In quest of beauty

The distinctive sensual style of Alphonse Mucha influenced the Sixties hippy scene, but without the intervention of a Dorset solicitor his artistic legacy would have been lost.

WORDS BY JEREMY MILES

It was almost exactly 120 years ago that a relatively unknown artist, Alphonse Mucha, was catapulted to international fame. The talented young artist had a chance encounter in a Paris print shop with Sarah Bernhardt - a superstar actress of her day - and she asked him to design a poster to promote her latest play.

Such was the impact of his work publicising her new play Gismonda that the public clamoured for copies. As soon as the image of Bernhardt appeared on the streets of the French capital on New Year’s Day 1895 people were cutting them from hoardings and bribing bill-posters to hand them over. Bernhardt, at the height of her fame, signed Mucha to a six year contract.

His Gismonda, with its subtle pastel shades and sensual design revolutionised poster art. No one had seen anything like it before. Art Nouveau had been born and Mucha's reputation was sealed. Before long his work was everywhere, advertising not just the illustrious Bernhardt but cigarettes, champagne, bicycles and baby food.

Over the years Mucha’s work drifted in and out of style, but decades later, long after his death in 1939, his influence could be seen in the hippy era posters for concerts by Jimi Hendrix, Jefferson Airplane, The Grateful Dead and The Doors. Mouse and Kelly in San Francisco and Hapshash and the Coloured Coat in London were among those who adapted Mucha’s style for the ‘tune in, turn on, drop out’ generation. Yet Mucha’s posters represent just a tiny part of his prodigious output. He didn’t much care for the Art Nouveau label either. There was more to him than that.

Now a breakthrough exhibition at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum in Bournemouth explores his extraordinary artistic legacy and the story behind it. Alphonse Mucha: In Quest of Beauty (which opened in April and runs until 27 September) explores the core principle underlying his artistic philosophy - that
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the aim of art is to celebrate beauty. It examines how Mucha’s distinctive style evolved beyond Art Nouveau. It’s a compelling story tracing the work of an artist driven to create not just posters but sculptures, jewellery and much more in a roller-coaster life of changing fortunes.

Born in Moravia (now the Czech Republic), Alphonse Mucha was feted in Paris and New York at the turn of the 19th/20th century and went on to enjoy widespread recognition in the newly independent Czechoslovakia where he designed the Republic’s new postage stamps and bank notes. Eventually though, during the dark days of the rising Nazi regime, he was sidelined in his Czech homeland. His death at the age of 78 came after severe interrogation by the Gestapo. Even beyond the grave Mucha’s artistic legacy faced a struggle. Communist controlled Czechoslovakia dismissed his art as bourgeois and decadent.

Which is where Dorset law firm Humphries Kirk, which is sponsoring the exhibition, comes into the equation. The company has close connections with the Mucha family and worked tirelessly to keep Alphonse Mucha’s name and work alive when it was threatened with obscurity before the fall of the Berlin Wall.

Senior partner, James Selby Bennett is a cousin of Sarah Mucha, wife of Alphonse’s grandson John, and has known the family for decades.

“I well remember the dark days of uncertainty and repression before the Velvet Revolution in Prague,” he says. “Alphonse’s works and heritage were under considerable threat. The advice that we gave the Mucha family proved resilient. It is no exaggeration to say that the works on display and the deeper artistic heritage of this extraordinary artist were saved for posterity and we at Humphries Kirk are very pleased to have played our not inconsiderable part in that.”

What happened to Alphonse Mucha was the result of massive political upheaval across Europe during the 20th century. “He was very big in Paris and then in New York and then in the Czech Republic right up until the time of his death but during the Second World War they tried to airbrush him from history,” says Mr Bennett. “There was a short interval when everyone thought it was OK and Alphonse’s son George took his wife Geraldine and their young son back to Prague and lived in the family house. Then suddenly the Communists grabbed power and they were all out. Geraldine described to me how George came back from work one day and they were all sitting on the street with a handcart with all their possessions in it, including the priceless works of art.”

‘Primrose’ (1899) Parisians flocked to buy this image, either printed on vellum at 12 Francs or on silk satin for more than three times as much.
As a visitor to the home of George and Geraldine in cold war Prague, Mr Bennett witnessed at first hand the bugging of their home. “They would often find a new microphone usually with a slight humming noise. It was extraordinary. I was a Territorial Army officer and after the wall came down I was given sight of part of my own dossier. Here I am a solicitor and farmer in Dorset and yet excerpts of my conversations were being listened to. Every room was bugged including the loo!”

It was a strange time and, as the Berlin Wall fell and what Mr Bennett calls the “vultures and carrion crows” moved in for a piece of the action, the future of the Mucha collection was very much under threat. Happily with legal advice from Humphries Kirk the collection was saved and Mucha’s wider artistic heritage fully re-established.

Mr Bennett, whose mother Dolores Lees was a wartime resistance heroine and the only Englishwoman to receive the Croix de Guerre and bar, also has a curious political history. He is that rare beast - an English country solicitor, landowner and former TA officer who is a card-carrying member of the Labour Party. He even made front page news during the 2001 general election campaign when, leaping from his Labour battle bus, he felled a thief with a rugby tackle and hung onto him until the police arrived. He then calmly continued canvassing, making sure that the victim of the burglary pledged a vote for Labour in return for his actions.

Fourteen years on his commitment to both the Labour Party and the artistic legacy of Alphonse Mucha remain as strong as ever. “I think it is marvellous that you can go to the Russell-Cotes and see these beautiful and fascinating pieces. Not just the pictures and the posters but also his sculptures, jewellery and designs for everyday living. It’s a very appropriate location.” he adds.

The Museum’s manager, Sue Hayward agrees, pointing out that the exhibition will draw links between Mucha’s work and philosophy and the Art Nouveau environment of the Russell-Cotes Museum and its remarkable collections.

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Alphonse Mucha: In Quest of Beauty is at the Russell-Cotes Art Gallery and Museum, Bournemouth until 27 September. For more information visit russellcotes.com