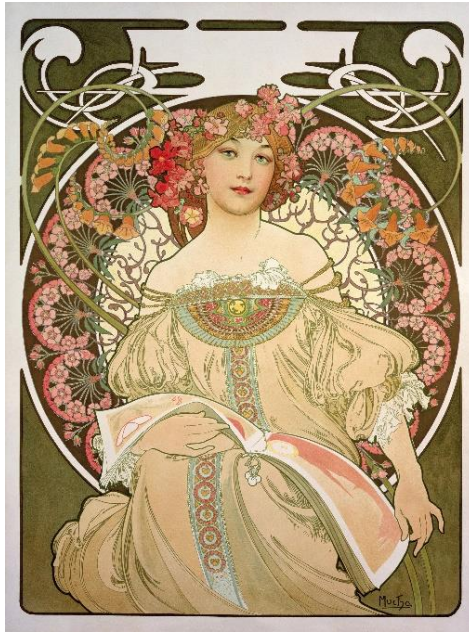


Media release

Experience the world of art nouveau visionary **Alphonse Mucha** in Sydney this winter



Alphonse Mucha *Reverie* 1898, colour lithograph, 72.7 x 55.2 cm © Mucha Trust 2024

This winter the Art Gallery of New South Wales will present an exhilarating exhibition showcasing the timeless works of the art nouveau master **Alphonse Mucha** (1860 – 1939). Opening on 15 June, exclusive to Sydney, [Alphonse Mucha: Spirit of Art Nouveau](#) will lead viewers on a journey through the enchanting world of Mucha's iconic artworks to reveal the life and work of an artist who developed a new stylistic language. Mucha's style defined the look of late 19th-century Paris and came to embody the very spirit of art nouveau.

Featuring more than 200 works, *Alphonse Mucha: Spirit of Art Nouveau* is the most comprehensive exhibition of Mucha's work ever seen in Australia. It will trace the full breadth of the artist's extraordinary life, from his humble beginnings in Moravia, in present day Czech Republic, to his commercially successful breakthrough in Paris during the belle époque followed by his later years working as a champion of the Slavic peoples.

Presented as the first exhibition of historical art in Naala Badu – the Art Gallery's new north building, *Alphonse Mucha: Spirit of Art Nouveau* is realised in close cooperation with the Mucha Foundation, Prague. The exhibition is drawn from the Mucha Family Collection with most of the works being shown in Australia for the first time.

Art Gallery director **Michael Brand** said: 'We are thrilled to present this extraordinary collection of Alphonse Mucha works to the Australian public for the first time. This exhibition includes highlights from his celebrated series of decorative panels, theatrical and advertising posters right through to exquisite jewellery, created with some of the greatest jewellers of his day. From the captivating series *The Seasons* to the sensationally successful works depicting the legendary actor Sarah Bernhardt, each piece reflects Mucha's mastery of form and his remarkable capacity to communicate the spirit of a new age.'

Minister for the Arts, Music and the Night-time Economy, and Minister for Jobs and Tourism **John Graham** said: 'Lovers of art nouveau will be treated to spectacular exhibition of the life and work of this visionary artist. Between

this and the annually anticipated Archibald Prize exhibition, visitors to the Art Gallery of New South Wales are in for a visual feast this this winter.'

The exhibition is co-curated by **Tomoko Sato**, curator of the Mucha Foundation, and **Jackie Dunn**, senior curator of exhibitions at the Art Gallery of New South Wales.

'Mucha's art continues to entrance audiences with its timeless beauty and heartfelt humanism,' said Dunn. 'For Mucha, beauty was the fundamental quality of art that could only be achieved by balancing the internal, spiritual world and the external, material world. This exhibition offers a unique opportunity for visitors to go on a journey of discovery to meet the complex, compassionate artist behind the iconic and influential images that defined an era.'

Born in 1860 in the small Moravian town of Ivančice, Mucha grew up in a Slavic province of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The domination of his homeland and other Slavic territories by a colonial power had a profound impact on his life's work, with Mucha investing much of his creative energy towards the formation of an independent Czech nation.

After working early as a scenic painter for theatres in Vienna, then studying art in Munich in the 1880s, Mucha moved to Paris where, after some years as a modestly successful illustrator, he had a dramatic career breakthrough when he was commissioned to create a poster for the great French actor Sarah Bernhardt. For her theatrical production of *Gismonda*, Mucha created a long, narrow scroll-like format featuring a life-sized figure of Bernhardt in the style of an exotic Byzantine empress, 'crowned' by orchids and framed by a mosaic arch. Bernhardt loved it, declaring 'Monsieur Mucha, you have made me immortal.'

