

Mucha

DELPHI CLASSICS

Masters of Art

Alphonse Mucha

(1860-1939)



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Version 1

Masters of Art Series

Alphonse Mucha



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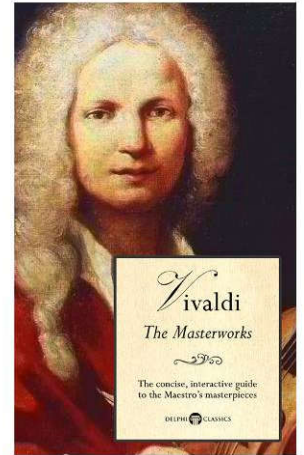
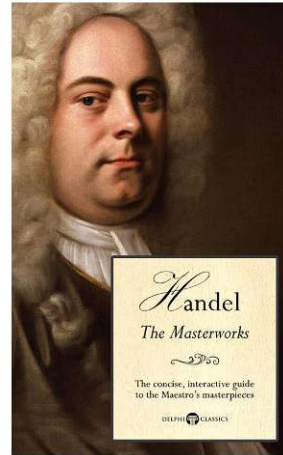
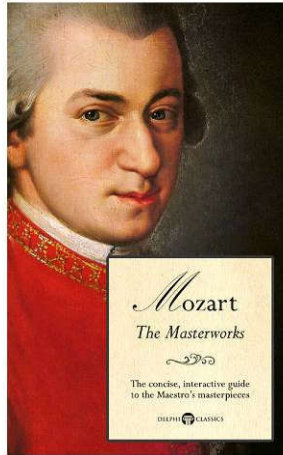
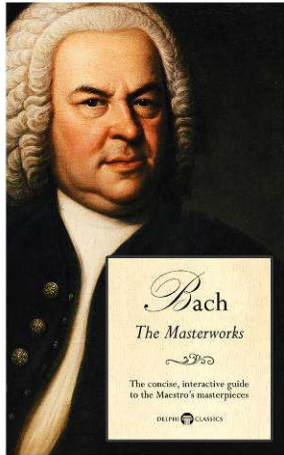
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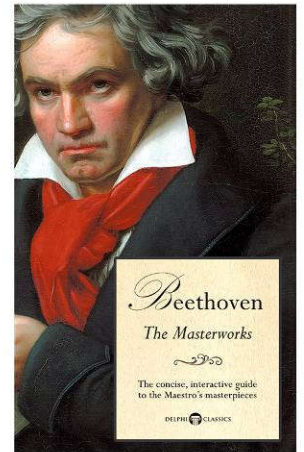
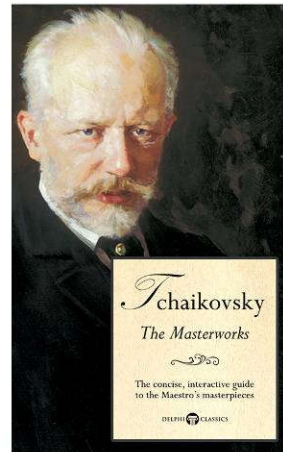
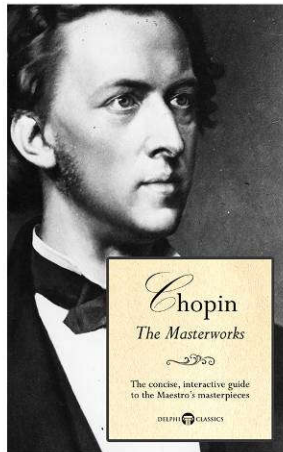
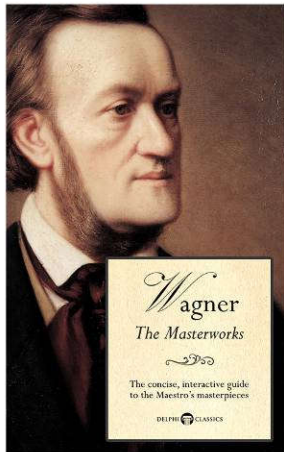
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The Highlights



Alphonse Mucha was born on 24 July 1860 in the small town of Ivančice in southern Moravia, then a province of the Austrian Empire, but now a region of the Czech Republic.



Mucha as a young man, c. 1897

The Highlights



In this section, a selection of Mucha's masterworks is provided, with concise introductions, special 'detail' reproductions and additional biographical images.

Portrait of Saints Cyril and Methodius (1887)



The chief exponent of the early twentieth century movement of Art Nouveau, Alphonse Mucha was born on 24 July 1860 in Ivancice, a small town in southern Moravia, then part of the Austrian Empire. His father was Ondrej Mucha, a court usher, and his mother was Amalie Mala, a miller's daughter from Budisov. Despite her humble origins, she was well read and before her marriage she had served as a governess to an aristocratic family in Vienna. Mucha enjoyed a large family life in a small residential quarter, close to the district jail and courthouse. The quiet market town of Ivancice was situated twelve miles southwest of the Moravian capital, Brno. Although its past was plagued with war and religious strife, at one time it was regarded as an important centre of Czech learning.

