Epic Significance: Placing Alphonse Mucha's Czech Art in the Context of Pan-Slavism and Czech Nationalism

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EPIC SIGNIFICANCE: PLACING ALPHONSE MUCHA’S CZECH ART IN THE CONTEXT OF PAN-SLAVISM AND CZECH NATIONALISM

by

ERIN DUSZA

Under the Direction of Dr. Maria Gindhart

ABSTRACT

Alphonse Mucha is primarily known for his early career producing Parisian Art Nouveau posters. However in 1910, Mucha left Paris to return to his home in the Czech lands where he concentrated on creating works for his country. Unfortunately, the later part of his career receives little to no attention in most art history books. His collection, *The Slav Epic*, represents ideas of Pan-Slavism, patriotism, and national identity. A leading scholar of national identity was Johann Gottfried Herder, a Czech sympathizer who influenced writers such as Jan Kollár and the historian František Palacký. Mucha’s works provided a visual representation of national identity and collective history specifically called for by these scholars. This thesis seeks to shed light on the late works of this artist, tracing the ever-present Slavonic influences, and also to place them in context within Czech Nationalism and Pan-Slavism in order to establish their historical significance.

INDEX WORDS: Alphonse Mucha, Mucha, Czech, Nationalism, Czechoslovakia, Art Nouveau, Pan-Slavism, Folk art, Slavic, Slavonic, Slavia, Sokol, Symbolism, Herder, Palacký, Kollár, 1900 Paris Exhibition, Prague, Moravský Krumlov, Slav Epic, Propaganda, Bosnia Pavilion, Obecní dům, History painting, Bohemia, Moravia, German, Austria-Hungary, National identity
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ERIN DUSZA

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of
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2012
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May 2012
Thanks

I owe much more than a few lines of thanks to my husband, Alexander Dusza. Without his faith in me, I would not have had the strength to go back to school and change my life. Without his encouragement, this path of my life could have gone much differently. Without his unending support, this thesis would not have materialized.

No one could ask for a better partner.
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Introduction

During a two-year battle between the town governments of Prague and the sleepy little village of Moravský Krumlov over a collection of large history paintings by famed Art Nouveau artist Alphonse Mucha entitled *The Slav Epic*, the collection was nominated to become an official part of Czech national heritage. Days later the decision was appealed, with some experts saying the style of the collection was too different from the more famous works of the artist, and others arguing over the semantics of the decision’s wording. A new vote was scheduled, and days later the national heritage department of the Prague City Hall and the Prague Municipal Gallery made the *Epic* a piece of national heritage. The *Epic* consists of twenty large-scale canvases painted between 1912 and 1928, intended to inform and define the Slavic people in the hopes of uniting them to the common cause of freedom in the early twentieth century. This patriotic opus was gifted to the city of Prague before the works were begun in 1909, however, the original contract stated that the city of Prague was required to build a hall to showcase them. Prague has yet to fulfill this part of the agreement, but nearly one hundred years after Mucha began to paint the collection, the Czechs are finally accepting the paintings as significant works.

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in Czech history. One must question why it took nearly a century to recognize these works. This essay aims to answer that question.

Alphonse Mucha achieved fame for his commercial Art Nouveau posters and designs in Paris during the fin-de-siècle period. Nevertheless, in 1910, at the height of his fame, he left Paris to return to his Czech roots and devote the rest of his career to making works that would aid and unite his country. Having grown up during what would turn out to be the last gasp of Pan-Slavism, a movement aimed at elevating the Slavic culture to the equal of other Western European cultures, his sense of patriotism motivated his move away from the Paris art scene. He returned to his homeland in an attempt to restore his own identity and that of his country. His main focus was on creating *The Slav Epic*. However, this post-Paris part of his career has received little to no attention in most art history books. Even in catalogues of the artist’s work, there is very little emphasis on the art created after he left Paris. This thesis seeks not only to shed light on the late works of this artist, and his efforts to create a national identity for a group of people suddenly clustered together in this new country, but also to fill a gap in current scholarship and place them in context within Czech nationalism and Pan-Slavism in order to establish their historical significance.

The ideas that inspired this work came from leading scholars of the Pan-Slavism movement and the same ideas also dictated his choice of subject matter. Yet neither Mucha [the artist], nor his Czech works are mentioned in books on Pan-Slavism or Czech nationalism, which

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8 Jiří Mucha, the artist’s son, has stated that he believed this perceived snub from the art world to be attributed to his father’s patriotism, stating “He refused to become a Frenchman, so they omitted him from the history of French art and are only now beginning to forgive him for his ‘sins.’ He didn’t ask for French citizenship; this was the main reason that, after World War I, they removed his name from art textbooks. As a result, his world reputation suffered greatly.” Antonin J. Liehm, “Jiří Mucha,” in *The Politics of Culture*, trans. Peter Krussi (New York: Grove Press, 1967), 207.
include Hans Kohn’s *Pan-Slavism*, Hugh LeCain Agnew’s *Origins of the Czech National Renascence*, and Miroslav Hroch’s *Social Preconditions of National Revival in Europe*. This thesis will illustrate how the Pan-Slavic philosophies directed his later career until he arrived at the creation of *The Slav Epic*. From the artist’s own writing we know that his donation of these paintings to the Czech people was not a gift of art, but of knowledge:

> I wanted to speak in my own way to the soul of the nation…I will be happy if I will be able to contribute with my modest strength towards this understanding, at least in one Slav family.9

This thesis argues that *The Slav Epic* is the visual embodiment and synthesis of Pan-Slavic philosophies and Mucha’s gift to the Slavs of a pictorial documentation of their roots and, by extension, their identity.

**Pan-Slavism**

While the nineteenth century brought new scholarship exploring ideas of nationality, culture, and identity, the twentieth century tested these theories in new and unforeseen ways. Every time borders were renegotiated or political regimes changed, these issues of identity were once again challenged. For centuries Central Europeans had known themselves as the dominated subjects of imperial powers, either the Austrian-Hungarian, German, or Ottoman, and then were faced with new national identities after World War I. Before all of this change, scholars were calling for the people of Central and Eastern Europe to identify themselves as one unified culture, the “Slavs.” The word “Pan-Slavism” was coined by a Slovak writer in 1826 in a treatise on Slav philology.10 This cultural movement rose to prominence in the nineteenth century, first

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by the Russo-Slavs and then carried on by the Slavs under Austrian rule.11 All areas of the arts were encouraged to reflect national (which for the Slavs also meant separatist) qualities, creating a wealth of patriotic verse, songs, and history paintings.12 The goal was to turn this cultural movement into a political movement that would free the once-great Slavic lands.13 Following new philosophies on nationalism, such as those of Johann Gottfried Herder, who saw cultural divisions as being naturally formed and language as the identifying and unifying trait of a culture, Pan-Slavists in the Czech lands sought first to elevate the Czech language into a literary language.14 Herder was a Czech sympathizer who influenced writers such as Jan Kollár and the historian František Palacký to compose works that emphasized Czech history and cultural traits separate from their Germanic neighbors, prompting the Czech national revival of the nineteenth century.15 The ideas these men promoted of a unique and rich Czech identity were an impetus for the separation of the Czech lands from the Austrian Hapsburg Empire. Mucha, having grown up during this revival period, showcased his national heritage in everything from his personal life to his artwork. The first chapter of this thesis will examine how Mucha’s Slavic identity permeated his work, concentrating on his own brand of Art Nouveau. While the Pan-Slavism movement that started the Czech revival concentrated on written literature and history, this thesis will show how Mucha provided a visual embodiment of the philosophies of Herder, the histories of Palacký, and the literature of Kollár. By imparting these works to the Czech people, Mucha

13 The Czech lands as described here consist of Bohemia, Moravia, and Silesia. These lands were combined with the region of Slovakia as the new independent nation of Czechoslovakia in 1918. John F.N. Bradley, Czech Nationalism in the Nineteenth Century (Boulder, Co: East European Monographs, 1984), 1-2.
15 “A disciple of Rousseau, he compared favorably the rural and backward Slavs with the highly civilized Romance and Germanic peoples, whose very degree of civilization implied their alienation from the state of nature and therefore their approaching decadence.” Kohn, Pan-Slavism, 1.
hoped “to build and strengthen in our country the feeling of national consciousness” in an effort to endow its people with a sense of identity.\textsuperscript{16}

In the eighteenth century, Herder wrote of his philosophies on national identity, claiming that rather than on political leadership, this identity rested in the hands of the people and their shared culture.\textsuperscript{17} This search for national identity, according to Herder, was necessary for a peaceful society.\textsuperscript{18} The culture of the people, or Volk, was qualified by their shared use of a common language.\textsuperscript{19} Herder promoted the value of folk culture, elevating it from “vulgar masses” to ancestral culture.\textsuperscript{20} As a Czech sympathizer, he promoted the image of a peace-loving Czech nation that had struggled against its aggressive German neighbors.\textsuperscript{21} The term “German” could be used to describe any of the German-speaking lands neighboring Bohemia and Moravia - including nearby Bavaria, towns in upper Hungary, and even the Germans of Austria proper, particularly Vienna—thus tying all of the Czechs’ traditional oppressors together under the term.\textsuperscript{22}

\begin{footnotesize}
\footnotesize
\noindent\textsuperscript{16} Staroštik, \textit{Alfons Mucha-Slovánská Epopej}, 5-6.
\footnotesize
\noindent\textsuperscript{17} It has been noted that Herder was a philosopher at heart, and not a political activist, despite his influence. Dominic Eggel, Andre Liebich, and Deborah Mancini-Griffoli. “Was Herder a Nationalist?” \textit{The Review of Politics} 69, no. 1 (Winter 2007): 48-78. F.M. Barnard, \textit{J. G. Herder on Social & Political Culture} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 7.
\footnotesize
\noindent\textsuperscript{18} Kohn, \textit{Nationalism}, 32.
\footnotesize
\noindent\textsuperscript{19} “Herder’s central political idea lies in the assertion that the proper foundation for a sense of collective political identity is not the acceptance of a common sovereign power, but the sharing of a common culture. For the former is imposed from outside, whilst the latter is the expression of an inner consciousness, in terms of which each individual recognizes himself as an integral part of a social whole. To the possession of such a common culture Herder applies the term nation or, more precisely, \textit{Volk} or nationality. The principle source of both its emergence and perpetuation is language. It is through language that the individual becomes at once aware of his selfhood \textit{and} of his nationhood. In this sense individual identity and collective identity become one.” Barnard, \textit{J. G. Herder on Social & Political Culture}, 7.
\footnotesize
\noindent\textsuperscript{20} Eggel et al., “Was Herder a Nationalist?” 54.
\footnotesize
\noindent\textsuperscript{21} Herder was a German, but there were many Germans at this time interested in Czech history, as they saw the Czechs as being derived from German culture. See Marta Filipová, “The Construction of a National Identity in Czech Art History,” \textit{Centropa} 8, no. 3 (September 2008): 258; Tomáš G. Masaryk, \textit{The Meaning of Czech History}, edited by Rene Wellek, translated by Peter Kussi (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1974), 56.
\footnotesize
\noindent\textsuperscript{22} Robert B. Pynsent, \textit{Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality} (Budapest: Central European University, 1994), 167.
\end{footnotesize}
Herder admired the Slavic adherence to folk roots, which exemplified his ideas of *Volk* identity.\(^23\) He was called “the main teacher of the Slavs during their period of renascence.” This thesis will thus explore how Herder’s ideas of folk identity greatly influenced Mucha’s works for Czech causes.\(^24\) At the beginning of the nineteenth century, Herder’s ideas began to change how Slavs could regain a lost identity by preserving and elevating their mother tongue, stating:

> a people, and especially a non-civilized one, has nothing dearer than the language of its fathers. Its whole spiritual wealth of tradition, history, religion, and all the fullness of life, all its heart and soul, lives in it. To deprive such a people of its language or to minimize it, means to deprive it of its own immortal possession, transmitted from parents to children.\(^25\)

This was especially evident in Bohemia, where the Czech language was by now only spoken by peasants, while the intelligentsia, nobility, and officials spoke German.\(^26\) Following Herder’s ideas, the nineteenth century saw interest in transforming the Czech language accelerated with the translation of famous works into Czech as well as the publishing of Czech and Slovak folk songs and poetry.\(^27\) The Pan-Slavists wanted to shake off the centuries-old inferiority to their Germanic neighbors and show Europe that their rich folk traditions gave them an equal artistic tradition.\(^28\) This began a movement to make over the Czech language into a literary language, which involved compiling a history of the language and grammar as well as an official Czech-German dictionary.\(^29\)

In 1824, Jan Kollár published the first of three cantos of *Slávy Dcera* (The Daughter of Sláva), containing 150 sonnets.\(^30\) This nationalistic work of poetry became the lyrics of Czech

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\(^{23}\) Kohn, *Nationalism*, 32.
\(^{24}\) This title was bestowed by Tomáš G. Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia. Masaryk, *The Meaning of Czech History*, 56.
\(^{25}\) Quoted from Kohn’s *Pan-Slavism*, 2.
\(^{26}\) Miller, *On Nationality*, 33.
\(^{27}\) Ibid., 18-19.
\(^{28}\) Mucha, *His Life and Art*, 261-262.
\(^{29}\) Miller, *On nationality*, 33.
patriotism and made Kollár the first great Czech poet.31 Kollár romantically describes the Slavic culture of a distant era, providing the allegory of the Slavs as a female named Slavia, who embodies the Slavic qualities of artistry and meekness, played against their more aggressive neighbors. His characterizations come directly from Herder’s writings, but Kollár also calls the Slavs to unite and seek a glorious destiny.32 Mucha gave Slavia a visual form, and his imagery of her was used repeatedly, most notably on the Czechoslovak currency (as will be discussed more in Chapter Two).

Because the term “Slavic” refers to multiple subgroups, to achieve a unified national identity they had to construct a shared cultural past that not only tied them together, but also established a place for them in the history of humankind.33 Herder also believed that in order to come to terms with a shared cultural identity, a people must understand their common historical connections. In 1831, the Bohemian estates commissioned František Palacký to write a concise history, such as had yet to be collected by one author.34 Palacký’s history in five volumes (published between 1836 and 1867), was first published in German as Die Geschichte von Böhmen, grösstenheils nach Urkunden und Handschriften. While he would have preferred his works to be published in Czech, he understood that a German book would have a wider readership. Palacký had the later volumes published in Czech first, titled národu českého v Čechách a v Moravě, and showing a clear Czech bias to history.35 Thus, Palacký became known as a great Czech historian and nationalist. We know from Mucha’s journals that he read

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31 Kohn, Pan-Slavism, 11.
32 Ibid., 15.
34 Barely any of Palacky’s writings have been published in English. The best resource is Joseph Frederick Zacek’s book, Palacky: The Historian as Scholar and Nationalist (The Hague: Mouton and Co., 1970), 38.
35 When the Germans learned that they were getting the second version that had been altered, they grew angry and insisted that subsequent volumes be released in German first so as to seem the originals. Ibid., 59.
Palacký’s histories in preparation for *The Slav Epic*. The third chapter of this thesis will examine Mucha’s transition to patriotic muralist with the decoration of the Bosnian Pavilion at the 1900 World’s Fair, and on to the Obecní dům (Mayor’s Hall) in Prague. These works relied heavily on Slavic history and mythology, and the chapter will analyze the impact these commissions had on the artist leading to the creation of *The Slav Epic*. The fourth chapter will address specifically how Palacký’s interpretation of history dictated Mucha’s choices and interpretation of scenes in the *Epic*, and emphasize how these Pan-Slavic works are manifested in these paintings.

