

## EXHIBITION OVERVIEW

*Timeless Mucha: The Magic of Line* celebrates the art and legacy of Czech artist Alphonse Mucha, one of the most significant figures of the Art Nouveau period. Tracing Mucha's career from his early artistic training to his breakthrough in Paris and his subsequent fame as a poster artist, this exhibition showcases the evolution of Mucha's distinctive style. Swirling lines, lush ornamentation, and forms inspired by nature combine in Mucha's works to achieve what he saw as the aim of art—"to glorify beauty."

In addition to showcasing Mucha's own work, the exhibition also examines his lasting influence in the fields of graphic design and illustration. Elements of modern visual culture, including Mucha-inspired psychedelic cover art of the 1960s and illustrations from popular comics, represent a period of renewed interest in Mucha's work that occurred decades after his death. The allure of his distinctive style for these later artists speaks to the historical parallels between the bohemian art world of Mucha's *fin de siècle* Paris and counterculture movements of the later 20<sup>th</sup> century.



*The Arts: Dance*, 1898

## USING THIS GUIDE

This guide can help educators incorporate *Timeless Mucha* into their students' learning. Look inside for background information on the exhibition's featured artist and artworks, activities to engage your students with the exhibition, and tips for where to learn more. The suggested questions and activities are best suited to students in 5<sup>th</sup> grade and up, but they can be adapted to work with younger learners.

Docent-led tours (for 9<sup>th</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades) and teacher-led tours (for 3<sup>rd</sup>-12<sup>th</sup> grades) of *Timeless Mucha* are available for school groups. The "Before Your Visit" and "Extend Your Learning" sections of this guide provide pre-and post-visit activities to complement a school tour, and the "In the Exhibition" section offers questions and looking strategies to guide students' exploration during a teacher-led visit.

To schedule a free school tour, visit [nelson-atkins.org/learn/field-trips](https://nelson-atkins.org/learn/field-trips).

## LEARNING OBJECTIVES

Through the activities outlined in this guide:

- Students will analyze the art of Alphonse Mucha, considering how he drew upon the elements of art and various sources of inspiration to develop his unique style.
- Students will explore parallels between Mucha's art and later works of graphic design and illustration that were influenced by his style.
- Students will consider how art is shaped by the historical context in which it is made.

## ABOUT THE ARTIST



Alphonse Mucha in Studio, about 1899

Alphonse Mucha was born in 1860 in the small town of Ivančice, Moravia, in what was then the Hapsburg Empire and is now part of the Czech Republic. As a boy he sang in the choir of a Catholic cathedral, and his experiences in church shaped his lifelong interest in harmony and mysticism. Desiring to become an artist, he traveled to Vienna and Munich as a young man, where he found various forms of artistic employment and studied the work of other artists. In 1887, Mucha made his way to Paris, the capital of the European art world. Mucha enrolled at two different art academies in Paris, supporting himself by creating illustrations for books and magazines.

A major breakthrough in Mucha's career came in 1894, when he took a commission to design a poster advertising the play *Gismonda*, which starred the legendary French actress Sarah Bernhardt. The poster became a sensation, and Bernhardt hired Mucha to make additional posters, stage sets, costumes, and jewelry for her theatrical roles. Mucha was soon in demand as a commercial artist, receiving commissions for posters, packaging, and other promotional materials.

Mucha developed a well-defined theory of design, which centered on his belief that “the aim of art is to glorify beauty.” He explored optics, the natural world, and mysticism, synthesizing what he learned into the belief that art should elicit an agreeable sensation in the viewer, and that natural forms, especially curving lines, are best able to produce this effect. Mucha taught classes in Paris and the United States, where he shared his ideas with students and offered practical instruction in illustration and design.

From an early age, Mucha was devoted to the cause of political independence for Slavic peoples living under imperial rule. In middle age, he spent over a decade painting a series of 20 large canvases depicting his version of Slavic history, working through the turmoil of World War I and the creation of the independent Czechoslovak Republic. When Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in 1939, Mucha's status as a Slav nationalist made him a political target of the Nazi regime; he was arrested and interrogated before being released in poor health. Mucha died in July 1939, shortly before the outbreak of World War II.



