
**Alphonse Marie Mucha:
Posters, Panels ... and Comic Books?**

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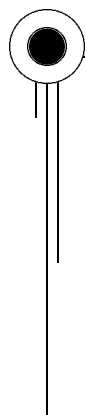
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ABSTRACT

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Creative work, theories and techniques of early 20th Century Art Nouveau poster designer and commercial artist, Alphonse Mucha, continue to inform the creation of contemporary media products to a surprising extent. Interviews conducted with comic book artists reveal the extent of Mucha's continuing impact on the development of an underappreciated medium. Features identified as common to both commercial and more exalted forms of art encourage a reevaluation of Mucha's historic significance.



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"The Mucha nymph, fresh-faces, pretty, clear-eyed, nowadays dominates so many images that have become familiar through poster reproductions, picture books (some even with text), advertising, pastiche, honest copy and plagiarism that one could be forgiven for thinking that his fame is greater now than it was in his hey-day."¹¹

A few years ago, as an undergraduate architecture student, I was required to take several semesters of design and art history. I became aware of the turn of the century Art Nouveau movement and one of its most significant artists, Alphonse Marie Mucha. His work immediately inspired mine. I began to notice his influence in places I never expected to find it. I found magazines and advertisements designed as obvious tributes to Mucha, but it was while browsing in a comic book store, looking at racks of similar covers, that I made a more surprising observation — Mucha has had an enormous impact on the world of comic books. His influence shines through detail and color choices along with cover design concepts. But I didn't pursue this investigation any further until a combination of timing, an interested professor and a group of willing artists led me to ask: Why? Thus, this project considers Mucha's popularity and influence in his own time as well as how his work came to influence comic book artists of today.



Alphonse Mucha, self-portrait (1898).

Seeking further insight into Mucha's pervasive influence, I relied on several different books, ranging from biographies written by his son, Jiri, to exhibition catalogs, to Mucha's own observations and theories about art. After studying his life and work, I turned to comic books. How do they function? Why do some bear such a strong resemblance to Mucha's work? I studied both Will Eisner's groundbreaking *Comics & Sequential Art* and Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics*. I referred to artists' books, magazine articles and comic books. My most valuable resource proved to be a series of interviews with seven comic book artists, all influenced by Mucha to some degree. I conducted the interviews either by e-mail or telephone, depending on the artist's preference. The basic questions remained the same. The artists interviewed for this project were (in alphabetical order): Franchesco, creator of *Xstacy*; Michael William Kaluta, former cover artist for *Books of Magic* and *Aquaman*; Joshua Middleton, creator of *Sky Between Branches*; Terry Moore, creator of *Strangers in Paradise*; Joe Quesada, former *Daredevil* artist and current Marvel Comics Editor-in-Chief; J. H. Williams III, artist for *Promethea*; and Barry Windsor-Smith, creator of *Storyteller*.

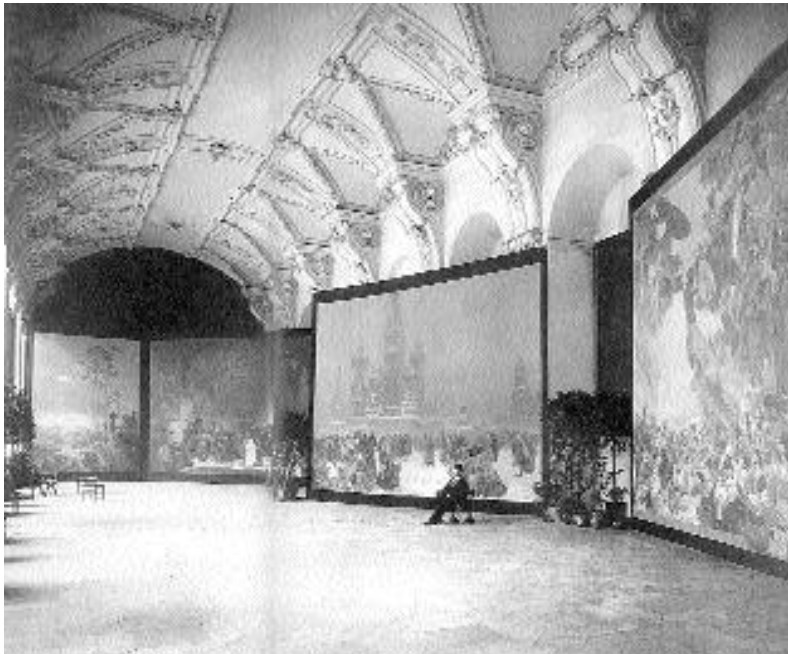
Three main questions frame this study; they represent the heart of my research:

1. Why is Mucha's visual style well-suited for influencing comic book art?
2. Is a Mucha influenced style used more often on cover or interior art?
3. Do Mucha's idealized women and dense, organic environments correlate to the same in comic books?

A question related to number one above, is: Can an historically significant poster artist, while still relatively unknown in the academic world, be legitimately championed as a major influence on the art of comic books? For instance, anyone who spends time browsing in a comic book store cannot help but come across a steady stream of books whose style can be traced directly to Mucha's. Question two sets up a comparison between artwork found on the interior pages of comic books and artwork found on covers. In some examples, the cover artist is not even the same person who draws the interior pages. Why would a separate artist, often with a more Mucha-esque style, be employed to attract buyers solely through cover art? And question three examines the content of Mucha's work in comparison to that found in comic books. Are there similarities, and if so, why?

"As the essential of farce is the contradiction between reality and appearance, it is in keeping that the period's most fashionable decorative artist should be a man whose life seems totally at variance with the work that made him famous. Alphonse Mucha, whose delicately sensuous style epitomizes the urbane grace of French Art Nouveau, was a Czech, born in 1860, next to the local jail in the remote Moravian town of Ivancice, who died, after being questioned by the Gestapo, in Prague, in 1939."⁹

Alphonse Mucha worked for years, at any graphically oriented job he could find, before becoming an overnight success. At his core, Mucha was a "nineteenth-century



Mucha sits in front of the Slav Epic at its 1919 exhibition in Prague.

academic history-painter who transformed the image of Woman through the most direct and popularly accessible medium, the poster."¹¹ Even with success and accolades, Mucha remained happiest living a Bohemian lifestyle. The more Mucha was honored for his posters, panels and other illustrations, "the more he longed to abandon it all and devote his life to painting huge canvases depicting the history of the Slav peoples."¹¹

His lifelong artistic journey began during childhood, far removed from the art world of Paris that helped him develop a style and brought him fame. He was born in the tiny Moravian town of Ivancice on July 24, 1860 to Andreas and Amalia Mucha. Andreas was a court-usher and Amalia was an educated daughter of a miller. Though they had little money, the family was able to give all of their children the gift of education, hoping they would live a decent life as civil servants or, in Alphonse's case, as a priest. But priesthood was not to be for Alphonse, as he was recognized early on as a naturally-gifted artist. He could draw before he could walk. His mother encouraged his talent by tying a pencil around his neck with a ribbon to allow him to draw on any and every surface in the house, including the furniture. He was born left-handed, but teachers taught him to use his right hand when he started school. For his entire life afterwards he was ambidextrous. His right hand was most often used for drawing and delicate work while he utilized his left for manual labors. Mucha was not only a gifted draftsman, but had the ability to execute models for buildings or sculpture with immaculate detail.²⁸

"As a child, I was continuously preoccupied with observation, even though I might seem to be gazing into a void." Alphonse Mucha²⁸



The Clowns, an early painting by Mucha (1887).

