

Art Nouveau, Alphonse Mucha and the Mass Visibility of Culture

This paper discusses the link between the concepts of mass culture, Art Nouveau and advertizing in the context of the western world with a special emphasis on Paris, fin-de-siècle. This phenomenon is represented by the artist Alphonse Mucha, through his posters, jewelry, public space decorations and paintings. The article focuses on posters and advertisements, as a blending of mass and formal art, designed by representatives of the Art Nouveau and displayed in public spaces.

Key words: *mass communication, access to art, Art Nouveau, Alphonse Mucha, advertizing*

1. Introduction

In this paper I attempt to explore some phenomena that emerged and developed by the end of the nineteenth century, that are interconnected and that can explain some of the cultural aspects of the time. I will touch upon the concepts of mass culture, Art Nouveau and advertizing in the context of western world with a special emphasis on Paris, fin-de- siècle. The link between these large developments is in my paper the figure of the artist Alphonse Mucha, whose trajectory I will draw in the pages to follow and whose art I will try to understand, linking art and everyday life in its emerging shape of culture that reaches the masses as well.

All the concepts to be used in the present paper could be problematized as single subjects, the phenomenon or Art Nouveau being large enough to cover plenty of pages. At the same time, advertizing is an institution of modernity that reshapes the functioning of press and the circulation of goods in the market. One of its early species in Europe, the poster was widespread in Europe in the flourishing epoch of Art Nouveau and had original representatives in Europe and the United States. It can be considered a hybrid form of art, caricature, decoration and promotion, according to the artists that were using it, as well as to its purpose and reach.

The restricted space of this paper does not allow for elaborate discussions of each of the above-mentioned basic concepts. Rather, I will try to define them briefly and to introduce them in their diachronic dimension as background for understanding the works of the selected figure that would link the basic concepts. The concept of 'mass' and of 'mass culture' have been richly documented by the authors dealing with popular culture even if in its later manifestations, starting with the second half of the twentieth century. In this paper

the masses are not a subject but the recipient that starts to have access to various forms of art and entertainment in the context of developing technologies¹.

In the pages to follow, the main attempt will be to understand the work of Alphonse Mucha in the new context of Art Nouveau as statement of linking art and life during the last years of the nineteenth century and the first ones from the twentieth one. I will explore each of the phenomena above-mentioned having as core Alphonse Mucha as a man of his epoch, one that is translating the transformations in the society and is expressing the emergence of a mass culture in the place of an exclusive high culture via the statements of Art Nouveau as a new form, pointing mainly on the advertising poster as a mass-culture form, even if not directly produced for the masses.

2. Art Nouveau

Art Nouveau began in the 1880s as a reaction against the historical emphasis of mid-19th-century, as an attempt to look at the present life forms, beauty and decorations and depart from the historicism characteristic of the Romantic epoch. Like Impressionism, Art Nouveau was a rebellion against classical and traditional art. The movement was very successful in going beyond the borders of fine art and spreading into commercial and decorative arts. Famous artists like Alphonse Mucha or Gustav Klimt, went into such fields as high fashion, jewelry designs and advertising. The style is characterized by integrating all aspects of art and design.

Art historians tend to interpret this new movement as a reaction to the Industrial Revolution. Creating art in this new style required a high level of craftsmanship. Thus it was in contrast to mass-produced goods made by machines and the objects consequently were rather expensive; the new style was reserved for the wealthy just like previous forms of art. The novelty consists in the fact that common people could have access to some of its products as its manifestations were ranging from public institutions, like some of the metro stations in Paris, to posters exposed in the streets and boulevards.

One of the main sources of inspiration for the representatives of Art Nouveau was the Japanese art that only became available to the western gaze after 1860, when the commerce with this distant place started to develop. Before that time, Japan had lived in complete seclusion for centuries. Japanese art became very fashionable in Europe and European artists like van Gogh, Gauguin or Toulouse Lautrec were influenced by it. By the middle of the 19th century type designers were experimenting with all sorts of ornamental type, particularly for use in advertising and in specialized books aimed at an increasingly intellectual middle class market. One of the innovators in this period was William Morris, who launched the *Arts and Crafts* movement, which included among its interests the development of new and visually striking styles of lettering and typography.

