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Alphonse Mucha and the Emergence of the “New Woman” during the *Belle Époque* (1871–1914)

Sarah Blattner, History

Mentor: Aaron Haberman, Ph.D., History

Abstract: Notions of ideal femininity in Western culture shifted during the *Belle Époque* (Beautiful Era), approximately 1871 to 1914. This article serves as a comparative historical study examining the shifting representations of women in art within Western society during that era. This study focuses on the transition from the image of the “modest maiden” (popular in the mid-nineteenth century) to the image of the “new woman” (emerging within the Art Nouveau movement, 1890 to 1910).

From the Art Nouveau (New Art) period, the lush art of Alphonse Mucha stands out as an example of the time’s idea of feminine beauty. Mucha’s representations serve as social commentary, indicative of the shift toward modernity. Through the employment of symbolism, archetypes, and thematic ideas, Mucha depicted women as socially empowered, participating in masculine activities and very much present in the public sphere. Mucha’s use of sensual imagery and floral motifs embody the idea of the emergence of sexually liberated women.

Keywords: *Mucha, Alphonse; Art Nouveau, “New Woman,” gender representation, modernity*

Broadly, artistic representations of perfect femininity portray the time’s perceived societal expectations of women. For example, nineteenth-century art reflects the day’s notions of idealized, subservient femininity. At that time, women were portrayed in art as pious, docile mothers and homemakers. In contrast, at the start of the twentieth century, art provided a more progressive concept of ideal femininity. Art of that time shows women as liberated, both socially and sexually. The Art Nouveau (New Art) movement of the turn of the century (1890 to 1910) reflected a “modern woman” of Western society.¹ The Art Nouveau movement, and specifically the works of the movement’s renowned decorative artist, Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939), demonstrated such changes in the public’s notions of ideal femininity during the turn of the century.

¹ Cybele Gontar, “Art Nouveau,” in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2006), unpaginated.

To scholars, Mucha’s work exemplifies the Art Nouveau movement. Art critic Alain Weill’s (b. 1946) praise for Mucha provides a perspective representative of the admiration that art specialists have widely held regarding Mucha’s work.² Weill praises the artist’s renditions as achieving effects that are “sensuous and spellbinding, symbolical and mysterious.” Weill describes Mucha’s style as “in bloom, languorous and almost feral.”³ Indeed, Mucha’s vision represents a new modern era—of which Parisian society was at the center. As literary scholar Rita Felski (b. 1956) describes the era, it was a time when modernity was characterized by “socioeconomic changes such as industrialization, urban expansion, and a growing division of labor, but also an epistemic shift toward a secular world view and the proclamation of universal ideals of reason, freedom, and

² Jack Rennert and Alain Weill, *Alphonse Mucha: The Complete Posters and Panels* (Boston, MA: G. K. Hall, 1984), 11–12.

³ *Ibid.*, 12.

equality.”⁴ Mucha’s demonstration of unreserved femininity indicates this cultural dynamic of progressive European society. He did so by shattering the conservative expectations of women that had once dictated the past. Although turn-of-the-century imagery marked the progression of women into the public sphere, it also served as evidence of an ideology in which ideal femininity had a primarily decorative role in society.

Sigmund Freud (1856–1939) was the “founding father” of psychoanalysis. He resided in the Western cultural center of Vienna during the era of Art Nouveau. Freud describes the era’s feminine ideal as a woman having a docile, subservient, and agreeable personality—yet also she must exhibit intelligence and have “masculine” aspirations of a career and accomplishments.⁵ This new ideal of femininity, according to scholars (such as Ann L. Stoler, Hope B. Wereness, Jan Thompson, and Dolores Mitchell), is a result of a shift in Western European society. The shift was due to a cultural movement toward modernity, popular around the turn of the century.⁶

⁴ Rita Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 202.

⁵ Linda Brannon, *Gender Psychological Perspectives* (Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 1999), 120.

