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Cover image:
Alphonse Mucha's panneau
décoratif *Music* (1898) from
the *Four Arts* cycle

Translated from the
German by Rachel Ward



Fig. 1 (title page): *Topaz*
(1900) from the *Four Precious Stones* series of pan-
neaux décoratifs.

Fig. 2: The *Moravian Teachers' Choir* poster (1911),
printed in Czech, advertises
two performances by the
group in Vienna. The woman
is pushing back her hair to
hear better –
this gesture also appears
in the panneau *Music* (p. 43).



CONTENTS

A CHRISTMAS STORY	5
A VILLAGE IN MORAVIA	8
AN ARTISTIC NATURE	13
VIENNA	15
THE COUNTS OF KHUEN VON BELASI	16
MUNICH	18
ARRIVAL IN PARIS	21
BORN OF NECESSITY: MUCHA'S ILLUSTRATIONS	23
MADAME CHARLOTTE'S CRÈMERIE	28
SARAH BERNHARDT	30
THE WORLD IN MUCHA'S STYLE	39
THE STUDIO AT 6 RUE DU VAL-DE-GRÂCE	52
ARTISTIC LIFE	54
THE WORLD EXHIBITION	61
AT THE CROSSROADS	68
WAYS AND MEANS TO SLAVIC ART	72
THE AMERICAN DREAM	75
MARUŠKA	80
THE AMERICAN MIRACLE: CHARLES R. CRANE	82
THE RETURN TO BOHEMIA	87
THE SLAV EPIC	90
EPILOGUE	99

Mucha



A CHRISTMAS STORY

The 26th December 1894, St Stephen's Day. In the workshops of the Lemercier graphic design company at 44 Rue Vercingétorix, Paris, the oven crackles, petroleum lamps battle against the dull December light. A man in a coarse rubashka, a Russian shirt, is bent over a desk. Despite his fine features and surprisingly narrow shoulders, he is an imposing figure. The man, in his mid thirties, wears a sash around his curved torso. Tousled light brown hair and a wiry beard, clipped into points, frame a face shadowed by an illness only just overcome. Moving quickly and confidently, he slides a steel pen, scraper and rubber over a greasy printing stone.

He is joined by de Brunhoff, chief printer at Lemercier. There is an urgent order on the books: Victorien Sardou's Byzantine melodrama *Gismonda*, a slick piece but not yet all that successful, is going into a new production in a few days, and a new poster is needed to boost ticket sales. It's a tricky job – commissioned by Sarah Bernhardt in person. The temperamental diva is known across Europe as the Divine Sarah. Her devotion to the arts is as legendary as the anger with which she punishes those who cross her. Working for Bernhardt is an accolade. De Brunhoff knows what's at stake, but at this Christmas period he can't get hold of any of his usual poster designers. This has given the man in the workshop his chance.

A top hat and tails are hired for ten francs, and that very evening, the printer and his artist watch the play at Bernhardt's Théâtre de la Renaissance. Almost before the curtain falls, an appealing first draft is lying on the marble top of a café table. The next morning the artist gets straight to work. The poster is rushed through production at top speed, initial sketches and final artwork are passed almost unchecked.

When everything is completed, de Brunhoff claps his hands to his head: "*Mais, c'est raté!*" – it's a dud! He sees in front of him the pale, hasty work of an

Fig. 3: The 1907 self-portrait shows Alphonse Mucha in a Russian "rubashka". Mucha began wearing these practical garments as a student and continued to do so frequently – they also underlined his Slavic heritage.

Fig. 4: Sarah Bernhardt in the role of Gismonda. A contemporary reproduction of a portrait by Theobald Chartran, painted during Bernhardt's 1896 tour of America.





Fig. 36: *Medée* (1898). Catulle Mendès wrote a flamboyant treatment of the tragedy specifically for Sarah Bernhardt.



Fig. 37: *La Dame aux camélias* (1896) with Bernhardt as the courtesan Camille.