In general it was most successfully practiced in the decorative arts: furniture, jewelry, and book design and illustration. Decorative type and lettering was a major element of the Art

¹ For an elaborated discussion on the substantive transformations of the 'mass', see Peter Sloterdijk, *Disprețuirea maselor; eseul asupra luptelor culturale în societatea modernă (Despising the Masses; Essay on the Cultural Fights in the Modern Society)* 2002, Idea, Cluj-Napoca

Nouveau movement, which had strong ties to the performing arts and other visual arts which required publicity in the form of advertisements and posters.

Everything could be art and in this respect Mucha designed from champagne advertising to stage sets, from beer promotion to large national paintings. Art Nouveau was an International modern art movement and The World's Fair in Paris in 1900 was a demonstration of its general public acceptance.

Art Nouveau can trace its beginnings in the last years of the nineteenth century, by the time Mucha launched his 'programmatic' poster for Sarah's Bernard theatre, for the play *Gismonda* in 1895. Based on precepts akin to William Morris' *Arts and Crafts* movement in England, the attempt was to eradicate the dividing line between art and audience. The basic precept of this new movement was synchronic with the emergence of the masses as conscious potential participants in the cultural production and consumption as well as with the increasing development of an intellectual middle class. At the same time, the common people were not yet direct target of culture. Nevertheless, Art Nouveau was descending from the ivory tower of high-culture in the streets and public places. The art was becoming visible to the many, from posters in magazines or theatre halls as Mucha became apparent to the common eye, up to public facilities, like decorations in the public institutions, other than the churches.

3. Fin-de-siècle mass culture and advertising; the poster

In the context of growing popular entertainment and popular-oriented art forms, one of the new forms of art was the design of posters and advertisements intended to catch the imagination and generate special interest in the audience, primarily the buyers, but also beyond. One of the important elements to be mentioned about early advertisements in the magazines is that it is rather art than a marketing outcome. Advertisements as they stay today, in the context of increased fragmentation of the audience, are carefully targeting the individuals from distinct groups of potential buyers. Thus, the creative process starts only after a clear identification of the target groups in a larger context of marketing mix. In the early days of advertising, in the Art Nouveau context for example, it is the form and the beauty that are prevalent, instead of the product and its uniquely shaped attributes that would benefit an increasingly narrow segment of the general audience; the latter case occurs in a context of a saturated market with dozens of similar products, serving similar ends. I can conclude that advertising could afford to be first of all art and then a tool for selling. It served its aim mainly by catching the eye via beauty.

Before radio and television could saturate the world with ads for soap products and soft drinks, there was no easy way to share information with a large number of people. From a historical perspective, the one that created the technology that enabled the development of posters is Aloys Senefelder. He created the process of stone lithography in 1798. Until this innovation, printing was expensive and tedious. At first, the craft of illustration was not very developed, by the end of the eighteenth century the colors could not be reproduced on the poster.

This new ability to combine words and images in an eye-catching, economical format enabled the poster to become the major means of mass communication in Europe and

America. In its first manifestations, from the advertising found in magazines and decorative frontispieces in books to the poster art movement in France, a consciousness emerged that type and lettering could be decorative and artistic and eye-catching in a way which had previously never really been considered. Thus, the illustration became a resource just a little later, after the discovery of the capacity of manipulating fonts and graphic forms. The concept of display and ornamental type started with newspaper and poster designers taking regular text styles and using them in enormous sizes, or developing italic or slightly embellished styles for emphasis within text.

By the 1870's Paris was a gaudy mélange of posters; they were posted to kiosks, train stations, buildings, carriages and pissoirs. They advertised everything: sporting and cultural events, new products, political protests, book publications and beautiful women. In France, the poster quickly became an art form. In 1891 Toulouse-Lautrec's first poster, *Moulin Rouge*, boosted the status of the poster from ephemera to fine art. His bold compositions, simple incisive lines, and expert use of angles and perspectives introduced a whole new style in poster art. Toulouse-Lautrec and his artist followers made obvious statements in their poster designs. Jack Rennert calls this "caricature plus". A caricature makes comments by the use of distortion, insult, and exaggeration, yet, in a subtle, indirect way.