Although Mucha intended his works to define the Slavic people and inspire them to seek freedom, they instead became a redundant notion of patriotism with the events of World War I and the subsequent formation of what would be Czechoslovakia. Mucha found his work at the mercy of new ideas and tastes for which he was not prepared. The rocky reception of the *Epic*, which will be discussed in Chapter Four, is in large part to blame for his collection’s languishing in obscurity. Hidden for decades, the paintings fell out of the memory of the people along with the suppressed writings of the men who inspired their form and content, leaving the significance of the *Epic* lost to modern audiences as it now resurfaces in national consciousness. This thesis aims to tie this collection of paintings to the movement and concepts that inspired them, revealing their influences and reclaiming their importance along the way.

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36 Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 100.
Chapter One

“Mucha, a Moravian, nevertheless had an influence on the development of Art Nouveau in major European centers such as Paris.” This statement, made at the beginning of a review of Jiří Mucha’s book about his father, *Alphonse Maria Mucha: His Life and Art*, reflects an odd sentiment. Why is it remarkable that a Moravian, a Czech, make a contribution to Art Nouveau? Mucha’s style had a major impact on advertising designs, illustrations, jewelry, decorative objects and interior design. “Le Style Mucha,” as it was called, was often imitated in the fin-de-siècle period. What this chapter seeks to explore is the amount of influence Mucha’s Czech heritage had on his style. Mucha himself did not see his style of art as belonging to any movement, but rather as a uniquely new take on Slavonic style. This aspect of his style is very rarely mentioned by scholars, even though this period in the artist’s life is very well known and documented. An understanding of the roots of Mucha’s style will demonstrate the unremitting tie that Mucha’s identity as a patriotic Czech had with his art, both in the early commercial period and in the later more political era. This chapter will examine these roots, the anthropological connection of the Slavs and Art Nouveau, and the scope of Mucha’s influence on the style.

*Early Influences*

Born in 1860 in the Moravian town of Ivančice to a court usher father and an extremely religious mother, Mucha’s early years saw many political changes for his country that would

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38 Quote from Alphonse Mucha in Mucha, *His Life and Art*, 132.
39 Ibid., 135-136.
instill a sense of patriotism from an early age.\textsuperscript{41} For example, in 1866 the Hapsburgs were driven out of Germany after defeat by the Prussians. They then turned to patch up a previously ruined relationship with Hungary and, in 1867, formed the new Austro-Hungarian Empire. In 1871 the Czechs fought to restore the rights and autonomy of the old Bohemian kingdom, but, due to opposition by German and Hungarian liberal sides, the changes were never enacted.\textsuperscript{42}

Mucha’s other influences early in life came from the church and the theater. He spent years as a choir boy in Brno and then as a scenic painter back in Ivančice.\textsuperscript{43} During these years many towns in Moravia saw a resurgence of folk traditions including art, costumes and festivals. Mucha tried his hand at clerical work, at the behest of his father, but quickly left for Vienna to work in the scene-painting workshop of Burghardt-Kautsky and Brioschi. He began taking night courses at the Viennese Art Academy, which at that time was under the direction of Hans Makart.\textsuperscript{44} Following the nineteenth-century Viennese academic style, Makart was known for large-scale, theatrical depictions of historical scenes done in vivid colors.\textsuperscript{45} While we can see this influence in Mucha’s later work on \textit{The Slav Epic}, it was Makart’s views on design, allegory, and use of natural forms that made a more immediate impact of the artist’s work.\textsuperscript{46} Other instructors that inspired Mucha were Ludwig von Löfftz, with his interest in folklore and folk details, Jules Joseph Lefebvre and Gustave Boulanger, for their neo-classical style, and

\begin{footnotesize}
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\item \textsuperscript{41} Andreas Mucha, his father, was descended from a long line of vine cultivators in the district of Ivančice, although in later life he occupied the post of usher in the local district court. Ronald F. Lipp, “The Message and the Man,” in \textit{Alphonse Mucha} by Sarah Mucha (London: Frances Lincoln Ltd. in association with The Mucha Foundation, 2005), 12.
\item \textsuperscript{43} His mother led him on a pilgrimage when he was only seven, and at age eleven he joined St. Peters Church boy’s choir in nearby Brno. When he turned 17 he left the choir and returned home to Ivančice. Lipp, “The Message and the Man,” 12.
\item \textsuperscript{44} Mary Gail Kana-Butrica, “The Historical Paintings of Alphons Mucha: The Slav Epic” (Master’s thesis, University of Texas, 1979), 30.
\item \textsuperscript{45} Ibid., 31.
\item \textsuperscript{46} Brian Reade, \textit{Art Nouveau and Alphonse Mucha} (London: Her Majesty’s Stationary Office, 1967), 12.
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Jean-Paul Laurens, for his interest in oriental and medieval motifs. In 1887, Count Khuen Belasy, a south Moravian aristocrat, employed Mucha to decorate his country home Emmahof with frescoes, the first large-scale historical painting commission for the young artist. Count Khuen would act as Mucha’s patron for one year, facilitating the artist’s move to Paris. Mucha made a name for himself in Paris as an illustrator, not a muralist, collaborating with Georges Rochegrosse on Scènes et Épisodes de l’Histoire d’Allemagne by Charles Seignobos. Though he was illustrating the history of Germany, Mucha cleverly chose to concentrate on themes where Bohemia played a role in German history, his bias reflecting his patriotism.

*Le Style Mucha*

Art historian Alfred Wolmann argued that all Slavic works of art had been so dependent on Germany, from its schools to Germanic style and themes, to the point that he denied any Slavic art of note. However, Czech artists such as Josef Mánes were making studies of the Slavic folk art of Moravia, Slovakia, and Silesia and incorporating the motifs into their own work, incorporating scenes of everyday life, as well as traditions and mythology, taking on a stylization based on the folk art. Other Czech artists took up this style, including Václav Brozík, who depicted great figures of Czech history, and František Ženišek and Mikeláš Aleš, who painted the patriotic decorative cycle for the neo-Renaissance style National Theatre in Prague.

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49 Reade, Art Nouveau and Alphonse Mucha . 10.
(Fig. 1) The paintings by Aleš show a remarkable likeness to the style that would make Mucha famous in Paris, prompting Mucha to refer to his style as uniquely “Slavonic.”

On New Year’s Day in 1895, a poster by Mucha advertising the famous actress Sarah Bernhardt as Gismonda at the Theatre de la Renaissance debuted in Paris, causing a sensation. Bernhardt was shown nearly life-sized on the long narrow poster, in a dramatic costume with an idealized face surrounded by long tendrils of hair and a large floral wreath, and heavily outlined in the style of Aleš. The lettering and background looked like a mosaic, recalling a Hispano-Moresque style, while the robe Bernhardt wears shows elements derived from folk embroideries of Central Europe and Renaissance motifs employing a Moresque color palette of earth tones.

Mucha went on to design many posters for Bernhardt, and the two became friends. In 1897, when a newspaper reported “Sarah Bernhardt plucking [Mucha] out of a Hungarian gypsy camp where he beguiled her with his violin playing and singing under the light of a full moon,” Mucha had Bernhardt state on his behalf that he was in fact “a Czech from Moravia not only by birth and origin, but also by feeling, by conviction and by patriotism.” The artist’s style of dress-wearing Turkish slippers, along with Russian-style shirts that proudly displayed Czech embroidery down the front, and sporting a pointed beard revealed his unwillingness to assimilate into French culture. Mucha refused to hide from his origins, acting as a welcoming host for all Czechs who came to Paris, and becoming a member of the Slavic groups Lada and the Czech Society Beseda. However, that did not keep Mucha from making friends with other artists in Paris at the time, from Toulouse-Lautrec, Sèrusier and the Nabis, to symbolists like Huysmans,

52 Sayer, The Coasts of Bohemia, 150.
54 Reade, Art Nouveau and Alphonse Mucha, 4.
Schwabe, and Gauguin.\textsuperscript{58} He studied works by the Pre-Raphaelites and artists of the English Arts and Crafts movement.\textsuperscript{59} Despite his interaction with these groups, however, Mucha did not consider himself a member of any movement.\textsuperscript{60}

Mucha soon had his designs featured in all sorts of advertising campaigns, whose circulation throughout Europe spread his popularity and fueled imitations.\textsuperscript{61} His style became instantly recognizable, summed up by Jeremy Howard as:

- the lyrical evocation of femininity; the delicate eroticism of the heavy eyelids;
- the gentle, subdued colouring; the cloisonnist outlining; the sensual and contemplative poses; the flat trusses of hair; the secular haloes; the air of mysticism and spirituality in the wafting arabesques of stars or the geometricized background letterings.\textsuperscript{62}

“Le Style Mucha” as it was called, became a synonym for French Art Nouveau.\textsuperscript{63} Art Nouveau is broadly used to describe fin-de-siècle movements such as the Secession Style, Modern Style, National Romanticism, Jugendstil, Free Style, and sometimes Arts and Crafts.\textsuperscript{64} The goal was to reunite art and craft, as well as to elevate organic forms to counteract the mechanization of the industrial revolution.\textsuperscript{65} It has even been described as a “Neo-Rococo stylization of nature.”\textsuperscript{66} This new style was meant to transcend all art forms, lending a decorative element to painting, sculpture, everyday items, and even architecture.\textsuperscript{67} Mucha embraced these values, even while saying that he was not following any style, by setting his hand to designing jewelry, cutlery,


\textsuperscript{60} Reade, \textit{Art Nouveau and Alphonse Mucha}, 18.

\textsuperscript{61} Products included Nestlé’s baby foods, Waverley cycles, Carmichael’s Luxuria bath tablets, Job cigarette papers, the Monaco-Monte Carlo Railway Company, Cassan Fils printers, La Trappistine liqueurs, Moet and Chandon champagne, and Lefèvre Utile biscuits. Howard, \textit{Art Nouveau}, 22.

\textsuperscript{62} Ibid., 22.

\textsuperscript{63} Ibid., 19.

\textsuperscript{64} Ibid., 1-2.


\textsuperscript{66} Howard, \textit{Art Nouveau}, 24.

decorative objects, furniture, and architecture. Howard goes on to describe Mucha’s oeuvre as being:

the embodiment of the Art Nouveau synthesis – practicing almost all the arts, including architectural design and photography, fusing the spiritual with the material, fine with commercial art, socialism and elitism, the ideal with the real, the universal with the national, the eastern with the western, the Christian with the pagan, the ancient with the modern. All in a quest for the beautiful.

Mucha’s style often interwove symbolism from many different sources together in one composition. Many scholars have been confused by his use of Byzantine, Celtic, Gothic, Rococo, Judaic, and also his own Czech folk roots, blending symbols of historicism, spiritualism and folk traditions together. (Fig. 2) However, by examining the artist’s own methodology, it becomes clear how he was able to claim that his works were clearly “Slavonic” in character. Mucha was known to make extensive studies into art of different historical periods, a practice stemming from his early involvement with history paintings. This attention to historical accuracy was a hobby that continued into his later works. In the words of his son Jiří:

Who were his predecessors? My father’s answer would probably have been that these and other elements are as old as art itself, and that even prehistoric potters ornamented their jars with curved lines because straight lines are tiring to the eye. This was how he always evaded talking about himself. Whenever he was asked a direct question he first went into great detail about the origins of art in general and then suddenly passed on to what, according to him, art should express. He would not have decried influences. Art was the legacy of centuries, and the artist’s duty was to increase it. He appropriated willingly—he learned to know, as he would say—anything that corresponded with his artistic temperament.

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68 Quote from Alphonse Mucha in Mucha, *His Life and Art*, 132.
Considering these historic elements as a study of Slavonic roots rather than mere eclectic symbolism, a new understanding of Mucha’s style develops. The clear Byzantine influence in Mucha’s works led many to question whether he was perpetuating the orientalist craze that took over Paris in the nineteenth century. Orientalism had, throughout the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, become the language of pleasure, relaxation, and escapist fantasy throughout Europe. Mucha’s Val-de-Grace studio itself was a compilation of oriental rugs and swagged fabrics amid Moorish tables, antiques, and curiosities. However, Mucha was very aware of how Slavic history was entwined with the Eastern Church, and though he himself remained a Catholic throughout his life, he was drawn to “Byzantine reliefs in old Balkan churches, peasant ornamentation, prehistoric decoration, icons, mosaics, and, in particular everything relating to early Slav history.” This connection to the Eastern Church would have also exposed Mucha to Islamic and Judaic motifs, allowing all of these elements to represent early Slav culture.

Mucha’s use of strong, thick cartooning lines has been attributed to the influence of Japanese woodcuts; however, studies of his tutors and predecessors such as Ženíšek and Aleš, as already discussed, point to roots in Slavic folk art. The presence of Celtic-inspired intertwining lines is a more difficult element to trace to the Slavs, yet studies at the time from anthropologists like William Z. Ripley were utilizing anthropometric data to differentiate the races of Europe as interest in nationalism and identity increased. Ripley defined the ancient Slavs as being of Celtic-Alpine origin, which Mucha might well have embraced as allowing Celtic and even

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75 Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 82.
Scandinavian and Viking motifs as being representative of Slavic origins. The Renaissance elements were representative of a more recent history when the Slavic lands enjoyed relative prominence, and the Rococo motifs reflect the recent artistic revival that dominated Mucha’s training in Vienna. The propensity to surround his women with flowers comes from the folk costumes and folk revivals of Mucha’s childhood. The women themselves differ from the diffused beauties of the Pre-Raphaelites, but also from the society women decked out in gold by fellow Czech artist Gustav Klimt. Their corporeal bodies and steady gazes out at the viewer have been described as “an unnerving amalgam of Slavic peasant girl and the Queen of Heaven.”

While Mucha is careful to cover wide ranges of history, he also avoids using elements that could have been interpreted as Germanic Gothic.