For years, Mucha toiled at various schools and odd jobs while devoting his spare time to drawing. In 1871 he moved to Brno where he attended the Petrov Church and was a member of the choir. 1875 brought him back home to Ivancice where he worked for a time as a court clerk. Mucha then applied to the Prague Academy of Fine arts, in 1878, but was rejected. He painted portraits for money in Mikulov in 1882 and received his first patron in 1883 when he painted murals for Count Khuen's castle.¹¹

In the fall of 1885, Mucha received his first official art training at the Munich Academy. While attending the academy, he found himself in the company of a large colony of Slavs and compatriots. This unique group of art students founded a club called Skreta which developed its own weekly journal, *Paleta*, to which Mucha was a frequent contributor. Eventually the members of Skreta elected Mucha as their club president.³¹ After completing his education at the academy in the autumn of 1887, he decided to travel to Paris, knowing not a single word of French. Upon his arrival, Mucha attended classes at the Academie Julian. He was taught by instructors influential in the Paris art scene, including Jules Joseph Lefebvre, Gustave Boulanger and Jean Paul Laurens. Though Laurens was probably the most influential on his style, Mucha strongly disliked him. Laurens' influence could still be detected many years later, especially in Mucha's 1893 painting, *The Odalisque*.³¹

Mucha's style was clearly indebted to other art outside of what he was taught in schools, most notably Japanese art, which he proclaimed to have studied intensely during the formative years of his artistic style.³¹ He also owed much in the way of style to Grasset, the pioneer of strikingly thick, stained-glass-like outlines and line work. Grasset also was a strong proponent of the use of floral forms in artistic endeavors which Mucha later used with great frequency.³¹

Mucha was influenced little by more popular artists of the time, such as Bonnard, Degas and Monet. Their asymmetrical compositions meant nothing to Mucha, whose own art was smoothly integrated. Any time Mucha was inclined to utilize the more fashionable tendencies of his artistic contemporaries, he made sure to balance this with his own two dimensional outline design. At this point in his career, everything he created was dependent on the varying emphasis of line drawing. Even his life studies were filled with contour lines — encouraging a viewer's gaze to trace the graceful shapes of Mucha's women.³¹

Throughout his life, Mucha was a deeply religious man. He followed no formal doctrine, but was convinced that supernatural intervention occurred in daily life. Mucha did not believe in "religious determinism," but he did think that every person had an exclusive destiny available to them. Fate would either allow it to be filled or would sweep them away from it. His belief in fate convinced him of divine intervention at crucial points throughout his life, especially when he was commissioned to produce the *Gismonda* poster for stage star Sarah Bernhardt. Fate was also the underlying factor in his occult experiments, whereby he sought new ideas and was reassured in his actions. One of his most utilized occult experiments was the practice of automatic writing, which he continued until the final days of his life. Mucha was convinced that he had the ability to receive messages from beyond the grave, usually coming from dead friends. A copy of the instructions Mucha believed he received from Goethe still exists, which advised him as to how he should paint his final major work, *The Age of Reason, Wisdom and Love*.²⁸

The story of Alphonse Mucha's first significant achievement in the world of art, and the birth of "le style Mucha," as the Art Nouveau period would come to be known, began, appropriately for the style, with a beautiful woman. In the span of one week, between Christmas 1894 and the beginning of 1895, a good illustrator, common in Paris those days, became instead an artistic master of the poster, due to a single image: *Gismonda*.³²

These events have more than likely been exaggerated over the years, but their core is founded in truth. It all started in the offices of one of Paris' best known printers, Lemercier. Mucha was working in Lemercier's shop alone on Christmas Day, proofing lithographs for his friend Kadar. When he was almost done and getting ready to leave, Lemercier's manager, de Brunoff, came storming in and told Mucha that Sarah Bernhardt informed him that she needed a poster for Sardou's play *Gismonda* — designed and printed for display on New Year's Day. Bernhardt was the star of the play, but attendance had been waning. Something was needed to revive interest in the play for the New Year. As this was a holi-



Portrait of Sarah Bernhardt, with a headdress designed by Mucha.

photo: Reintlinger, Paris.



Mucha's Gismonda poster.

day time, all of Lemerancier's regular designers were on vacation, so Mucha was asked to fill-in. He was willing to give it a try, so, with a rented coat and a borrowed hat, Mucha went to the theater to produce preliminary sketches. He was quite taken by Bernhardt and was quickly off to begin work on her new poster design. De Brunoff left for the holiday while Mucha stayed behind to work on the poster. De Brunoff returned on December 30th to a finished poster, already printed and hanging to dry. But what he saw horrified De Brunoff. He believed Sarah Bernhardt would hate the poster and he would take the blame. Since there was no time left to make changes, the poster was immediately sent to the Theatre de la Renaissance. Mucha was completely depressed by the reaction of De Brunoff and sulked in the Lemerancier studio until he was eventually called to the theater. Though he expected yet another round of harsh criticism from Bernhardt upon his arrival, instead he found her staring, entranced, at her own image. She was enamored with Mucha's work, thanking him and quickly contracting him to design more than just posters. In a collaboration that lasted for several years, Mucha designed posters, theatre cards and programs, as well as costumes, stage sets and often parts of Bernhardt's complete theater productions.¹

In sharp contrast to the bright, loud colors of Cheret's previous versions, Mucha's poster for *Gismonda* debuted on January 1st, 1895 with a muted and almost translucent look. The change electrified viewers. His version of the elongated, slender form of Sarah Bernhardt, frozen in time with a beautiful dress and intricate linear decoration, was an immediate hit with Parisians everywhere. Cheret's original poster for *Gismonda*, with its blobs of bright colors, was useful in briefly catching the attention of people hurrying by on the street, but Mucha's version had the opposite effect.

