

ALPHONSE MUCHA'S *SLAV EPIC* AND THE PROJECTION OF CZECH IDENTITY

by

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(Under the Direction of Nell Andrew)

ABSTRACT

In 1910, Alphonse Mucha began work on a series of twenty paintings that he titled the *Slav Epic*. Mucha intended to donate these paintings, which chronicled the major events of Slav history, to the City of Prague with the hope that they would fuel his countrymen's desire for Czech independence. Mucha's *Epic* can also be seen as an attempt to promote a positive image of the Slavs to the wider world. This paper examines the extent to which the themes of Mucha's *Slav Epic* resonated with the cultural and political interests of an international audience. Beginning with a discussion of Mucha's role in Paris as a spokesperson for his people, the paper then considers the importance of the "Slav" in Mucha's artwork, and concludes with a series of pictorial analyses that demonstrate that Alphonse Mucha created his *Epic* with both local and international audiences in mind.

INDEX WORDS: Alphonse Mucha, the *Slav Epic*, Art Nouveau, Pan Slavism, Neoslavism, Karel Kramář, Tomáš Masaryk, Paris, Prague, Czech history, Slav history, Josef Mánes, 1900 *Exposition Universelle*

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DEDICATION

To my mother and father, who are a constant source of love, wit, wisdom and support.

Thank you.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In 1910, Alphonse Mucha began work on a series of paintings that he titled the *Slav Epic*. The twenty paintings within this series, which Mucha intended to donate to the City of Prague, are all monumental in size.¹ Their subject matter is equally broad. The *Epic* begins with *The Slavs in their Original Homeland: Between the Turanian Whip and the Sword of the Goths* (Fig. 1), an image of the Slavs' primitive origins, and ends with *The Apotheosis of the Slavs: Slavs for Humanity* (Fig. 2), which glorifies the Slavs and their future accomplishments. Between these two bookends, Mucha illustrated a selected history of the Slav people. Mucha was born and raised in Moravia, a region of today's Czech Republic. Therefore, the *Slav Epic* represented the continuing story of Mucha's homeland. However, Mucha also wove the common threads of Slav peoples of neighboring lands into his series, portraying subjects taken from Czech, Russian, Bulgarian, and Serbian history. Why, though, did an artist who spent the majority of his career in Paris create his *Epic* to speak not only for the Czechs, but for all Slavs? Mucha said that he saw the *Slav Epic* as "a great and glorious light shining into the souls of all people with its clear ideals and burning warnings," an indication that the artist hoped that these messages would spread beyond the borders of any future, newly-formed Czech state.²

¹ The largest paintings are 240 inches by 390 inches while the smallest paintings are 139.5 inches by 189 inches.

² The details of Alphonse Mucha's life and his thoughts on art and the *Slav Epic* are drawn from the two biographies of the artist written by his son. See Jiri Mucha, *Alphonse Mucha, the Master of Art Nouveau* (Prague: Artia, 1966) and *Alphonse Maria Mucha: His Life and Art* (New York: Rizzoli, 1989), 145.

While the subject of Mucha's *Slav Epic* is wide-ranging, studies of the series have been largely concerned with the project's connection with the Czech independence movement. Anna Dvořák has studied the iconography and subject matter of each painting in the *Epic*. Her studies have led her to see the series as a continuation of Mucha's earlier illustrations.³ Sara Cristoph has examined the *Epic* as a revitalization of the traditions of Czech history painting.⁴ Dvořák's and Cristoph's interpretations strengthen the connections between the *Epic* itself and Mucha's spoken desire to heighten his audience's awareness of Czech history with the *Epic*'s "clear ideals and burning warnings." The work of these two scholars lends greater context to the artist's decision to move to Prague to begin his project. It remains curious, however, that greater attention has not been given to the fact that Mucha's series attempted to represent a history of a very diverse native population.

Mucha arrived in Prague and started work on the *Epic* when the desire for Czech independence was becoming especially passionate. Since the mid-seventeenth century, Mucha's countrymen had lived under Hapsburg rule.⁵ Although by the Hapsburg Empire's 1911 Parliamentary elections, the Czech people had 107 individuals representing them in the Empire's Parliament in Vienna, these representatives comprised a small minority, and had limited means

³ Dvořák's examinations of Alphonse Mucha's *Slav Epic* are made in two main publications, the first a dissertation, the second an essay within the catalogue *Alphonse Mucha and the Spirit of Art Nouveau*. Anna Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," in *Alphonse Mucha: the Spirit of Art Nouveau*, ed. Victor Arwas, Jana Brabcová-Orlíková, and Anna Dvořák (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 1998). See also, Anna Dvořák, "Alphonse Mucha: Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings" Ph.D diss. (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 1978).

⁴ Sara Christoph, "The Rebirth of Romantic Nationalism in Bohemia: Alphonse Mucha's Epic Reconstruction of History" Bachelor's Thesis (James Madison University, 2006).

⁵ Victor Mamatey's *Rise of the Hapsburg Empire* is a source of information on the Hapsburg Empire's acquisition of the Czech regions after the Thirty Years War and their existence under Hapsburg rule. Josef Kalvoda traces the history of the Czech independence movement in his book *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*. Victor Mamatey, *Rise of the Hapsburg Empire* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1971). Josef Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986).

to affect change or to improve conditions of their homeland.⁶ The people within Mucha's homeland came from diverse backgrounds themselves. Bohemians, Moravians, and Silesians all fell under the "Czech" umbrella. In addition, once Czech independence was gained, Slovaks also joined this diverse group, further diluting any sense of cultural homogeneity. Alphonse Mucha may have observed that these various peoples needed a confirmation of their shared heritage to strengthen their will for independence; he may have intended the *Slav Epic* to fulfill such a need.

Other scholars have taken a slightly different approach in studying Mucha's *Epic* by exploring the project's ideological roots. Otokar Kukla sees the *Slav Epic's* iconography as an expression of Mucha's strong Slavophilic sentiments.⁷ The creation of Mucha's *Epic* coincides with the Neoslav movement, an early twentieth-century incarnation of nineteenth-century Pan-Slavism, which was a movement that sought to elevate and revive Slav culture. Kukla sees Mucha's pro-Slav painting series as an extension of the writings of the German scholar and philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder and of the Slavophilic Czech poet Jan Kollar. Herder and Kollar— who both promoted Slav culture in the late eighteenth century— set the earliest precedents for Mucha to follow, but the artist would have certainly been aware of and familiar with the writings of later advocates of Slav culture. Even from Paris, Mucha would have had access to the writings of his contemporaries, Karel Kramář and Tomáš Masaryk, both of whom published pro-Czech and pro-Slav essays in Prague and abroad. Kukla's observations are

⁶ Kalvoda makes the point that the 1911 election was particularly significant in Czech history. It was the final Parliamentary Election before the outbreak of World War I and was therefore the final Parliamentary Election before the collapse of the Hapsburg Empire. Kalvoda also points out that the 107 delegates representing the Czechs were further divided between nine political parties, the most prominent among them the Agrarian Democrats with 36 delegates and the Social Democrats with 26 delegates. For more on the pluralism of the Vienna parliament and the 1911 election's impact on the Slav peoples see Stanley Pech's article on the subject. Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 11-12. Stanley Pech, "Political Parties among Austrian Slavs: a Comparative Analysis of the 1911 Reichsrat Election," *Canadian Slavonic Papers* 31, no. 2 (1989).