Fig. 38: *Lorenzaccio* (1896). The poster for Alfred de Musset's play shows Sarah Bernhardt in the male role of Lorenzaccio de Medici.

calculated that their sales brought in no less than 130,000 francs.

To Sarah Bernhardt, Mucha represents yet another sensation surrounding herself and a welcome source of income. Thanks to the actress, Mucha now had it made as an artist – and not only from a financial point of view. Over six years, he created eight placards for Bernhardt's theatre, of which seven are among the most successful of his known works: *Gismonda* was followed by *La Dame aux camélias* (1896), *Lorenzaccio* (1896), *La Samaritaine* (1897), *Medée* (1898), as well as *Hamlet* and *Tosca* (both 1899). *L'Aiglon* (1900),



produced in great haste and badly printed, must be considered the only failure in the series. In the very first poster, Mucha had discovered a core design principle and from then on he could play through countless variations on different themes. He had “arrived” as an artist. There were the long, curving lines, entwining themselves into decorative patterns; the hair, enveloping the head like a halo – this would soon begin to swirl into arabesques, the stylised strands becoming known as “macaroni”; the dynamics of the figures, slightly turned away. The essential elements of all this had already been laid down in his first Sarah

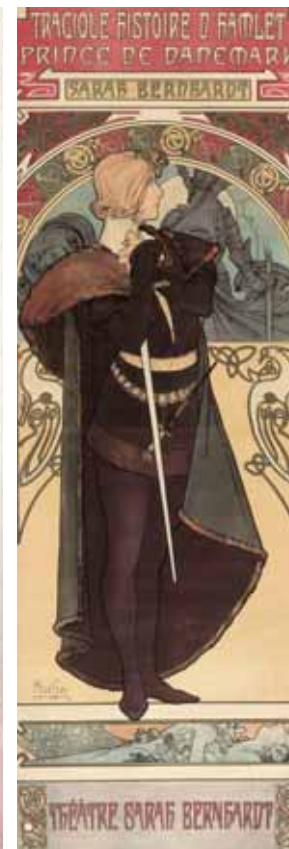


Fig. 39: *La Samaritaine* (1897). Edmond Rostand's piece cast Bernhardt as a young Samaritan beauty who comes to faith.

Fig. 40: *Hamlet* (1899) shows Sarah Bernhardt as the title character of Shakespeare's masterpiece – another male role.

Fig. 41: *La Tosca* (1899). The drama surrounding the singer Fiora Tosca is also the basis of Giacomo Puccini's opera of the same name.



Figs 47, 48, 49: A year with Alphonse Mucha: three panneaux from the first *Four Seasons* series. Left to right: *Summer*, *Autumn* and *Winter* (all 1896).

everybody, which would “go excellently in a hallway or on the staircase” as one no doubt well-intentioned critic wrote. Champenois and his artist had struck a cord. Only a year earlier, the art dealer Samuel Bing had founded the Salon de l’Art nouveau in Paris. There was still no movement by that name, but the stream of new products had begun to flow, growing every day and bursting the bounds of strict, established salon etiquette and monumental art. Art was going into production and the Belle Époque, the beautiful age, was creating for itself the greatest gallery in the history of art in thousands of everyday commodities.

Here, Mucha found a profitable field of work: “[...] I was glad not to be making art for closed salons, but instead to have the chance to make art for the people. It was cheap, everyone could buy it, and it found its way into propertied and unpropertied families alike.” The panneaux sold like hotcakes. Champenois also had around 150 designs printed on postcards, a means

Fig. 50: This motif, used here in the journal *La Plume*’s Zodiac Calendar (1896), adorned several calendar editions as well as posters in at least nine variations; it was also distributed as a panneau.