When *Gismonda* hit the streets of Paris in the early hours of New Year's Day 1895, it changed the art of the poster forever. The radical style of it, and those he would create for Bernhardt during a six-year exclusive partnership, became an inspiration to the rapt artists and zealous collectors who frequently ripped freshly pasted posters from the streets of Paris. In contributing his images of Bernhardt to the icon already known as 'The Divine Sarah' (perhaps the world's first global celebrity), Mucha had cemented his own success and fame.

Mucha continued to enjoy a successful and profitable period in Paris producing and designing advertising posters for a wide variety of consumable products such as champagne, perfume, chocolate, biscuits and cigarette papers, often featuring at their heart a strikingly modern woman, her abundantly flowing hair framed by flowers and other decorative motifs. His signature style – what would become known as 'le style Mucha' – became instantly recognisable and synonymous with Parisian art nouveau. Widespread recognition continued for Mucha as he went on to create immensely popular decorative panels, affordable to all. Mucha was involved in a wide range of exhibitions and projects at the Paris Exposition Universelle of 1900 – dubbed the 'greatest event of the 19th century' – including the decoration of the Bosnia and Herzegovina Pavilion, which ignited his passion to promote the cause of the Slavic peoples of eastern Europe.

While commercially successful, Mucha saw his 'path as lying elsewhere, somewhere higher.' After becoming financially secure following a period teaching and portrait painting in America, where he was declared 'the greatest decorative artist in the world', he would begin work on a monumental painting cycle he called the *Slav Epic*. A testament to Slavic unity, the series of major works, made between 1912 and 1926, depict twenty episodes of Czech and Slavic history, covering themes from politics and war to religion, philosophy and culture. Today considered national treasures, the enormous canvases, measuring up to eight by six metres, were presented to the City of Prague in 1928 as a celebratory gift to the nation on the 10th Anniversary of Czech Independence (1918). Now unable to travel, in Sydney they will come alive in a digital activation created by immersive environment designer **Andrew Yip** featuring a specially commissioned score by celebrated musician **Gary Daley**.

Alphonse Mucha died in July 1939, four months after the German invasion of the new state of Czechoslovakia, with his impact as an art nouveau luminary cemented, but also as a visionary mystic-patriot-philosopher who believed in the inspirational power of art to progress humanity.

Today, Mucha's legacy is administered by the Mucha Foundation in Prague, home to the Mucha Museum and the Mucha Family Collection. **Marcus Mucha**, executive director of the Mucha Foundation said: 'We could not be more delighted to have this opportunity to bring my great-grandfather's art to Australia. Never before has a Mucha exhibition travelled so far from Prague, and it means so much to our family that the Art Gallery of New South Wales will give Australian audiences perhaps their first opportunity to experience Mucha's work face to face. This exhibition tells the story that we hope will inspire its visitors: a story of a boy with big dreams and a willingness to work hard, who was born in a small village in Moravia, but who went on to make a major contribution to perhaps the world's first truly global artistic movement in art nouveau, a style that still influences the graphic and visual language of the world around us today.'

The exhibition will also feature a selection of Japanese prints from the Art Gallery's exceptional *ukiyo-e* collection, the likes of which circulated throughout 19th century Paris and doubtless influenced Mucha, and a truly exciting selection of iconic 1960s and 1970s band posters and LP record covers – and later Japanese manga – that followed the countercultural rediscovery of Mucha's art.

The exhibition is accompanied by a richly illustrated catalogue, written by Tomoko Sato, a leading Mucha expert and curator at the Mucha Foundation. The publication features over 200 stunning images depicting Mucha's art and life, including rarely seen archival photographs.

Alphonse Mucha: Spirit of Art Nouveau is proudly supported by the NSW Government through its tourism and major events agency, Destination NSW.

Alphonse Mucha: Spirit of Art Nouveau is on display at the Art Gallery of New South Wales from 15 June to 22 September 2024. Tickets will go on sale soon alongside tickets for the *Archibald, Wynne and Sulman Prizes 2024* exhibition. Discounted Gallery Pass tickets providing entry into both exhibitions will be available.

Note for editors: Mucha is pronounced 'Mook-huh'

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About the Art Gallery of New South Wales

On Gadigal Country

The Art Gallery of New South Wales acknowledges the traditional custodians of the Country on which it is located, the Gadigal of the Eora nation, and recognises their continuing connection to land, waters and culture. From its magnificent site in Sydney, the Art Gallery is one of Australia's pre-eminent art museums and the state's leading visual arts institution. Its mission is to serve the widest possible audience as a centre of excellence for the collection, preservation, documentation, interpretation and display of Australian and international art, and a forum for scholarship, art education and the exchange of ideas. The transformation of the Art Gallery – now with two buildings, Naala Badu and Naala Nura – brings together art, architecture and landscape in spectacular new ways with dynamic galleries and seamless connections between indoor and outdoor spaces. It is the most significant cultural development to open in Sydney in half a century and is a prominent new destination for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander art and culture. artgallery.nsw.gov.au

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