*Gismonda*, 1894

## WHAT TO EXPECT IN THE EXHIBITION

Alphonse Mucha was best known for his graphic work, which took the form of posters, books, advertisements, and other mass-produced images. This exhibition presents examples of Mucha's art from these categories alongside art objects that inspired him and works by later artists who drew inspiration from him. Numerous color lithographs are featured, as well as other types of prints, drawings, photographs, and decorative arts. Two spaces that employ digital technology add an immersive element to the exhibition.

Like many artists, Mucha was interested in the human form and depicted it in various poses, settings, and states of dress. Please note that this exhibition includes semi-nude figures.

**Timeless Mucha is organized into nine thematic sections:**

### **Le Style Mucha**

Explore the distinguishing elements of Mucha's style through the works that launched his career, theater posters that advertised the plays of French actress Sarah Bernhardt.

### **Inspirations for Mucha's Style**

View early influences that shaped Mucha's style, including the folk arts of his native Moravia, religious iconography, and the work of Austrian painter Hans Makart.

### **The Art of Storytelling**

Consider how Mucha conveyed the essence of a narrative through drawing as you view illustrations he made for books and magazines and design materials he collected and displayed in his studio.

### **The Making of Mucha's Line**

Examine preparatory drawings and sketches that illustrate Mucha's use of line and its evolution from his early artistic training to the refined expressiveness of his mature style.

### **Mucha & the Art of Ornament**

Learn about the importance of patterns and ornamentation in Mucha's style and view a copy of *The Grammar of Ornament*, the sourcebook that informed many of his decorative motifs.

### **Icons of Beauty**

See the posters that have become enduring icons of the Art Nouveau period — Mucha's depictions of idealized women representing natural forms like stones, flowers, or celestial bodies.



Page from *The Grammar of Ornament* by Owen Jones, 1868

### **Cover Art Commissions**

Explore Mucha's approach to commercial work, which included posters, magazine covers, and packaging and promotional materials.



L: Mucha's *La Trappistine*, 1897  
R: Grateful Dead LP cover by Alton Kelley, 1971

### **From Counterculture to Comics: The Rebirth of the Mucha Style & Its Legacy**

Discover the art that emerged from revived interest in Mucha's work during the 1960s, when anti-establishment artists drew on his idyllic imagery to create album covers and rock posters, and his style spread to American comics and Japanese manga. This section includes an immersive space where music and visuals suggest the psychedelic world of 1960s rock culture.

### **Mucha's *The Slav Epic*: A Monument to Identity and Resistance**

Experience a digital projection of Mucha's monumental painting cycle depicting a romanticized history of the Slavic people, which he hoped would bring about their political independence.

## TIMELINE: MUCHA AND THE WORLD OF ART NOUVEAU

### Mucha's Life & Art

**1860:** Mucha is born in Ivančice, Moravia.

**1881-1885:** Mucha meets a local landowner, Count Eduard Khuen-Belasi, who sponsors his artistic studies.

**1887:** Mucha arrives in Paris. He studies in local art academies and makes connections with the Slavic community and young artists and writers.

**1889:** Count Belasi's financial support ends, and Mucha makes a living creating illustrations for books and magazines.

**1894:** Mucha is asked to design a poster for Sarah Bernhardt's play *Gismonda*. The popularity of the poster launches Mucha's career.

**1902-1905:** Two collections of Mucha's printed designs are published in Paris; they prove instrumental in defining the Art Nouveau style. Mucha makes several trips to the United States and teaches art courses there.

**1906:** Mucha marries Marie "Maruška" Chytilová; they have a daughter in 1909 and a son in 1915.

**1910:** Mucha and his family move to West Bohemia (in present-day Czech Republic); he travels throughout eastern Europe studying the folk traditions of Slavic communities.