Le Style Mucha grew in popularity to the point that Mucha could not keep up with the demand—not that he wanted to anymore. He was increasingly growing restless to create a work of national significance for his own Czech people. While working at the 1900 Paris World Exhibition, he remarked:

My art, if I may call it that, crystallized. It was en vogue. It spread to factories and workshops under the name of “style Mucha” and at the exhibition a whole lot of objects were removed to prevent infringement of copyright. This was a safeguard for the manufacturers—but the weeding out was done at my expense, because I was the one who had to go to the storerooms to identify fakes, and I got nothing out of it. And there were many fakes—even the main pavilion was not without my ornamentation,

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76 There is no indication that Mucha read Ripley’s work specifically, but I use it here as indication of prevalent thought at the time. William Z. Ripley, *The Races of Europe: A Sociological Study* (New York: D. Appleton and Co., 1899), 355.
77 More so the Renaissance period than the Rococo, for at that time the Czech lands were either under the rule of Austria or the Ottoman Empire.
78 Klimt was a fellow student of Makart. Kana-Butrica, 31, n. 83. Quote from Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia*, 150.
79 This comes not just from Mucha’s own patriotism, but also from Palacký’s views on Bohemian history, as will be discussed more in Chapter 4.
80 “Most of all he abhorred copying someone else’s style. That is why he dismissed with a shrug the fact that his style was being widely emulated. He was embarrassed rather than gratified that so many people could not get by without aping someone else. I think that his most typical characteristics were absolute modesty, an encyclopedic mind and an enormous capacity for hard work.” Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 84, 86.
figures and flowers. Needless to say, nobody paid any fines over to me, they were collected by the manufacturers and the publishers. But in any case that was not the point. I simply deplored the precious time it cost me.\footnote{Quote from Alphonse Mucha, in Mucha, \textit{The Master of Art Nouveau}, 135-136.}

Mucha made the decision to sever himself from the decorative arts in order to pursue works that held greater importance to himself and his country. Once his patriotism met his determination to endow his people with an enduring legacy and identity, the decorative arts became trivial and cloying in comparison.\footnote{Sayer, \textit{The Coasts of Bohemia}, 19.} To accomplish this shift away from commercial art and decoration, he chose to create a design guide to be used by those seeking his style, and published \textit{Documents Décoratifs} in 1902, followed by \textit{Figures Décoratives} in 1905 to answer the unending demand.\footnote{Reade, \textit{Art Nouveau and Alphonse Mucha}, 26; and Mucha, \textit{The Master of Art Nouveau}, 144.}

Art Nouveau masters such as Fouquet, Lalique and Louis Comfort Tiffany in America used these design aides.\footnote{Mucha, \textit{The Master of Art Nouveau}, 135, 198.} The style became so popular that after 1900 it became difficult to decipher those designs that plagiarized Mucha from those that embodied the spirit of the style in a similar way, such as Guimard’s famous metro entrance, which features the omega arch that Mucha frequently used and had incorporated into his signature. With the publishing of his guides, Mucha released his style to public use, absolving himself from incessant commissions that distracted him from his goal.\footnote{Ibid., 135.} To understand how far-reaching his style spread, when Mucha travelled to Russia, he was pleasantly surprised to find “they use my motifs in all the art schools here, because they are ‘Slavonic’.”\footnote{Mucha, \textit{His Life and Art}, 262.}

Clearly then, Mucha was more than just an influence, but rather a huge presence and driving force in the style of Art Nouveau. The roots of his style and the influences that he incorporated are tied to his identity as a Slav to the point that it is doubtful whether a Frenchman
could have conceived the style and carried its influence as far as Mucha did. Therefore it is a misinterpretation of Mucha’s works to say, as Gabriel P. Weisberg and Elizabeth Kolbinger Menon do, that “Mucha, a Moravian, nevertheless had an influence on the development of Art Nouveau in major European centers such as Paris.” It was not in spite of his nationality that he was successful, but because he capitalized on it that he developed such an influence. The ignorance comes from a lack of scholarship on the artist in the years following 1910. It was then that Mucha returned to his homeland to create works that would have an impact on the Czech people, and “with this, to all intents and purposes, he dropped out of the history of Modern Art.” Though Mucha’s name is synonymous with the Art Nouveau era, a greater period of intellectually stimulating and profound works was still to come.

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Chapter Two

In the nineteenth century, explorations of national identity gave rise to an interest in folk art, especially its importance and its role in shaping national character. In 1895 Prague held a large ethnographic exhibition, showcasing the regional cultures of Bohemia, Moravia, and Slovakia, in an effort to promote the culture of the Czech-speaking people. Folk art and culture, with its “alleged ancient character” made up a large part of the exhibition, which drew journalists and scholars on the national and international scale. By showcasing their folk past, Czechs aimed to raise awareness of a cultural identity separate from that of their Germanic neighbors. The exhibition specifically excluded any German organizers or exhibits, emphasizing a national Czech character. That same year, Lubor Niederle, the Czech professor of archaeology at Prague University, emphasized the significance that folk, or peasant culture had, acting as the keeper of the language and traditions of the ancient Czechs. Folk culture then served as an aid to the national revival. This chapter examines the polemic of folk art as nationalistic art through an examination of Alphonse Mucha’s Czech posters. After the artist left the decorative arts scene in Paris in 1910, his style developed a patriotic character, emphasizing uniquely Czech roots and identity. Mucha, stating that “a taste for symbols is part of the inheritance of all Slavs … that is why the language of symbols is the surest way to communicate our feelings to our brother

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90 Ibid., 15, and Filipová, “The Peasant in Art History. Discourses on Folk Art in the Late Habsburg Empire,” unpublished work sent to the author, 2.
91 Filipová, “Peasants on Display,” 15.
Slavs,” utilized the skills he had honed in his Parisian works to produce a sophisticated program of propaganda in support of Pan-Slavic ideals.\(^9\)

As explained in the Introduction, Pan-Slavism was a movement aimed at elevating Slavic culture as separate from German culture for the purpose of uniting the Slavic people and inspiring them to seek independence. The concept of Czechs struggling against German oppressors was first put forth by Johann Gottfried Herder, and carried on as a thread throughout František Palacký’s histories. The poet Jan Kollár dramatized this clash of cultures in his epic poem *Slávy Dcera* (The Daughter of Sláva) (1824), where his prose detailed a history based on Herder’s characterization of the “oppressed and humbled…Slavs.”\(^9\) One of the main tenets of Pan-Slavism was to shake off the centuries-old inferiority Slavs had suffered at the hands of their Germanic neighbors and to show Europe that their rich folk customs gave them an equal artistic tradition.\(^9\) With the increase of ethnographic exhibitions such as the one in Prague, folk art was being reassessed as an appropriation of high art, with scholars such as Alois Riegl in Vienna, Václav Vilém Štech, a student of Heinrich Wölfflin, and the Czech Antonín Matějček making similar statements.\(^9\) Therefore, Czech folk art was seen as a Slavic interpretation of Renaissance and Baroque motifs. It was stylized and simplified for the common people and, as such, became a cultural identifier and thus signified national character.\(^9\)

During the Czech revival before the formation of Czechoslovakia, the reawakened interest in folk art brought attempts to produce modern versions of the ancient style. Czech artists Josef Mánes and Mikuláš Aleš had already been working folk motifs and myths into their works,

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such as those for the National Theater in Prague. The resulting works were not always based on any historical reality of folk culture, but rather a new symbolic construction of shared folk culture, or what Max Weber terms “imagined uniformity.” The goal was for this identity to cast the Slavs as a separate and once-autonomous race distinct from the Germans. The success of this imagined uniformity was due to the fact that it managed to incorporate the differing local and regional identities, which Stefan Berger states is essential for the creation of an effective national identity. Knowledge of national history became a second foundational element to establishing a unified cultural identity, and it renewed an interest in Slavic histories and legends. Mucha, who relied heavily on historical studies for his works, agreed, stating: “I am convinced that the development of every nation can only be successful if it grows organically and uninterruptedly from its own roots, and that the knowledge of its past is indispensable for the preservation of that continuity.”

According to the political theorist Murray Edelman, during hard times a country is more likely to turn to nostalgic depictions. When Mucha began making posters for Czech organizations, he used images evocative of the past embedded with folk motifs to emphasize the shared past that united the Slavs. This move also proved to be a camouflage of sorts, leading the Austrian authorities (by whom the Czechs were still controlled) to believe his style had not changed much from his Paris days, but all the while Mucha was disguising symbols of Czech

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97 The presence of these paintings, with their Slavic styling of Slavic legends, inside the theater meant for the upper classes, was itself a statement to the Germanic nobility that the Czech culture was reclaiming its place in the country. Note from Filipová, “Peasants on Display,” 16-17 and Jeremy Howard, Art Nouveau, 80.
98 The original German term is “geglaubte Gemeinsamkeit.”
102 Mucha, His Life and Art, 269.
nationalism in an effort to unite his country to make a bid for their own freedom. Mucha felt that his new take on the Slavonic style was needed in order to bring the people together under a new identity, and he felt that the medium of poster art was the best way to reach the people, stating:

The public was lacking something. It was obvious that it needed to breathe fresh air and find peace and harmony. The existing harmonies were exhausted, empty, taken over from old Renaissance motives, and people were glad to quench their thirst for beauty with a new draught. It seems that it was the refreshing new Slav element they were looking for. Posters were a good way of educating a whole population. They would stop on their way to work and derive from them spiritual pleasure. The streets became open-air art exhibitions.104

The choices of imagery Mucha would use in these posters raise questions about the establishment of national identity as well as how to define a repressed people without upsetting the oppressors.

Czech Posters

One of the most often cited, although rarest, posters along this theme is an early work for the Pěvecké Sdružení Učitelů Moraských or Moravian Teacher’s Choir from 1911 showing a girl wearing folk clothing sitting in a tree. (Fig. 3) This is hardly seditious propaganda. However, it is a celebration of an organization that was gaining international fame performing music by Czech composers as well as folk songs.105 The girl, from the Czech town of Kyjov, wears an outfit indicative of a festive occasion, with a dark blue apron embroidered with geometric floral folk designs over a red skirt and a white head scarf embroidered with flowers.106 She is no longer the ethereal floating beauty of the Parisian posters, but an earthly representation of the Czech people.

105 Mucha, His Life and Art, 267.
One hand is raised and cupped behind her ear in a listening gesture while she seems to be biting a nail on her other hand, a gesture of either innocence or nervous anticipation. The multivalent readings of the poster could have her listening to the music of the choir, to the thrush behind her, or, given the Choir’s reputation for spreading positive messages of nationalism, to news of freedom for the Czechs. These are the kinds of readings of Mucha’s works that do not receive a great deal of attention by scholars, but that firmly place him among other Czech nationalists, and thus as a significant national figure.

Mucha’s role as a nationalist is further cemented by his works for the Sokols. The Sokol was essentially a gymnastics organization, one that would organize competitions like mini-Olympics every four years. While the Sokol (the Czech word for falcon) may have trained youth for gymnastics and sports competitions, it also pushed an agenda of training active Czech patriots. They are described as combining the traits of the Boy Scouts with the selfless patriotic spirit of the Green Berets in their effort to train their youth, hoping that they would be the future leaders of the country. For the Slet Všesokolský of 1912, Mucha designed the poster for the sixth of these mini-Olympic trials which were attended by other Slavic nations and promoted the dissemination of Pan-Slavism’s tenets. (Fig.4) The poster does not display an athlete, but a girl in a red cloak, which is billowing in front of her, and a white embroidered head scarf. Red is the official color of the Sokol, and is emphasized behind the lettering and in the

107 Ancient Egyptians used the motif of a finger in the mouth to indicate a youth; I interpret the gesture from the modern context of nervousness.
109 “The Sokol was organized by Jundrich Fügner (1822-1865) and Dr. Miroslav Tyrš (1832-1884) in 1862 under the influence of the German gymnastic movement, founded by Jahn, to animate the nation with ideals of equality and brotherhood (The Sokols called each other “brother” and addressed each other with “thou”), mental vigor and physical fitness…Tyrš was a student of classical antiquity and of the history and theory of the arts: from the beginning he tried to make the Sokol an educational movement on a broad cultural basis…” Kohn, *Pan-Slavism*, 184.
decorative corner designs. The embroidery of the cloak and scarf showcase folk patterns and motifs, and her crown is a representation of the ramparts of Prague, making her a personification of the city. In her left hand, she holds a staff with a round emblem of the city on top. In her right hand, held against her chest, she grasps multiple round wreaths of leaves. Mucha uses the circle to symbolize Slavic unity, but we learn from Anna Dvořáková that the leaves are from the linden tree which had been a Czech symbol since Kollár published his patriotic romance poem Slávy Dcera in 1824 in which he opposed the German oak with the Czech linden. Behind her, a large figure in shadows, meant to represent a youth from early Slavic history, holds up a circle with spikes (which Dvořák calls a sun symbol) and her other hand supports a falcon, the largest bird of prey in the Czech lands and the namesake of the organization.

Both figures in the Sixth Sokol poster are female, and although Mucha made a career of portraying beautiful females, here he seems to be using Kollár’s graphic prose to guide his interpretation of patriotic symbolism. While allegories often manifest as feminine, the Czech people had long been referred to as a feminized culture by German-trained scholars. Once Herder cast the Slavs as victims of German domination by saying, “the proud Germans with their aristocratic warrior tradition had from Charlemagne on oppressed and humbled the Slavs who with their primitive democratic organization and their natural disposition towards peace had cultivated music and poetry instead of war,” he established a characterization that would be carried on by scholars, politicians, and artists. Kollár viewed Herder as a “priest of humanitarianism” and borrowed heavily from his descriptions of Slavs. Kollár personifies the
Slavs as a female allegory; The Goddess Slava (or Slavia) derived from *slava*, for “glory” and also from *slovo*, for “word,” - refers to Herder’s assertion that Slavs are gifted in the arts of poetry and song, which are feminine attributes.¹¹⁵ He repeatedly describes in his poem, *Slávy Dcera*, the female Slava as being attacked by virile, masculine Avar or Teuton warriors.¹¹⁶ Because historians have been predominantly male, gendering cultures as male for dominant and female for weak cultures has been the norm until recent feminist methodology has intervened.¹¹⁷ However, Czechs tended to see this female personification as representative of two aspects of femininity: as a Virgin, attacked by strong male invaders, and as the Mother figure protecting her children. This split image originates from a Bohemian legend, “The War of the Maidens,” as described in the popular fourteenth-century *Dalimil Chronicle (Kronika tak řečeného Dalimila)*, one of the first Czech books.¹¹⁸ In the Sokol poster we see both the innocent girl who needs to be protected and the strong protective woman behind her instilling pride and giving the Czechs the tools they need— in the form of the falcon representing the power of the Sokol against their oppressors.