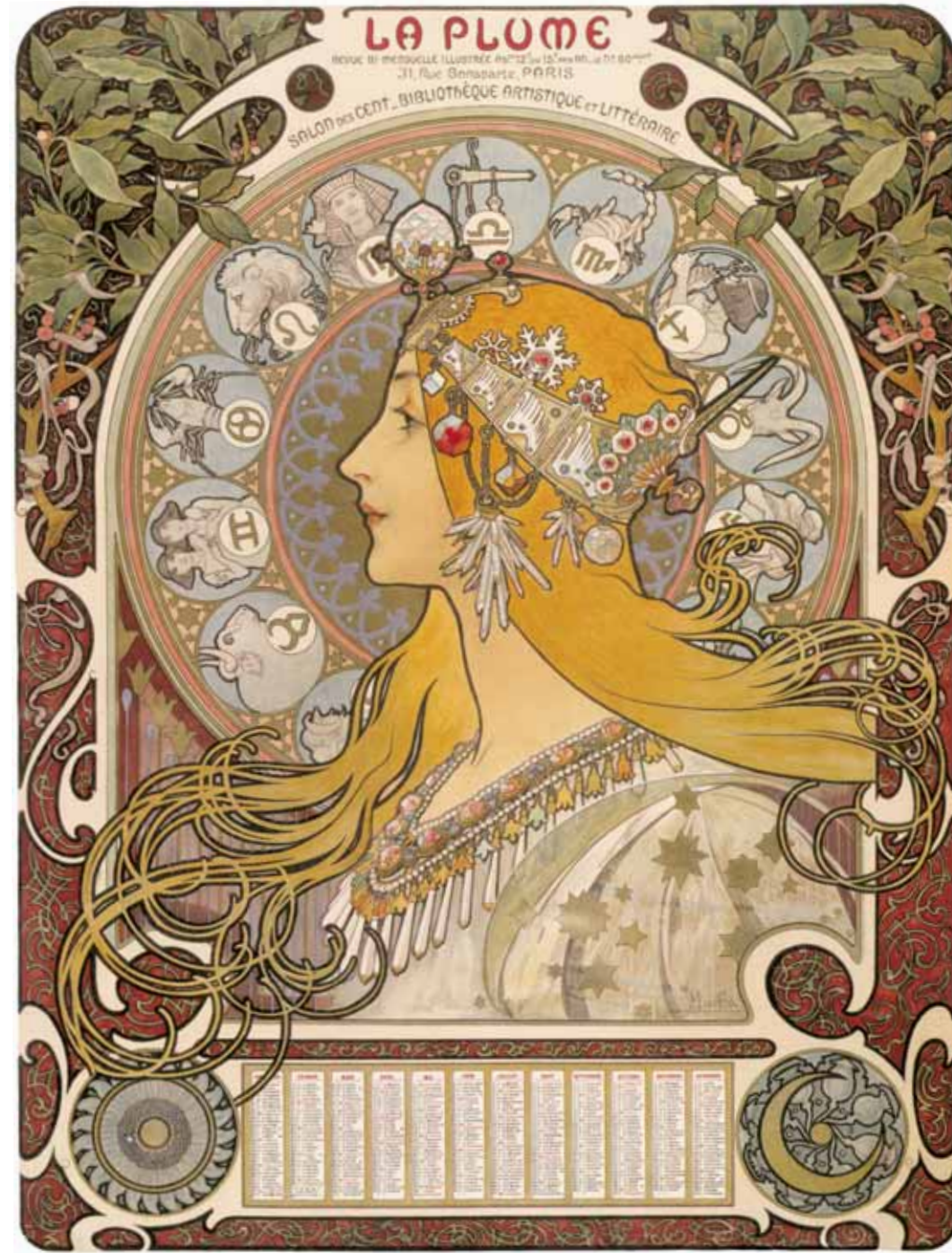




Fig. 60: The rural beauty in *Bières de la Meuse/Beers of the Meuse* (circa 1897) is wearing a headdress of barley, malt and hops as well as poppy flowers.