**1911-1926:** Mucha paints the *Slav Epic*, a monumental painting cycle celebrating Slavic culture.

**1920s-1930s:** Major exhibitions of Mucha's work are held in the U.S. and Europe.

**1939:** Mucha is arrested and interrogated by the Gestapo in March; his health declines in captivity and he dies in July shortly after his release.

**1963:** The Victoria and Albert Museum in London hosts a retrospective exhibition of Mucha's work, kickstarting a revival of interest in his style.

### World Events

**1853:** Japan begins opening its ports for trade with the U.S. and Europe, leading to high demand for Japanese art in the West.

**1874:** The first Impressionist exhibition is held in Paris.

**1880s:** Working in Paris, Jules Chéret creates the first modern advertising posters using a large-format color lithography process.

**1887:** Construction of the Eiffel Tower begins.

**1900:** The Paris Métro opens; its above-ground components are designed in the Art Nouveau style.

**1907:** Picasso paints *Les Femmes d'Alger (O. J. R. Version O)*.

**1914:** World War I breaks out.

**1917:** The Russian Revolution brings an end to Czarist rule.

**1918:** World War I ends; Czechoslovakia is founded.

**1922:** The Soviet Union is formed.

**1920s:** Art Deco becomes the dominant international art style.

**1939:** Czechoslovakia comes under German occupation. World War II begins.

**1967:** The "Summer of Love" brings thousands of hippies to San Francisco.

**1969:** Shōjo, a subgenre of Japanese manga, rises to prominence; some of its artists find inspiration in Art Nouveau designs.

**1970s:** Posters and album covers for psychedelic rock bands draw on Mucha's style.

**1985-1986:** A creative high point for the U.S. comic scene; some comic artists use Art Nouveau elements in their work.

## BEFORE YOUR VISIT

### Get Familiar with Art Nouveau

Alphonse Mucha is closely associated with the Art Nouveau style, which emerged in Europe in the late 1800s. Using books or web sources, encourage students to learn more about Art Nouveau. Suggested resources are listed at the end of this guide. You could also share the following introductory video(s) with students:

**For older students:** “Where the 1960s ‘psychedelic’ look came from,” *Vox*, 2020, [bit.ly/4uBB2cj](https://bit.ly/4uBB2cj)

**For younger or older students:** “Understanding the Styles of Art: Art Nouveau,” *Art Ed Guru*, 2021, [bit.ly/4IHKZkL](https://bit.ly/4IHKZkL)

Ask students to answer the following questions:

- Who are some other artists associated with Art Nouveau?
- What are some distinguishing visual characteristics of Art Nouveau?
- Where did Art Nouveau artists find inspiration for the design elements they used?
- Why do you think the Art Nouveau style became popular in the late 1800s? What was going on in the world that might have contributed to the development of this particular style?

### Consider Historical Context

The art of Alphonse Mucha was shaped by the time and place in which he lived. Have students brainstorm what they know about the years spanned by Mucha’s life — approximately 1860 to 1940. What were some major world events that occurred during that time period? What was happening in eastern Europe, where Mucha was born and lived toward the end of his life? What was happening in Paris, where Mucha spent much of his artistic career? You can use the timeline included in this guide to fill in any historical context students might be missing.

### Analyze a Mucha Poster

Invite students to look closely at one of Mucha’s posters. One example is shown at right; it can also be viewed online at [wikiart.org/en/alphonse-mucha/topaz](https://wikiart.org/en/alphonse-mucha/topaz). Discuss the following:

- How would you describe the lines, colors, shapes, and forms used in this image?
- Let your eye travel through the image. How does Mucha direct your eye from one point of interest to another?
- Where do you see elements inspired by nature? Where do you see elements that might be inspired by art from other cultures?
- How does this image make you feel? Why might that be?