Mucha chose a female image again in his visual allegory of Slavic unity. In 1907, he converted a portrait of his friend and patron’s daughter into the image of Slavia.¹¹⁹ (Fig. 5) His patron, Charles Crane, was an American diplomat very interested in Slavic history and excited by Mucha’s idea of painting works devoted to the Slavic people.¹²⁰ In the portrait of Josephine

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¹¹⁵ Ibid., 16.
¹²⁰ Charles Richard Crane was an American minister to China and an advisor to President Wilson on his diplomatic mission to Russia. He was also a friend of Professor Tomáš Masaryk. Anna Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” in Alphonse Mucha, *The Spirit of Art Nouveau*, by Victor Arwas, Jana Brabcová-Orkiková and Anna Dvořák, edited by Jane Sweeney (Alexandria, Virginia: Art Services International, 1998), 104, n. 5. also - Crane agreed to pay Mucha a stipend of $15,000 a year. Ibid., 97.
Bradley as Slavia, the subject sits on a throne wearing a white dress with embroidered embellishments on the sleeves, and red and white ribbons cascading from her hair and around her collar. Entwined in her thickly braided hair are lime leaves, a Czech symbol whose leaves are also scattered around the frame of the poster.\(^1\) She is surrounded by a crescent filled with patterns from folk embroidery such as geometric flowers and hearts that echo the shape of the lime leaves.\(^2\) The arms of Slavia’s throne are capped with figures of stylized peace doves, and she holds up the circle representing Slavic unity. While Slavia appears to be the quintessential embodiment of the stereotypical “peace-loving” Slav, on her lap lies a sword, which she could easily pick up with her right hand.\(^3\) The presence of the sword indicates that while the Slavs are known for a peaceful nature, they will defend themselves if attacked.\(^4\)

Mucha re-used the Slavia image two times: once as an advertisement for the Czech bank Slavia, and, in 1920, on the “green” one-hundred crown bank note of the new Czechoslovak Republic.\(^5\) (Fig. 6 and 7) Mucha was chosen as one of the main designers for the currency once

\(^1\) Derek Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia*, 147.

\(^2\) Mucha’s use of the crescent shape has been linked with his involvement with the Freemasons, although he was using it before he was initiated in a Parisian lodge in 1898. He became Grand Master of the Grand Lodge of Czechoslovakia, for which he designed letterheads, diplomas, certificates, and patents as well as Masonic jewels. Victor Arwas, “Le Style Mucha and Symbolism,” in *Alphonse Mucha, The Spirit of Art Nouveau*, by Victor Arwas, Jana Brabcová-Orkiková and Anna Dvořák, edited by Jane Sweeney (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 1998), 67.

\(^3\) The use of the term “quintessential” is referencing other Slavic embodiments in art such as Karel Vitezslav Masek’s *La prophétesse Libuse* (ca. 1893, Musée d’Orsay). Here, the mythical originator of the first Czech dynasty in the early eighth century, and founder of Prague, is shown in a white robe decorated with jewels, recalling an ancient priest, and holding a branch of lime leaves. She wears symbols of the crescent and ox, and with her face shaded green in the moonlight, this site likens her to the Egyptian goddess Hathor. The author goes on to attribute the style of her headdress to Alphonse Mucha. Hervé Lewandowski, “Musée d’Orsay: Karel Vitezslav Masek The prophetess Libuse”, 2006, <http://www.musee-orsay.fr/en/collections/works-in-focus/painting/commentaire_id/the-prophetess-libuse-10610.html?tx_commentaire_pi1%5BpidL%5D=509&tx_commentaire_pi1%5Bfrom%5D=841&cHash=f8c3602644.>.

\(^4\) Rennert and Weill, *The Complete Posters*, 322.

Czechoslovakia was formed in 1918.\textsuperscript{126} Along with the sinewy lines from his decorative art days, and his folk and tribal motifs, Mucha used portraits of his wife and daughter surrounded by the symbols established in his patriotic posters to decorate the currency. The five-hundred-crown bank note features a portrait of an ancient Slav family looking at the Prague skyline with Prague Castle in the distance, enclosed in a crescent-shaped frame. (Fig. 8) The back features two falcons, the country’s crest surrounded by a frame of hearts in a folk-motif, and a portrait of a woman (modelled on his daughter) wearing a white head scarf and crowned with a wreath of lime leaves. For Mucha to be chosen as the artist of the new currency of Czechoslovakia was a great honor, establishing him as the representative artist of the nation.\textsuperscript{127}

It is interesting to note the changes that occur in Mucha’s style as he moves away from his Parisian decorative works to his patriotic posters. The sweet pastels are replaced with bold colors and an emphasis of the Pan-Slavic colors of red, white, and blue.\textsuperscript{128} While the thick, black outlining remains, the figures and their clothing show more refined shading that adds dimensionality to them, as opposed to his previous, almost flat rendering style. His figures further lose their ephemeral appearance in their straightforward stances and their stares out at the viewer. Gone are the blithe spirits among the flowers with shy, downcast eyes, and in their place are ancient warriors. Their faces even change. For example, the first portrait of Josephine shows a slim face with a thin straight nose, and light eyes and hair. For the Slavia Bank, her hair and eyes are now darker, she is not as slight in her build, and her face is broader with higher

\textsuperscript{126} Mucha designed the 10 crown, circulated from February 28, 1920 to May 31, 1944; the 20 crown, designed in 1920; the 50 crown, circulated from 1931 to 1945; the 100 crown, circulated from July 5, 1919 to January 31, 1921 (due to forgeries when it was replaced by the “green” note featuring Mucha’s Slavia portrait); and the 500 crown, from 1919. After World War II the notes were redesigned without Mucha’s imagery. Mucha, \textit{His Life and Art}, 267.


\textsuperscript{128} Many Slavic countries retained these colors in their national flags upon gaining independence. Nancy M. Wingfield, \textit{Flag Wars and Stone Saints: How the Bohemian Lands became Czech} (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2007), 135.
cheekbones. This was Mucha’s attempt to show a different, Slavic, physiognomy to differentiate his Slavia from the Western European women he had drawn before. The basis for this interpretation is likely from works of anthropologists, such as William Z. Ripley, utilizing anthropometric data to differentiate the races of Europe as interest in nationalism and identity increased. As already discussed in Chapter One, Ripley defined the Slavs as being of Celtic-Alpine origin, which he describes as “brachycephalic (broad-headed), below the Aryan in stature, with skin pale white, swarthy, or light brown, and eyes brown gray, and black,” as opposed to the Teutonic or Aryan (German) whom he described as “members of the northern race…long-skulled (or dolichocephalic), tall in stature, and possessed pale eyes and skin.”

Mucha’s use of broad-faced beauties in costumes imitating folk traditions gave his fellow Slavs an icon with which to identify. We see another example of this in his 1903 poster for the Výstava Českého Severovýchodu or Northeast Bohemia Fair where his Slavic girl with lime leaves in her hair has a very wide face and a fuller figure. (Fig. 9) Behind her, Mucha has used his crescent motif to frame the emblem of the Czech lion in traditional embroidery patterns.

Might Mucha’s use of feminine symbolism have some other purpose than to perpetuate the peace-loving image of the Slavs? Because his overall goal was to inspire patriotic unity, this seems an unlikely reason. I argue here that he chose to continue using female depictions for the purpose of masking his subversion. After making his career in Paris on the portrayals of females, it would be expected of him to continue making similar works. From the point of view of Austria, which also used a feminine allegory, Mucha’s Slavic women would seem to be sharing in the Austrian identity. With this pattern of production established, Mucha was able to insert symbols with rebellious implications into his imagery, such as the sword on Slavia’s lap, without

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drawing suspicion. In his poster for the Jarní Slavnosti Pěvecké A Hudební V Praze, or Spring Festival of Song and Music at Prague in 1914, Mucha provides us with an even older representation of Slavia, recalling tribal traditions. (Fig. 10) Here, a wide-faced and high cheekboned Slavia sits in a linden tree wearing a white dress with a few embroidered embellishments, a low-slung byzantine-style belt, and an embroidered headdress with tassels hanging near the ears. Her headdress is not from any particular culture or period, but is Mucha’s invention, its form hints vaguely at any number of Eastern and Slavic influences. Her left hand holds onto the linden tree, while the right grips a circle radiating with leaves from the linden and streaming bright red and white ribbons. Behind Slavia’s head, Mucha has inserted the emblem of Prague. Under her left arm is a harp, recalling Celtic or Viking anthropomorphic carvings. In Mucha’s style of combining ancient and traditional art forms, we have an allusion to the fact that the culture of the Slavs goes back to the beginning of time. The birds facing her on a branch in the foreground appear to sing to her, and so, with the harp, the poster would on first glance seem to be a simple advertisement for the music festival. However, another reading of this poster could be made by examining Mucha’s choice of color scheme. The leaves of the linden tree are purposefully made blue so that, when combined with her white dress and the red and white streamers, her image now becomes a representation of the colors of the Czech national flag, which in 1914 was not allowed to be displayed. Here, Mucha’s application of folk imagery along with his use of a personification and color symbolism allowed him to enact a subversive strategy to promote patriotism and to unite his people against Austrian rule.

All of the posters discussed thus far were created while Austria still had control over the Czechs, which played a part in inspiring as well as censoring their imagery. After 1918 when the

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132 An earlier letter from Crane, Mucha’s patron, shows he had requested Salvia have a musical symbol. Mucha, The Master of Art Nouveau, 248.
133 Rennert and Weill, The Complete Posters, 350
independent Czechoslovakia Republic was formed, Mucha continued to create works to promote a patriotic spirit among his fellow Czechs while also donating his unique Slavic style to works like the new stamps, banknotes, and even police uniforms. Without the oppressive eye of Austria looking over his shoulder, the new patriotic posters Mucha designed carried much of the same visual programming, but in stronger forms. In his poster for the Eighth Sokol (Slet Všesokolský v Praze) of 1925, Slavia now stands in the blue shadows of the background, which Mucha uses to signify the spiritual realm, while strong men are able to stand in the foreground, referring to the real world and the new free Slav man. (Fig. 11) The man in front wears a red shirt—the color of the Sokol, and stands confidently, finally able to show his support for the Neo-Slavism movement by holding a staff topped with a falcon just at the edge of the poster, from which a giant Czechoslovakian flag billows in front of him. Behind him a shirtless man representing the ideal athletic gymnast of the Sokol stands with arms outstretched, in both hands he holds a circle made of linden leaves with red and white ribbons that blow diagonally across the poster. Mucha is free now, in this country, to show the Sokol for what it was, an athletic association that also encouraged patriotism, without any cloaked messages or symbolism.

The final poster that Mucha designed for a nationalistic cause was the poster for the tenth anniversary of the Czechoslovak Republic in 1928. (Fig. 12) The figure of Slavia is now a young girl in white robes with a red cape of indeterminable provenance. She wears a crown of heraldic emblems representing the different regions consolidated into the new republic. The figure behind Slavia who is crowning her with a garland is, according to Jack Rennert and Alain Weill,

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134 The term “donating” is referring to Mucha’s belief that he should give these works to his country, saying: “My aim was to make money abroad and to give my nation what it needed free.” Jiří Mucha, His Life and Art, 237; and Sayer, The Coasts of Bohemia, 20
136 For example, Bohemia (the lion), Moravia (the checkered eagle), Slovakia (the cross), Ruthenia (the bear), and Silesia (the eagle at left).
“a mythical being, representing the victors of World War I who, led by America and president Woodrow Wilson, dictated the terms which split the old Austro-Hungarian monarchy and created several new states in 1918.”137 I disagree with this assessment on the grounds that Mucha was both clever and consistent in his use of symbolism and allegory. Her hierarchal scale, along with the wreath of lime leaves around the mysterious figure’s head indicates she serves as a Slavic allegory. Her blue coloring sets her in the spiritual realm, while her green voluminous robes hints to her serving as a representation of the literal land of the Slavs. If she then stands as the ancient land of the Slavs, she is therefore crowning the new Slavic national identity with her bounty as an act of welcome.

Alphonse Mucha’s use of symbolism and allegory played on the current trend of pride and nostalgia, and on the increasing interest in the history and heritage of the Slavs. He managed to craft an identity for the Czechs based on established folk traditions and developed a program of symbols based on histories and literature of the time touting folk culture as the true ancestral heritage of the Slavs. This program allowed his brand of propaganda to go largely unnoticed by Austrian authorities. He was also able to capture the spirit of the new nation, which was circulated around the world via their currency and postage. “Le Style Mucha” had blended itself with traditional folk art to produce a national and truly Slavonic style.

Chapter Three

It was midnight, and there I was all alone in my studio in the rue du Val-de-Grâce among my pictures, posters and panels. I became very excited. I saw my work adorning the salons of the highest society or flattering people of the great world with smiling and ennobled portraits. I saw the books full of legendary scenes, floral garlands and drawings glorifying the beauty and tenderness of women. This was what my time, my precious time, was being spent on, when my nation was left to quench its thirst on ditch water. And in my spirit I saw myself sinfully misappropriating what belonged to my people. It was midnight and, as I stood there looking at all these things, I swore a solemn promise that the remainder of my life would be filled exclusively with work for the nation.138

These words, written by Alphonse Mucha, illustrate the conviction that led him to devote the rest of his career to creating works for his people, the Slavic people of the Czech lands, with the culmination being *The Slav Epic*. As will be demonstrated in the following chapter, *The Epic* is a large-scale collection of history paintings that deviate greatly from the style that had made the artist famous. This chapter will deal with the mural works that led Mucha to the style and concept choices used in *The Epic*. The inspiration that culminated in the epiphany Mucha details above came while he was working on the 1900 Paris Exposition, at which point he was made aware of the vastness of the Slavic culture beyond the Czech borders. Mucha was then granted the chance to work on murals in the Obecní dům (Municipal Building) in Prague. It was at this time that Mucha set about educating himself on the history of the Slavs and Pan-Slavic philosophies, thus laying a foundation for his knowledge and passion about the Slavic people. These two commissions reveal the progression of Mucha’s style and technique from the Slavonic style perfected in his poster work, which he then combined with his early theatrical scenic art training and academic history painting tradition, to the style of *The Epic*.