His poster forced people to stop and take a closer look at the detail and richness of the design. "Crowds gathered around each poster, and collectors bribed the poster men to keep one for them, or attempted to cut them off the hoardings."¹

After this seminal work in Mucha's career, his popularity was difficult to ignore. Even in the midst of many great artists, he managed to captivate Paris, as well as the rest of France, with his beautiful designs. His name could be found on every wall in town and heard coming from everyone's lips. Everyone wanted Mucha to produce work for them and in those pre-Hollywood days, he was considered a superstar, the likes of which were rarely

seen in the art world.³¹ Some of Mucha's more famous works were produced as decorative lithographic panels, including among them the *Four Seasons*, the *Four Arts*, the *Four Times of Day*, and the one many critics hailed as his best work, the *Four Precious Stones*.¹



The Four Precious Stones — *Topaz, Ruby, Amethyst, Emerald* (1900).



As time passed, Mucha began to feel more comfortable with his experiments in decoration. One of Mucha's most widely seen experiments involved the serpentine potential of female hair. He drew his nymphs and maidens with elaborately tangled strands of hair which flowed around them, almost to the point of dominating the image. Though this stylized hair was often admired, he was just as frequently criticized in the media for what they called his 'macaroni' or 'noodle' style.¹ This type of representation of hair in Mucha's work was likely influenced by the stylized lines of water found in Japanese art popular at that time.³¹

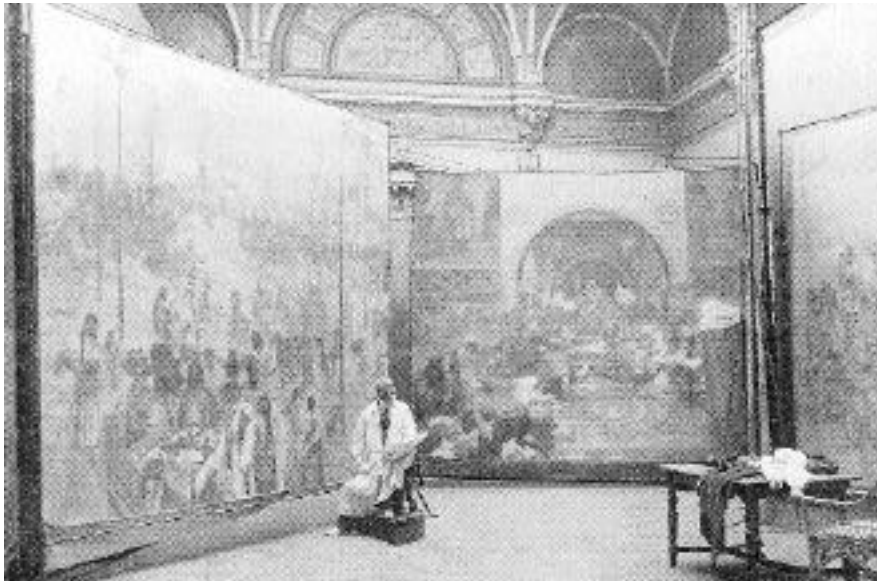
Mucha also chose to incorporate a great deal of symbolism in his work, especially in his posters. Oftentimes, the symbolism he selected was a reversal of "Sacred and Profane," as can be seen in the Citroen collection's girl crowned with thorns. Though perceived as a decadent type of symbolism when others utilized it, Mucha used this approach to unify his work. Other artists, working in different media, were also experimenting with this type of symbolism, including Debussy, Munch and Yeats.³¹

During his life, Alphonse Mucha was arguably the most famous artist of the Art Nouveau era. In keeping with his Bohemian

The "Sacred and Profane" theme, exemplified in Mucha's poster for Leslie Carter (1908).

roots, though, when his fame was at its highest point, he left Paris. Mucha felt Paris had become solely associated with commercialism. He sought a more serious form of recognition in America and in his homeland of Czechoslovakia. Mucha's departure signified the end of Art Nouveau as a vital artistic movement in Paris.

In 1910, while in America, Mucha secured funding from the very wealthy Charles R. Crane, who agreed to finance his work on the *Slav Epic*. Shortly thereafter, he returned to his homeland and spent much of his remaining life carrying out this dream.¹ Mucha planned to present the *Slav Epic* as a free gift to the Czech people upon its completion. In twenty large scale panels (15' x 24'), he endeavored to display the heart and soul of the Slavs throughout their history. This monumental work was his way of giving back something to his people for gifts he was provided during his life. To Mucha, this was an ideal use



Mucha continued to work on the Slav Epic throughout his life (seen here in 1926).

of his artistic skills. The first panels were finished and exhibited in 1912, in both the U.S. and Czechoslovakia. Mucha continued to work on the *Slav Epic* for sixteen more years. Even during his final days, he continued to add significant details to this complex work of art. Mucha did not live to see its permanent exhibi-

tion because the Slave Epic did not find a final home until 1963, in Moravsky Krumlov in the Czech Republic.²⁸ While working on the *Epic*, Mucha also designed banknotes, stamps and uniforms for Czechoslovakia, refusing to accept any money for the designs.²⁸

Within a few years of leaving Paris, Mucha was completely forgotten by the art world. It has been documented that a major gallery in Paris bought huge quantities of his decorative panels, "folded them in half, cut a window opening on one side, and used them



A 100 crown note designed by Mucha (1919).

as mounts or mats in which to display better known works. After all, the panels were cheaper than plain white card. When the revival of interest in Art Nouveau began in the post-war years, none of the writers on the subject so much as mentioned Mucha."¹

"The expression of beauty is by emotion. The person who can communicate his emotions to the souls of others is the artist." Alphonse Mucha²⁷

Throughout his life as an artist, Alphonse Mucha always seemed more interested in producing art that the general public could see and enjoy, rather than producing art explicitly for critics, or for art's sake.³² He wanted to create works that would not only be shown in galleries, but that would be recognized and admired by the common man.⁹ Mucha once remarked, "I was happy to be involved in an art for the people and not for private drawing rooms. It was inexpensive, accessible to the general public, and it found a home among poor families as well as in more affluent circles."³² Mucha's lifelong goal was helped along most by his use of the printing press to create inexpensive reproductions of his artwork. That which was once available only to the rich could now be publicly displayed and enjoyed by an entire population.¹⁷

This attitude did not sit well with the Parisian art critics of Mucha's time. Many felt that Mucha was lowering himself in taking on projects such as advertisements and posters. They believed he should instead use his newfound fame to focus on producing "pure" art. Such criticisms intensified further when *L'Estampe Moderne* published a critique stating, "When one has come to occupy a place and acquire a reputation like Mucha, one should neglect the commercial side and aim exclusively to produce art and truth."²⁸ Though Mucha was not overtly affected by such criticism, he would eventually take it to heart, choosing to dedicate many of his remaining years to producing works for his Slavic

brethren. But this was less in response to critics than a realization of a lifelong goal — producing art for the people.

