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French art nouveau and Mucha

Within this essay, I am going to explore the art movement known as art nouveau and the impact it had within French culture as well as where it appeared in other parts of Europe, through how artists such as Mucha Guimard, Plument, Chedanne, Benouville, Auscher and Gaillard, although I will be discuss Alphonse Mucha work further, who is credited as one of the most recognisable artists during this era, How he grew to fame, and how he is one of the most influential in France and to this style during this movement.

I will also be using the theorist John Berger's, specifically his work on the ways of seeing to explore this subject further, in an attempt to gain a deeper understanding of the different art work that was created by Mucha and deconstructing it to discuss as many details of the pieces as possible.

The movement Art nouveau was very popular and influential in Paris, France. Although, It also existed in other parts of Europe such as Belgium, Germany, Spain and other parts of Europe. (Howard, 1996) Beginning during the late 1800s and rather quickly phasing out in the early 1900s, Leading the way into the art deco movement of the 1920s. In English the literal translation of L'art Nouveau is 'New Art', Which derived from the gallery of the same name (Howard,1996 P.).

The style can be found in architecture, For example the Paris Métropolitain entrances which were designed by Hector Guimard (Clendenin, 2008).

The metro entrances are an iconic part of Paris during this time, being the transport for so many people, Parisians and also other travellers of any race, ethnicity, religion

and background alike. (Clendenin, 2008), It was seen and loved by many patrons daily.

‘The Metro's architecture appealed in an elemental way to these people of disparate nations and cultures.’ (Clendenin, 2008) Of course not forgetting to mention that the design itself charmed these travellers as if it moved with the fast travelling men and women of the city (Clendenin, 2008).

Although, Guimard is quite possibly the most well-known art nouveau architects at least in France. Others include Charles Plument, Georges chedanne, louis Benouville, Paul Auscher. (Midant, 1999 P. 132)

All of them worked and created the architecture that is so familiar when you think of France, specifically Paris. Although their designs were subtler than Guimard. (Midant, 1999 P. 132).

As well as showing in fashion, Particularly jewellery such as hairpins (Midant, 1999 P. 74) as well as bracelets, necklaces and rings. Artists ranging from Lucien Gaillard (Midant, 1999 p. 75) to Alphonse Mucha who dabbled for a short time in jewellery making, and one of his most notable pieces being a bracelet for Sarah Bernhardt (Howard, 1996 P. 20).

Art Nouveau was also found within furniture such as coffee tables, dining tables, chairs, cabinets and bookshelves (Midant, 1999).

Further even branching into more decorative home items like vases, teapots, jugs and sculptures. Nearly all of which carry floral elements with leaves and flowers. Continuing with home décor for a moment, even wallpapers carried the trend with many different examples of patterns and colours that intertwine with ease. (Midant, 1999 P.)

‘L’art nouveau is replete with beauty of line, grace of form, and freedom. Its sympathetic style and in its best rendering is full of repose and unobtrusive beauty.’ (Howard, 1996 P. 1) This description perfectly describes the feel of the movement which is filled with curves and flowing lines, while also being very detailed. Another very prominent part of this style is the use of feminine figures posing delicately and ornately decorated often with objects such as flowers.

The style is pulls inspiration from many other movements depicting *“traces of decadence, primitive motives, attenuated pre-Raphaelitism, Japanese influence”* (Howard, 1996 P. 1) to add another, The Rocco style. Although, The Japanese influence is by far the most prominent within this movement in particularly this is shown with the use of soft colours and delicate floral patterns.

As previously mentioned, Alphonse Mucha is a highly influential artist within French art nouveau. His work being highly recognisable. Although he was a Czech artist (muchafoundation.com), he rose to fame whilst living and working in Paris designing posters. Although he also dabbled in jewellery, such as rings and bracelets, one bracelet of a snake is famously depicted within one of his theatrical posters (Manty,2021) .



Fig. 1, Mucha (1894), *Gismonda*.