⁷ Otokar Kukla, "Anmerkungen zur Ikonographie des Slawischen Epos von Alfons Mucha," in *Alfons Mucha: Meditation und Botschaft*, ed. Jan Sekera Viet Loers (Kassel: Weber & Weidemeyer GmbH & Co., 1989).

significant in that they widen the scope of the *Epic's* audience. For the Panslav movement sought not only to unite the various Slav countries of Europe, but also to promote Slav culture to the world. In this light, the *Epic's* "burning ideals" must have been intended to reach beyond Prague's borders. By representing Panslav principles in the *Slav Epic*, Mucha created a painting series with a much wider audience in mind.

My thesis will extend the scholarship on Mucha's *Slav Epic* farther. More can be said about the ways in which Mucha's *Epic* was relevant to international audiences. Mucha arrived in Prague as an artist of international acclaim. While living in Paris, Mucha was an established poster maker and designer. He had also lived and worked in the United States before moving to Prague.⁸ It was in the United States that Mucha attracted several wealthy patrons; among them was the industrialist Richard Crane, future sponsor of the *Slav Epic*. Mucha's international reputation put him in a position to act as a spokesperson of sorts for the people of his homeland. He could promote the Czech cause to an audience already familiar with and supportive of his artwork. The very fact that paintings within the *Epic* were displayed in Chicago from June to November 1920, in New York in January 1921, and in Paris in 1936 is a testament to the fact that the *Epic's* "clear" and "burning" ideals were of interest to audiences outside of Prague, and even outside of Europe.⁹

In this thesis, I will examine the extent to which the themes of Mucha's *Slav Epic* resonated with the cultural-political concerns of an international audience. This examination will begin with a discussion of Mucha's career in Paris and of how it prepared him to serve as an international spokesperson for his people. I will then move on to a study of the term "Slav." Why

⁸ Anna Daley discusses Alphonse Mucha's time spent in America, works of art produced by Mucha for American patrons, and the display of the *Slav Epic* in the America. Anna Daley, "Alphonse Mucha in Gilded Age America" Master's Thesis. (National Design Museum, Smithsonian Institution and Parsons the New School for Design, 2007).

⁹ Dvořák, "Alphonse Mucha: Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings," 145, 149.

was this all-encompassing cultural designation a fitting springboard for Mucha's *Epic* when the project was intended specifically to promote Czech independence? The study will conclude with a series of pictorial analyses, demonstrating the ways in which Alphonse Mucha created images with both local and international audiences in mind. These analyses will demonstrate how Mucha promoted the political and cultural significance of the Czechoslovak Republic within and beyond the nation's borders. To that end, the *Slav Epic* therefore presented images that unified the various peoples of Mucha's homeland in a way that could resonate with those who followed the Pan-Slav evolution from afar.

CHAPTER 2

LIVING IN PARIS AND SPEAKING FOR THE SLAVS

While he was living in Paris, Alphonse Mucha expressed a wish that “the remainder of [his] life would be filled exclusively with work for the Nation.”¹⁰ These convictions are surprising, given the fact that Mucha spent so much of his life removed from his homeland in Eastern Europe. One could even raise the question of how intimately Mucha was connected with the concerns of his homeland while living in Paris. Close study of Mucha’s conduct in the French capital reveals that, whatever the distance, the artist remained deeply invested in the political and artistic developments of his homeland. When one considers Mucha’s native interests in coordination with an examination of Parisians’ reactions to Mucha and his artwork, one comes to understand that Mucha actively promoted his Czech heritage in Paris, and that the city was eager to welcome an “exotic” Slav into its midst.

While proponents of the Neoslav movement sought to unify the various Slav states under one banner, an independent Czech nation among them, there was also a strong effort to legitimize Slav identity to Western Europe. These two elements would find representation in the *Slav Epic*. Before Mucha even began work on the *Epic*, however, Neoslav publications were making foreign audiences receptive to Slav, and therefore Czech, artwork in particular. Before

¹⁰ In this passage, recorded in Jiri Mucha’s biography of his father, Alphonse Mucha describes the moment when he realized that he had spent the majority of his career working on trivial projects when he could have been working to better the lives of his people. The “Nation” he refers to is the Czech nation. Alphonse Mucha quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 145.

returning to Prague, Mucha had established his role as a representative of Czech culture in both Paris and in the United States.

In Jiri Mucha's biography of his father, Alphonse Mucha's wife Maruška describes the first time she met her future husband.¹¹ Shortly after Maruška arrived in Paris, she visited Mucha, as many other young Czechs had done before her. When Maruška first visited Mucha, he was reading a Czech newspaper. She says that after he put the paper down, "Mucha led me to an armchair and started questioning me about Bohemia and Prague...He was interested in every thing, in our young people and their aims."¹² Maruška even seemed surprised that Mucha would not only read periodicals from Prague, but also welcomed "all the students who came to Paris into his home."¹³ Maruška's memories reveal Mucha's persevering interest in his homeland.

In Paris, Mucha had various opportunities to remain apprised of current political ideas among Czechs. Josef Kalvoda, a scholar of Czech history and political science, states that Dr. Karel Kramář, a Czech politician in the Viennese Parliament and a founding figure in the Neoslav movement, frequently published articles in both France and England to promote Czech independence.¹⁴ Kalvoda points out that these articles placed particular emphasis on the importance that Czech independence would have on the European stage. Kramář promoted a belief that the Czech people need not break free from the Austro-Hungarian Empire but rather that the Empire itself should function more independently from Germany.¹⁵ Kramář argued, "a strong, internally vigorous Austria, remorselessly antagonistic to the Pan-German designs, is a

¹¹ The details of Alphonse Mucha's and Maruška Mucha's first meeting, and their subsequent romance are chronicled in Jiri Mucha's biography. Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 191.

¹² Maruška Mucha quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 191.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Josef Kalvoda discusses the Karel Kramář's publications, and their relationship to the Czech independence movement in his book *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*. Josef Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 13.

¹⁵ Ibid.