Fig. 61: A heady cocktail of tumbling tresses, draping fabric and sparkling wine: *Champagne Ruinart* (1897).

Fig. 62: Mucha's advertisement for *Moët & Chandon's Crémant Impérial* features a magnificent evening dress (1899).

Fig. 63: Mucha's first poster for the cigarette paper manufacturer *Job* (1896) is one of his best composed pieces of all time.

as *Lefèvre-Utile*, *Nestlé* and *Chocolat Masson*; the perfumier *Rodo*; Champagne houses such as *Champagne Ruinart*, *Moët & Chandon* and *Heidsieck & Co*; liqueur producers like *La Trappistine* and *Bénédictine*; the Paris-Lyon-Marseille railway – the list of Mucha's clients is a panorama of famous *fin de siècle* firms, and reads like a colourful itinerary through the consumer world of 1900.

The posters are stylistically almost identical to the *panneaux* and, as with the latter, individual copies found their way into private collections. When Mucha gained more commissions from the “twerps”, as he called the publishers and company representatives queuing outside his door, than he could manage, he began to borrow directly. The lady with typically Moravian corn poppies in her hair in the *Four Seasons* *panneaux* – the embodiment of the shimmering heat of a sensual summer – can also be found devoted

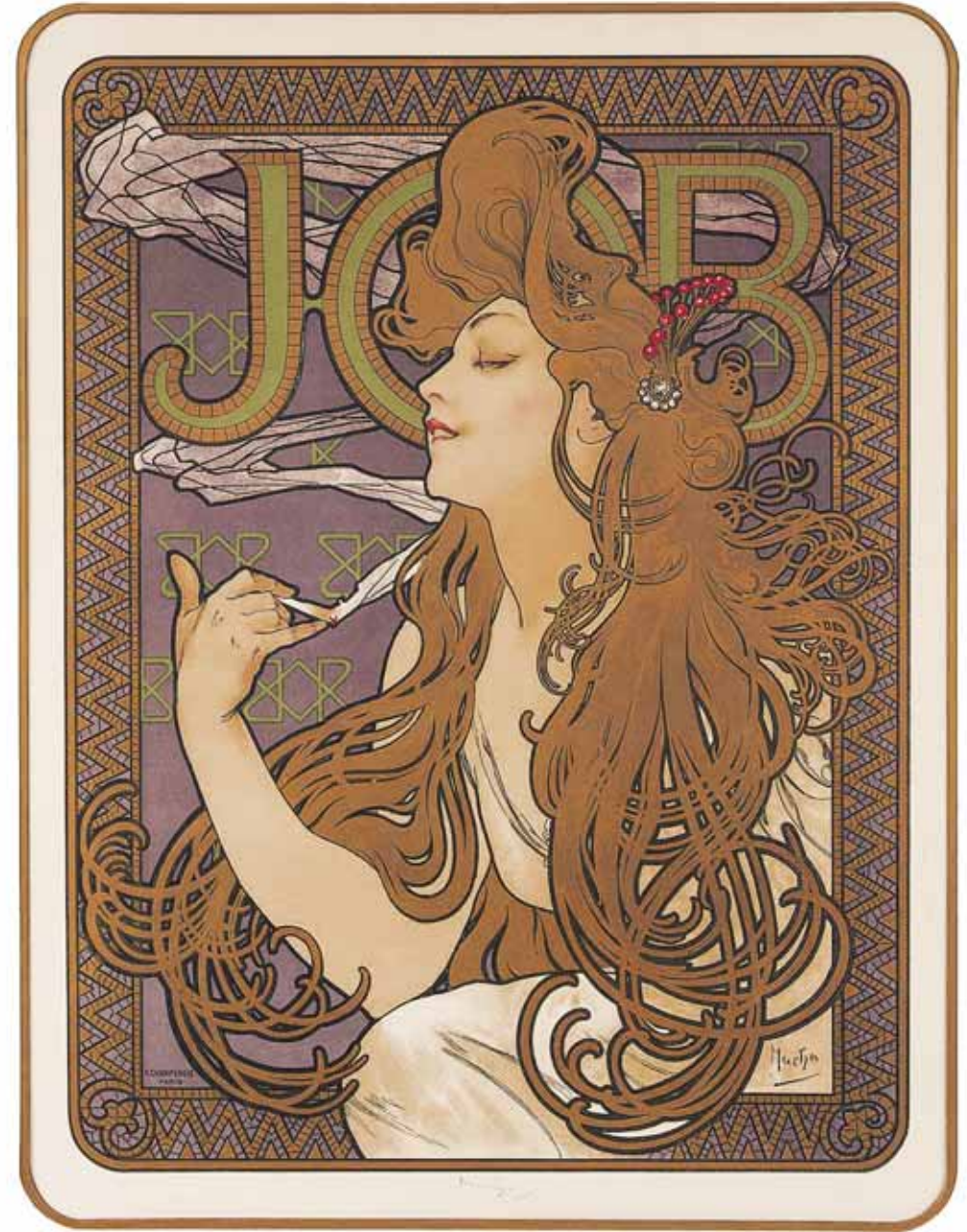




Fig. 116: The third panel in the *Slav Epic* depicts the *Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy* by the saintly brothers Cyril and Methodius.

Fig. 117: The sixth panel of the *Slav Epic*, *The Coronation of the Serbian Tsar Stefan Dušan as East Roman Emperor (The Slavic Code of Law)* (1926) shows the coronation procession of the Tsar into Skopje, where he would bestow a first legal code on the Slavic empire.

Slavs, which followed the highly topical *Abolition of Serfdom in Russia in 1861*. Incredibly detailed crowd scenes are overlaid with hovering figures taken from a mythical dream world. The theatrical, lofty adulation of *The Oath of Omladina Under the Slavic Linden Tree* follows on from gloomy, sober scenes like *The Last Days of Jan Amos Komenský in Naarden*. Mucha even shone a spotlight on a significant moment in the history of his home town: the fifteenth panel in the *Epic* shows *The Printing of the Bible of Kralice in Ivančice*, the first Czech Bible to be translated from the original languages, on which work began in 1564.