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138 Alphonse Mucha in a letter to a friend, quoted from Jiří Mucha, *His Life and Art*, 145.
The Bosnian Pavilion

In 1899, Mucha was approached by the Austrian representative of the World Exposition in Paris and asked if he would help with the design of various displays Austria would showcase at the Exposition, specifically the pavilion for the newly annexed territories of Bosnia and Herzegovina. Mucha met for a planning session with the Austrian representative, Hofrat Exner, who offered him the job of creating a large painting cycle and various decorations in the Bosnia and Herzegovina pavilion.139 Because the annexation of Bosnia was not a popular decision, officials believed that having Mucha’s style of art to decorate the pavilion would put Austria’s decision in a positive light and draw Parisian crowds to the exhibit.140

Mucha was given a rail pass to travel through the country to conduct research for the project.141 It is quite ironic that it was the Austrian government, exerting its authority over a Czech subject on whose success it sought to capitalize, that provided Mucha the opportunity he desired to learn more about the Slavs and encouraged his examination of Pan-Slavism.142 Mucha was affected by his research journey and pleasantly shocked to see his treasured Slavic customs in other areas of Europe. As he wrote in a letter upon his return:

I was not only very satisfied with my journey but also amazed. What I had been looking for so hard all this time I found among the Balkan Slavs. Right, I thought, before dedicating my work to my own people I shall work for the southern Slavs… Once again I was doing historical painting, but this time not about Germany but a brotherly Slav nation. Describing

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139 Ibid., 145.
140 Foreign Minister Gyula Andrássy and Benjámin Kállay, an expert on south Slav history are quoted as “not wanting Austria-Hungary to be weighed down with another million or so Slavs.” Noel Malcolm, Bosnia: A Short History (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 136.
141 Mucha, His Life and Art, 140-145.
142 The Slavist Pavel Jozef Šafařík, a contemporary of Czech writer Jan Kollár, had published his Slovanský národopis (Slav Ethnography) in 1842, with a map of the Slav peoples illustrating their spread throughout Europe, including the Balkans, which had been under Ottoman rule since the fifteenth century. Stanko Vráz (1810-1851), one of the leaders of the Illyrian movement, wrote from Zagreb to Prague: “When I brought a copy of this map, the local patriots and even the non-patriots almost tore it out of my hands. All of them cannot get over the fact that the Slav nation is spread so far. The map arouses more patriots here than a whole literature could do.” Hans Kohn, Pan-Slavism, 19. Malcolm, Bosnia, 22.
the glorious and tragic events in its history I thought of the joys and sorrows of my own country and of all the Slavs.\footnote{Alphonse Mucha’s words from a letter, as they appeared in Mucha, His Life and Art, 145.}

Mucha set out to depict the suffering of these oppressed people and the tyranny of their conquerors, but this idea did not sit well with the Austrian delegates who were looking to put this annexation in a positive light.\footnote{Alfred Weidinger, “Alphonse Mucha and the Pavilion for the Ottoman Provinces of Bosnia-Herzegovina and the Exposition Universelle in Paris 1900,” in Alphonse Mucha (Vienna: Belvedere, 2009), 52.} Mucha then decided to depict the Slavic qualities of the people, or \textit{samobytnost}, in an effort to define the Bosnian people.\footnote{Kohn, \textit{Pan-Slavism}, 2.} While there is no evidence that Mucha read the works of Johann Gottfried Herder, he seems to have learned of the philosopher, based on his art conforming to Herder’s guidelines: “The dwindling remnants of their (the Slavs) customs, songs, and legends should be collected, and finally there should be painted a history of the family as a whole, a history appropriate to the canvas of mankind.”\footnote{Johann Gottfried von Herder, “Ideas for the History of Mankind” (1784-1791), book 16, excerpt from Kohn, \textit{Nationalism}, 108.} This is reflected in Mucha’s choice to depict the Bosnian Slavs from prehistoric times to the present.

How does an artist go about depicting an entire nation? Anthony Miller defines a nation as “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and historical memories, a mass, public culture, a common economy and common legal rights and duties for all members.”\footnote{Anthony D. Smith, \textit{National Identity: Ethnonationality in Comparative Perspective}, reprint (Nevada: University of Nevada Press, 1993), 14.} Mucha covers each of these criteria in his Bosnian cycle. Mucha used the heavy-lined Slavonic style to paint the murals on thin canvas in his studio that was then placed in the pavilion.\footnote{Weidinger, \textit{Alphonse Mucha}, 53.} While he failed to leave a description of the work himself, scholars have relied on the contemporary account of Abel Fulcran César Fabre, who published a very detailed article, “Mucha – Un Maitre Décorateur: Après Une Visite Au Pavillon De Bosnie (Mucha – A Master Decorator: After a Visit to the Pavilion of Bosnia),” on May 17, 1900. Fabre categorizes the
scenes as The Prehistoric Eras (Stone, Bronze and Iron) (Fig. 13), The Roman Era in Front of an Ionic Temple, The Arrival of the Slavs (Fig. 14), The Apostles (Fig. 15) Before the Tribunal: The Oath of the Sword (Fig. 16), The Revenge of the Bogomils: The Heretics of the 12th Century, The Coronation of the King of Bosnia (Fig. 17), and, along one wall, the depictions of the three main faiths of the land: Catholic, Orthodox, and Islamic (Fig. 18). The concentration on these legends of Slavic origin rendered in the thickly cartooned Slavic style was Mucha’s first attempt at creating a unified historical identity to connect the Slavic people. While Mucha was often mentioned in descriptions of the pavilion, the exotic and unknown aspects of Bosnian culture were what commentators praised:

Bosnia, a country which somehow seems so far away from us, has a very distinguished structure, and the interior is decorated by a superb frieze, painted by Mucha, the artist whose stunning posters are now in such demand. The subject he has chosen is a symbolical history of this land, almost unknown to us, and will go around the sides of the large hall of which the ceiling is in colored glass, and where workwomen from the government factories, dressed in national costumes, will weave carpets and divide the visitor’s interest with the pupils of the school where the inlaying of metals in wood work is taught. The whole is full of local color.

This proves that Mucha’s cycle portrayed the common myths, histories, and cultural aspects of the Bosnians, thereby granting them an identity within the European community.

In another section of exhibition, Allegory of Bosnia-Herzegovina, Mucha applied the same elements that he had used in his Czech allegory posters, such as a beautiful female representative of the country with down-cast eyes sitting on a throne surrounded by flowers and backed by a circle, which insinuates its patterning is from local tile designs (Fig. 19). The clothing on the figures shows simply rendered pseudo-ethnographic folk costumes of the

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Balkans. Mucha then deftly inserted symbolism to add a hidden message against the Austrian government in the form of a girl holding a tobacco plant, the one plant that farmers could grow without a permit, thereby covering the economic and legal aspect of Smith’s definition. The scene emphasizes Herder’s “peace-loving Slav” stereotype, showing an industrious group of people caring for animals and plants and staring out at the crowd beseeingly.

The fact that Austria paid for the province of Bosnia to have its own four-story building reveals its desire to showcase its annexation in positive light. Officials placed the pavilion in between a royal Austrian pavilion, which displayed Baroque architecture and white marble statues, and the Hungarian pavilion built in a Gothic style that held a museum of military regalia. (Fig. 20) George Heinrich Moser was put in charge of planning the pavilion for Bosnia-Herzegovina. His assignment was to ensure the pavilion highlighted Austria’s efforts at “civilizing” the country and developing economic revenue from the goods there, insinuating that the Austrians saw the Balkans as populated by an inferior culture that needed to be “saved” by a superior people. He developed an illustrated travel guide emphasizing areas of preserved natural landscape, historic buildings, and Austria’s works within the country, as well as a promotional pavilion at the 1897 “Exposition Internationale” in Brussels.

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151 Weidinger, Alphonse Mucha, 53.
152 “Unlike the majority of the exhibitors, the pavilions of Austria, Hungary, and Bosnia-Herzegovina were finished, furnished and decorated in time for the grand opening of April 14, 1900. The Press wrote: The Hungarian Pavilion and the American House, as well as the Bosnian Palace are open to the public and are being stormed by masses of visitors. In the Bosnian Palace, the works of art, i.e. the frescoes by Mucha and the panorama portrayal of Sarajevo by Adolph Kaufmann are a sheer delight to the visitors. The public is showing great interest in Bosnian products; they are looking at all the items exhibited and are pleased to see a complete exhibition.” Ibid., 54
153 Moser is described as a watchmaker and orientalist born in St. Petersburg. Ibid., 49.
154 Conveniently, by not advertising any modern accomplishments, they were insinuating that Bosnians were behind the times and in need of Austria’s guidance. These advertisements were akin to rural tourism. Ibid., 49-50.
Carlo Panek was chosen as the architect of the Bosnian pavilion and he modeled the building on a traditional Bosnian manor house.\textsuperscript{155} While Mucha had emphasized the Slavic elements of Bosnian culture, Panek emphasized the Eastern aspect of the country as a way of separating the Bosnians as “other,” as well as casting them as similar to the Arabs on display down the street. The mixture of architectural styles in the country often confused European commentators due to its foreignness. The term “Oriental” was applied to buildings whether they were Byzantine, Arab, Moorish, or modern creations that were attempting a neo-Islamic style.\textsuperscript{156} The pavilion had a two-story open foyer with a staircase and a stained-glass ceiling. (Fig. 21) The squinches in the corners held Islamic muqarnas details inside pointed arches and canopies with ogee arches decorated the room along with plants, statues, and swags of patterned fabric, giving the room a slightly chaotic and cluttered look. The building was decorated with glass display cases showing art objects like glass sculptures and metal inlays in wooden boxes made by the art school in Sarajevo, which showcased the “civilizing” aspects Austria had brought to the territory. Opposite the entrance and stairway, a large arch with carved vousoirs framed a mural of the city of Sarajevo by Adolph Kaufman.\textsuperscript{157} Above this sat Mucha’s allegorical painting, and his other paintings in the series circled the second floor that was open to the foyer. Despite the extravagant decorations of the pavilion, Mucha’s Slavic paintings did not lose their impact on the viewer:

\textsuperscript{155} “Altogether, the four-floor structure measured 93 x 82 ft on plan, providing a net space of approximately 10,225 square feet. Visitors to the exhibition entered the two-story 40-foot-high central hall, which was covered by a skylight, via a foyer measuring about 645 square feet. The individual exhibition rooms were arranged on three sides of this hall. Openings from almost every room made it possible to look into a central hall and observe the individual areas displaying Mucha’s historical paintings.” Ibid., 50.


\textsuperscript{157} Weidinger, Alphonse Mucha, 52-53.
the charm of the completed compositions lay not in their fidelity to the actual, but in their flowing rhythmic grace, and their felicitous coloration, grouping, and arrangement. They were in fact the feature of that fantastic, red-roofed, blue-walled pavilion which stood in the rue des Nations between the more pretentious Austrian and Hungarian palaces.158

By only showcasing what were considered “craft arts” and advertising that Europeans were commissioned for the large-scale paintings and architecture, Austria was further placing the Bosnians as a less civilized culture, while Mucha was placing the Bosnian Slavs in a historical context with other European nations to emphasize a Slavic connectivity.

The Obicnì Dům

After the World Exhibition in Paris, Mucha traveled to America to gather funds for his patriotic works by painting portraits and designing clothing.159 In the summer of 1909, Mucha was asked to return to Prague by the Czech architect Osvald Polívka to paint murals inside his new building, the Obicnì Dům (Municipal Building).160 While Mucha was thrilled at the opportunity to contribute his style to a building in his home country, he met with opposition from the local Czech artists. Having spent the last twenty years living abroad, and finding fame in Paris, Mucha was now seen as an outsider to the local artistic community. A newspaper campaign against Mucha began before he had even returned to Prague, calling for a competition for Czech artists to earn the commission. Mucha’s wife, Maruška, wrote to warn him:

You just can’t imagine the shameless attacks being made on you. Not only Mánes, but also the Union of Artists have joined in . . . They have all the newspapers on their side . . . Nothing is too low for them to stoop to . . . This is your reward for all you’ve done for Bohemia. Now you’re being stoned

159 This trip was not very successful but provided Mucha the opportunity to meet Charles Crane, a Czech sympathizer who would become the patron of The Slav Epic. Mucha, The Master of Art Nouveau, 251.
160 Though still before the formation of Czechoslovakia, the municipal building was built on the site of the old king’s court which the Habsburg dynasty had abandoned. Agnes Husslein-Arco, Jean Louis Gaillemin, Michel Hilaire, and Christiane Lange, eds. Alphonse Mucha. (Vienna: Belvedere, 2009), 232. Kana-Butrica, “The Historical Paintings of Alphons Mucha: The Slav Epic,” 11.
by the very ones you have given yourself for. And they laugh at your patriotism.161

Mucha’s response reveals the strength of his artistic convictions:

How sad that there are so many petty people in Bohemia . . . I don’t let it worry me. My life has been clear as crystal, filled with high ideals, sacrifices and striving for a worthy goal . . . Their accusations matter no more to me than their praise . . . They don’t exist in themselves, they live only in the reflections of others. Everything they do is imitation, copied . . . I am not their servant, I am the servant of my country.162

This type of fervor reveals how deeply Mucha’s patriotism had come to rule his life. It also mirrors words written by Palacký about the commitment necessary to achieve the elevation of Czech culture:

If our nation, in the last centuries so deeply fallen, is again to be raised even a little, many people must devote themselves to it completely and sincerely without regard for the gratitude or ingratitude of the age and persist in the task begun, though all effort seem in vain and difficulties increase rather than diminish. Unfortunately, there are not many such people among us, and there is a great abundance of work for them on all sides . . . Therefore, while I still have the strength, I want to assist toward this end.163

Mucha was taking on not only the knowledge of great Pan-Slavists, but also the emotional connection to their cause. Mucha would go on to concede to the group of protestors by agreeing to only partial involvement in the Municipal Hall commission, completing only the murals and ceiling in the round Lord Mayor’s Hall.164 The other areas were divided amongst Mikuláš Aleš, Jakub Obrovský, Jan Preisler, Karel Špilar, Max Švabinský, and Josef Wenig.165

Mucha’s conception for the decoration of the Mayor’s Hall continued to follow Herder’s call for a collection of Slavic legends and history. He designed the entire room, from the doors and stained glass windows to the furnishings. (Fig. 22) Pilasters around the room are crowned

161 Mucha, His Life and Art, 357.
163 (Palacký to his daughter Marie, January 24, 1851, Rodinné listy, 63) Zacek, Palacký, 13.
165 Mucha, The Master of Art Nouveau, 244-245.
with silver gilt female heads, evoking his Art Nouveau imagery, wearing crowns of lime leaves with silver gilt words above them in curvilinear script.\footnote{The choice of silver gilt instead of gold pays tribute to the large silver mines in Kutna Hora, outside of Prague, that provided wealth to the country during the 14th century when Prague was the seat of the Holy Roman Empire, even though Mucha, following Palacký’s opinions, does not honor this period in Czech history because it was an age of westernization. This will be covered more in Chapter Four. František Kavka, “Politics and Culture under Charles IV,” in \textit{Bohemia in History} (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 50.} The words define the virtues that the figures painted above them on wedge-shaped spandrels are meant to represent, such as “Mother Wisdom,” “Steadfastness,” “Creativity,” and “Independence.” (Fig. 23-26) Mucha uses historical figures to illustrate pride-inducing Czech characteristics. Drawing from Palacký’s writings, he chose the religious reformer Jan Hus for \textit{Spravedlnost} (justice), Jan Žižka, a leader of the Hussite movement, for \textit{Bojovnost} (military prowess or belligerence, depending on the translation), the religious figure Jan Amos Komenský for \textit{Vernost} (trust/loyalty), and the Chodové (medieval Bohemian border guards) to represent \textit{Ostražitost} (vigilance).\footnote{“Mother wisdom” is represented by Eliška Přemyslovná, mother of Charles IV, which is the closest Mucha comes to honoring the Czech Holy Roman Emperor. “Steadfastness” is Jan Roháč of Dubé, “Creativity” is Jan of Pernštýna, and “Independence” is Jiří of Poděbrady. Husslein-Arco et al., \textit{Alphonse Mucha}, 238-9.} (Fig. 27-30) These are characters he would honor on a grander scale in his \textit{Epic}. His three murals under the arches continue his exploration of the subjects and themes later used in the \textit{Epic}, and he titles them with dramatic wording to create an emotional response to the works, such as “Accept love and enthusiasm from your son, mother of the holy nation,” and “Though humiliated and tortured, you will live again, my country.”\footnote{All of these sentences end in exclamation marks. Due to conflicting titles from different sources, I have translated the center title myself: Silou k svobode-laskou k svornosti! = The strength of freedom-loving harmony! Sayer, \textit{The Coasts of Bohemia}, 150-151.}

It is here that we see the artist’s style begin to transform. The spandrel portraits serve as transition pieces, retaining some thick cartooning and standing against a solid background, recalling Mucha’s posters. Many of the figures stand before a pale image of Slavia, usually in white robes and headscarf (although red accents are sometimes used), and holding a circle or
The three murals, however, reveal a complete lack of thick outlining, and there is an emphasis on depicting realistically modeled figures bathed in dramatic colors. The room’s decoration combines spiritual and realistic imagery (like his Czech posters), and becomes a jewel box of color and Czech patriotism. This is a departure from his pale Parisian posters or the primary colors of his Czech posters. The artist described his decision-making process in a letter:

I must choose a technique which doesn’t take too long. . . . This is why I think oil painting is too technical and not suitable for expressing ideas. In oils the technique is always visible, and this I don’t want . . . if it is broadly painted it’s just shallow virtuosity, unworthy of serious subjects. And if it is too meticulous and naturalistic, the harsh colours will kill the idea and the whole thing looks terribly heavy handed and forced. My work must be like sudden shouts without any bravado technique, honestly felt and honestly expressed, with no showing off, no acrobatics of the brush. I think I will do it like the tragedy of the German Theatre, only better and more seriously worked out, with the main stress on drawing, while the colour, harmonious and natural, should be subordinate. Now I’m looking for a method and I think I have found it. Contemporary oil technique has nothing in common with the Slav spirit. . . . it is French, or Dutch, perhaps even German or Italian, but not Slavonic. We must start from a completely different angle . . . not painting because . . . we get satisfaction from effects of light and colour, but because . . . painting is a more direct way of conveying feelings. And these feelings must remain the principal object while technique and colour must be subordinate. This is my new approach . . . and perhaps I’ll be able to do something really good, not for the art critics but for the improvement of our Slav souls.”