Of course, not everyone was so critical of Mucha's commercial work. The famous artist James Whistler was an admirer of Mucha's unique style and skill. Whistler's studio was filled with Mucha's posters and when, on one notable occasion, a visitor asked why he would chose to decorate with prints instead of original works of art, which a man of his distinction could obviously afford, Whistler replied, "So that I can show fools like you what it means to be able to draw."²⁸ Mucha's ability to draw was obvious to more perceptive artists such as Whistler, and his distinctive posters have, over the years, become one of the defining styles of Art Nouveau. How did he create a style whose influence can still be detected in art produced today? Why was Mucha's art more admired by the common man than the work of many of his contemporaries? Put simply, he understood what his audience valued and he knew how to produce it.

The first and most recognizable theme in Mucha's work is his depiction of female form. He has long been acknowledged as a top artist of women and flowers. There are few artists whose similar combinations are more beautiful or widely prized.²⁸ Art Nouveau designers are often associated with a "veiled but highly charged eroticism," but none more so than Alphonse Mucha. His work exemplifies the sophistication of form for which the Art Nouveau woman is best known. Mucha's ability to seamlessly connect idealized



La Trappistine (1897) is a classic example of Mucha's use of female form, as well as the "Q-formula."

images of women to specific products was successful in selling not only goods, but also a complete lifestyle. "His posters commodified women, making them the ultimate symbol of the modern consumer world."³⁹

Mucha was fixated on the idea that the human eye favored following a curved rather than a straight line. It was therefore the mission of the artist to encourage this trait in the audience by replicating these "natural" curves. Like many artists, he also believed that the human eye would focus on an object placed at a central point as determined by the Golden Mean, which employed a ratio of 2:3. Because of this, "good" artists would place the focal point of any composition at this critical axis.²⁸ Brian Reade, in his book *Art Nouveau and Alphonse Mucha*, explains how these fundamental principles of design informed style decisions that would stay with Mucha for his entire career. He states that Mucha emphasized a basic scheme that recalls the letter Q. This scheme can be seen typically in the form of an ornamental circular frame, with a woman's body placed asymmetrically inside it. By continually utilizing this basic composition in a variety of unique situations, Mucha was able to work around the problem of how to tie ornamentation to a central figure. The integration of these two aspects in the form of a figure/frame relationship allowed Mucha a means of balancing natural form and an abstract frame, in a way that also produced a subtly erotic image.³⁸

An extreme example of the Q formula can be seen in Mucha's poster for *La Trappistine*, where the female body and her hair strike sharply, almost sword-like, downward and out of the circular frame behind her head. This formula is often hidden in the intricate details of the frame or the flowing hair of the central figure, but is rarely missing from the composition. Even in much of Mucha's final work for the Czechoslovakian people, this signature trait, though highly veiled, can still be detected.³¹

Another technique used by Mucha, which he personally describes in detail in his *Lectures on Art*, is the harmony of points. In this layout method, Mucha determined that no two points of interest should be placed on an equal plane, either horizontally or vertically. In his own words Mucha explained that "a vertical line, as a horizontal line, gives to the eye no particular pleasure ... the eyes are so often charged with these two functions, the judgment of both length and height, that finally the aspect of these two horizontal and vertical lines becomes more or less deprived of lively pleasure."²⁷ In attempting to create an interesting and distinctive composition,



A sketch demonstrating Mucha's "harmony of lines" theory.

Mucha believed that an artist must always place points of interest in locations that will please the human eye. Mucha's attempt to explain what was most likely an innate understanding, about how to convey natural beauty as a two-dimensional drawing, is a revealing insight concerning his design theories.

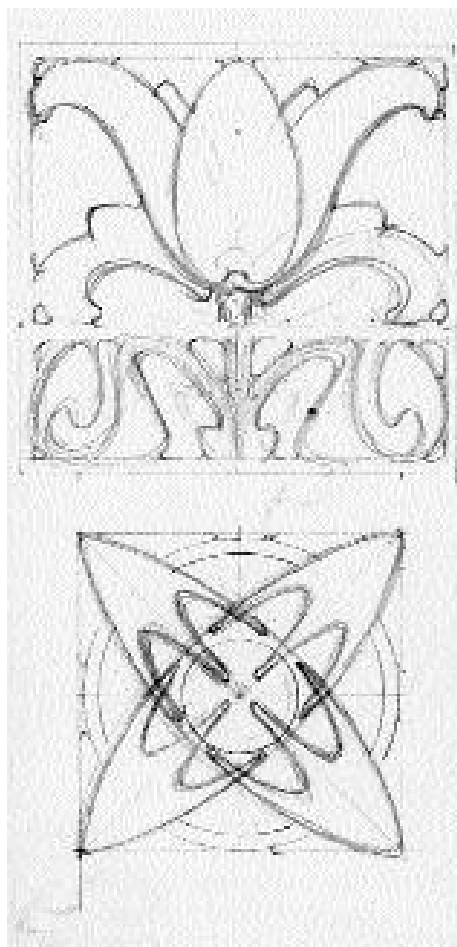
In direct relation to the harmony of points is the harmony of lines. Mucha is often recognized by his line work, combining thick outlines of major figures with delicate interior details. Somewhat

surprisingly, this method is related to the Modernist maxim: less equals more. As Mucha once stated, "If a scene may be expressed by one person there is no necessity for introducing others. If an emotion may be expressed with the movement of an arm it is not necessary to move both arms. If the movement of a finger is sufficient to express an emotion, one must never move the entire arm, and if one expression of the eye sufficiently explains this emotion, it is unnecessary to move any other part of the body."²⁷ This may seem to go against what is expected of an artist who produced such richly detailed work as Alphonse Mucha. It is interesting to observe that, in his detail work, Mucha constantly tried to *conserve* the use of lines.

In addition to the first two harmonies, Mucha also explains that a harmony of masses must be incorporated into any composition. Symmetrical masses are disturbing to viewers because they force them to follow the same movements and judge the same sizes at two points of a picture. Not only must masses be harmonious, they must be so within the same composition. The primary mass or point of attraction must be placed in a specifically determined position, the pivot around which every other mass will be arranged.²⁷ Setting up the masses in this way allows for an unsurpassed viewing experience by the audience.