European necessity— indeed, a condition on which the continued existence of the Europe of today depends.”¹⁶

With time, Kramář’s opinions on the place that the Czech people held within the Hapsburg Empire shifted dramatically. After the Empire annexed the regions of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Kramář and other Neoslav proponents argued for the Czech region’s complete separation from the Austro-Hungarian Empire.¹⁷ In spite of his shift in goals, Kramář continued to argue that the Czech cause was of international significance. Kramář believed that an independent Czech nation could unite with other Slav states to form a “great, strong, indestructible union, guaranteeing independence and a free development to all of its members and, simultaneously, guaranteeing by its strength and spiritual substance peace to Europe and the world.”¹⁸

Kramář’s arguments became so long-lived that in 1927, when Vladimir Nosek, who published *The Spirit of Bohemia*, a history of the newly formed Czechoslovak nation in Great Britain, he opened his book with the lines, “The history of Bohemia belongs to Europe, and Bohemia’s cause... was always bound up with the cause of humanity.”¹⁹ Nosek’s words betray his dependence on the traditions established by Kramář, promoting the Czech cause as being of international importance. By the time Nosek’s history was published, the pan-German threat had been severely diminished in the wake of World War I, and the Slavs were much closer to achieving their independence. One can argue that Nosek had less of a reason to promote the

¹⁶ Karel Kramář, made this assertion in an article included in the journal *Revue de Paris*, February 1, 1899. Article quoted in Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 13.

¹⁷ Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 15.

¹⁸ Vladimír Sís, ed. *Dr. Karel Kramář. Život-dílo-práce. Vudce národa*, vol. I and II (Prague: Skizza, 1936) 153 and 156 ff quoted in Karel Kramář quoted in Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 15.

¹⁹ Vladimir Nosek, *The Spirit of Bohemia* (New York: Bretano's Publishers, 1927) 17.

international importance of Czech people. Nosek noted the importance of the Czech people to the whole of Europe regardless of these developments.

Karel Kramář began promoting the Czech cause long before Alphonse Mucha arrived in France, and Mucha's Slav heritage was a focal point for those who wrote about him. French journalists often created fantastic stories, including one particularly romantic, albeit inaccurate, account of Mucha's discovery by the actress Sarah Bernhardt, "Passing through Prague Sarah Bernhardt was seduced by the genius of a handsome young stranger [Mucha] whom she met quite by chance...As for the man himself, nobody knew him. He had been kept in a luxuriously appointed underground apartment—a miniature grotto of Monte Cristo."²⁰ Jiri Mucha recalls another invented account in which, "Sarah [Bernhardt] had discovered Mucha in Hungary, traveling with a gypsy caravan through the *puszta*, and had been enchanted by his singing at full moon."²¹ A third French journalist described the encounter as follows, "Making a stop in Prague, Sarah the *tragedienne*, struck by the smooth originality of Mucha's works and his masculine robustness, carries him off without any hesitations."²² Yet another journalist described Mucha's studio in *La Plume* with an emphasis on Mucha's spiritual nature, "It makes the impression of a secular chapel... screens placed here and there, that could well be confessionals; and then there's incense burning all the time. It is more like the chapel of an Oriental monk than a studio."²³ The fixation on Mucha's exotic heritage demonstrates first that Paris was receptive to those who claimed to be Slavs, an attitude that may have been encouraged by the pro-Slav articles of Kramář and his peers which were published in Paris. These articles give precedence for the city's warm acceptance of Mucha and his artwork. More importantly, the words of critics suggest that

²⁰ An unnamed French journalist quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 72.

²¹ Ibid.

²² An unnamed French journalist quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 72.

²³ Paul Redonnel quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 15-16.

while living in Paris, Mucha was already serving as a representative of Slav cultures, more specifically, of Czech culture.

In 1900, Alphonse Mucha had the opportunity to represent the Slav culture to the world at the *Exposition Universelle* in Paris. Hofrat Exner, a representative of the Austrian government, visited Mucha to “offer [him] the job of decorating one whole pavilion. It was to be the pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, the two provinces Austria had recently annexed and wished, therefore, to be put before the public in the best possible light.”²⁴ This commission asked Mucha to decorate the pavilion with a series of mural paintings (Fig. 3). Although Mucha eagerly began work on the commission, his motivations behind ennobling the Slavs of Bosnia and Herzegovina were different from those of his patrons. The Bosnia and Herzegovina pavilion at the *Exposition Universelle* was a contentious subject to Slavs living in Mucha’s homeland. Austria-Hungary annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina in 1899, and the neighboring Slavs saw this annexation as another pan-German infringement on the Slav people. It was the annexation of Bosnia and Herzegovina that finally convinced Kramář that the Slav regions should completely separate from the Hapsburg Empire. While Mucha sought to honor his oppressed Slav brethren, his patrons wanted to showcase a new addition to their Empire. In spite of this contradiction, Mucha’s murals of the Slavs of Bosnia and Herzegovina represented them in a positive way, if not to glorify the Empire’s territorial gains, then to attract foreign audiences to empathize with the Slav cause. Mucha seemed aware of the political support that could be gained through the Bosnia and Herzegovina murals. When speaking about the murals, Mucha pointed out, “I was doing historical painting, but this time not about Germany but a brotherly Slav nation.”²⁵ In

²⁴ Alphonse Mucha quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 145.

²⁵Ibid.

short, Mucha acted as a representative of Slav culture on a global stage and embraced some of the principles published by Kramář as a justification for his production of the Bosnian murals.

Dr. Favre, a close friend of Alphonse Mucha, wrote to the artist in 1900 and described the *Exposition Universelle* saying, “It produces the effect of a gigantic Babel...An artificial city with its complex and confused appearance, all lines clash, planes collide, patterns criss-cross. It is a sequence of phantasmagoric pictures unfolding on the screen of a vertiginous fairyland cinematograph.”²⁶ In his biography, Jiri Mucha expands upon Favre’s description, “in this Babel with its chaotic constructions there is impartial judgment to be rendered...Each nation, each race appeared of its own free will on the banks of the Seine to face the tribunal sitting in Paris.”²⁷ Their words underscore the roles that visual imagery and public opinion played at the *Exposition Universelle*, and these points make Alphonse Mucha’s role as a representative of Czech culture all the more obvious. One could even argue that Mucha’s commission to create murals for the *Exposition Universelle* indicates a shift in the wider world’s interest in Slav cultures and in the artist himself. When Mucha first arrived in Paris he was seen as a romantic figure, even as a gypsy. By 1900, he was depended upon to create official representations of Slav culture for a wider audience. Just as some Czech authors and politicians wrote to promote Czech culture and the Slav to an unfamiliar audience, in a similar way, Mucha promoted Bosnian culture to the many foreign visitors to the pavilion. Mucha’s murals had the advantage of being placed in a public, prominent location for an international audience, a pavilion in the *Exposition Universelle*.

The writings of Kramář inspired Mucha to believe that the Bosnia and Herzegovina mural could promote the Slav cause to foreign audiences. The mural, in turn, served as an early

²⁶ Dr. Favre is an unspecified friend and correspondent of Alphonse Mucha, this portion of his letter is quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 151.