Mucha intended these works to serve as sources of national identity for generations, and therefore sought a method that was true to Slavonic heritage and new, yet classic, in the hopes of creating timeless works.

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169 The spandrel featuring Jan Hus is different as it shows Slavia in a turquoise color holding a silver chalice on a gold background with silver sun motif surrounding it. This is in reference to Hus’s protests against the church, insisting on a doctrine of communion *sub utraque specie* (of both kinds), because at that time, only the clergy were allowed to take the wine of communion, making the chalice one of the symbols of the Hussite movement, which Palacký emphasizes as the most important period of Czech history. Nyrop, *Czechoslovakia*, 11, and Zacek, *Palacký* 51.

There is not a plethora of information available on the details of these murals; they are mostly noted for their colorful compositions and patriotic spirit. In Jiří Mucha’s writings, he emphasizes this work as the beginning of the *Epic*, but skims over any details.\footnote{Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 244-251.} However, many symbols and motifs from his poster days discussed in Chapter Two are repeated here, so that we can see patterns emerge aided by titles that provide insight into their individual meanings.

On the left is the dark blue scene, “though humiliated and tortured, you will live again, my country,” showing a man looking at a large female figure wearing white with heraldic crests on her chest. (Fig. 31) Encircled around them are kings of the past, presumably the oppressors that the title suggests. In the background rises a large athletic male holding a spiked circle in his right hand and a falcon in his left recalling the symbolism of Mucha’s Czech posters. The hierarchal scale works diagonally from the front with a small realistic figure lit from light coming from the lower right hand corner where he stands, then to the symbolic figures of the oppressors with light reflecting off of their crowns and swords, to the larger symbol of the nation which is lit from the sun symbol held by the allegory behind her. The darkness of the composition reflects the melancholy of the theme, the low point of Slavic history.

The mural on the right side is the purple scene, ‘accept love and enthusiasm from your son, mother of the holy nation.’ (Fig. 32) In the background, the large ghostly figure looks sadly over a field of dead bodies, littered with black birds, and burning ruins under her seat. Opposite her is a strong male figure in pale light standing next to a woman holding a child. According to Agnes Husslein-Arco’s book on Mucha, the female figure in the background is “a queen wrapped in a veil: She is portrayed there, because she saved her son, a future king.”\footnote{Husslein-Arco et al., *Alphonse Mucha*, 232.} However, the title leads one to assume the large female figure is Slavia, acting as the mother of the nation.
Again the canvas is dark, both to reflect the mood of the scene and to frame the change in the central panel.

Between these dark murals is a lighter composition over a doorway entitled “the strength of freedom-loving harmony.” (Fig. 33) Painted as if catching the early pink rays of the rising sun, three youth represent strength among a chaotic crowd in the background. Husslein-Arco’s book refers to this scene as *Pubescence*, and the youths as athletes proclaiming a bright future to the crowd.\(^{173}\)

On the ceiling is a circular mural titled “Slavic Unity,” recalling Mucha’s work in the Sokol posters discussed in Chapter Two. (Fig. 34) The viewer looks up to see Slavs of various countries around the perimeter, in various harvesting poses, wearing white with red highlights in the form of flowers, ribbons or scarves. Behind them grow lime trees, whose foliage becomes a circular hedge framing the shadow of a large falcon in front of a silver circle.\(^{174}\) This one composition combines all of the Slavic and national symbolic identifiers: the circle of Slavic unity, the falcon and the color red as symbols of the Sokol, and the Slavic lime tree. He even includes the folk culture aspect in the different outfits and headwear, and emphasizes the peaceful agricultural culture of the ancient Slavs.

At this point Mucha had gathered inspiration from Pan-Slavic philosophers, studied different Slavic cultures, and researched their history. He had worked on historic pieces in order to test different compositional techniques and even changed his style of painting to one he deemed appropriate to the scope of work he envisioned. With the financial backing of Charles Crane, whom he had met in America, he was now ready to bring to fruition the work he felt was

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\(^{173}\) Ibid., 243.

\(^{174}\) While there is some cartooning and framing in this piece, that could be explained because of the distance from and angle to the viewer, as well as a way to define the figures while keeping to a limited color palette.
his calling. The idea that had struck him ten years earlier would become a twenty-canvas collection called *The Slav Epic*. 
Chapter Four

The Slav Epic

In 1911, Mucha set about researching and planning for a collection of paintings he had conceived of ten years earlier. The Slav Epic was meant to inform the Slavs of their history, one that connected all of the disparate Slavic tribes, thereby granting them a unifying identity. The very concept of this collection espoused the tenets of Pan-Slavism: knowledge of a shared history, pride in purely Slavic achievements and figures, and a sense of unity built among all Slavic people in hopes of creating an independent Slavic nation. However, for the first time, these ideas were being expressed in a visual manner. Nationalist scholar Johann Gottfried Herder himself had called for a specifically visual collection that displayed an interconnected history, saying:

If only I were able to bind these disparate scenes together without tangling them up! If only I were able to show how they relate to one another, develop out of one another, and blend into one another – to show that individually they are but moments in history and that only through historical progress do they become means to higher ends. If this could be done, then what a view this would be! What a noble use of human history! What a way to encourage us to hope, act, and believe even when we do not see everything or see nothing at all . . .

Mucha’s patriotism led him to believe it was his own mission to provide visually the tools Slavic people needed to form a new independent identity. He chose to depict the history of the Slavs on twenty canvases: ten on specifically Czech subjects, and ten on broader Slavic themes. With the financial backing of Charles Crane, a Czech sympathizer he had met in America, Mucha

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175 Herder, Against Pure Reason, 45-46.
176 Sayer, The Coasts of Bohemia, 151.
planned out what he hoped would be his strongest legacy, to be donated to the city of Prague.\textsuperscript{177} He wanted his cycle of paintings to portray the Czechs as the historian František Palacký describes them and their country, as:

small, indeed, but richly gifted, unusually progressive, enlightened, devoted to productive and useful work; not aggressive but heroic, fighting gloriously not only for its own life and its own independence and freedom but for the highest treasures of human society; greatly responsible for the progress of humanity, but suffering cruelly through the disfavor of fate, the malice of its neighbors, and the lack of inner concord.\textsuperscript{178}

To distill this viewpoint into images, Mucha decided to cover topics such as early Slavic myths and legends, national saints such as Cyril and Methodius, the reformist Jan Hus, powerful rulers in Slavic history, wars in Slavic history, and the dream of living in a country free of oppression.\textsuperscript{179} He spent a few years traveling with his wife Marie and new daughter Jaroslava sketching and photographing areas around the Slavic lands, including the Balkans and Russia.\textsuperscript{180} As part of his preparation, Mucha read histories by Palacký and Jaroslav Bidlo as well as a French writer of Slavic history, Ernest Denis.\textsuperscript{181} Denis’s take on Czech history very closely followed that of Palacký.\textsuperscript{182} Both Denis and Palacký wrote heavily on periods that highlight Slavic contributions to Western history, or what Pan-Slavist scholar Hans Kohn calls “nationalist messianism,” as a way of justifying the existence of an independent Slavic nation.\textsuperscript{183} The

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{179} Waights Taylor, \textit{Alphonse Mucha’s Slav Epic, an Artist’s History of the Slavic People} (Santa Rosa, CA: Waights Taylor, 2008), 11.
  \item \textsuperscript{180} Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 97.
  \item \textsuperscript{181} Ibid., 100.
  \item \textsuperscript{182} Denis’s work has not been translated into English, but can be found in the original French as \textit{La Question d’Autriche les Slovaques (Question From Austria to Slovakia)} (Paris: Librairie Delagrave, 1917).
  \item \textsuperscript{183} Zacek, Palacký, 91-92.
\end{itemize}
narrative tone that they used to textually translate events influenced Mucha’s art, in that he tried to portray narratives within his scenes of *The Epic*.

Mucha believed a work of such significance deserved a grand scale, and so he started the first canvases at 26.6ft wide and 20ft tall. The large format, in Mucha’s opinion, added weight to the historic and symbolic content he wanted to express in his paintings. He was perhaps trying to compete with fellow Czech artists Mikoláš Aleš, Vojtěch Bartoněk, Václav Jansa, and Karel Mašek, who had exhibited a tableau measuring 33ft wide and 26ft tall, called *The Massacre of the Saxons at Hrubá Skála*, at the Ethnographic Exhibition in Prague in 1895. (Fig. 35) Crane drew up the paperwork which stated that the city of Prague would build a permanent venue to display the monumental works. The city urged Mucha to reduce the scale of the works, concerned about the cost of building a gallery large enough to house his collection, but he refused to make the changes, stating:

> to make them smaller would be impossible. The whole point would be lost. It must either be big, or not come into being at all. It mustn’t look like an illustration for a book … If there are going to be difficulties that will be the end. Let Krakow, Warsaw, or Moscow have it.

Mucha had already conceived these works not only as creating a grand legacy for himself, but as feeding the Slavs images for a national identity.

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188 Due to the fact that they never specified the time frame in which such a structure should be built, the issue is still being contested today. Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 97.
Early Slavic Myths and Legends

In December of 1911, Mucha travelled back to Paris in order to consult with Denis in person. Mucha writes about the success of the trip:

I agreed with him on the first three pictures: the first, a prehistoric, a kind of Slav Adam and Eve, roughly the way I sketched it at home: the second, from the Pagan times, a sun festival, and third, Methodius bringing the Papal bull and ordaining Old Slav as the liturgical language. This was the pinnacle of Slav power.\[190\]

Mucha returned to the Czech land to begin work, renting an apartment with a large studio space in Zbiroh castle in western Bohemia.\[191\] The first three canvases—*Slavs in Their Original Homeland, The Festival of Svantovít on Rujana, and Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy in Great Moravia*, all painted in 1912—are considered by scholars to be closely related both stylistically and thematically.\[192\] Drawing on his experience from the theater, and his mural work in the Municipal Building in Prague, Mucha used a custom tempera paint mixture for his large canvases, with select details finished in oil, in order to achieve a luminous effect, which was necessary for the mythological tableaux he was creating.\[193\] These works mix together ancient history, legend, and myth in seemingly realistic scenes.

The first canvas, *Slavs in Their Original Homeland*, subtitled *Between the Turanian Whip and the Sword of the Goths*, confronts viewers first with a starry night scene meant to depict the trials of the Slavic tribes in the sixth century.\[194\] (Fig. 36) There are two figures dressed in white off center to the left at the bottom of the canvas meant to represent the “Slavic Adam and Eve,”

\[190\] Ibid., 258.
\[191\] He rented space in Zbiroh Castle in western Bohemia from Count Colloredo-Mansfeld. The castle did not have electricity, but it did have a large dining room with a glass ceiling for incredible natural light which Mucha converted into his studio. Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 97.
\[193\] “A mixture of egg yolk mixed with ground pigment and water to which he added oil.” Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 98.
\[194\] All the paintings in the Slav Epic have both a title and subtitle, giving more insight into the artist’s intentions. Ibid., 102. Capitalization for the subtitles is taken from Dvořák. The date of the scene depicted is debated—here Dvořák places this between the third and sixth century while Taylor lists the subject year as 550.
who have escaped an attack on their village by the group on horseback now running behind them. The glowing light in the background is from their burning homes in the distance. The two figures hide amongst their crops and stare wide eyed out at the viewer with a look of fear. In the upper right corner floats a cluster of ethereal figures. Employing the color symbolism established in his poster and mural work, these figures are shaded in blue to represent the spiritual realm. A pagan priest looks up at the sky asking for mercy for his people, with a youthful male as the symbol of war, but passive, on one side and a young girl, the symbol of peace, on the other. Mucha meant to show the instability and vulnerability of the tribes as they lived in isolation from each other, emphasizing that by banding together they could bring peace to their lands. The use of the term “Goths” in the subtitle is a not-so-subtle clue to the viewer that the painting also represents the damaging effect the German culture had had on the indigenous folk life of the country.