However, Czech learning had declined under the Habsburg rule, which had commenced in 1620 with the victory of the Catholic Habsburg armies over the Protestant Czechs at the Battle of White Mountain. Catholicism then became the state religion, whilst the Czech language, indigenous religion and culture were suppressed through a process of 'Germanisation'. A century before Mucha's birth, the Czech language had been reduced to little more than a folk dialect. There ensued a fierce struggle for national survival, wherein the Czech National Revival movement sought to restore the Czech language, culture and national identity in the mid-nineteenth century.

The Austrian government's hold over its enormous territory was now beginning to weaken. Austria was defeated by Prussia in the Austro-Prussian War of 1866 and consequently ceded its German states. The immediate impact of the conflict was felt in Ivancice, as the town was overrun with retreating Austrian soldiers, before being occupied by the triumphant Prussian army for two months. The small community struggled to feed this mass influx of more than 58,000 men. However, to the six-year-old Mucha, who from a young age was preoccupied with observing the world around him, this fabulous display of the Prussian soldiers in their colourful and resplendent uniforms appeared like a scene from epic literature. Still, a cholera epidemic broke out and this fantastic vision was reduced to a scene of contagion, where countless corpses were thrown into mass graves outside the town. The events of this summer would have a lasting impact on the young Mucha, shaping his view of war and death in his mature masterpieces.

His curious mind and passion for drawing were reportedly noted before he could walk and he was soon regarded as an outstanding draughtsman. His numerous caricatures and fantasy drawings impressed his school friends and teachers, while a nearby shopkeeper was so impressed by his drawings that he often supplied the Mucha family with free paper — a great luxury at that time. Fascinated by the world around him, he liked to record everything that was out of the ordinary, both drawing and painting. In his early years, religion played an important part in Mucha's life. His mother was a devout Catholic and he spent many years as a choirboy at the Church of the Assumption of the Virgin Mary in Ivancice. At the age of eleven, his impressive singing ability allowed Mucha to become a choral scholar at the Cathedral of Saints Peter and Paul in Brno. This scholarship opened a pathway to higher education at the

Slovanské Gymnasium in the city. He was deeply inspired by the grand setting of the cathedral, its frescoes, statues and intoxicating incense.

In 1878 Mucha applied to the Academy of Fine Arts in Prague, but he was unsuccessful and was advised to find 'a different career' by the Academy. A year later, a newspaper advertisement offered a new opportunity. The Kautsky-Brioschi-Burghardt, a theatre-set company in Vienna, wanted a painter for its workshop. Mucha was immediately offered the position of apprentice scene painter. At the age of nineteen, wishing his family a fond farewell, he set off for the capital of the Austro-Hungarian Empire.

He spent two years in Vienna, which was of course a centre of high culture and a world capital of music, offering the aspiring artist numerous opportunities to explore dazzling churches, museums, galleries and theatres — the latter excursions aided by the free tickets he received from his employer. In his spare time in the evenings, he took art classes and studied the latest artistic styles, including the work of Hans Makart (1840-1884), held at the time to be the most fashionable artist in the Viennese art world. Mucha also started taking photographs, using a borrowed camera, experimenting with effects in this new medium of visual expression. For the rest of his career, he would employ photography, which played a significant part in his evolving creative process.

After a tragic fire at the Ringtheater in 1881, Mucha's employers suffered insurmountable losses and so he was left without a job. He decided to try his luck as an artist, taking a train as far north as his remaining money would allow him, reaching Mikulov, a picturesque Moravian town on the border with Austria. In time, he earned a reputation as an accomplished portrait painter and designer for tombstones. His work caught the attention of Count Eduard Khuen-Belasi, resulting in a commission to paint a series of frescoes for Emmahof Castle. Then, another commission followed, this time for the Khuen-Belasi ancestral home in the Tyrol, Gandegg Castle, where the Count's younger brother, Count Egon lived. So impressed were the noble brothers with Mucha's work, that they became his first patrons, supporting him financially for formal training in Munich and Paris. At Emmahof Castle, Mucha enjoyed unlimited access to the Count's library, where he could study Old Masters, as well as drawings and illustrations by contemporary French artists, such as Gustave Doré and Eugène Delacroix. Count Eduard also introduced Mucha to Freemasonry, laying the foundations for Mucha's later spiritualism. Count Egon was an amateur artist and often took Mucha painting *en plein air* in the Tyrolean Mountains, while also travelling with him to northern Italy, introducing the young painter to the artistic heritage of Venice, Florence and Milan.