⁶ See Ann L. Stoler, “Making Empire Respectable: The Politics of Race and Sexual Morality in 20th-Century Colonial Cultures,” *American Ethnologist* 16 (1989): 634–6; Hope B. Wereness, “The Modest Maiden in 19th-century Art: Evolution of a Theme,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 5 (1984–1985): 7–10; Jan Thompson, “The Role of Woman in the Iconography of Art Nouveau,” *Art Journal* 31 (Winter 1971–1972): 158–67; Dolores Mitchell, “The ‘New Woman’ as Prometheus: Women Artists Depict Women Smoking,” *Woman’s Art Journal* 12 (1991): 3–9.

THE MID-1800s VIEW: THE SUBMISSIVE WOMAN

Women’s primary concerns in the mid-1800s were supposed to be domesticity and moral virtue.⁷ The prominent “cult of domesticity” associated with the female role in Western culture until the late 1800s came largely as a result of the “new monied middle class” birthed by the Industrial Revolution. During this time, more people were able to subsist on a single income.⁸ As domestic confinements persistently contained women in selfless subjugation the Western world restricted women’s access to the public sphere.⁹ The submissive role thrust upon the wives and daughters in Western society reinforced the perceived relationship between womanhood and purity.

The Feminine as the Modest Maiden

Portrayals of women in art created during the mid-nineteenth century illustrate the reserved perceptions of ideal femininity held during the time. The “modest maiden,” a common theme depicted in nineteenth-century art, reflects these societal notions.¹⁰ How was she depicted? The art shows her as elegant, submissive, and sexually repressed. She is fully clothed and often pictured lying down or passively positioned.¹¹

A painting by British artist John Everett Millais, *Ophelia* (1852; Figure 1), provides an example of such a modest, repressed, and passive beauty.¹² Millais (1829–1896) offers up a docile Ophelia, modestly adorned, reclining in a pool of

⁷ Jessica Bomarito and Jeffrey W. Hunter, eds., “Women in the 19th Century: Introduction,” in *Feminism in Literature: A Gale Companion*, vol. 2 (Detroit, MI: Gale, 2005), 1–2.

⁸ Wereness, “The Modest Maiden in 19th-century Art,” 7.

⁹ Bomarito and Hunter, “Women in the 19th Century: Introduction,” 1–2.

¹⁰ Wereness, “The Modest Maiden in 19th-century Art,” 7.

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*, 8.



Figure 1. John Everett Millais, *Ophelia*, 1852.
Source: Gardner’s *Art through the Ages: A Global History*, 14th ed., Fred S. Kleiner, ed., 786.

water, readily anticipating her death. In this way, Millais, an artist of the Pre-Raphaelite movement, romanticized the nineteenth-century feminine ideal: a woman submissively accepting her dismal fate.

Gustave Courbet’s painting *The Hammock* (1844; Figure 2) serves as a similar example of the “modest maiden.”¹³ Courbet (1819–1877) was a French artist of the realist movement. His art provides the earliest depiction of the submissive beauty theme.¹⁴ Courbet portrays the woman as clothed modestly and reclined in a position evoking feelings of passivity, the epitome of mid-nineteenth century societal expectations. Women were supposed to be innocent, gentle, and pure. Overtones of sexual repression are conveyed in the work. Clearly she is posed in a sensual position in the hammock, symbolically paired with lush floral elements of nature often associated with female sexuality. However, the overt symbols of sexuality within the painting clash sharply with the innocence expressed on her sleeping face, demonstrating the sexual purity and innocence expected of the nineteenth-century woman. Courbet’s work reflects nineteenth-century notions of ideal femininity because the women he painted display attributes of both docile

¹³ Ibid., 7.

¹⁴ Ibid.