²⁷ Jiri Mucha’s expansion on Dr. Favre’s thoughts on the *Exposition Universelle* brings the importance that judgment played in *Exposition* to the forefront. Alphonse Mucha made his murals with the understanding that the world would be judging the Southern Slavs based on his images. *Ibid*.

precedent for the *Slav Epic*, which likewise was meant to communicate regional Czech independence to a foreign audience rather than to a domestic one.²⁸ Dvořák tells us that the artist sought a similarly prestigious location for *The Slav Epic*; he planned to donate the series to the City of Prague with the expectation that the city would construct a special exhibition space for the canvases.²⁹ If the *Epic* had found such a home, it could have promoted the nobility of Czech culture and history. The extent to which *The Slav Epic* also exhibits the ideals of contemporary Czech political movements will be discussed in a later section, but it seems that in closely following the approach to his Bosnia murals, Mucha created another work of art that would be relevant to both a European audience and a Prague audience.

Shortly after the *Exposition Universelle*, Mucha left Paris for America.³⁰ Even in the United States, the artist had access to pro-Czech and pro-Slav ideology. The primary source of this ideology was the writings of Tomáš Masaryk. Masaryk may be best remembered today as the first President of Czechoslovakia, but he did not start his career as a politician. First, Masaryk worked as a university professor who promoted Czech independence.³¹ According to Kalvoda, Masaryk often depended on historical precedents to advocate a given political position, seeing history as the “present reflected in the past.”³² Masaryk would himself say, “History is not a science and knowledge about what was and what was a long time ago, but it is knowledge and a

²⁸ Alphonse Mucha said that these murals inspired him to create the *Epic* saying: “Describing the glorious and tragic events in its [Bosnia and Herzegovina] I thought of the joys and sorrows of my own country and of all the Slavs. And so, before I had completed the south Slav murals, I had made up my minds about my future big work which was to become the *Slav Epic*.” Alphonse Mucha quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 145. Dvořák also point out the Bosnia and Herzegovina murals as the project that inspired Mucha to create the *Slav Epic*. Dvořák, “New Aspirations 1900-1939,” in *Alphonse Mucha: the Spirit of Art Nouveau*, ed. Jane Sweeney (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 1998) 31.

²⁹ Although the paintings of the *Slav Epic* were donated to Prague in 1928, a permanent exhibition facility was never built for the large canvases. The series is now displayed in Moravský Krumlov. For more on the *Slav Epic*’s initial conception see Dvořák, “Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings,” 100.

³⁰ While in the United States, Mucha would spend time as a lecturer in both New York and Chicago. Daley, “Alphonse Mucha in Gilded Age America, 1904-1921,” 1.

³¹ Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 21.

³² *Ibid.*

science about what is and what will be.”³³ Masaryk’s writings on the importance of national history may have had a profound impact on Mucha’s artwork and on the *Slav Epic* in particular, given the fact that Mucha relied on Slav history so heavily in the series. Because the *Epic* focused on representing scenes of Slav history, Mucha could bring about a greater sense of awareness of the Czech’s long and noble past. As a consequence, Mucha could stir up a greater desire for Czech independence, both at home and abroad.

Thomas Masaryk maintained close ties to the United States. As his wife was originally from Brooklyn, he visited the U.S. three times before the outbreak of World War I.³⁴ It is in the United States that Masaryk befriended Richard Crane, a wealthy American industrialist.³⁵ The ties between Crane and Masaryk and the Czech people would strengthen over time; Crane’s son was appointed the first American Minister to Czechoslovakia in 1918, and his widowed daughter, Frances Crane Leatherbee, married Masaryk’s son Jan. Perhaps the greatest sign of Crane’s affinity for the Czech people was his decision to sponsor Mucha’s *Slav Epic*, so that the series could be donated to Prague.³⁶

Crane’s financial sponsorship was important to Mucha, who wrote to Crane soliciting support for the monumental project. Mucha claimed the project would cost \$15,000 a year, ultimately totaling \$75,000; in the end, Mucha’s project cost Crane \$100,000. According to Dvořák, Crane would not have been willing to make such a significant financial commitment were he not already confident in Mucha’s ability to speak to the spirit of the Czech people, and if

³³ Masaryk quoted in Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 21.

³⁴ Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 23.

³⁵ Charles Crane was not the only high-profile American that Mucha came into contact with while living in the United States. Daley points out that Mucha also developed friendships with Mr. and Mrs. Cornelius Vanderbilt, the George J. Goulds, and Charles Schwab. Mucha even claimed to be acquainted with Theodore Roosevelt. Daley, “Alphonse Mucha in Gilded Age America, 1904-1921,” 1.

³⁶ Dvořák, *Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings*, 99.

he were not sympathetic to the ideals behind Mucha's project.³⁷ In short, because Mucha was able to present himself as a representative of the Czech people, he was able to gain the financial support of an American sponsor in Crane.

When he first left his home in the Moravian town of Ivancice, Mucha had received no formal artistic training in his homeland. In 1881, at the age of 21, Mucha moved to Vienna, where he worked as a painter of theater sets. He received his academic training not at the Prague Academy of Fine Arts, but at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts.³⁸ By the time he moved to Paris in 1888, the artist had spent seven years abroad where he acquired all of his formal training; upon his return to Prague, Mucha had spent twenty years living abroad, in Vienna, Munich, and Paris, and in the United States. Given the details of his early biography, Mucha's prolonged interest in the Czech cause may seem unusual. Jiri Mucha's biography pays particular attention to describing Ivancice, Mucha's childhood home, as a cultural center in the region, and he spends even more time describing Mucha's engagement with the images of this traditional city, from the artist's fascination with the city's Baroque churches to his love of the decorated cookies served at town festivals.³⁹ Scholars take Jiri Mucha's account to mean that his father depended on these childhood images to remind himself of Czech culture. Dvořák makes the point that in relying on these memories, Mucha actually distanced himself from the political and artistic developments of his homeland.⁴⁰ However, Mucha had access to Neoslav ideology abroad which gave him the opportunity to stay close to his homeland; after all, Maruška was impressed by the fact that her future husband frequently read Czech periodicals while he lived in Paris. The people of Paris and of the United States evidently believed that Mucha was still closely connected to Slav culture,

³⁷ Ibid., 100.

³⁸ Jana A. Brabcová-Orlíková, "Bohemia and Paris," in *Alphonse Mucha: the Spirit of Art Nouveau*, ed. Jane Sweeney (Alexandria, VA: Art Services International, 1998), 16.

³⁹ Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 16-17.

⁴⁰ Dvořák, "Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings," 69.

and that his images of the Slavs were accurate. In short, Mucha does not seem to have been detached from his homeland while he lived in Paris and America, and greater attention should be paid to the possible influences that Mucha's time abroad may have had on his production of *The Slav Epic*.