For Mucha, the most vital goal when it came to rendering an object was to examine all of its characteristics thoroughly. If, for example, he set out to draw a flower, he would first observe it both horizontally and vertically, noticing the exact shape of all of its parts, from buds to leaves to stem — including any imperfections. Along with that, a careful study of color and any other significations revealed appropriate linear forms to use for rendering. Mucha was enamored with the *process* of creating a composition. When speaking about artists in this light, he said, "We feel an awakening in ourselves; all the elements that may accentuate, illuminate or sustain this emotion eddy in a whirl of disorder about their nucleus, up to the moment when gently, one after the other, according to relative importance, each takes its proper place, and the composition begins to grow."²⁷

One of the most crucial elements of any Art Nouveau project is decoration or ornamentation. Similar to architect Frank Lloyd Wright's famous statement that "form follows function," Mucha once said, "Art and its form should serve as a language to the object or to the forms to be decorated."²⁷ In other words, rather than attempt to conceal elements of the object, decoration can instead enhance the beauty of its natural form. Done properly, decoration, in combination with the rendering of the object, can help produce work of the highest artistic merit. There are many possible examples to describe what Mucha meant

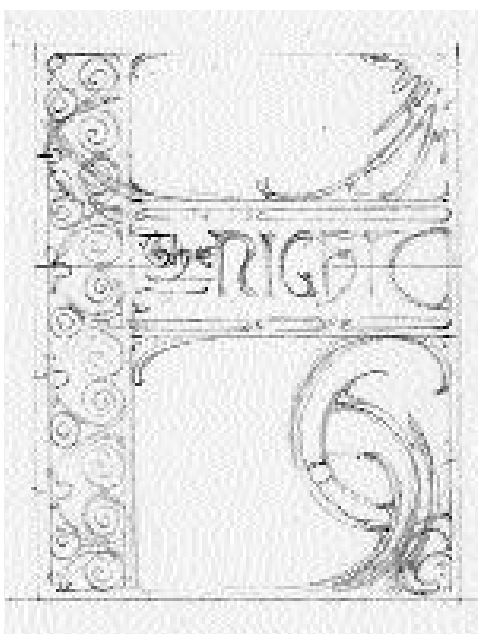
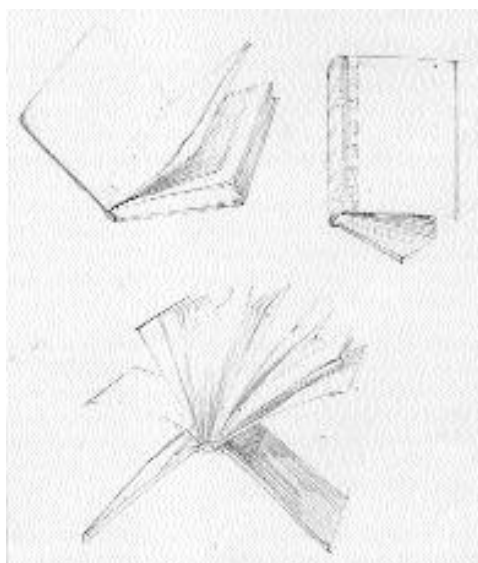


Mucha's sketches of the parts of a flower.

when he discussed his theories on decoration, but one that is particularly relevant to this study is the decoration of a book cover.

“To decorate the cover of a book it is necessary to know, as always when the question of decorating an object arises, its character and its use,” Mucha explained.²⁷ The first thing he set out to determine was the physical characteristics of the book cover. He observed that it is a rectangular surface whose purpose is to protect interior pages and that it is attached to one edge of the book. A necessary item to include in the decoration is the book’s title. The most sturdy section of the book cover, the spine, should be the first thing to be noticed and is therefore the most important to emphasize with decoration. If attention is not called to the area nearest the spine, it is not truly decoration for a book cover. This can be determined by separating the cover from the book and attempting to see if it still clearly indicates what it was designed for. Without emphasis on the spine, it could be just as easily seen as a poster or panel. With the spine accentuated, any viewer can easily see that a decoration was meant for the cover of a book.²⁷ On top of being descriptive of the physical characteristics of a book, the decoration must also make it more visually appealing to be considered a successful design.

The last element of Mucha’s style which needs to be examined is his use of color. The palettes he utilized would set the tone for many generations of artists who followed. Mucha described color as the “final touch” that distinguished a good rendering from a great one. The example he gave in one of his lectures was the difference between portraying happiness and sadness. With a happy image, the “joy causes an expansion of all the muscles, the eyes open, the nostrils dilate, the mouth widens, the head lifts up, the breast swells, the arms are extended and the sound of the voice is uplifted and strengthened.”²⁷ To his distinctive line work and elegant proportions, he would add “fresh, direct and simple colours, in which the rays of the spectrum may dance and laugh.”²⁷ But when Mucha set out to



The sketches above illustrate Mucha’s concept of a book cover’s functionality, as well as the proper use of text, while emphasizing the design of the spine.



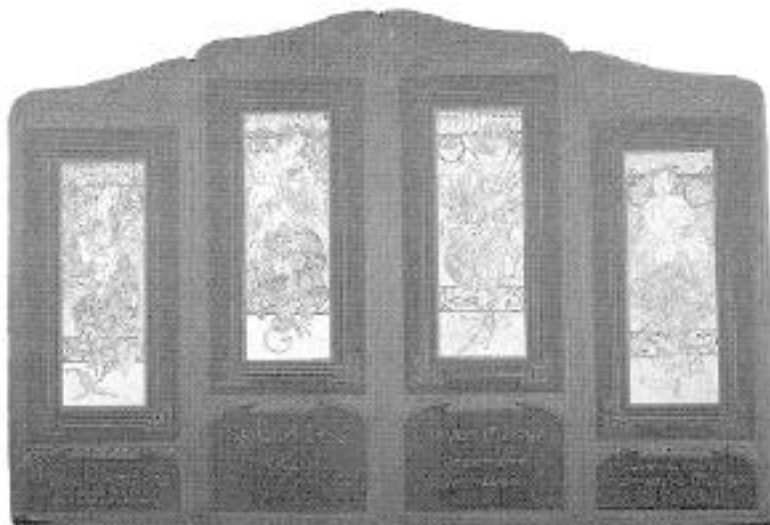
The sketch above expresses Mucha's concept of sadness.

express sadness, the figure would be hunched over or sitting down. Mucha believed that, as an expression of this emotion, legs should appear almost paralyzed and unable to support the figure. "The eyes close, the nostrils are pinched, the teeth are clenched, the head lowered, falling almost on to the breast, the back curved, the arms hanging without force, while groans emanate at intervals," observed Mucha, regarding the physical traits of grief.²⁷ Just as sunlight and light colors are indicative of joy, the nightscape, with its dark hues, is the natural palette of sorrow. Additionally, the central figure or point would be placed low in the composition, far from the "happy" sky.

Mucha believed that the earth's atmosphere provided him a full range of colors to work with. He noted that, while sunlight filters through the sky all around us, and appears to have no visible color, it is tinted with particles. The brightest day will appear as a blue sky while the evening sunset will be suffused with reds and yellows, whereas night yields darkness. Also, the distance light must travel through the atmosphere results in various *shades* of colors. Objects farther from a viewer can only be seen *through* these atmospheric particles and thus will change in appearance. Mucha incorporated such knowledge into many of his designs. "We see all the objects, trees, and stones, turning towards the background of the landscape. The more distant it may be, the thicker it will appear; the thicker it is, the bluer it will appear to us and the greater will be its function as a filter for other colours. The objects in the last plane will lose completely their natural colour and will retain only their value, and more than this, will be diminished by the lack of transparency in the heavy layers of air. The thinner this layer of air, the less the blue colour will alter the local colour of the object and the clearer this object will appear."²⁷ In this way, Mucha was able to portray depth of field combining his unique color palette with a precise eye for detail.