Figure 2. Gustave Courbet, *The Hammock*, 1844.
Source: Hope B. Wereness, “The Modest Maiden in 19th-century Art: Evolution of a Theme.” *Woman’s Art Journal* 5 (1984–1985): 7.

passivity and sexual purity. These qualities matched the era’s feminine ideal of subservient wives and mothers.¹⁵

THE BELLE ÉPOQUE VIEW: THE LIBERATED WOMAN

Such depictions of women within the art world during the mid-nineteenth century contrasted greatly with those in the Belle Époque (Beautiful Era). A previously discussed, this was a period in Western society that spanned from 1871 to 1914. The art of Alphonse Mucha is a good example of an artist of the time. He was a master of poster art and gained prominence due to the works he produced within the Art Nouveau (New Art) movement of 1890 to 1910. Mucha received international notoriety for his work, and his portrayals of women reflected ideals of femininity held by the majority of affluent European society during the *Belle Époque*. Mucha’s work encapsulated popular style and fashion coinciding with the sway of the Art Nouveau movement.¹⁶ Mucha’s works depict “ideal” women, reflecting the notions of female identity contemporary with

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Lucy Fisher, “Shock of the Nouveau,” *Time Europe* 155 (June 2000): 124.

his day.¹⁷ Moreover, Mucha's stylistic portrayals of female subjects embodied the *femme nouvelle* (new woman). She was supposed to be progressive, elite, and modern, hardly a passive vessel of docility.¹⁸ Mucha's use of symbolism, archetypes, and personified themes effectively convey to the viewer the cultural perceptions of ideal femininity. Mucha's unrepressed beauties deeply contrasted with the presentations of women established within Europe prior to this movement.¹⁹ He captured the symbolic emergence of the *femme nouvelle*. His work is ample evidence of the cultural shift that refuted the traditional representation of femininity as domestic and compliant.

Modernity Catches On

Society responded to the mechanized world emerging from the Industrial Revolution with a movement of modernity. The *Belle Époque* blossomed in Europe and much of the Western world. Modernity swept across Western culture and brought with it the idea of the *femme nouvelle*, the new perception of ideal femininity.²⁰ Feminist scholars have pointed out that "the growth of urban and industrial culture helped to disrupt traditional gender roles by depriving them of their natural and God-given quality, even as the doctrine of separate spheres sought to reign in and stabilize this ambiguity."²¹

Did modernity help women? It is true that industrialization and urbanization allowed women increased access to the public sphere. Women were allowed societal roles outside the traditional expectations of domesticity and servitude. At the

same time, modernity cast women in new roles of sexual objectification. Men became sexually fascinated with them, now that they were out in the public sphere and subject to the male gaze.²² The *femme nouvelle* became increasingly popular in culture. The new expression of the female form became the so-called "poster girl" for the movement of Art Nouveau.²³ Art of the Art Nouveau period revels in unbridled sensuality prescribed to the "modern woman" during the turn of the century.

The Feminine as Pagentry

Central to this celebration was Alphonse Mucha (1860–1939), who was a Czech-born artist who primarily lived in Paris during the movement. His art exuberantly expresses the loveliness of the female form.²⁴ In contrast to the "modest maidens" of the past, the women in Mucha's art show the attributes given to the "modern woman" of his time.²⁵ He portrayed the contemporary idealized female in "sprightly representations" of starry-eyed Parisian *midinettes* (shop girls).²⁶ These pieces reflect everyday life in the metropolitan city of Paris. His art depicts the "new woman" and is a rejection of the conventional ideals of femininity of the past. But as previously mentioned, women were increasingly subject to being objectified by men as women entered the public sphere. In art, the female form became decorative. It is a reaction that can be seen in Mucha's art. For example, in creating *Documents décoratifs* (1902; Figure 3), he abstracted the female form from reality and synthesized the feminine into nature.²⁷ By rendering the female body as essentially a swirl of

¹⁷ Rennert and Weill, *Alphonse Mucha*, 13.

¹⁸ Gontar, "Art Nouveau," unpaginated.

¹⁹ Thompson, "The Role of Woman in the Iconography of Art Nouveau," *Art Journal* 31 (Winter 1971–1972): 167.

²⁰ Jane Adlin and Amelia Peck, "20th Century," *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin* 53 (Winter 1995–1996): 63.