Realising Mucha's designs set the whole of Zbiroh in uproar. Squeezed into historic armour or swathed in ancient Slavic costumes, the people of the village spent the eighteen years in which the artist was at work on his *Epic* physically recreating the entire eventful



history of the Slavic people. A governess named Manka, for example, was cast as a mother with her child in the foreground of *The Celebration of Svantovít*, while, thanks to his impressive beard, the teacher Kreisinger was cast in the dignified role of the *Hussite King George of Poděbrady*, after lessons of course.

Day after day, Mucha climbed several metres up his scaffolding to work on the canvases. His son Jiří was soon growing up amongst them, and he provided a vivid impression of Mucha's studio at Zbiroh: "Whenever I went to Father in the studio later on, to let him know that it was lunchtime, or that supper was ready, I entered the huge room with a feeling of secret excitement. Looking down at me to my left was a monumental figure with a ring in his left hand – the symbol of unity in the foreground of the picture *Cyril and Methodius*. Watching me from my right was Manka, hovered over by Svantovít and the wolves



Fig. 118: *The Meeting at Křižky* (1916), the ninth picture in the cycle, is the right-hand wing of the triptych *The Magic of the Word*. It shows the inflammatory speech of the Pilsen Hussite Koranda, who called on the devotees of his faith to resist their Catholic opponents by force of arms.

Fig. 119 (overleaf): Panel thirteen in the *Slav Epic* shows the *Hussite King George of Poděbrady* (the crowned figure to the right of the picture). The character in the red robes is the papal legate Fantinus de Valle; Mucha has given him the features of Pope Pius II (1930).