2. The Artist Who Changed His Fortune: The Story of Alphonse Mucha



Imagine arriving in Paris as a relatively unknown artist, struggling to make a living. This was the situation of Alphonse Mucha, a young artist from Moravia, then part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

On 26 December 1894, a few days before New Year's Eve, the young Czech artist was about to become famous almost by accident.

Alphonse Mucha was living in Paris and earning a modest living as an illustrator. On that particular day, he happened to be visiting the Lemercier printing workshop, helping a friend to correct some proofs. Suddenly, an urgent telephone call arrived. Sarah Bernhardt, the most celebrated actress of the time, needed a new poster for her forthcoming production of *Gismonda.* The deadline was extremely tight: the poster had to be ready for the New Year. Unfortunately, all the workshop's regular artists were away for the holidays!

The workshop manager turned to Mucha. Would he accept the commission? Mucha agreed. He produced something completely different from the advertising posters of the time: an extraordinarily tall and narrow composition, featuring Sarah Bernhardt almost life-size, dressed as a Byzantine princess, surrounded by delicate ornamental patterns and a decorative halo.

When Bernhardt saw the result, she was delighted. She immediately offered Mucha a long-term contract to design her theatrical posters, costumes and stage decorations. His career was transformed almost overnight.

But the story does not end there!

When the posters appeared on the streets of Paris on 1 January 1895, they became so popular that people actually started stealing them. Some collectors bribed the workers responsible for putting up the advertisements; others went out at night with scissors and carefully cut the posters off the advertising boards to take them home! What had previously been considered disposable advertising had suddenly become something worth collecting as a work of art.

The Mucha’s women became icons of Art Nouveau: their long hair, delicate expressions and elaborate floral frames transformed advertising into an art form.

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