²¹ Felski, *Doing Time: Feminist Theory and Postmodern Culture* (New York: New York University Press, 2000), 203.

²² Gontar, "Art Nouveau," unpaginated.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Amy Dempsey, *Art in the Modern Era: A Guide to Styles, Schools & Movements 1860 to the Present* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, 2002), 36.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Rennert and Weill, *Alphonse Mucha*, 12.

²⁷ Gabet Olivier, "The Object According to Mucha," in *Alphonse Mucha*, Agnes Husslein-Arco, ed. (New York: Prestel, 2009), 33.



Figure 3. Alphonse Mucha, *Documents Décoratifs*, 1902. Source: Jack Rennert and Alain Weill, *Alphonse Mucha: The Complete Posters and Panels*, plate 9.

movement, accompanied by a floral background, Mucha posed the woman as a sensual, decorative ornament, submitting to the viewer’s gaze. In contrast, a mid-1800s artist would have shown the viewer a docile virgin, epitomized by the “modest maiden.”²⁸ Instead, Mucha casts women in a role rooted in aesthetic pageantry. For example, in *Documents décoratifs*, the women’s feet are unseen. Her body directly fuses to the frame and lettering of the piece. It is as if she is public décor or architecture, rather than an individual.²⁹ Mucha’s depiction of women illustrates the societal perceptions of femininity during the time. In his day, women maintained a subservient role that they exhibited publicly. When he shows women as decoration, he symbolizes a shift from a female existence confined to private domestic

²⁸ Olivier, “The Object According to Mucha,” in *Alphonse Mucha*, 33.

²⁹ Ibid.

servitude to a female existence rooted on the grounds of public pageantry.

At Once Virgin and Temptress

Art Nouveau artists portrayed women in symbolic roles that represented good and evil, often simultaneously. In the past, the concept of female purity dominated the interpretation of women in art. But the emergence of women’s sexual liberation created tension, because it went against the requirements of female purity that had controlled women in the past. Themes of sexual



Figure 4. Alphonse Mucha, *The Arts: Dance*, 1898. Source: Rosalind Ormiston, *Alphonse Mucha: Masterworks*, 21.

polarity began to appear within culture, which was not surprising due to the need to preserve feminine morality alongside the introduction of female sexual liberation. Through symbolism, the artists of Art Nouveau revealed the idealized modern woman in a way that evoked dual qualities associated with both temptress and virgin.³⁰

³⁰ Thompson, “The Role of Woman in the Iconography of Art Nouveau,” 164–5.

This duality is present in Mucha's work. Within the same image, he illustrated women epitomizing seduction and purity. For instance, *Dance* (1898; Figure 4) demonstrates the day's fascination of femininity as both good and evil.³¹

The piece depicts a young girl scarcely clothed in a swirl of almost-translucent fabric, positioned in way that emphasizes her shoulders, back, buttocks, and breasts. Mucha eroticized her hair through sensual, organic lines, accompanied by floral ornamentation. Even so, the figure's face expresses a sense of docile purity. In this way, the work offers the viewer an expectation of innocence within the "ideal" female. By illustrating women in this light, Mucha presented the woman of his day as encompassing both seductive and pure qualities—contrasting highly with the docile wholesomeness expected of women during the middle of the nineteenth century.

Breaking into Masculine Activities and Power

Mucha put women in advertisements for commercial products once typically representative of masculinity. Some ads feature women drinking alcohol, for example *Lefèvre-Utile Champagne Biscuits* (1898; Figure 5). In *Waverly Cycles* (1897; Figure 6), a woman is pictured with a bicycle, and in *JOB* (1894; Figure 7), a woman is smoking. Female smokers marked social deviance during much of the nineteenth century.³² However, with the rise of "new women," smoking advertisements began to show women selling the product with their beauty.³³ In Mucha's work *JOB*, a lady openly enjoys a cigarette.³⁴



Figure 5. Alphonse Mucha, *Lefèvre-Utile Champagne Biscuits*, 1898. Source: Rosalind Ormiston, *Alphonse Mucha: Masterworks*, 34–5.