In September 1885, Mucha enrolled at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in Munich, one of the oldest and most prestigious art academies in Germany. During his two-year study at the academy, Mucha forged lasting friendships with many Slavic students that shared his nationalistic enthusiasm. He became the leading inspiration for the Czech art students' club Skréta, named after the important Czech Baroque painter Karel Skréta. After being elected as its president, Mucha expanded the membership to all other Slavs in the city. The various members published their drawings in the club's periodical, *The Palette*, as well as other magazines and newspapers.

One of the few surviving artworks from his Munich days, *Portrait of Saints Cyril and Methodius* (1887) is generally regarded as his first masterwork. It was actually produced for the Church of St. John of Nepomuk at Pisek, a small town in North Dakota, which had been founded by Czech settlers in America in c. 1880. Among these settlers were Mucha's relatives, who arranged for him to produce the

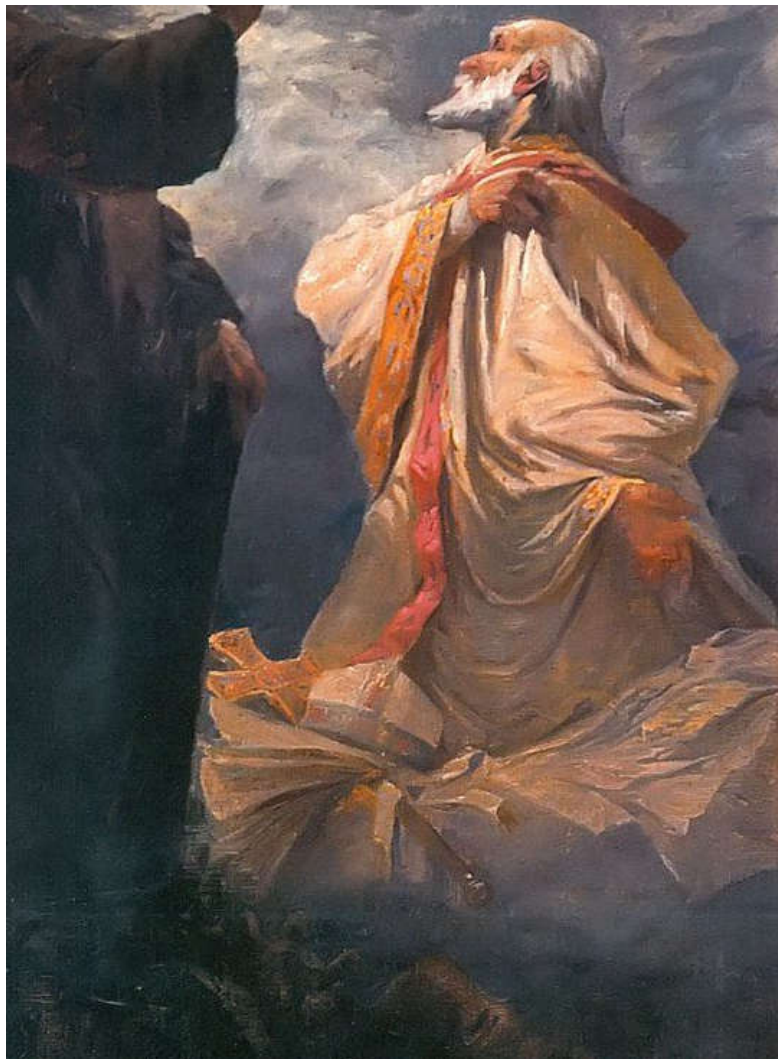
commission. Saint Cyril and Saint Methodius were ninth century Byzantine missionaries and Czech patron saints, who had taken on the commitment of spreading Christianity among the Czechs and other Slavs. Later, in his famous *Slav Epic* paintings, Mucha would return to the theme in *The Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy*. The impressive altarpiece, measuring 85cm x 45cm, portrays the two saints in a Classical pyramidal structure, reminiscent of Raphael and Rubens. Mucha's use of bold foreshortening, a rich palette and the palpable tones of symbolism all reveal his emerging talent for academic painting.

Frank Paul Rumreich was one of the first settlers to arrive from Europe to found the town of Pisek. He had made several trips back to visit his homeland, always returning with friends and relatives to settle around Pisek. On one occasion, he commissioned Mucha to paint a picture of the patron saints of Moravia, whose names it was hoped would be used in the naming of the new Catholic church in Pisek. The painting was brought to the small town in 1887 by Frank's sister Marie, when she and her family sailed to America. Eventually, the church was named St. John Nepomucene, in spite of the patron's hopes, though the magnificent painting of Saints Cyril and Methodius still hangs in the church today.





Detail



Detail



Detail



Detail



St John's Nepomucene, a Catholic church in Pisek, North Dakota, USA

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