*The Precious Stones: Topaz, 1900*

## IN THE EXHIBITION

### Find Elements of Inspiration

Alphonse Mucha drew inspiration from many different sources in developing his signature style. As students explore the exhibition, encourage them to look for elements that he may have derived from:

- **Japanese art:** look for flat areas of color with bold outlines; asymmetrical compositions
- **Nature:** look for flowers and plants; swooping, vine-like lines; celestial bodies
- ***The Grammar of Ornament* book:** look for decorative geometric patterns

Can they find any works of art that include elements inspired by all three of those sources?



### Explore Mucha's Style

Encourage students to view the interpretative station within the exhibition that draws attention to Mucha's distinctive approach to line and composition. Panels on the wall depict reproductions of some of Mucha's best-known posters, with colored lines added to highlight noteworthy design elements in each image. Can students identify those same lines and layouts in other works by Mucha in the exhibition?

### Compare & Contrast

Mucha's artistic legacy was cemented in the 1960s and 1970s, when his work was rediscovered by a new generation of poster designers, comic artists, and more. These artists incorporated Mucha's signature design motifs, style, and sometimes whole compositions into their work.

Find the "From Counterculture to Comics" section of the exhibition, where works by Mucha are displayed alongside the later works they inspired. Invite students to choose one pairing to compare and contrast. Suggested pair:

- Alphonse Mucha, *La Dame aux Camélias*, 1896 (view online at [wikiart.org/en/alphonse-mucha/the-lady-of-the-camellias-1896](http://wikiart.org/en/alphonse-mucha/the-lady-of-the-camellias-1896))
- David Byrd, *David Edward Byrd Solo Exhibition Promotional Poster*, Triton Gallery, New York, 1971 (view online at [postermuseum.com/products/u191024](http://postermuseum.com/products/u191024))

Discuss as a group: Why do you think Mucha's art was so appealing to later artists of the 1960s and 1970s? Do you find it appealing today? Why or why not?



L: Alphonse Mucha, *La Dame aux Camélias*, 1896. R: David Byrd, *David Edward Byrd Solo Exhibition Promotional Poster*, Triton Gallery, New York, 1971

## EXTEND YOUR LEARNING

### Art Nouveau Beyond Mucha

Now that students are familiar with the design elements that characterize Mucha's art, challenge them to find those same elements in works by other artists. Where do they see the influence of Mucha and/or Art Nouveau in the art of today? They can look beyond two-dimensional art to explore architecture, fashion, interior design, or housewares.



Art Nouveau-inspired film set from *The Lord of the Rings*, 2001. Photo via MSB Architects.

### Make a Mucha-Inspired Artwork

Mucha designed his advertising posters to be beautiful to look at, so that people would have positive associations with the product being shown. Challenge students to design their own advertising posters inspired by Mucha's approach to design. They can select a product of their choice, then use colors, lines, patterns, or composition principles based on Mucha's art to create a poster with visual appeal. How will they incorporate an image of the product itself into their design in a positive way?

## TERMS TO KNOW

<b>Art Nouveau</b>	An international art style that flourished between 1890 and 1910 and was applied to architecture, graphic arts, furniture design, and other functional objects. Characteristics include the use of curvilinear lines, decorative patterns, motifs inspired by nature, and influences from Japanese art.
<b>Belle Epoque</b>	"The Beautiful Era" in French; a period of European history that began in the late 1800s and ended with the start of World War I. It was marked by optimism, regional stability, and artistic innovation.
<b>Counterculture</b>	A way of life that is opposed to prevailing social norms and values.
<b>Folk Art</b>	Traditional arts and crafts made by a culture.
<b>Lithography</b>	A printing process that involves marking a stone or metal plate with a greasy medium, then applying a chemical solution to the surface. Printing ink sticks to the grease markings but not the chemically-treated areas, and paper is placed against the plate to form the image. Lithography allows for wider gradations of tone than other printing methods, and makes it easier to print in color.
<b>Manga</b>	A type of comic book or graphic novel that originated in Japan.
<b>Psychedelic</b>	Related to or suggestive of the experience of being on mind-altering drugs.
<b>Shōjo</b>	A genre of manga geared toward girls; it underwent a period of significant development and innovation in the 1960s and 1970s.
<b>Slavic</b>	Refers to an ethnic and linguistic body of peoples distributed throughout central, southeastern, and eastern Europe as well as northern Asia. Slavic nationalities include Poles, Croatians, Ukrainians, and Russians, among others.
<b>Whiplash</b>	An ornamental s-curve line that mimics the writhing tendrils of plants or other natural forms. It is a defining feature of the Art Nouveau style.