CHAPTER 3

THE SLAV'S ROLE IN THE *SLAV EPIC*

The Slavs comprise one of the largest ethnic groups in Europe. This larger ethnicity can be broken down, however, into three groups: Western Slavs (consisting primarily of Poles, Czechs, and Slovaks), Southern Slavs (Serbs, Croats, Slovenes, Macedonians, Montenegrins, Bosnians, and Bulgarians) and Eastern Slavs (Russians, Ukrainians, and Belarusians).⁴¹ Given the fact that the term “Slav” unites cultures as geographically disparate as Bulgaria and Poland, it may be difficult to imagine that many affinities are shared between these cultures. Indeed, the Slavs are so diverse that Mucha’s decision to represent Slav history to promote Czech independence may seem counterintuitive.

Although the Slavs came from a wide range of cultures and backgrounds, the nineteenth and twentieth centuries saw the rise of Pan-Slavism and its later incarnation Neoslavism; both movements were characterized by their desire to unify all Slav peoples. In titling a series the *Slav Epic*, Mucha created a body of paintings that claimed to represent a wide range of peoples including his fellow Czechs. How could such a wide-reaching subject specifically relate to Czech

⁴¹ The term “Slav” has been used to unite the cultures of Eastern Europe as early as the nineteenth century, when the earliest manifestations of Pan-Slavism emerged. For more on the history of the Pan-Slav movement see John Erickson, *Pan-Slavism* (London: Cox & Wyman Ltd., 1964); Hans Kohn, *Pan-Slavism: its History and Ideology* (New York: Vintage Books, 1960).

independence? This section will explore how Mucha developed the Slav and Neoslav ideology to be tools to promote his people's cause to both local and foreign audiences.

When Mucha began work on the *Slav Epic*, the glories of the Slav cultures were being heavily promoted by the Austro-Hungarian Empire, such as in the Bosnia and Herzegovina murals made for Paris's 1900 *Exposition Universelle*.⁴² While Mucha's *Exposition* murals needed to satisfy the demands of his patrons, the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the *Slav Epic* gave him the opportunity to create an image of Slav culture that was not tainted by German influences. In this way, the *Slav Epic* echoed a traditional Pan-Slav theme of antagonism toward German culture. If the Austro-Hungarian Empire seemed willing to promote some Slav history as its own at the 1900 *Exposition Universelle*, then this promotion reflected the Empire's claims to the accomplishments of Slav cultures as their own or the Empire's sense of superiority over Slav cultures.

The German-speaking world's dominance over the Czech people even left its traces on Mucha's artistic development. As mentioned earlier, Mucha received his training at the Munich Academy of Fine Arts.⁴³ The painting academy in Prague was too small to accept a large number of students. As a result Mucha, and many of his peers, received their training abroad. Widely recognized artists like Mucha may have therefore been associated as much with their German training as with their Slav heritage. A second example of this cultural appropriation can be seen František Palacký's multi-volume publication of the history of the Bohemian people, titled *Die*

⁴² The Bosnia and Herzegovina Pavillion is one episode in a succession of episodes where the Austro-Hungarian Empire would present Slav culture and achievements as their own. For more on the subject see: Stanley B. Kimball, "The Austro-Slav Revival: a Study of Nineteenth-Century Literary Foundations," *Transactions of the American Philosophical Society* 63, no. 4 (1973).

⁴³ Petr Wittlich discusses the foreign training of Czech artists in his Essay, "The Road to Cubism", and points out that many young Czech artists sought better instruction at the Munich Painting Academy. Petr Wittlich, "The Road to Cubism," in *Czech Cubism: Architecture, Furniture, and Decorative Arts*, ed. Alexander von Vegesack (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1992) 21.

Geschichte von Böhmen, or *The History of Bohemia*.⁴⁴ Although Palacký had intended this work to celebrate the history of the independent Czech state, that is to say the historical periods in which the Czech people were not subjects of the Empire, his work was censored by the Austro-Hungarian government. Furthermore, Palacký would have to publish his multi-volume history in German before he could publish it in the Czech language. The first volume of Palacký's *History* was published in German in 1836, and the first official Czech translation did not appear until 1848.⁴⁵

The Austro-Hungarian Empire's cultural appropriation of Czech culture becomes even more pointed when one examines Georg Hegel's description of the Slavs in his lectures on history given between 1830 and 1831.⁴⁶ In these lectures, Hegel argued that a State's history embodies the Universal Spirit "when the private interest of its citizens is one with the common interest of the State; when one finds its gratification and realization in the other."⁴⁷ Hegel would elevate the Prussian State as an example of such a perfect embodiment of the Universal Spirit; at the same time, he dismisses the Slav nations by lumping them together into a category of "non-historical [*geschichtlose*] nations" and thereby distinct from the Prussian State.⁴⁸ "They come only late into the series of historical States, and form and perpetuate the connection with Asia," he wrote.⁴⁹ According to Hegel, the countries of Asia were typified by freedom-restricting

⁴⁴ For more on Palacký's publication, and on the historiography of Czech history in general, please see Joseph Zacek's book on the subject. Joseph Frederick Zacek, *Palacky: the Historian as Scholar and Nationalist* (The Netherlands: Mouton, 1970).

⁴⁵ The first volume of Palacký's history was intended to commemorate Emperor Ferdinand V's coronation as King of Bohemia in 1836, but was published two months after the actual coronation. Joseph Zacek points out that while many Czech's hoped that the history would be published in their own language, Palacký's project was approved under the stipulation that it be published in German. This stipulation guaranteed that the *History* would reach a wider audience. Zacek, *Palacky: the Historian as Scholar and Nationalist*, 56-57.

⁴⁶ Georg Hegel, *The Philosophy of History* (New York: The Colonial Press, 1899).

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*

⁴⁸ Lavrin, *Russia, Slavdom, and the Western World*, 36.

⁴⁹ George Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, quoted in Lavrin, *Russia, Slavdom, and the Western World*, 36.

tyrannies, and because the Slav states stood on the border between Europe and the East, they were similarly associated with the tyrannical principles of the so-called Orient.⁵⁰

Hegel's writings, emblematic of the German-speaking world's dismissal of the Slavs, would need to be refuted on an international level. When Karel Kramář founded the Neoslav movement at the opening of the twentieth century, he called for a federation of Slav states, where all Slav regions would hold equal footing and would defend and support one another.⁵¹ Kramář tried to garner support for the plight of the Slavs across Europe, publishing his ideas in both French and English, in which he claimed he had, "one desire, namely, that non-German Europe also may at last show that it understands the meaning of the Bohemian and how pregnant with fate it is, and may follow the struggles of the Czechs with that measure of sympathy which a good and righteous cause deserves."⁵² Tomáš Masaryk echoed Kramář's call for Slav unity, and to it he added his own call for a greater awareness of Slav history. Building the principles of Neoslavism, both Kramář and Masaryk created a new image of the Slav for the wider world to recognize; Alphonse Mucha could use these principles to revise the Slav's image in the same way.