Figure 6. Alphonse Mucha, *Waverly Cycles*, 1897. Source: Rosalind Ormiston, *Alphonse Mucha: Masterworks*, 114–5.

³¹ Alphonse Mucha, *The Arts: Dance*, 1898, from Rosalind Ormiston, *Alphonse Mucha: Masterworks*, 21, Figure 4.

³² Mitchell, "The 'New Woman' as Prometheus," 3.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 4.



Figure 7. Alphonse Mucha, *JOB*, 1896.
Source: Rosalind Ormiston, *Alphonse Mucha: Masterworks*, 63.

Mucha has the woman expressing an emotion akin to sexual pleasure from partaking in an activity previously linked to masculine virility. In this art, a modern woman seems to be getting a sense of social authority.³⁵ Indeed, by Mucha’s depicting her as both freely expressing sexuality and boasting a phallic symbol in the form of a lit cigarette, he is conveying to the viewer a shift toward social empowerment through behaviors typically associated with masculinity—and thus power.

The new idea of the ideal woman having some social power was in direct contradiction to the prior feminine ideal of an acceptance of a passive, dismal fate. So when artists of the Art Nouveau movement reflected a shift in female sexuality, they were paying heed to the emergence of a “new woman” in Western society. The new movement art displays women with a sense of sexual liberty, contrary to the sexually repressed women popular in art of the mid-1800s. Gone are the images of perpetual female purity and household

³⁵ Ibid.

domesticity. As society moved from the mid-1800s toward modernity, women gained roles outside of the realms of motherhood; the female figures depicted in Mucha’s masterful artworks show this change. Although societal expectations concerning women during the turn of the century continued to position women in a role of inequality below men, the “new woman” that emerged during the time inched away from a role of compliant docility. Thus, in everyday life, modern women began to distance themselves from the role that had kept them from entering the public sphere. As mentioned, the freedom from domesticity had a drawback, which was that women became objectified in a new way, almost as decoration.

Sexual Liberation of Women

The theme of sexual liberation is a hallmark of the Belle Époque’s portrayal of the modern woman. Looking at art from the mid-1800s next to Art Nouveau pieces clearly evidences the shift in public mores. The earlier arts adhere to strict moral guidelines, upheld by a subservient virgin. She is the demure “modest maiden.” In contrast, the Art Nouveau pieces exemplify sexual liberation and unabashedly enticing females.

For example, Mucha gives the viewers a good look at their sensual curves, unfurled hair, and tightly clad garments. They have highly eroticized physical features, often paired and in harmony with sensual floral imagery. As such he both reflects and encourages the acceptance of female sexuality. His work *Dance* successfully captures the expectations held by society regarding women; the woman in this image represents an individual equally capable of both innocence and seduction.

CONCLUSIONS

Art is often a good indicator of the day’s societal norms. Undoubtedly, Mucha’s work captures the essence of the period’s view of femininity. His art provides a visual demonstration indicating the evolution of expectations regarding ideal femininity during the turn of the century. Mucha’s specific use of symbolism, motifs, and themes portrayed the

“new woman” that emerged during the movement. His art reflected the modern views of femininity as held during his time.

It was during the Art Nouveau period that women rejected conventional notions of womanhood and in turn transcended the realms of domesticity and motherhood. The turn of the century represented the modern woman’s progression into the public realm and an adoption of more liberated sexual expression. This cultural shift is seen in Mucha’s work. Viewers can see the differences in the notions of ideal femininity between the mid-1800s and Mucha’s time. Art provides testimony to women’s liberation from a time of domestic oppression all the way to the emergence of women within the spheres of public life. Moreover, Mucha’s works effectively illuminate the early shifts toward female equality within Western society. Thus, his work in the Art Nouveau movement transcends beyond the world of art. Rather, his works can be seen as challenging old notions of forced female servitude within the home and promoting women’s inclusion within the public sphere of Western society.

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