## SUGGESTED RESOURCES

### Books

*Timeless Mucha: The Magic of Line*, edited by Tomoko Sato, 2025. Available in the ERC.

This catalog contains images of the works featured in *Timeless Mucha* alongside articles exploring various aspects of Mucha's art and life.

*Mucha*, Tomoko Sato, 2015. Available in the ERC.

Written by the curator of the Mucha Foundation, this book presents some of Mucha's key works.

### Web

*Mucha Foundation* / [muchafoundation.org/en](https://muchafoundation.org/en)

Explore a rich gallery of images along with an interactive timeline and other resources.

"Art Nouveau," *Victoria & Albert Museum* / [vam.ac.uk/collections/art-nouveau](https://vam.ac.uk/collections/art-nouveau)

This landing page from the Victoria & Albert Museum features articles and images of objects that epitomize the Art Nouveau style.

*Smartify* / [app.smartify.org/en-GB/nelson-atkins-museum-of-art](https://app.smartify.org/en-GB/nelson-atkins-museum-of-art)

Video and audio content related to *Timeless Mucha* can be found here, or access it via the Smartify app by scanning the QR code at right.



## EDUCATOR RESOURCE CENTER

This guide was produced by the Educator Resource Center at the Nelson-Atkins. The ERC supports educators with a variety of programs and resources. We invite you to connect with the ERC to access curriculum consultations, circulating resources, and professional development workshops.

Visit [nelson-atkins.org/learn/educator-resources](https://nelson-atkins.org/learn/educator-resources) for more information.

## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS

Activities described in this guide can engage students with the following learning standards:

### Visual Arts

Anchor Standard #7: Perceive and analyze artistic work.

Anchor Standard #8: Interpret intent and meaning in artistic work.

Anchor Standard #11: Relate artistic ideas and works with societal, cultural, and historical context to deepen understanding.

### Social Studies

MO 9-12.WH.5.PC.C: Analyze the technological, intellectual, artistic, and literary achievements of the modern era to determine how society reflects and challenges the status quo.

## CREDITS

### Artwork credits:

Unless otherwise noted, all works are by Alphonse Mucha (Czech, 1860-1939).

Page 1: *The Arts: Dance*, 1898. Color lithograph, 83.7 x 60.7 x 2 cm. Collection of the Mucha Trust, © 2025 Mucha Trust. Page 2: *Gismonda*, 1894. Color lithograph, 227.5 x 84 x 85 cm. Collection of the Mucha Trust, © 2025 Mucha Trust. Page 3: *La Trappistine*, 1897. Color lithograph, 210.2 x 78.7 cm. Collection of the Mucha Trust, © 2025 Mucha Trust. Alton Kelley (American, 1940-2008), *Grateful Dead Live: Skull and Roses*, 1971. Cardboard album sleeve cover, 32.3 x 32.4 x .1 cm. Collection of the Mucha Trust. Courtesy of Warner Bros. Records. Page 5: *The Precious Stones: Topaz*, 1900. Color lithograph, 84.5 x 47 x 3 cm. Collection of the Mucha Trust, © 2025 Mucha Trust. Page 6: *La Dame aux Camélias*, 1896. Color lithograph, 213 x 85 x 8.5 cm. Collection of the Mucha Trust, © 2025 Mucha Trust. David Byrd (American, 1941-2025), *David Edward Byrd Solo Exhibition Promotional Poster*, *Triton Gallery, New York*, 1971. Offset lithograph, 158 x 62 x 3 cm. Collection of the Mucha Trust, © 2025 Mucha Trust.

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