In the years following the First World War, the Neoslav movement suffered setbacks. While the founders of the Neoslav movement hoped to achieve independence, peace, and unity among all of the Slav nations, Pan-Slav sentiment in Serbia had been seen as a contributing factor to the outbreak of World War I. Furthermore, the end of the war saw the collapse of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. With the Empire's dissolution, the primary antagonist in the Czechs' struggle for independence had disappeared. If the Czech Slavs could no longer illustrate their

⁵⁰ Hegel, *The Philosophy of History*, 161

⁵¹ Josef Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986), 16.

⁵² Kramář quoted in Paul Vysny, *Neo-Slavism and the Czechs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1977), 19.

virtues by contrasting them with the vices of German-speaking oppressors, then new ways of promoting the Czech cause abroad would need to be devised.

After the War, the proponents of Neoslavism and of Czech independence would take a slightly different approach. New Czech and Slav histories provided an even greater emphasis on the inherent pacifism of the Slavs. Edvard Beneš published in English an argument in favor of Czech independence in 1917, and it went so far as to call World War I a “German plan” and an “Austro-Hungary policy of violence.” He continued to describe the harsh treatment of Czech soldiers by their German superiors during the war.⁵³ In his book *The Spirit of Bohemia: a Survey of Czechoslovak History, Music, and Literature*, published in 1927, Vladimir Nosek emphasized the pacifist leanings of Czech culture, saying:

“it is significant of the Czech’s spirit of toleration that on the conclusion of war, during the revolutionary *coup d’etat*, when Czechoslovak independence was proclaimed, no acts of violence or revenge were committed against the Germans, and that also later the policy of the Czechoslovak Government has always been one of conciliation and respect for the rights of the minorities of the Republic.”⁵⁴

While speaking about Slav history, Nosek acknowledged that “From the earliest times the Czechs had to struggle for their language against the Germans, who surrounded them on all sides.”⁵⁵ Nosek used these struggles to bring Slav pacifism to the fore saying, “Whenever we won victories, it was through moral superiority rather than through physical power.” Nosek and

⁵³ Edvard Beneš, *Bohemia's Case for Independence*, 2nd ed. (New York: Arno Press, 1971), 53.

⁵⁴ Nosek, *The Spirit of Bohemia*, 19.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 18.

his peers wrote their histories of the Czechs in order to rebuff the negative perceptions of Slavs that stemmed from the First World War.

The worth accorded to the Slavs, and the Slav's antagonistic relationship to the German-speaking world by proponents of Neoslavism would become key influences on Mucha's *Slav Epic*. The importance of the ideas of the Neoslav movement to the artist can be seen in the first and last paintings of his *Epic*, *The Slavs in their Original Homeland*, and *Apotheosis of the Slavs*.⁵⁶ The two paintings represent Mucha's interpretation of not only the origins (and basic character) of the Slavs, as well as Mucha's aspirations for the future of the Slav people. These paintings reveal the artist's interpretation of the principles of Neoslavism.

As its title suggests, *The Slavs in their Original Homeland* (Fig. 1) illustrates the origins of Slav history. In this painting, a pair of prehistoric Slavs crouch in the foreground of an untamed wilderness. Behind this couple, one sees a procession of horsemen riding across the horizon line. Dvořák calls the couple in the painting's foreground (Fig. 4) the Adam and Eve of the Slavs.⁵⁷ This is an interesting comparison because the couple forages the surrounding ground for food. Those familiar with the book of Genesis will remember that Adam and Eve did not have to work for their food until after they had been expelled from Eden, when God ordered: "cursed is the ground for your sake; in toil you shall eat of it all the days of your life...In the sweat of your face you shall eat bread till you return to the ground."⁵⁸ This couple is certainly a post-Eden Adam and Eve. The expelled Adam and Eve reflect the status of Mucha's

⁵⁶ Discussion of Pan Slavism has largely focused on its expression in writing rather than painting. This focus may stem from the fact that Slav cultures are united in language. The Slav cultures are so called because they all use languages that are believed to have derived from a shared proto-Slavic "parent" language. There are of course other media that are capable of unifying the various Slav cultures. Given the fact that painting is a visual medium, it is therefore free from any restrictions that a language barrier may impose, even on the united Slavs. The visual nature of painting implies that the same Pan Slav message— free from the filter of translation – could be communicated to both Slavic and non-Slavic people.

⁵⁷ Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," 107.

⁵⁸ Genesis 3:17-19.

contemporaries, who were unable to control their homeland while they lived under the rule of the Hapsburg Empire.

Dvořák identifies the horsemen seen on the painting's horizon as Germanic invaders and suggests that the red glow behind these figures is not the dawn, but the glow of the couple's burning village, hidden behind the hillside.⁵⁹ If Dvořák's analysis is accurate, then the scavenging couple is expelled from their village— as Adam and Eve were expelled from Eden. This reference to the Slav's expulsion becomes even stronger when one studies the lone horseman who stands isolated on the left horizon (Fig. 5). As this figure stands between the Slavs in the foreground and their burning village in the background, this horseman can be read as the angel who guards the entrance to Eden with a sword of fire.⁶⁰ Although Mucha's title claims to represent these Slavs in their "original homeland," it is clear that this couple is not depicted in their true home.

If Mucha's painting appropriates and adapts the Genesis story of Adam and Eve's expulsion from Eden, as Dvořák has pointed out, how might the story also be reconciled with the ideals of Pan-Slavism? For example, a Germanic rider stands as an obstacle obstructing the Slavs from their Eden reiterating current Slav hostility toward their German-speaking rulers. Is this a representation of a (proto) German figure acting as an executor of God's will bringing divine punishment on the Slavs, Mucha's native people? Mucha's painting can be seen as an inversion of the biblical story's meaning. The Slavic Adam and Eve crouch in their terrestrial homeland, forcibly and wrongfully expelled from their Eden rather than having sinned and been punished. The actions of the Germanic invaders, when seen in this light, are not the result of orders given

⁵⁹ Dvořák, "*The Slav Epic*," 107.

⁶⁰ Genesis 3:24

by a divine authority.⁶¹ By inverting the meaning of the traditional biblical story, Mucha was able to paint Slav history in accordance with the principles of Pan-Slavism. The Slavs are represented as inherently peaceful people, while Germans— or at least their ancestors— are depicted as wrongful aggressors.⁶²

A symbolic figure hovers in the upper right-hand section of Mucha's painting. Dvořák identifies this figure as a pagan priest whose arms are outstretched in prayer.⁶³ This priest prays for a brighter future for the Slav people, be it in times of peace, symbolized by the young woman to the priest's left who wears a crown of linden branches, or of war, symbolized by the young man holding a sword at the priest's right.⁶⁴ One could further assume that this pagan priest appeals to a higher authority to reestablish these Slavs in a village, regaining entry into their Eden. Such a prayer would essentially mean the removal of the Turanian and Gothic invaders.