Posters took over the cities of Europe, with subjects that varied from country to country. In France, the café was the center of life. Absinthe, champagne and other alcoholic beverages were main advertising topic. Italy produced dramatic, large scale opera and fashion posters. Spain celebrated the bullfight, while Germany promoted her trade fairs and magazines. At the same time, in America of the time, the posters were not considered art, but merely a mean of relaying information to the public. In America, the most common posters were letterpress announcements of upcoming events such as slave auctions, circuses. "Wanted" posters covered the walls of post offices and banks. The text was the thing in the 18th and 19th century American posters.

French culture promoted poster art. Rapidly growing cities, and expanded commerce and industry created new wealth among a large number of people. A middle class was born, with discretionary income and leisure time to help them revel in their new status and lifestyle. They read, went to the theater, and learned to appreciate music and art. Literature flourished. Lavish illustrations and appealing covers became the style. Bookstores became more commercial, and often placed small cardboard placards in their windows to display an illustration from a new book or its cover. Thus art joined text in the poster as Rennert explains it.

Nevertheless, after the turn of the century the poster craze declined, particularly in Paris. Mucha moved to America, and eventually back home to Czechoslovakia. Along with the end of the Belle Epoch came the decline of Art Nouveau. Although it remained the major international art movement until World War I, its novelty and appeal waned. Few poster catalogues were published, and poster shows became obsolete.

World War I dramatically changed the poster's focus, and stimulated the largest advertising campaign to date. Communication was an integral part of the war effort; posters were the ideal solution. Typical war posters urged the public to buy war bonds, enlist in the military, volunteer, boost production, and despise the enemy. Huge numbers of posters were printed during WWI. In the United States, approximately 20 million posters were printed in two years. These wartime posters caught the attention of the Bolsheviks, who in turn used

them as propaganda tools in their civil war against the Whites. Lenin set the standard for making the poster a major weapon that could be used in wars everywhere.

4. The exemplary figure of Alphonse Mucha



I chose to illustrate the link between mass-culture, the advertising poster and Art Nouveau with the figure of Alphonse Mucha not because of lack of options but because this artist not only produced works of art, but also theorized his vision about art and decoration in his book *Documents Decoratifs*. Besides, there are authors that consider him as Art Nouveau, the very representative that set the principles and put them into practice in a variety of ways, ranging, from jewelry to scene decorations, from theatre posters to adverts for soap. Every component of this style is seen in Mucha's art: elaborate, nature-themed ornamentation; idealized female subjects; fine drawing and the use of symbolism and allegory.

Born in Moravia in the second decade of the nineteenth century, in 1860, Alphonse Mucha emerged first as a starving-artist sort of student in Vienna and Munich for a few years of his youth, and then for some more years in Paris. Living above a *Cremerie* that catered to art students, drawing illustrations for popular, therefore low-paying, magazines, getting deathly ill and living on lentils and borrowed money, Mucha met all the criteria of a bohemian artist. At the same time, he was formulating his own theories and precepts of what he wanted his art to be.

After a few difficult years in Paris, it was during the Christmas holiday when Sarah Bernhardt needed a poster immediately. On January 1, 1895, Mucha thus had the chance to present his new style to the citizens of Paris. Called upon over the Christmas holidays to create a poster for Sarah Bernhardt's play, *Gismonda*, he put his precepts to the test. The poster was the declaration of his new art, the near life-size design was a sensation. The whole story runs that the city's leading poster artists were busy and that Bernhardt reluctantly used Mucha. Nevertheless, his poster was immediately an overwhelming success, and Mucha became the theatre director favorite artist.