What can be seen here in figure 1. Is the poster that caused the rise in his popularity, The aesthetic gaining its own name within art nouveau movement, Called ‘style Mucha’ (Howard, 1996 p. 19.) The poster was originally created for a Theatrical

production, and depicted actress Sarah Bernhardt who went on to continuously show up with in his work as she worked with him often as she commissioned him several times for these theatrical posters, such as 'Gismonda', (Howard, 1996 P 21) which is what you can see here in figure one, Bernhardt is stood dressed in a beautifully detailed full coverage gown, with a flower headdress with her hair gently covering her right shoulder and is posed holding a large flower in her hand, behind her head is also a mosaic style background piece with states the name of the production as well as the actresses name.

Along with 'Gismonda', Bernhardt also went on to commission 'La Dame aux camélias', 'la toska', 'hamlet', 'Lorenzaccio' 'la Samaritaine', (Howard, 1996 P. 21) and Médée. They are all part of the same collection and all were created in the same long portrait format. In many of these posters, Bernhard is often depicted as a femme fatal, most notably in the poster for Médée. (Howard, 1996 P. 21)

'The painters way of seeing is reconstituted by the marks he makes on a canvas or paper.' (Berger, 1972 P. 10) This quote in particular from John Berger's Ways of seeing, can only make you wonder how Mucha envisioned the world whilst he made his revolutionary work. For example, Figure. 2.

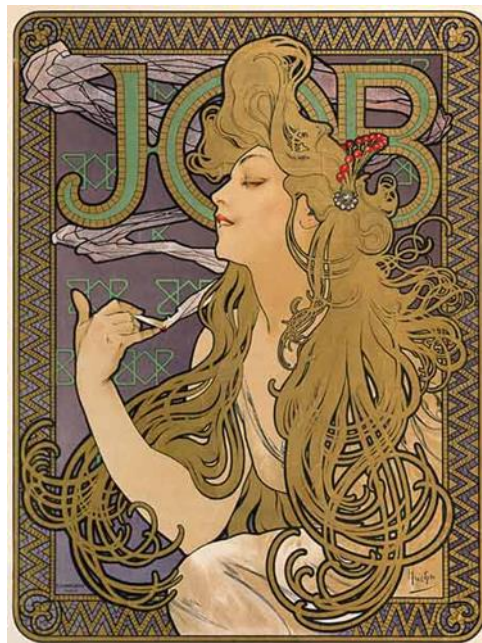


Fig. 2 ,Mucha (1896), Job cigarette papers.

Mucha produced this piece of work for the job cigarette company as an advertisement poster, It depicts a rather beautiful woman posed graceful whilst holding a lit cigarette.

The advertisement is very appealing and catches your eye as her long flowing blonde hair covers parts of her presumably naked body.

Mucha was said to '*vary the degree of his sensualism and mysticism commensurate with the type of product or patron being objectified.*' (Howard, 1996 P. 22) Which is an important connection to make whilst reviewing his work and is most definitely a reoccurring pattern, although as stated it does vary, for example figure one and figure two are at the opposite sides of the spectrum, Fig. 1 clearly being the more modest of the two being fully clothed as previously mentioned. whilst fig. 2 dives deeply into sensuality from the her head is drawn back and the lack of clothing,

The boarder is also very detail oriented filled with triangle pattern along the edges and ornate looking heart shape within the corners, although parts of the background overlap the boarder, such as her hair, the smoke from the cigarette and even her leg as the lady also seems to be stepping out of the poster, almost as if going towards the viewer.

The background is also interesting, even with its simplicity, there's still this repeated pattern that takes place, which almost gives the impression of a possible wallpaper. It bares the question of if Mucha had much like many of his other pieces, had referenced from a muse.

Another important detail to add is that this is also a coloured lithograph. What is Lithograph? A lithograph, is an oil based form of print making '*which a design is drawn onto a flat stone or prepared metal plate, usually zinc or aluminium and affixed by means of a chemical reaction.*' (metmuseum.org).

To conclude, There are many subcategories Art nouveau has within its reign, the movement was most definitely one of the biggest and influential art movements for France, as seen not only with in the art work but also in fashion, architecture, décor, interior design, art and advertisement. Some of which is still visible today in the forms of buildings and other similar structures but even showing within old ads and postcard Inspiring many artist from Hector Guimard to Alphonse Mucha, who although they worked in different materials and work turned out different to one another. You are still, able to spot the similarities between the twos work, be that from the lettering, to the colours, or even flowing lines. The style is distinct and highly recognisable despite the

difference. You are clearly also able to see this within other artists work at the time as well.

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