The figure of the pagan priest reappears in Mucha's final painting of the *Slav Epic*, *Apotheosis of the Slavs: Slavs for Humanity*. In this second iteration, the older pagan priest of the first painting has been transformed into a younger man. While the priest of *Slavs in their Original Homeland* occupied a distinct and separate space, there was no clearly defined spiritual world within the scene. In contrast, the priest figure in *Apotheosis of the Slavs* occupies what seems to be a purely mystical space. Groups of figures and areas of colors are not arranged in accordance with natural laws but instead serve as a program of ideas and principles designed by the artist.

The figure groupings and color program in the *Slav Epic* paintings have again been analyzed by Dvořák, who explains that each area of color represents an historic group of Slav

⁶¹ Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," 107.

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," 107.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

people.⁶⁵ The blue section in the lower-right corner of the painting signifies the earliest Slavs, one assumes, those Slavs of the *Epic's* first painting. The figures relegated to the strip of black that stretches across the painting's center are the enemies of the Slavs, more specifically Germans and Magyars. The red region in the upper-left corner contains figures from Slav medieval history, specifically the Hussite Wars, and the bright yellow region in the painting's center includes figures who, in Dvořák's words, strove to bring about "freedom, peace, and unity."⁶⁶ Within this yellow region, arguably the focal point of the painting, Mucha included not only Slavs of various descents, but also an American flag. Dvořák hypothesizes that this flag is an acknowledgement of the American support for the formation of Czechoslovakia and for the growing presence of the Slav people during the early twentieth century.⁶⁷

The *Apotheosis of the Slavs* was finished in 1926, eight years after the Czechoslovak Republic gained independence in 1918, and so can be seen as a tribute to the triumph of the Czech Slavs. The title's "apotheosis" meant a dawning of a new age of glory for the Slav peoples. The prayers of the pagan priest have been answered and the Czech Slavs have regained access to the Eden of autonomy. A figure of Christ with his hands raised in blessing presides over the scene, visible just behind the central youth with outstretched arms, a final symbol perhaps of the divine acceptance of the Slavs into their Eden.

The Slav's final apotheosis, as imagined by Mucha in this painting, is an inherently peaceful one with continued allusions to the Slav's peaceful nature. The central figure of the painting, who Dvořák calls a symbol of the strength of the newly-born Czechoslovakia, holds two circular wreaths in his hands. A similar wreath is held by a woman in the central, yellow

⁶⁵ Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," 122.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

⁶⁷ More specifically, this flag may be an acknowledgement of the Richard Crane's financial support. Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," 122.

section of the painting. These wreaths are seen in other paintings of the *Slav Epic*, and Dvorak identifies them as symbols of a union between all of the Slav states.⁶⁸ The groups of Slav youths in the lower left corner who face the scene as though in worship, hold linden branches in their hands.⁶⁹ The linden tree was a symbol not only of Slav cultures, but also of peace; the same branches partly frame and partly veil the figures behind them, Czech soldiers who fought in World War I.⁷⁰

The above-mentioned signs of peace are all images specifically associated with Slav culture and with the Neoslav ideal of a peaceful people. Mucha also included signs that communicate the Slavs' intrinsic spirituality. Often, these two groups of symbols overlap. Within the central, yellow section of *Apotheosis of the Slavs*, Mucha included a family (Fig. 6). The family's father holds a staff that is topped by a carved dove whose wings are raised to form a circle. This dove, derived from Czech carvings, and a traditional symbol of peace appears in other paintings by Mucha, including his portrait of Josephine Crane Bradley (Fig. 7), the daughter of his patron, Richard Crane.⁷¹ Bradley is represented as Slavia, a divine embodiment of the Slav peoples; the chair in which Bradley sits has two finials with the same carved dove decoration. (Fig. 8).⁷²

In addition to being an embodiment of Slav culture, the dove also has clear biblical connotations that are relevant to Mucha's Pan-Slav project. The clearest biblical connotation of the dove is the role that it plays in the story of Noah's Ark, wherein the dove, who returns to Noah with an olive branch in its beak, becomes a portent of hope and of the end of hardships for

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Ibid.

⁷⁰ Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," 122.

⁷¹ Ibid.

⁷² Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," 122.

the Old Testament patriarch.⁷³ The ties to the story of Noah become even more obvious when one notices the rainbow that frames Christ's figure in the painting's background. The rainbow, of course, was a symbol of God's contract with Noah never again to devastate humanity as he had done with the flood. In light of the recent creation of Czechoslovakia, these images became assurances of the future prosperity of the newly formed nation. The *Apotheosis of the Slavs* conveys a divine promise that Czechoslovakia's new-found independence would bring peace and prosperity for the Slavs.

Mucha completed the *Apotheosis of the Slavs* in 1926, and the painting made a fitting celebration of the Czechoslovak Republic's recent independence. While the people of Mucha's homeland were achieving their independence, however, the Pan-Slav movement was waning. On the one hand, this painting can be seen as a celebration of Czech achievement, but it may also have represented a rallying cry for supporters of the Neoslav movement. To that end, *Apotheosis of the Slavs* is an image of a yet-to-be-acquired ideal.

Mucha's *Slav Epic* reflects two key principles of the Neoslav movement: an antagonism to German culture and the glorification of the Slav people. In the *Slav Epic*, the Slavs are represented as a cohesive whole, a unifying stand-in for the Czech people with whom a wider audience could sympathize. The first and final paintings of Mucha's series reveal the means through which Mucha promoted Czech independence to a broader public. Mucha relied on the Slavs to present a unified image of the Czech people, and he used biblical tropes to make the Czech's plight more accessible or sympathetic. The stories of Adam and Eve and of Noah's Ark reduce the Czech's history and goals to their most basic elements: the Czech's oppression at German hands, and the yet-to-be achieved glory of the Czech people. Furthermore, the recurring

⁷³ The language of this covenant underscores the permanence of God's deliverance. He says: "Thus I establish My covenant with you: Never again shall all flesh be cut off by the waters of the flood; never again shall there be a flood to destroy the earth." Genesis 9:11-13.

appearances of the pagan priest figure in the first and final paintings suggest that Czech culture was not recently produced by the Austro-Hungarian Empire for the wider world. Instead, the Czech people developed their own unique culture parallel to the development of German-speaking culture in early history. In other words, the Slavs' present and future glory stemmed from the prayers and actions of these pre-historical Slavs, and the culture of the Czech people predates the Hapsburg Empire. In this way, Mucha presented Slav culture in his *Epic* as autonomous from and as older than the Austro-Hungarian Empire, and he communicated the desires of Neoslavism to a wider public.

CHAPTER 4

IMAGINING CZECH UNITY

Before beginning work on the *Slav Epic*, Mucha described his project as a light that would shine, “into the souls of all people.”⁷⁴ Those who have studied these paintings read them primarily as a series crafted to speak specifically to Czech audiences. One must not, however, think that in focusing on a Czech audience, the artist did not also want the series to be relevant to a wider audience. Mucha’s claim that the messages and warnings of the *Slav Epic* were meant for all people, was not hyperbole. As an artist who spent significant time in Paris and America, Mucha was particularly well-qualified to address various publics and to portray diverse nationalities that played a part in the Neoslav movement. The following section will examine the ways in which the *Slav Epic* can be seen as an expression of Neoslav ideals, carefully crafted to communicate with both local and foreign audiences. The challenge for Mucha lay in creating a series of paintings that would be relevant and inspirational for a local audience, well-acquainted with the mores of Czech history and Slav culture, while also making images that were relatable and appealing to non-Slav viewers.