Mucha's style can also be seen as a direct influence on comic book artwork. Everything from the idea of an art for the middle-class made possible by the printing press, to the elegant female figures rendered with veiled eroticism, to the intricate line work and harmonies he utilized can be seen in the manifestation of comic books. Many comic book artists show a direct influence of the Mucha style in their work while others only take subtle inspiration from him, but the relationship is undeniable. The influence is so apparent that some might think Mucha's fame is greater now than it was in his own time, at least in the world of the comic book.

The stress on drawing in comic books corresponds not only to the traits of Mucha's work, but also to his mission of rendering a world which is like our own, yet altered. His compositions typically reveal an artificial paradise where we can look but not actively participate in the scene, much like the worlds depicted in comic books. Mucha's worlds are separated from the common life, drawn as an escape for viewers otherwise unable to experience the luxuries revealed in them.



This soap box advertisement combines Mucha panels in a screen-shaped unit (1907).

Mucha's work can also be thought of as scaled up book pages, as seen in his panel projects. The gutter in comic books plays the magical role of separating images and/or panels while it encourages the human imagination to fill in the gaps and unite the work as a cohesive idea or a narrative sequence.¹⁷ Sequential art is not solely the provenance of comics;

the technique can also be seen in manuals, stained glass windows depicting biblical scenes, and the series paintings of Monet and others, including the panels and the *Slav Epic* of Alphonse Mucha. Scott McCloud has stated that there are six different categories for the changes which occur between panels in the gutters of a comic book: 1) moment-to-moment, 2) action-to-action, 3) subject-to-subject, 4) scene-to-scene, 5) aspect-to-aspect, 6) non-sequitur. Mucha's works often envelope scene-to-scene transitions, which requires deductive reasoning to fill in gaps and transports the viewer across great distances.¹⁷ Often artists will exhibit a series first as a set of paintings, then they will be sold as a portfolio of engravings. In each case the works have been designed to be viewed in sequence, similar to comic book panels and pages.¹⁷

Mucha's art was also highly sought as a collectible during his time. Some printers during his hey-day were even accused of illegally keeping several copies for themselves and selling them to collectors for much more money than they received for printing them. Jiri Mucha commented on this collectible trend in the many books he wrote about his father. He notes that he has never even seen a photograph of one of his father's posters, originally hung in Paris, most likely because as soon as they were posted, collectors came out to steal them. "Some were certainly pasted up on the billboards — how else could their existence be justified — but the majority must have gone directly to the collectors."³² Jiri also notes, "What might have struck him as strange — because I find it more than strange — is the somewhat unfeeling approach to the poster as a collector's item by those who value condition over content."³²

While my own theories on the correlation between Mucha and comic book art are valid in themselves, it is helpful to go directly to the source, to find out why his influence is so significant in this unique part of the art world. To do this, I contacted as many comic book artists as possible whose work had been noticeably inspired by Mucha. I was pleasantly surprised to find that many top artists in the field were willing to openly discuss their admiration of Mucha and fondness for his work. In the end, I was granted telephone or internet interviews with seven artists whose work in the field of sequential art shows vary-

ing degrees of Mucha influence. I asked each artist the same set of questions, so that their unique responses could be compared to the responses of others.

How did you first discover the work of Alphonse Mucha?



Brandon Peterson's Mucha-inspired cover for Crossgen Comics' Mystic #1.

Of the seven artists interviewed, five responded by saying that, in one way or another, they had discovered Mucha's work on their own as opposed to studying him in art classes or through other means. Each had gone through their own unique process of self discovery except Joshua Middleton. He had not studied Mucha until about three years ago when he started working at Crossgen Comics. The art director at Crossgen, Brandon Peterson, himself a Mucha-inspired artist, introduced Middleton to Mucha's work because he saw a Mucha influence in Middleton's style. Middleton said, "He got his art books out and when I saw his books I immediately saw the connection. The



An untitled Barry Windsor-Smith drawing from 1980, showing Mucha's influence.

next day I ordered everything I could on Amazon.com and saturated myself. Everything I was trying to do he had already done."¹⁹

There were many stories to be told about the different ways each of these artists discovered Mucha's work. Most of the artists noticed Mucha's work in passing and then at some point recognized deeper qualities and set out to learn more. Barry Windsor-Smith explained that by the time he began to study art, Mucha had been completely forgotten. It was not until the poster boom of the late 1960s in London that Mucha's Art Nouveau posters were reproduced again. At that point, Windsor-Smith could have purchased original Mucha drawings for only \$50. Mucha had been disregarded as a true artist.³⁷

How much time have you spent investigating Mucha's body of work?

The responses to this question were essentially split down the middle. Four of the artists said that they had studied Mucha for an extreme amount of time. The other three said they had investigated his work just a little or had only recently started delving into it.



Kaluta's first issue cover for Image Comics series, Hedge Knight.

Michael William Kaluta said he devoured everything he could find in print about Mucha. Other artist friends would share their Mucha finds with him. They all went to see showings of Mucha's work. "The Rizzoli bookstore had a show and sale of Mucha's art. None of my friends could afford to BUY the art, but we certainly went to the bookstore and looked at it enough!"¹² Kaluta also noted that he does not read the Mucha books he owns as often as he used to, but they are still a source of inspiration. Barry Windsor-Smith said that he has spent much time since his art student days in the



Sketches of Middleton's designs for Sky Between Branches, #0.

60s studying Mucha. Jiri Mucha even visited his Manhattan studio in 1975.³⁷

Since Joshua Middleton has only consciously known about Mucha since his days at Crossgen, his time spent studying the man and his work has been limited but not insignificant. "I have collected just about everything that is in print ... Sometimes, if you're an artist doing line art, you have a tendency to refine the line to a point. If you like a clean line style, you inevitably find a common ground with other artists. Even if you aren't conscious of it, it leads back to Mucha because of his clean line style."¹⁹



How much has Mucha's visual style influenced your own artistic style?

This question elicited another wide variety of responses. The answers ranged from artists' feeling they had very little Mucha influence in their style to those who believe their whole approach is based on what they have been able to learn from his work. Franchesco, Terry Moore and J.H. Williams III felt that they had only a slight amount of influence in their style that they would attribute to Mucha. Williams stated, "I take in whatever I see and use it as an influence. From music, movies, personal experiences, books or sometimes I dive into a genre for a while like [Art] Nouveau."⁴¹ On the other end of the spectrum is Michael William Kaluta who said, "I absorbed his presentational posed approach. It's become a cornerstone of my compositions. The most obvious is my near-constant use of the circle to present the major figure, and my reliance on the portrait to present fantasy imagery."¹²

Promethea #23 (America's Best Comics) — a Mucha homage by J.H. Williams III.