In *The Festival of Svantovit*, which is subtitled *When Gods Are at War, Salvation is in the Arts*, Mucha shows a procession outside the ancient temple, destroyed in antiquity, to the Slavic pagan god Svantovit at the bottom of the canvas, while floating above are figures that act as a visual hint of things to come. In the upper left hand corner the enemy tribe descends from the sky being led by wolves representing the Teutonic god Thor, another reference that vilifies the Germans and also indicates that this happy scene and the temple itself are about to come to an end. Next to this float figures from mythology meant to inspire pride in the Slavs. In front of an oak tree, the last Slav warrior is dying while riding a sacred white horse and leaning onto the spirit of Svantovit, who has branches of a new oak sprouting from his chest. Again, Mucha draws on long-established symbolism and stereotypes, such as Herder’s characterization of the

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195 The identity of the figures in and the summaries of the paintings are taken from Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 107-122.
196 Ibid., 108.
peace-loving and artistic Slav and Kollár’s vision of the aggressive Germanic enemy. It is important to note that even when confronted by these combatants, the Slavs are not shown taking up arms. Though characterized as peaceful, this did not mean that Mucha intended to portray them as weak. When seen altogether, the message of the Epic, as will be shown, is that spiritual strength and fortitude is more successful in uniting a people together against an enemy than weapons and violence. This attitude is easily attributed to the historian Palacký, who stated:

Whenever we were victorious, it was always due rather to spiritual superiority than to physical might, and whenever we succumbed it was always the fault of a lack of spiritual activity and moral courage . . . . if we do not raise our spirit and the spirit of our nation to higher and more noble activity than our neighbors, not only will we fail to achieve an honorable place in the ranks of nations, but we will not succeed in defending finally even our original home.197

Records reveal that Mucha used Palacký quotes in the gallery along with the Epic or as captions during the few times that parts of the collection were displayed during the artist’s life, though no records document which quotes were chosen.198

National Saints: Cyril and Methodius

In the painting Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy in Great Moravia: Praise the Lord in Your Native Tongue, Mucha shows the figures responsible for the survival of the Slavonic language. (Fig. 38) At the end of the ninth century, Prince Rostislav of Great Moravia appealed to the Byzantine emperor for missionaries who could teach people in their native tongue, in order to prevent the Germanization of his land by German missionaries. In 864, two monks from Salonika arrived, Cyril and Methodius, who translated parts of the New Testament into

Old Church Slavonic. The missionaries even received permission from Rome to continue their teachings. In this complex and crowded painting, Mucha depicts the Papal Bull being read to Prince Svatopluk, Rostislav’s successor, in the courtyard of Velehrad, as, off to the side, German missionaries glower at the scene. The figures in the sunlight represent the earth-bound world whereas the figures shaded in blue and floating in the air again occupy the symbolic world. The floating figures include Saint Cyril comforting frightened pagan women and Svatopluk’s predecessor, Prince Rostislav, on his throne with the patriarch of the Eastern church. Up front a boy stands and stares at the viewer as he holds a circle in one outstretched hand while his other hand is held up in a fist-symbols of Slavic unity and strength established in Mucha’s Sokol posters. On the right float four figures, depicted in a style derived from Byzantine icons, who represent Boris in Bulgaria and Igor in Russia and their wives, who supported the spread of Christianity in the Slavic language. In this painting Mucha introduces the long history of Old Church Slavonic, praises those who brought it to the Slavs, and provides the Slavs with a connection to the Eastern Church that casts the Germans as the inferior “other.”

The style of the first three paintings, however, does not last. After 1912 the use of floating symbolic figures ceases, and Mucha’s compositions become more realistic depictions of historical events, resembling French tableau vivants. Many of the works are depictions of religious leaders and movements, or of kings and famous figures that have supported the Slavs. In his painting Tsar Simeon of Bulgaria: The Morning Star of Slavonic Literature, Mucha continues to depict the legacy of Cyril and Methodius as national saints, but also a great Slavic

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199 Cyril being the namesake of the Cyrillic alphabet.
king. (Fig. 39) After Methodius died, Prince Svatopluk apparently withdrew his support of Slavonic liturgy, and its followers were evicted to find refuge under Tsar Simeon in Bulgaria. Simeon, a former monk, had become a warrior king and expanded the Bulgarian territory, but he was just as fiercely passionate about literature. He built a collection of Byzantine literature at Preslav which he had translated into the Slavonic language. In this painting, Simeon sits in the center of the painting under a Byzantine-style dome on pendentives and directs the translations from what appears to be an Eastern basilica. The floating figures from the previous painting are now painted saints on the walls, recalling Byzantine mosaic portraits. Above the arch over Tsar Simeon is a golden Tree of Life motif, which is included in multiple religions, including Christianity and Islam. The band of doves and griffins along the back also has two meanings in this work, one being the dual natures of Christ, the other referencing the stereotype of the Slavic dove-like nature versus the heraldic griffin as protector and defender of the kingdom. During the majority of Mucha’s work on the Slav Epic, Bohemia was still under Austrian rule, and officials would be sent to inspect his canvases. Mucha would reportedly tell them “fairy tales” to appease their curiosity and distract them from any problematic symbolism. Because of this, Mucha’s symbolism holds multivalent qualities, but still contains elements of Slavic patriotism.

Mucha continued the theme of Cyril and Methodius’s contributions to Slavic culture in the paintings The Holy Mount Athos: Sheltering the Oldest Orthodox Literary Treasures and

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202 Ibid., 110.
204 Mucha, His Life and Art, 238.
The Printing of the Bible of Kralice: God Gave Us a Gift of Language.\textsuperscript{205} (Fig. 40-41) From the tenth to fifteenth centuries, the monastery at Mount Athos, a Greek Orthodox Church, kept a treasury of Byzantine and Slavonic literature, and held for the Orthodox church a status similar to that of the Vatican in Rome for Catholics.\textsuperscript{206} Mucha felt that the spirituality that this location embodies allowed for the return of floating symbolic figures, only now they are saints and angels appearing over pilgrims as blessings. The connection to the Byzantine past is clearly stated in the architecture of the church. He finishes the group with a scene showing the sixteenth-century \textit{Unitas Fratrum} (Unity of Brethren), having been expelled from Bohemia and establishing a school in Moravian Ivančice where they began to print a Czech translation of the Bible. The translation would be finished in nearby Kralice and is therefore known as the Bible of Kralice.\textsuperscript{207} This was not only a tribute to Mucha’s hometown, but also a reaffirmation of a longstanding Czech literary culture.

\textit{National Saints: Jan Hus and Other Religious Figures}

In the nineteenth century, Pan-Slavists turned their efforts toward separating their identity from German culture, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and the Catholic Church.\textsuperscript{208} Mucha himself was a Catholic, but although he never renounced the faith, his fervent patriotism led him to view figures of the Hussite movement as heroes worthy of exaltation.\textsuperscript{209} Mucha honors figures from the great Czech religious reformation in a set of paintings designed to be displayed as a triptych:

\textit{John Milíč of Kroměříž: A Brothel Converted into a Convent, Master Jan Hus Preaching in}

\textsuperscript{205} Names and dates takes from Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 118-120; however Taylor lists “The Printing of the Bible” as “The Unity of the Brethren School at Ivančice.” “Mount Athos” was painted in 1926, and “The Printing” was painted in 1914. Taylor, \textit{Alphonse Mucha's Slav Epic}, 11.
\textsuperscript{206} Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 120.
\textsuperscript{207} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{208} Bydžovská and Srp, “The Slav Epic - Word and Light,” 57.
\textsuperscript{209} Reade, \textit{Art Nouveau and Alphonse Mucha}, 19.
Bethlehem Chapel: Truth Prevails, and The Meeting at Křižky: Sub Utraque. In *Jan Milič of Kroměříž*, Mucha depicts Milič, who preached against excesses in the church in his native Moravian tongue, building a chapel to Saint Magdelene and a nunnery for former prostitutes to care for the poor and sick. Milič, along with the writings of John Wycliff of England, would influence the religious activist Jan Hus. Hus’s preaching called for an end to hierarchal tendencies that separated the clergy from the congregation. In 1414, Hus was condemned as a heretic at the Council of Constance and burned at the stake the next year. Hus’s death was the trigger that set off decades of religious warfare by a group of followers calling themselves Hussites. In the painting, Mucha show Hus preaching to his students, who take notes, while the Queen listens in the background. Mucha is credited with portraying Hus without a pointed beard, demonstrating his attention to historical accuracy. The third painting shows a group of followers after Hus’s death, gathering at Křižky to hear the preacher Koranda urge them to take up arms in defense of their religious views. This was the beginning of the Hussite Wars. The narrow, vertical format of *John Milič of Kroměříž and The Meeting at Křižky* breaks with the convention Mucha had set for himself of horizontal layouts that conveyed emotion, due to their place as wings in a triptych.

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211 Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 112.
212 Nyrop, *Czechoslovakia*, 12.
214 Ibid., 113.
215 *Sub Utraque* is the term for communion of both kinds, because at that time, only the clergy were allowed to take the wine of communion. This was one of the fundamental tenets of the Hussites as a way of bridging the gap the Catholic church had set up between clergy and the people. Nyrop, *Czechoslovakia*, 11. And Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 113.
The Czechs look to Hus not just as the leader of the first Reformation movement, but as a warrior for justice.\textsuperscript{217} Palacký had written of Hus not as a religious reformer, but as a pioneer of freedom and equality that would spawn the growth of rationalism and liberalism throughout Western Europe, thus elevating the Czech land as the birthplace of Western thought.\textsuperscript{218} The value that Mucha places on the Hussite movement, giving it the only triptych of the collection, comes directly from the amount of emphasis Palacký placed on him. Palacký was actually warned against praising the religious reformist so greatly by Count Sedlnitzky, head of the Polizei-und Zensurhofstelle in Vienna, who saw the elevation of this activist as seditious propaganda against the Empire, stating “the Austrian government, as the chief protector of the Catholic church, cannot allow that, in a work appearing under its censorship, periods of domestic church history be treated in a spirit hostile to the ruling religion.”\textsuperscript{219} It was even suggested that Palacký’s manuscript be suppressed because he highlighted Hus as a martyr without faults, and never posed the opposing viewpoint of Hus as a heretic.\textsuperscript{220} In the face of such opposition by the Austrian government, Pan-Slavists elevated the Hussite period as the epitome of Czech identity, exemplifying the Slavic love of liberty.\textsuperscript{221}

The other painting of a religious figure is *Jan Amos Komensky: A Flicker of Hope*. (Fig. 45) Jan Komensky was a seventeenth-century religious exile whose writings inspired the Czech people for generations to seek unity and freedom. Exiled during a dark time in Czech history to Holland, Jan spent his last days walking the shore, asking for a chair on his last day.\textsuperscript{222} Mucha, whose focus when designing the scenes of the Epic was to emphasize emotion, preferred

\textsuperscript{217} This is also seen in his depiction of Hus in the Municipal building where he labeled his spandrel portrait with the word “Spravedlnost” (justice). Husslein-Arco et al., *Alphonse Mucha*, 238-9. And Kohn, *Pan-Slavism*, 11-12.
\textsuperscript{218} Kohn, *Pan-Slavism*, 24-25.
\textsuperscript{219} Zacek, *Palacký*, 63.
\textsuperscript{220} Ibid., 64.
portraying the final stage of an event so the viewer could contemplate the meaning of the event. Instead of painting Jan as his sermons stir up a crowd, the viewer is invited to consider the legacy he left behind.

**Great Slavic Kings**

Mucha pays tribute to the southern Slavs in his depiction of a coronation procession in *The Coronation of the Serbian Tsar Štěpán Dušan as East Roman Emperor: The Slavic Code of Law.* (Fig. 46) In the mid-fourteenth century, Dušan used his military prowess to conquer much of the southern Slavic territory, calling himself the Tsar of the Serbs and the Greeks. The choice to depict this king gave the Serbian Slavs an icon that espoused military might and political acumen. After his work on the Bosnian Pavilion for the 1900 World Exhibition in Paris, the fight of the southern Slavs for cultural equality would have been near to Mucha’s heart, earning them a dedicated canvas. The composition emphasizes sinuous lines and the Pan-Slavic colors white and red. The girls at the center front of the canvas that lead the procession in Serbian folk costumes re-affirm the Pan-Slavic belief in folk culture as the guardian of tradition.

In the painting *The Bohemian King Přemysl Otakar II: The Union of the Slavic Dynasties,* Mucha’s choice of Otakar II as one of the greatest Czech kings itself shows the artist’s agenda. (Fig. 47) While many historians credit Charles IV or Rudolph II as the greatest king in Czech history, Mucha saw them as too German, or closely tied with German sympathies, thus making their depiction incongruous with the artist’s underlying message in

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Otakar became king of Bohemia and other surrounding territories in 1253, but was also the Duke of Austria. During his reign, Otakar defeated the armies of Béla IV of Hungary, then married his granddaughter to keep peace while arranging the marriage of his own niece to Béla’s son. In this painting, Mucha shows this marriage ceremony, the sole purpose of which was to strike a truce between these two kingdoms now and into the future. The King’s eagle insignia fills the half dome in the background, while below sits a band of emblems from the different territories under Otakar’s rule. Flags above show hints of more heraldic crests. This is not just a historiographical tool but a device to reinforce the idea of different groups of Slavs under one shared identity. Knowledge of his reign over both Bohemia and Austria and his victory over the Hungarians were meant to instill pride and confidence in the Slavic identity. His military victories led him to be called the “Iron King,” while the wealth he gained by wise management and through the silver mines of Kutná Hora earned him the nickname “Golden King.” In the painting, trinkets, ornaments, and carpets decorate the front of the composition, which all hint at his power and the affluence of the Czech court under his reign. Anyone possessing the knowledge that Otakar met his death battling Rudolph of Hapsburg, the founder of the house of Austria, could read this image as a display of what once was and therefore what Austria has destroyed. Secondly, the image of a Bohemian king as the source of unity among different Slavic territories and rulers is a message to those who view this work, that with the independence of the Czechs, they could aid in the freedom of all Slavs.
Mucha pays homage to another of Palacký’s favorite Czech kings in his painting *The Hussite King Jiří of Poděbrady: The Treaties Are To Be Preserved.*

(Fig. 48) In the early fifteenth-century Czech lands, the Hussite crusades ended with the General Council at Basel agreeing to some of the Hussite demands. In 1458 Jiří z Poděbrad, himself an Utraquist, was elected king, and the first native Czech king in nearly 150 years. In the center stands Cardinal Fantin, sent by Pope Pius II to demand that King Jiří renounce the teachings of Jan Hus, which had been adopted by the kingdom, and conform to the Roman Catholic Church. Jiří famously refused and earned a place in Czech history for his stand against Rome, and his acceptance of Hus. 

However, the focus of the painting is not on the king. The central figure is the cardinal, who was forced to stand as a show of disrespect. A large gothic-arched window frames and illuminates the scene. The overturned chair next to the king hints to this being the scene of a fiery debate. The emphasis is on what the king stood up against, so the viewer is left to consider the convictions of freedoms in which he believed.

**Battles**

Mucha chose to depict famous battles in Slavic history by evoking emotion and portraying the final stage of an event, revealing his own attitude towards war. In his works *After the Battle of Grunewald: The Solidarity of the Northern Slavs, After the Battle of Vitkov: God Represents Truth, not Power,* and *Petr of Chelčice: Do Not Repay Evil with Evil,* there are no images of strong warriors, of good triumphing over evil, or of people uniting for a cause. (Fig. 49-51) The viewer is confronted with the aftermath of war-survivors surveying fields of dead bodies. The dates that these works were completed (1924, 1916 and 1918 respectively) indicate

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233 Ibid., 116.
that events of the First World War played a role in coloring his views.\textsuperscript{234} His personal philosophy was that war should never be glamorized or celebrated, even in historic accounts.\textsuperscript{235} The subtitles of these works convey this viewpoint as clearly as the pictures do. The one picture that does display a battle is *The Defense of Sziget by Nikola Zrinski: The Shield of Christendom*, which portrays the defense of the Hungarian town of Sziget against the invading Turks.\textsuperscript{236} (Fig. 52) On the left side of the canvas the men of the town, having been led by Croatian nobleman Nikola Zrinski, have been defeated, and the Turks have broken through the barricades and are burning the village. Zrinski’s Czech wife, Eva Rožmberk, had hidden with the women of the town in a tower, shown to the right of the canvas. On seeing that defeat was inevitable, she set off an explosion, killing the women and saving them from the hands of the enemy, and taking most of the Turk army with her.\textsuperscript{237} The canvas is visually divided into the destruction by the Turks on the left side and the brave stance of the women on the right by an eerie column of dark smoke in the foreground. This desperate act to thwart the invading enemy without taking up arms drew Mucha’s respect for displaying a strong Slavic sense of justice, a desire for freedom, and a willingness to sacrifice.

