Belle of the Belle Epoque

See the master of French Art Nouveau at Memorial Art Gallery

Sandra Parker
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Paris was the grand destination for artists in the late 19th century, known as the Belle Epoque, when the arts flourished and optimism reigned. The city’s promise of artistic innovation was made crystal clear by the impressionists, with their penchant for painting barely-there sunsets and regular folk in barely-there clothing.

It was in Paris that Czech artist Alphonse Mucha (pronounced MOO-ha, with a bit of back-of-the-throat action after the MOO) emerged as a leader in a new artistic revolution, the French Art Nouveau style. This innovative style blurred a different line, the one dividing fine art and decorative art, to create art that was — gasp — mass-produced for advertising.

A lithograph of his most celebrated poster, featuring famed stage actress Sarah Bernhardt in her role in the Greek melodrama “Gismonda,” is one of 70 works on display at the Memorial Art Gallery; “Alphonse Mucha: Master of Art Nouveau” runs through Jan. 19.

In addition to his posters, one of which is on loan from Rochester metal sculptor Albert Paley, the exhibit features Mucha’s book illustrations and jewelry made from his designs. Also on display is a bronze bust of his rendition of Nature, portrayed as a woman whose hair is signature Mucha. Long, unruly locks cascade from beneath her crown and twist around her like a wind-blown scarf.

In a discussion at MAG when the exhibit opened, Paley said he was influenced by Mucha: “I was always compelled by his design sensibilities and sensitivity.”

Mucha’s art was accessible to the public and could be afforded by the masses, who could not hope to own an oil painting. “I prefer to be someone who makes pictures for people, rather than who creates art for art’s sake,” Mucha once said.

“His prints are a perfect representation of the Art Nouveau movement, which sought to elevate traditionally ‘low’ art mediums, such as printmaking, to the fine arts arena,” says Dotti Bolekman, chair of the Art and Design department at Nazareth College. It was about more than the art world. According to Bolekman, the movement used craft media “as a statement against the rampant industrialization of the era.”

Mucha’s fame as an illustrator stemmed from a lucky break. On Dec. 26, 1894, Bernhardt decided she needed a new poster in just five days to advertise the reopening of “Gismonda.” Mucha, who had previously drawn the actress for a local magazine, happened to be at the publishing house when Bernhardt called. He was hired for the job, and when the poster hit the streets on Jan. 1, Bernhardt and the Parisian public were delighted.

The Memorial Art Gallery worked with local artist Dellarious to install replicas.

If you go
What: “Alphonse Mucha: Master of Art Nouveau”
When: Through Jan. 19. The MAG is open from 11 a.m. to 5 p.m. Wednesday to Sunday, and until 9 p.m. on Thursdays and select Fridays.
Where: 500 University Ave., Rochester
Tickets: There is a $5 surcharge for this exhibition. Gallery admission is $15; senior citizens, $12; college students with ID and children ages 6 to 18, $6. Admission is free for museum members, University of Rochester faculty/staff and students, and children ages 5 and under. General admission is half price on Thursdays from 5 p.m. to 9 p.m.
For more information: Call (585) 276-9000 or go to mag.rochester.edu.

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Accustomed to the poster style of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, with its brashly drawn figures in vibrant colors, Parisians were stunned by Mucha’s elegant depiction of a life-sized Bernhardt in a narrow, 7-foot high poster. The art has an ethereal quality — dressed in an ornate Byzantine gown in muted colors, Bernhardt stands in profile on a pedestal and gazes at the palm frond in her hand. Her long hair tumbles from beneath the garland of flowers on her head.

“Where Toulouse-Lautrec caricatured flirtatiously, Mucha conjured dreamy, ornamented elegance,” says Rachel Haidu, chair of University of Rochester’s art and art history department.

The Gismonda poster epitomized Mucha’s signature style of the female form. The women are thin, elegant, clad in billowy clothing and have long, untamed hair framing their beautiful faces. Sensuous and seductive, they are as simuous as the vine tendrils and interlacing flowers that envelop them.

Art Nouveau shunned edges. Strict conventions of high art were abandoned for curving or arabesque lines suggesting the freedom and wilderness of nature. Lines meandered to form asymmetrical curves and coils known as the “Art Nouveau whoosh.”

While art traditionalists felt the sting of this whoosh, others rushed to invigorate architecture, jewelry, furniture and textiles with the intoxicating style.

“Art Nouveau wanted to marry the wall and the garden, the metro station and the drawing room,” says Haidu. “Conceived during European imperial conquests across Asia and Africa, the movement is a fascinating lens into designs on public space and private fancy.”

Suddenly famous, Mucha landed commissions for creating magazine covers, jewelry design and advertisements for bicycles, biscuits, baby food, champagne, chocolate and cigarette papers. Sometimes the dynamic image of a Mucha woman was so central that the product advertised was barely noticeable or even absent altogether.

An 1897 poster advertising rail travel features a background of mountains and the sea with a kneeling woman gazing skyward in the foreground. There is just a mere suggestion of a train in the wheels of flowers that surround her.

“He was influenced by Byzantine mosaics in the decorative, flat two-dimensional nature of his art and also by Japanese woodcuts of the era that feature asymmetrical compositions and beautiful flowing, organic lines,” says Bokelman.

Around 1910, Mucha returned to his homeland, telling his wife that “I will be able to do something really good, not just for the art critic but for our Slav souls.” There he painted 20 towering canvases (20 x 30 feet), known as The Slav Epic, depicting the history of the Slavic people. But the Nazis invading Prague in 1939 viewed his nationalism as a threat and imprisoned him. Mucha died soon after being released.

Frustrated by being labeled an Art Nouveau painter — “art can never be new,” he said — Mucha wished to be remembered as a history painter. Nevertheless, he is remembered primarily for creating the Mucha woman who, by his paintbrush, emerged from the confines of the Victorian chrysalis to become the belle of the Belle Époque.

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