While many aspects of Mucha's art have influenced his own work, Kaluta admits that he rarely utilizes Mucha's muted color palette.

Similarly, Middleton recognizes Mucha's influence in his own work, both superficially and in deeper ways. Considering the surface, he says Mucha's rules for using bold outlines and color are techniques that often get adopted by other artists. Looking deeper, Middleton also observed, "You will see how he handles organic things or fabric. In my own work, when I'm trying to figure out how to approach something, if I need inspiration I'll look to his books to see how he handles snow, for example. He defined it so precisely, the clean line, that if I get lost, [Mucha's work] is definitely a place to look."¹⁹ In contrast with Kaluta, Middleton has noticed how important Mucha's color palette is to his own compositions. Middleton now sees even more of Mucha's influence in his use of muted colors.



Regarding the immense impact Mucha has had on other artists, Barry Windsor-Smith declared, "It must be understood at the outset that Alphonse Mucha was one of the greatest linear artists who ever lived. Despite the commerciality of his best known material, such as the posters and biscuit tins and all of that, Mucha could really, really DRAW. He could perceive the forms of women's breasts with the same clarity that he saw and understood a bird's wing, or a flower petal, or a huge building, or a small, yet to be proud, tree."³⁷ He also noted that the color palette Mucha used for the *Slav Epic* paved the way for the "fantasy colors" used for everything from science fiction book covers to Howard Pyle's illustrations.

Barry Windsor-Smith's painting Gaia (1978) utilizes "fantasy colors."

Is Mucha's influence primarily evident in your cover artwork, interior artwork or both?

I thought that most, if not all of the comic book artists I interviewed would say that they see a Mucha influence primarily in cover artwork, because the comic book cover most closely resembles Mucha's poster designs. The primary goal of a comic book cover is to attract enough attention that a consumer will pay money to take a copy home. This seemed similar to the goal of Mucha's posters, designed primarily to attract attention on the streets and get viewers to pay money to see a play, or buy a product being advertised. Yet to my



A page from Strangers in Paradise, #51 epitomizes Moore's use of "feminine space," inspired by Mucha.

you have a job to do. You have to move the story along. You can't always use the most graphically interesting shots. Covers are the best opportunity to think about design a lot more."¹⁹

surprise, not everyone saw it this way. Only two of the seven artists interviewed said the cover was where Mucha's influence would be seen most often in their work. Terry Moore, along with the majority of the artists, said that Mucha had influenced both their cover and interior work equally. "Although I have done several cover homages to his designs and style, my general illustrative art is influenced by his spirit of design, line and use of feminine space."²⁴

Michael William Kaluta and Joshua Middleton said their covers are often influenced by Mucha. Middleton emphasized this, noting that: "Covers are stand alone illustrations ... Interiors



Sky Between Branches, #0 utilizes a color palette similar to Mucha's.



The cover of Strangers in Paradise, #52 is one in a series of Mucha cover homages by Moore.

How much do you think Mucha-influenced cover art is useful in attracting comic book buyers?

This was a difficult question to ask, and based on the responses, difficult to answer. I wasn't sure if the artists would even have an answer. I presented this as a "what do you think" question, to determine why some artists might choose a Mucha-influenced direction over other possibilities. Most who answered said that Mucha-influenced cover art was more popular because of its aesthetic qualities. Terry Moore said, "I don't think most comic buyers are aware of [him], but a Mucha homage still attracts the eye because beauty attracts the eye."²⁴ Joshua Middleton added, "There is a whole group who are just in love with the genre ... I don't know if they are really conscious of what they are looking at. They don't know why they like it, but

know they like it.”¹⁹ Franchesco had a hard time with this question because he feels there isn’t an established method for determining what makes a cover successful. After all, if anyone could determine that, then *all* covers would be great. “I guess the question should also be: define ‘success.’ Just because something makes lots of money at the box office, that is not necessarily ‘art.’ And just because something doesn’t sell, doesn’t necessarily make it garbage. Beauty is definitely in the eye of the beholder, and art for an audience of ‘one’ is just as important as art that appeals to the masses,” Franchesco explained.¹⁰



Franchesco's take on the Crossgen Comics story, Mystic shows his Mucha-inspired line work.

What parts of Mucha’s visual style have you consciously incorporated into your own artwork?

This question produced an interesting group of answers. Each response was quite different from most of the others. For Joe Quesada, it was Mucha’s flow of design and compositional elements that he elected to incorporate into his own art.³⁰ Franchesco said that Mucha’s decorative elements, especially the way he designed with hair and cloth was important in his work. Also, the line weights and choice of elegant female subjects were useful inspirations to Franchesco.¹⁰ Terry Moore, meanwhile, agreed with this and described it as Mucha’s “celebration of feminine beauty.”²⁴ Michael William Kaluta remarked that he often uses the Q formula, as described by Brian Reade. He explained, “I used mostly his Circle-As-Anchor for the face or figure.”¹² Joshua Middleton describes



Quesada's title page for Daredevil #5 (1999) clearly shows Mucha's influence.

himself as being most influenced by the limited line work that Mucha employed. “When I get stuck and look at some of his work, possibly facial features, often times it is what you



Kaluta's Angel of the Wheel uses his "Circle-as-Anchor" formula, inspired by Mucha's similar "Q-formula."

leave out that is just as important as what you leave in. Most of the time I'm drawing, I'm actually erasing. I'm trying to make it as minimal as possible. Mucha was a master at implying. When you look at a female form of his, there are very few lines defining the form or maybe one small sweep of a line which defines a nose. But it has to be in just the right place.”¹⁹

Which of Mucha's techniques do you think has been most influential on the comic book art community in general?

With this question, I asked the artists to step outside of their own personal experiences and attempt to determine which of Mucha's techniques is most important in the comic book art community. In direct opposition to the variety of responses regarding Mucha's influence on their own work, almost every artist assured me that Mucha's heavy black outlines were the single most influential element for this group of artists. Michael William Kaluta said, “If anything, his thick and thin line

approach. It hasn't pervaded the entire comic book world. Most of Mucha's influence came to comic book artists by them being inspired by another artist who'd been inspired by Mucha's work.”¹² Terry Moore reinforced this view with his own comments. “Mucha's ability to portray 3D bodies through near-silhouette, without anatomical detail, is still studied today and very useful to the cartoonist/comic book illustrator.”²⁴

Why do you feel that Mucha's visual style has been influential in the comic book world?

In response to this similar follow-up question, all respondents agreed that Mucha's ability to portray three-dimensional form on a two-dimensional surface, with his masterful line work, was the key to his wide-ranging influence. Joe Quesada said simply, “[Mucha] plays with the same 2D elements that we [all] have to deal with on a daily basis.”³⁰ Franchesco added, “Mucha's work was a synthesis of line art and painting combined in such a way that made it very appealing, and so very pretty to look at. The same applies to comic book art; line work that's filled in with color.”¹⁰ Finally, Joshua Middleton brings all of the elements together. “Comics by their nature are line drawings, so they work well with what he was doing. He didn't have the reproduction quality to do paintings. His line draw-

ings connect to our work because of how comics are made and how he was making posters. In the development of the medium, the limits of production start to affect the way things are done.”¹⁹

Why do you think Mucha’s work is not studied by art scholars as often as the work of some of his peers?