*Scenes of Recent Slavic History*

Mucha dedicated two canvases to events that took place in recent history for viewers to gain perspective on how far the Slavs had come. In *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia: Work in Freedom Is the Foundation of a State*, which depicts the reading of the Emancipation Edict in 1861, long after serfdom was abolished in Europe, the viewer is faced with a subdued crowd in

\textsuperscript{234} Taylor, *Alphonse Mucha’s Slav Epic*, 11.
\textsuperscript{235} Mucha, *His Life and Art*, 149.
\textsuperscript{236} Painted in 1914. Taylor, *Alphonse Mucha’s Slav Epic*, 11.
\textsuperscript{237} Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 116.
front of a hazy image of St. Basil’s cathedral in Moscow. (Fig. 53) The suggestion for the scene apparently came from Charles Crane. Mucha, instead of choosing a scene of rejoicing, chose to depict “the awakening of a vast nation—the moment when it still did not realize that a new future was opening up, and stares amazed at freedom with which it does not know what to do.” Again, Mucha chooses to depict the aftermath rather than the high point of a scene in order to challenge the viewer to consider the greater consequences of the event. Mucha held an admiration for Russia, being the birthplace of Pan-Slavism and its adherence to the old Slavic ways. In a letter to his wife during his first visit to Russia, he remarks on how nothing had changed in 2,000 years and that the country was still “utterly Byzantine and Slav.” He knew he would devote a canvas to the Russian Slavs after visiting Moscow and taking pictures of peasants outside the cathedral.

In the painting The Oath of Omladina under the Slavic Linden Tree: The Slavic Revival, which remains the only unfinished canvas in the collection and the only canvas not to be exhibited during the artist’s life, Mucha portrays the rising patriotism of contemporary Slavs. (Fig. 54) Omladina was a patriotic, anti-Austrian, anti-clerical youth organization begun in the 1890’s and dissolved by the Austrian government in 1904 with the arrest of its leaders. Mucha’s scene shows a circle of strong youths kneeling and holding hands with outstretched arms, making their pledge to the patriotic organization under the image of Salvia in a linden tree. Around the inner circle stand representatives in traditional dress representing the different Slavic tribes. The figures at the bottom of the canvas sit on a low wall, which resembles the edge of a

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239 Mucha, His Life and Art, 262.
241 Mucha, His Life and Art, 245.
243 Started in 1926. Taylor, Alphonse Mucha’s Slav Epic, 11.
stage, and famously known to be portraits of Mucha’s wife and children. The girl playing the lyre on the left hand side was re-used as the poster image to advertise the *Epic* when it was partially exhibited around Europe and America.\(^{244}\) Although the event he has chosen is contemporary, Mucha sets the scene in a dream-like bucolic setting, with the figures dressed in folk costumes, recalling the poetry of Kollár and obliterating any temporal setting to ensure the image will never appear dated to future viewers. Here, Mucha’s style returns to the patriotic symbolism of his posters and mural work. Scholars and family members do not know why he never completed it, but the reason could lie in the importance of its message to the artist. This canvas does not simply document an event of the past, but crosses over into what the artist wants for the Slavs of today.

*The Future*

The final canvas of the *Epic* summarizes the sentiments of the previous canvases with a grand, dramatic collection of patriotic symbolism and allegory called *Apotheosis of the Slavs: Slavs for Humanity.* (Fig. 55) The canvas is divided into colored sections with each color segment representing a different period: blue for the mythical history of the Slavs, red for the height of the middle ages, black to represent enemies, and yellow to highlight symbols of freedom and those who helped to achieve that freedom. A large figure rises in the background carrying two wreaths of flowers to represent the strength of the new independent republic of Czechoslovakia, with a haloed image of Christ behind him. In front of him figures representing all of the Slavic tribes and flags of countries that supported their freedom emit a soft yellow glow.\(^{245}\) The painting celebrates peace, unity, and patriotic pride, and encompasses the characterizations and stereotypes espoused by scholars such as Herder and Palacký. This one

\(^{244}\) Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 120.

\(^{245}\) Ibid., 122.
painting best synthesizes their desire for a unity among the people and a future built on a historic familial connection.

Reaction

Mucha began this grand collection in 1910 and worked through the First World War, which saw the defeat of Austria and the formation of the new independent state of Czechoslovakia in 1918. The *Apotheosis* was the final finished painting, completed in 1926, eight years after the establishment of the new state, when peace had been achieved but patriotic fervor and Pan-Slavism had died down. Mucha’s type of nationalistic fervor was now considered old-fashioned, as was his style of painting.

The art world had been embracing modern works exploring ideas of abstraction, cubism, and orphism. Gustav Klimt, a classmate of Mucha’s when he studied under Makart, led the Vienna Secession Movement in the 1890’s. Fellow Czech artist František Kupka, who moved to Paris at the same time as Mucha, turned away from Art Nouveau towards rhythmic abstraction. In 1912, Kupka exhibited his painting *Fugue for Two Colors* (National Gallery, Prague) which is considered the first truly abstract painting. (Fig. 56) Other Czech artists like Josef Gokař, Pavel Jáňak, and Josef Chochol were making their name in abstraction and cubism.

The architect Adolf Loos, born just a few miles away from Mucha’s hometown of Ivančice, would famously go on to loathe excessive ornamentation, stating that there “was a direct

246 Mucha had to reduce the scale of the canvases from the 20 x 26 ft size of the first seven paintings to 13 x 20 ft, and later even 13 x 16 ft due to restrictions from the war. Bydžovská and Srp, “The Slav Epic - Word and Light,” 60.
connection between the elimination of ornament and the cultural maturity of a nation.\textsuperscript{251} In other countries, this abstract style of art was reinterpreting patriotism, as in Giacomo Balla’s \textit{Partriotic Song} from 1915, which conveys the same sense of unity and near religious sense of imagery as Mucha’s work, but in a modernist style. (Fig. 57) When compared to the contemporary styles of the period, Mucha’s works look like they are from a different century. Their size, style, and subject matter remind us more of previous nationalistic works like Eugène Delacroix’s \textit{Liberty Leading the People}, from 1830.

When the first few pieces of \textit{The Slav Epic} were first shown to the public at the Klementinum in Prague in 1915, they were scoffed at because the skies were done in a pointillist technique, the colors were muted, and scenes were too figural.\textsuperscript{252} Mucha’s severest critics, the writer and left-wing poet Stanislav Kostka Neumann wrote of the collection, “It is simply a sugary monstrosity of spurious artistic and allegorical pathos which, if exhibited permanently, could harm the taste of the public.”\textsuperscript{253} Neumann was a futurist artist, who in 1913 wrote a manifesto called “Otevřená okna” (Open windows), condemning the nationalist promotion of folk art. He specifically called out Mucha and historicism as obsolete.\textsuperscript{254}

This attitude against historicism was shared by Tomáš G. Masaryk, the first president of the newly formed Czechoslovakia.\textsuperscript{255} In an effort to develop a new and modern nation, Masaryk stated the need for the Czech people to look forward to new areas of innovation such as the natural and social sciences and technologies, and not to drag themselves down in historicism. He

\textsuperscript{251} Mucha, \textit{His Life and Art}, 247.
\textsuperscript{252} However, when exhibited at the Art Institute in Chicago and the Brooklyn Museum in New York in 1921, they were a huge success, being called “the greatest work of its type since the beginning of the sixteenth century in Italy.” Sayer, \textit{The Coasts of Bohemia}, 20, and 163.
\textsuperscript{253} Sigma [pseud. for Stanislav Kostka Neumann], “Vlastenecký případ Alphonse Muchy” [A Patriotic case of Alphonse Mucha], \textit{Kmen} 3 (May 1919), 17.
\textsuperscript{254} Filipova, “The Peasant in Art History,” 4.
claimed that a preoccupation with the once great past of Bohemia was detrimental to the modern national character. He specifically called out Palacký, stating that his “historicism has led many of our best people toward sterile conservatism,” and blamed the works of Šafařík and Kollár for emphasizing the ancient past. ²⁵⁶ While it is understandable that he would want to concentrate on the future, his turn away from historicism was literally turning its back on the tenets of Pan-Slavism that had led to the Czech Revival—the movement that elevated the Czech culture to the point where it could once again sustain an independent country. In 1919, Arnošt Procházka, in his book On the Edge of Time, labelled the “peace myth [as] a national curse,” calling “Czech pacifism, the Czech ‘dove-like nature,’ and the Czech’s readiness to forgive wrongs and to forget any humiliation they have suffered” “hideous monsters that pose a horrifying threat to any national future.” ²⁵⁷ The quest for a modern identity spared no thought for preservation of previous centuries’ scholarship and theories, and Mucha found himself in a new era without any knowledge of how he got there. As Derek Sayer explains, “his patriotism became petrified . . . increasingly identified with static symbols of Czech nationality while ever more cut off from the realities of the rapidly changing Czech lands.”²⁵⁸ Everything about the collection, from its style to its message, based on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century concepts, made it archaic in the twentieth century.

On 15 March 1939, the Nazis marched into Prague. Mucha was one of the first arrested as a problematic nationalist. He was soon released, but died months later of pneumonia and, it is said, a broken heart over the fate of his country.²⁵⁹ The Nazis also banned the works of Palacký,

²⁵⁷ Arnošt Procházka, Na okraj doby (On the Edge of Time), Prague, 1919, p. 112 as translated by Robert B. Pynsent in Questions of Identity: Czech and Slovak Ideas of Nationality and Personality (Budapest: Central European University, 1994), 149.
calling him a “fanatical Germanophobe” and blaming his distorted history for the current unrest in Central Europe. Mucha and his family had *The Epic* rolled up and stored in the basement of the Archives of the Czech Lands, hidden from the Nazis and later the Communists. The paintings that were meant to gift the nation with a sense of identity were hidden away from view, and the works that inspired them were either banned or deemed outdated and unpopular. Mucha’s great work never saw the reception and acceptance he envisioned in his dreams. After Mucha died, the Germans prohibited any type of formal funeral for him, although he was allowed to be buried in the Vyšehrad cemetery with other famous artists.

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260 The Germans had begun burning his works in town squares as early as 1890. Critic Josef Leonard Knoll, a professor of general and Austrian history at Prague University, urged that the work be suppressed before it created “thirteen million Slavs burning with national fanaticism and hatred against Germans.” Zacek, *Palacký*, 78, 107-108.

Conclusion

The *Slav Epic* was officially handed over to the city of Prague on September 1, 1928, even though the city had yet to build a site for the paintings.\(^{262}\) No time limit was stipulated in the agreement with the city, so any plans to build a site were postponed.\(^{263}\) With the invasion of the Nazis, and through much of the communist era, the collection was literally buried in drums. In 1949 a small group of Mucha supporters initiated the fight to put *The Slav Epic* back on exhibit.\(^{264}\) The paintings were displayed in an old chateau in nearby Moravský Krumlov in 1963, thanks to the efforts of the artist’s children and grandchildren.\(^{265}\) By the time the paintings resurfaced, not many viewers could remember the patriotic fervor of the pre-unification years. The name “Mucha” stirs up images of Art Nouveau designs, yet these canvases which bear his name have no resemblance to such motifs. With the suppression of Palacký’s histories and the negative feelings towards historicism that still circulated, the scenes were viewed as grand, yet foreign, even to Czechs.

Between the end of World War II and 1989, Prague only held one National Gallery exhibition devoted entirely to Mucha’s works, but did not include canvases from *The Epic*. However, other Czech artists from the nineteenth century had exhibitions. For example, Josef Mánes had seven exhibitions and Mikolaš Aleš had five during that same period. Mucha’s posters and illustrated works appeared in numerous exhibits all over Europe and the United States after a revival of popularity in 1960.\(^{266}\) Still the *Slav Epic* remained in a tiny village

\(^{263}\) Ibid., 279.  
\(^{264}\) Dvořák, “The Slav Epic,” 103.  
\(^{266}\) Sayer, *The Coasts of Bohemia*, 249-250.
without much else to draw in tourists. Most books on the artist mention the *Slav Epic* briefly at the end of Mucha’s life, leading scholars like Jana Brabcová in the catalogue of the 1980 retrospective of Mucha’s work to dismiss the whole enormous cycle as an “artistic mistake,” stating that:

> His major contribution remains confined to the short period of his Paris activity, and the core of Mucha’s production lies in the realm of the poster and decorative work...On the other hand in the areas where he thought to address the time in which he lived and future generations he lost his way in ideals coming from the preceding century and his outdated message found no spectators and listeners. It would be a disservice to Mucha’s talent if we were to disguise this fact, which cannot in any way lessen his significance for the face of Paris around the year 1900.

However, when eleven pieces from the *Epic* were shown in Prague’s Carolinum Hall in 1919, a year after the formation of Czechoslovakia, Mucha himself defined the role he hoped such a work would play in the minds of future viewers. In his opening speech he proclaimed:

> the mission of the *Epic* is not completed. Let it announce to foreign friends – and even to enemies – who we were, who we are, and what we hope for. May the strength of the Slav spirit command their respect, because from respect, love is born.

Unfortunately, the *Epic* never got the chance to fulfill this great expectation. It is only now, after the fall of communism and the formation of the new, truly independent Czech Republic, that we have the freedom to study these paintings and the works that inspired them. Now we can view the works as a reflection of national pride, without fear that they will be mistaken as seditious messages of propaganda. Pan-Slavism makes as much sense today as modern Czechs reestablish their individuality as it did when they were fighting to be allowed a separate Czech identity. As this thesis has shown, the *Slav Epic* is more than a collection of history paintings. The canvases

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269 Mucha, *His Life and Art*, 269.
operate as a source of Slavic identity by portraying history, but also characteristics, ideals, and philosophies. In this way they function as a visual embodiment of Pan-Slavic ideals by uniting the different groups of Slavs under a shared history and culture, highlighting Slavic contributions and instilling a sense of pride and understanding of Slavic roots in order that they may find their place in the contemporary world. Mucha truly thought it was the will of destiny that he carry out these works.270

In 1992 John Mucha, the artist’s grandson, started the Mucha Foundation, which works to conserve and promote the works of Mucha, and opened the Mucha Museum in Prague which showcases the posters, sketches, and photographs of the artist, while the Epic remained in the old chateau in Moravský Krumlov.271 Even in 2010 when there was first a debate about whether or not the Epic was considered a piece of national heritage, then when Prague fought to have the Epic back in the city, only to leave it in storage while they further debated on where to exhibit it, and then offered it to Japan for a two-year loan, does it become clear that the works are valued for the identity of their creator, but not yet because of their content.272 If these works were understood as Mucha intended for them to be, then perhaps they would find themselves properly showcased and given the respect that they deserve.

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270 Ibid., 238.
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Rennert and Weill, 351.
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