are pressing flowers which reference the many herbs that make up Bénédictine.



### Moët et Chandon, 1899

- In one of his most stunning poster sets, Mucha contrasts the bounty of a springtime goddess in the field with a regal empress in front of stained glass.
- This type of allegorical representation foreshadows the artist's many decorative panel series on display in the Cellar Level Gallery.



**“Art for him was essentially didactic.”**

—Jiří Mucha

### **Documents Décoratifs, 1901**

This is a selection of some of the 72 plates in the *Documents Décoratifs*, a book created by Mucha at the height of his career so that manufacturers and artists could learn from his style. It became an Art Nouveau Bible, detailing how to produce “le style Mucha.” It was used as a textbook in art schools as well as a manual in factories, allowing for a proliferation of the Art Nouveau movement on a previously unforeseen scale.

While Mucha had hoped that this publication would alleviate some of the demand for new designs, it just fed the fire and added to his tremendous artistic workload.

# Alphonse Mucha

## & Allegory

In 1895, Mucha signed a contract with the Champenois printing firm that put him on retainer to produce anything they wanted—and what they wanted was to mass market the alluring, bold women Mucha created. Champenois brilliantly turned them into special editions for high-end clientele and also sold them to other companies in order to be repackaged and reused to promote an endless array of products.

Most popular were his lavish allegorical panels of dreamy women in timeless dress, all shown in this gallery. Mucha had made a career by putting women at the center of his advertising, and now his women were so popular that they needed neither products nor text to be effective.

Unfortunately, while Mucha approved of the fact that his work could be enjoyed by people from all classes, the constant demand by the printer for new designs led him to utter exhaustion.

Such exploitation would ultimately cause Mucha to leave France in 1904, following the recommendation of Sarah Bernhardt who said he could find fortune as a fine artist in America. Bernhardt actually introduced Mucha's work to American audiences as she had toured there with his posters. After going back and forth between the United States and Europe for a few years, Mucha finally settled in Prague with his family where he completed his great tribute to the Czech people, *The Slav Epic*. Nevertheless, Mucha's women remain his hallmark, and through them he brought indomitable beauty to advertising art.



The Flowers, 1898



The Precious Stones, 1900



**Dawn & Dusk, 1899**



Times of Day, 1899



**The Seasons, 1896**



The Seasons, 1897



**"I was glad that I was engaged in art for the people and not for the closed salon. It was cheap, within everyone's means and found its way into both well-to-do and poor families."**

—Alphonse Mucha

**The Seasons, 1898**



The Seasons, 1900



The Stars, 1902



**The Four Arts, 1898**



His signature “macaroni” hair would become one of the most copied design tropes of the early 20th century.

Zodiac, 1896



Heather & Sea Holly, 1902



**Byzantine Heads, 1897**



Fruit & Flower, 1897



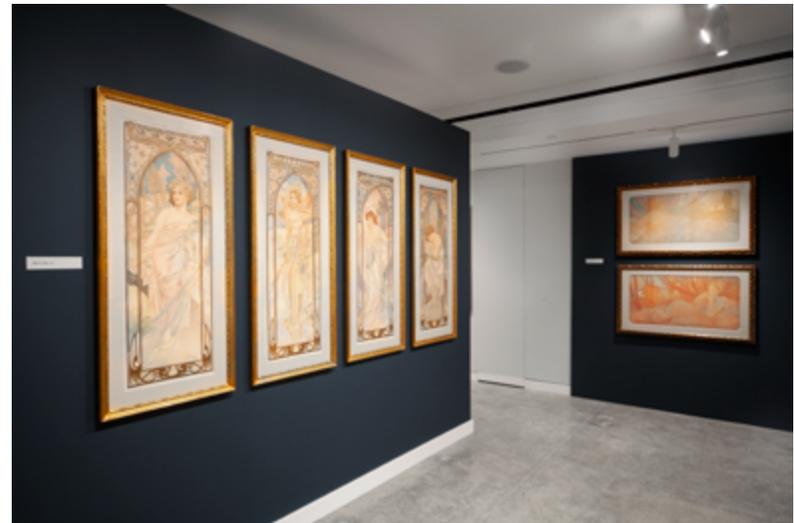
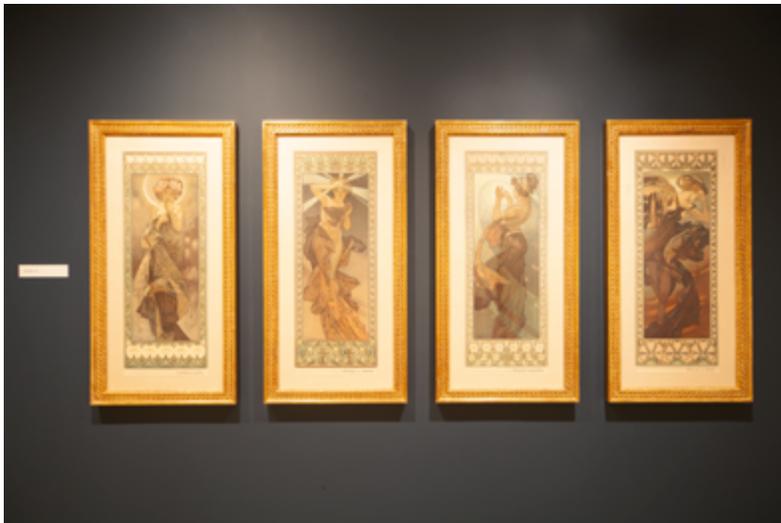
“Posters were intended to work on the general public, prompting a desire to visit a theater or buy a new product, while decorative panels opened up a realm of private reverie.”

—Karel Srp & Lenka Bydžovská

**Primrose & Quill, 1899**

# POSTER HOUSE





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