Mucha was an overnight success at the age of 34, after seven years of hard work. By 1898, he had moved to a new studio, illustrated *Ilsee, Princess de Tripoli*, and had begun publishing graphics with *Champenois*, a new printer anxious to promote his work with postcards and panneaux - sets of four large images around a central theme (four seasons, four times of day, four flowers, etc.). Thus, it is quite obvious that in the good tradition of Art Nouveau the artist is encompassing different fields where decoration needed, this being as well as sign of the changing worlds, of the opening of opportunities and areas that could be covered by art. To paint was no longer just to draw paintings but to approach new sites and what I consider very important, to become visible to a larger audience, to be part of the mass-culture via the species of poster or via decorating theatre scenes.

Mucha also became affiliated with several elite beverage companies. His poster for Ruinart, the first champagne company, featured an elegance *demune* young woman, seemed to personify elegance except for her hair, which had taken on a life of its own. This out of control coiffure hinted the "heady" effects of Champagne Ruinart. In all his posters the hair of the omnipresent girls is strirling around the canvas, in a wild and sensual manner, encompassing the products to be advertised, becoming the decoration by excellence in the artist's view. Anyway, the hair is a trademark of Alphonse Mucha, is the element that defines his works and that make him recognizable immediately. It is visible thus that the object comes second after the artist artistic specificity, in this case the 'hair' trait of Mucha.

I should mention here what I consider to be one of the fundamental elements of the early advertising poster, the works of Mucha coming to illustrate the point I am trying to make. In the contemporary understanding, the object is the hero and the copywriter is an anonymous contractor in the service of the producer. While the artist was the one that made the product to be sold at the turn of the last century, at the moment the importance of the advert producer has faded away to be replaced by the unique features and attributes of the product to be advertised. Thus, in the contemporary advertising the author is not present in the final product; the advertisement cannot be attributed to an artist, the one that has created it, which is usually a team, stay behind as employees of an advertising company.

The situation was different by the end of the nineteenth century but things were starting to change with the Italian artist poster designer Leonetto Cappiello that introduced the concept of brand identity, thus raising the product and its attributes to the centre of the creative product and starting to leave the author behind. Cappiello's concept of brand identity became the foundation of modern advertising.

Mucha was popular and his posters and other forms of decorations sold immediately because they were produced by the artist. The product to be advertised was indeed present in the poster, a piece of bicycle in round shapes emerging from the hair of a young girl, at the same time, Mucha was given work to do because people were familiar with his style, they liked it and they wanted to recognize him and to enjoy one more of his pieces. In this case, it is apparent that the product advertised comes second, after the artist that it is not for the soap in itself that Mucha was putting his creative energy in, but that this product was a pretext for the artist to express himself and to create beauty. To conclude, he was the end and not the mean and this is a striking difference from the contemporary advertisement environment. This is also an element that shows that even if produced for economic ends, the posters were first of all works of art that were important because of the author that put them to live and not for transmitting the special attributes of the product advertised.

At the World's Fair in Paris in 1900 Mucha designed the Bosnia-Herzegovina Pavilion. At the same time, he partnered with goldsmith Georges Fouquet in the creation of jewelry based on his designs. The bronze, *Nature* is from this time period. He also published *Documents Decoratifs*, his attempt to pass his artistic theories on to the next generation. In actuality, it provided a set of blueprints to Mucha's style and his imitators wasted no time in applying them. The fact that the epigones have been around the maestro can be telling in several ways. It shows that his style was much admired as an artistic intervention but also as a popular way of touching the ground, thus being appropriated by the emerging mass-culture. He would have not been copied had he not responded to the public taste, providing with the elements that were considered beautiful and worth admiring at the time. This is the element that makes me state again that Mucha was the men of his epoch, elaborating a style that is both

artistically sound and publicly accepted. A second element deriving from the fact that others borrowed his style is that Mucha reached much further than he envisaged. He entered more households in this indirect manner and had been present on more streets, cafes and boulevard than he could ever do with the 100 posters that he actually produced.

Mucha is considered until today to be a master lithographer and colorist, and created about 100 posters and decorative panels. Today, his body of work continues to be admired and collected. Special exhibits of his posters have traveled around the world. His fame spread around the world and several trips to America and resulted in covers and illustrations in a variety of U.S. magazines. Portraiture was also commissioned from U.S. patrons. At the end of the decade he was prepared to begin what he considered his life's work.