To get away from the comic book art world for a moment, I decided to ask what these artists thought was the reason that Mucha is not studied more often, being one of the great artists of history, and one so clearly influential in their chosen field. The reasons they gave were similar to what I was expecting. Like comic book art, the commercial work that Mucha produced was not deemed “high art” and thus is rarely discussed among art scholars today. Michael William Kaluta stated, “[Critics] have a general attitude toward *commercial art* as to demean it. Hence, they never mention Mucha when talking about, say, Monet, or even Toulouse-Lautrec.”¹² Many of the artists feel that, like Mucha, they are



A recent Mucha-inspired illustration by Franchesco.



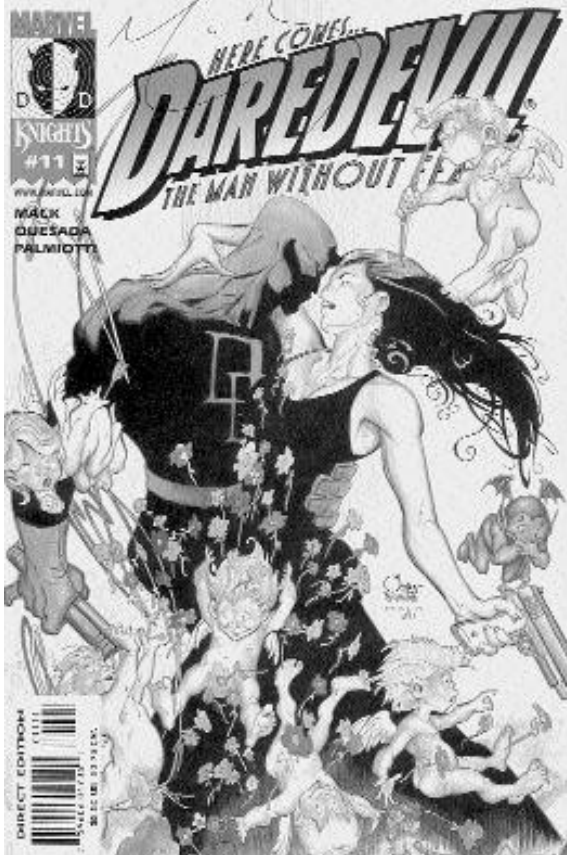
A Mucha-inspired page by Middleton, from Crossgen's Meridian #1.

not receiving the credit that they would get if their work was produced in a different genre of art. Franchesco voiced similar thoughts, remarking that, “It is possible that some of Mucha’s contemporaries are considered ‘artists’ with a capital ‘A’ because maybe they sat in front of an easel, painted in obscurity, lived like paupers and died penniless, only to have their work sanctified by pundits long after the artist died, when the artworks sell for millions, and hang on museum walls. Mucha was celebrated in his own lifetime. When he came to America, it was a big media event. He was a celebrity.”¹⁰

Just prior to my interview with him, Joshua Middleton had visited Joe Quesada’s Marvel Comics office and they had a discussion about this very topic, which he recounted to me. “The same question can be asked about comic book artists. Some of the finest art being created today is in comics. Mucha probably suffered from this as well. A large chunk of his work is in advertisements. Even his work for the plays is just advertising. When it is not oil paints, it doesn’t get respect. It was just a fine line style, and he was just too popular for his own good. He was too commercial. If you take one panel out of a comic and put it in a gallery, people think it’s fine art. Mucha was the ultimate example of this. He was too good for his own good. He was too popular to be a ‘fine’ artist.”¹⁹ Quesada echoed this. “They perceive it in the same way they perceive comics. It was meant for commercial purposes and the holding lines make people perceive it as cartoonish.”³⁰

Reconsidering my interviews with these comic book artists, along with the research I conducted into comic books and the work of Alphonse Mucha, I arrive at several conclusions. First, Mucha's visual style as a poster and panel artist is well suited for incorporation into comic book art because of the similarity of the two art forms. Mucha's recurring subjects — beautiful women and fantastic environments — translate directly to what is often depicted in comic books. His color palette and the way those colors fill in thick outlines are

both similar to the necessities of comic book art production. The fact that Mucha embraced the printing press and its ability to distribute his art to the common man can be correlated to the way comic books are published. Even the fact that both are less



Joe Quesada's cover illustration for Daredevil #11.

respected than “high art” can be seen as a contributing factor to Mucha's influence in this modern form of art. Comic book artists feel a connection to Mucha because of what the critics said to him then and what they say about comic books today.

Surprisingly, my initial hypothesis that comic book cover art is the place that Mucha's influence is most commonly seen proved to be incorrect. Many of the artists I interviewed felt that although it might be most noticeable on the cover, Mucha's influence is considerably more pervasive — it's found throughout their interior pages as well. Art inspired by Mucha can borrow any of his elements, even something not immediately recognizable as such, and still exude the qualities that made Mucha's work distinctive. In many cases, just the fact that a comic book artist utilized an elegant feminine form in a knowing way is enough to evoke a Mucha-esque experience. Cover art does often have a more widely rec-



An interior page from Middleton's Sky Between Branches, #0.

ognizable Mucha influence because of the relationship of the comic book cover to Mucha's Art Nouveau posters and the similar functions that each were intended to achieve.

Finally, the fact that Mucha placed idealized women in environments that were seen as more than ideal to his primary audience relates unequivocally to the same phenomenon in comic books. The major difference with comic books is that not only are the women idealized, but the men are as well — though not necessarily in the same way. In comic books, both male and female forms are often endowed with superhuman proportions. There is almost always an underlying sense of eroticism and the situations and environments are often of the fantastic sort. While Mucha was mainly interested in taking ideal forms and placing them in ideal environments, comic books take a somewhat different approach, presenting us with superhuman beings in magical lands.



Panels #1-3 from the Slav Epic presented here in "comic book" form.

In light of my research, re-viewing Mucha's panel work and the *Slav Epic* might even lead one to consider Mucha as a prototype of today's comic book artist. As I have pointed out, Mucha's art work is often sequential. It contains many, if not all of the essential elements found in comic books. The space between Mucha's panels are not unlike the gutters of comic art. Leaps in time and space, which only take place in the human mind, illuminate the connections between an exhibit of Mucha's art and the pages of a comic. Such connections are difficult to ignore. And comic book artists, judging by the group I interviewed, are more than willing to share their experiences learning from Mucha and his work. Such connections I can no longer overlook; such influences run deeper than I imagined.

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