



Alfons Mucha

1860-1939

Allegory of Saving

Watercolor on paper signed and dated 1931 lower left

Dimensions : 39 x 28,5 cm

Dimensions : 15.35 x 11.02 inch



Dimensions with frame : 55 x 43,5 cm
Dimensions with frame : 21.65 x 16.93 inch

Biography

Poster artist, illustrator, graphic designer, professor of Czech Art and painter, Alphons Mucha is today considered one of the main initiators of the Art Nouveau style.

The artist, born in the south of Moravia in 1860, developed a pronounced taste for art from an early age. At the age of 8, he began producing drawings. His father, a bailiff, found him a job as a court clerk, which he held for three years. However, young Mucha chose to study art. He thus presented himself at the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, which refused his candidature. In this context, the artist left his hometown for the City of Vienna in 1879. He chose to work for the city's largest theatre decorating company, Kautsky-Bioschi-Burghardt, while at the same time training with Hans Makart, an Austrian painter and decorator. He began his career with a few private commissions.

The artist developed a pronounced taste for religious painting. He discovered the frescoes of the Church of Usti, as well as the Church of St. Ignatius in Prague, which considerably influenced his artistic production.

After studying at the Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, where he received academic training in figure drawing, Mucha moved to Paris in 1887, like many art students from Central Europe. In the French capital, he followed the teachings of Jules-Joseph Lefebvre and Jean-Paul Laurens at the Julian Academy, and then, at the Colarossi Academy. Lefebvre's allegorical compositions, with their idealized female figures and Laurens' great historical paintings, probably influenced Mucha's style.

The painter later chose the poster genre, a field that was to expand enormously. He was able to establish himself as a renowned illustrator, thanks to his academic artistic training and the new printing techniques that developed during this period. His talent earned him a job at the prestigious Armand Colin publishing house.

In 1894, actress Sarah Bernhardt urgently commissioned a poster for her new play, "Gismonda", which was performed at the Renaissance theatre she directed. Mucha was chosen to produce the poster. The tragic actress has been so seduced by his sophisticated style that she hired the artist for a period of six years. His works include "Lorenzaccio", "La Dame aux camélias" (1896), "Hamlet" and "Médée" (1898). The posters, designed by the artist, quickly became a resounding success and became real collectors' items.

Alfons Mucha's work became so popular that he was awarded a silver medal at the 1900 Universal Exhibition. One year later, he received the medal of the Legion of Honour for his contribution to the Universal Exhibition in Paris. He was also elected a member of the Czech Academy of Sciences and Arts.

An internationally renowned painter, the artist was to make six stays in the United States between 1904 and 1913. Within this framework, he taught his practice in many art schools in New York, Chicago and Philadelphia.

As a turn of his career in 1911, Mucha left Paris, came back to his native city and definitively settled in Prague at the age of 50. In this new area, he rent a studio inside a castle located in Zbiroh, western Bohemia. Here, he started to work on Slav history through a set of 20 large paintings on which he will work during seventeen years. In this way, he chose to put his art at the service of his fellow citizens, convinced that in this way he could be a part of the creation of a better world.

Simultaneously to the production of the great "Slav Saga" the artist accepted some orders that mattered to him, like the decoration of the Prague local house in 1910, an important stained-glass window for the Saint-Guy's cathedral in 1931 and also some illustrations for sportive events in Sokol in 1912 and 1926.

In these posters and paintings based on Czech themes, women dressed in traditional ceremonial costumes stayed

at the heart of his composition. Now they are not only sensual figures but they appear like spiritual symbols, in charge of inspiring and uniting Slav people around a common politic goal. In this time, the artist continued to develop his unique "Mucha style" created like an universal language capable to show the eternal beauty.

The new independent Czechoslovakia, born in 1918, asked the artist for the creation of its new postage-stamp as well as drawings for banknotes. Alphonse Mucha always stayed a fervent member of the liberation of people. This probably costs him to be arrested by Gestapo when German army entered Prague in 1939. The artist has been broken by his incarceration, and the man who believed in the strength union of Reason and Love died a few months later, leaving behind him an artistic style worldwide known.

Museums

Musée national, Prague

Mucha Museum, Prague

Musée d'Orsay, Paris

Dhawan Collection, Los Angeles

Victoria and Albert Museum, London

Bibliography

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Ann Bridges, Alphonse Mucha : The Complete Graphic Works, New York, Harmony Books, 1980

Renate Ulmer (trad. Marie-Anne Trémeau-Böhm), Mucha, Cologne, Taschen, 1994

Sarah Mucha, Alphonse Mucha, Paris, Gründ, 2005

Arthur Ellridge, Mucha le triomphe du modern style, Paris, Terrail, 2001

Agnès Husslein-Arco, Jean-Louis Gaillemine, Michel Hilaire et al., Alfons Mucha : Exposition. Montpellier, Musée Fabre. 2009, Paris, Somogy, 2009

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