Mucha was always a patriot of his Czech homeland and considered his success a triumph for the Czech people as much as for himself. In 1909 he was commissioned to paint a series of murals for the Lord Mayor's Hall in Prague. He also began to plan out *The Slav Epic* - a series of large paintings chronicling major events in the Slav nation. Mucha had hoped to complete the task in five or six years, but instead it embraced 18 years of his life. Twenty massive (about 24 x 30 feet) canvasses were created and presented to the city of Prague in 1928. Covering the history of the Slavic people from prehistory to the nineteenth century, they represented Mucha's hopes and dreams for his homeland. In 1919 the first eleven canvases were completed and exhibited in Prague, and America where they received a much warmer welcome.

The style of Mucha influenced many other artists and designers and when Mucha returned to his native Czechoslovakia he spurred a renaissance of art and design in Eastern Europe, which eventually developed into the cubist and futurist movements in art which had a great influence on designers around the world in the period between the two world wars.

5. Conclusion

To conclude, the fin-de-siecle period as well as the first years of the twentieth century witnesses the apparition of a growing middle class, together with an increase in the overall literacy of the masses and the emergence of mass-culture. These social factors should be understood in due terms. I speak of mass-culture but I rather refer to a still high-culture that is penetrating via the increasingly various manifestations of art the lives of the common people. Art is no longer part of a closed world of aristocracy but as well enters the streets; the main genre that is provoking the sudden exposure of the population to art I consider to be the poster. I do not dismiss the existence of previous forms of art visible to the many, but I argue that their repertoire was first of all religious and the reception was intended as an embracement of the sacred rather than as purely aesthetic, action. Certain technological developments allowed the secular art forms to spread, as well as the readiness of artists to take them over and use it as a legitimate format for art.

It should also be remembered the proliferation of printed press, the emergence of cheap, the so-called penny press that added to the access of the population to the printed formats. Another effect of the proliferation of the cheap print is as well the emergence of advertising as a mean of reaching the audience via eye-catching adverts. It is also worth noting the collaboration between artists and the producers of all sorts of products. This type of sponsoring the work of art, but not for itself but for commercial reasons has a far reaching

effect in making the art accessible to the emerging consumer eye. The link between art and street could be seen in the all-encompassing ideology of Art Nouveau that has as declared mission statement the erasure of the distance between art and life, thus including in the legitimate forms of art formats ranging from painting theatre scenes to jewelry, shop-keepers firms to theatre and advertising poster, yet as well public institutions like metro stations in Paris. It is Art Nouveau that encouraged the emergence of new forms of culture, a mass-culture, in other words, it was the movement that best responded to the needs and transformations of the society. Nevertheless, it is an art movement that resonated all over Europe under different names and shapes and was vigorous from the last years of the nineteenth century up to the World War I.

To conclude, Cheret's color stone lithography laid the groundwork for the modern poster, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec brought it to the forefront in the 1890's while Alphonse Mucha is considered by many the Art Nouveau. He was using the technology representing commercial brands from champagne to soap, in a hybrid style of beautiful art and persuasiveness characteristic for advertising. The Art Nouveau movement spurred a renaissance in font design, hand-lettered posters and advertising titles by artists like Alphonse Mucha were in great demand. The Poster Art movement grew out of Art Nouveau and the poster became the major new medium for popular art by the turn of the century.

In those times of great changes and the emergence of an increasing larger public and incipient forms of mass-culture, the creations of Alphonse Mucha stay as emblematic for the period, they are the ones that define the style and the beauty for several years in Paris, more specifically from 1895 until around 1905 when Mucha himself changed his destiny by dedicating his life to the *Slav Epic*, departing from the Parisian lifestyle and popular glamour of boulevards and theatres decorated with works of art.

Nevertheless, by World War II, radio and newspapers became the poster's major competitors. From the fifties on, television took over some of the functions that the posters and illustrations had previously held. Mass culture and the availability of art and beauty have become naturalized in the last decades, but it is not to be forgotten that it was Art Nouveau and artists like Mucha that believed in the democratization of art and in the right of the common people to have access to beauty in its most various and mundane forms.

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