A comparison of the eighth painting of Mucha’s *Epic*, entitled *Master Jan Hus Preaching at the Bethlehem Chapel: Truth Prevails* (Fig. 9), and the painting *Master Jan Hus Before the Council of Constance* (Fig. 10), by the nineteenth-century Czech history painter Václav Brožík, illustrates Mucha’s references to Czech history paintings to instill patriotism in his audience. Both paintings take their subject matter from the life of Jan Hus, a Czech preacher whose death

⁷⁴ Alphonse Mucha quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 145.

has been considered as the spark that ignited the Hussite Wars of the fifteenth century.⁷⁵ Jan Hus first gained the attention of the papacy when he denounced acts of the Catholic Church in his sermons. Hus was called to Rome to speak for his actions and shortly thereafter was imprisoned and put to death by order of the papacy. In the Brožík painting, *Master Jan Hus Before the Council of Constance*, we see the Bohemian preacher defending himself in Rome. Mucha's painting serves as a prequel of sorts to the scene shown in Brožík's painting; in it we see Hus preaching in a pulpit in the Bethlehem Chapel of Prague above a large crowd of listeners, Czech royalty among them. Queen Sophia, the wife of King Wenceslaus IV, sits under a red baldachin opposite Hus. A second priest stands next to a baptismal font near the left edge of the painting, recording Hus's words as evidence for the Council of Constance.

Although the two paintings depict two different moments in Jan Hus's life, they are compositionally similar, with Hus on one side, addressing an audience opposite. In Mucha's painting, Queen Sophia sits under a red baldachin, just as a papal official sits in a position of authority in Brožík's painting. The similarities between the two paintings extend beyond composition to the poses of the figures themselves. Mucha painted Jan Hus with his hand pressed against his heart, just as Brožík has painted Hus. Given the similarities between the two paintings, Mucha's representation of Jan Hus can be seen as a prequel to the story illustrated in Vaclav Brožík's painting. Mucha added weight and context to the original Brožík painting by depicting the scene that precipitated Hus being called to Rome. Mucha's decision to paint Jan Hus clearly reflects the artist's desire to evoke Czech patriotism by depicting a martyr figure key

⁷⁵ Christoph points out that Jan Hus was a prominent figure in Frantisek Palacky's *History of Bohemia*, a five-volume history of the region carefully crafted to paint the Czech people in a positive light. Palacky marked Jan Hus's death, and the subsequent Hussite Wars as the beginning of modern Europe. Christoph, "The Rebirth of Romantic Nationalism in Bohemia," 10-12.

figures of Bohemian history and representing him in a historicizing style.⁷⁶ Mucha's desire to paint these figures in a historicizing style is harder to explain, especially when one considers the fact that many of Mucha's peers in Prague were painting in more abstract, Cubist styles.

In her analysis of the series, Sara Cristoph argues that Mucha sought to depict Slav culture as being long-lived and deeply-ingrained, and the Slav people therefore deserving of independence.⁷⁷ Mucha's references to Czech history painting in the *Slav Epic* not only communicates a long and important Czech history, but also a long native painting tradition. Mucha's use of the Brožík painting can be seen as more than an attempt to highlight the most significant episodes of Slav history for the world. The compositional similarities between the two paintings make Mucha's depiction of Jan Hus seem like an extension of a story told by Mucha's artistic ancestor, Vaclav Brožík. If Mucha could promote Neoslav principles to the residents of Prague by illustrating the key moments of Czech history, he also could strengthen the viewers' attachment to Slav culture by illustrating its engaging and long-lived artistic traditions. In short, the Jan Hus of Mucha's painting becomes an image of Bohemian independence from foreign incursions; the painting itself serves as a testimony to the native Czech's visual culture.

Vaclav Brožík was not the only Czech artist whose work provided important source material for Alphonse Mucha's *Epic*. Cristoph presents Josef Mánes and Mikoláš Aleš as other Czech artists whose work influenced the *Epic*.⁷⁸ The paintings of Mánes, a nineteenth-century artist particularly known for his depictions of Czech peasants, are a particularly interesting source for Mucha. Mánes's painted catalog of traditional Czech costumes, including the peasant

⁷⁶ Mucha's decision to include Hus in his *Epic* can be seen as another instance of depicting episodes of Czech history with international significance. For more on Mucha's use of Palacky's *History of Bohemia* see Christoph, "The Rebirth of Romantic Nationalism in Bohemia," 10-12.

⁷⁷ Cristoph, describes the history depicted in Mucha's *Slav Epic* as an "invented tradition." For more on this "invented tradition" and its relationship to Panslav movements in the nineteenth and twentieth century, see *Ibid.*, 5-18.

⁷⁸ Cristoph, "The Rebirth of Romantic Nationalism in Bohemia," 12-18.

figures that decorated Prague's famed astronomical clock (Fig. 12), inspired Mucha as he painted his own images of Czech peasants in the *Slav Epic* (Fig. 11). By basing his own peasant figures on Mánes's originals, Mucha continued to emphasize the accomplishments of Czechs in the field of painting. The fact that Mucha referenced the images of Joseph Mánes and his peers on such a large scale aggrandized these accomplishments. Mucha also gave visual weight to the nobility of Czech history; he evoked icons of Prague itself.

Just as Mucha's references to the Brožík painting of Jan Hus creates an aggrandizing image of the history of Czech painting, the artist's interpretation of Mánes's peasants could serve a similar function. Cristoph argues that the artist replicated Mánes's own methods of preparing for paintings.⁷⁹ She makes the point that although Mánes's paintings of traditional Czech folk costumes were based on observations of contemporary Czech peasants, their clothing was also drawn from his study of theater costumes. Mucha continued this practice of studying theater costumes by dressing his own models in what he believed to be historically accurate costumes.⁸⁰ Mucha's interaction with the paintings and painting methods of Brožík and Manes evokes an image of the long and engaging traditions of Czech painting. Such an image could convince foreign audiences that the Slavs had a distinct culture worthy of representation and independence.

More than a debt to Mánes, however, Mucha's study of theater costumes also relates to the theatrical drama found in all of the paintings in the *Epic*. Furthermore, the painting's dramatic flair is a clear point where the artist breaks from his Czech predecessors. The paintings of Mánes and Brožík are typified by their relatively intimate compositions and naturalistic painting style. In Brožík's painting of Jan Hus, a much smaller group than in Mucha's painting

⁷⁹ Ibid., 14.

⁸⁰ Cristoph, "The Rebirth of Romantic Nationalism in Bohemia," 14.

attends to the preacher's words. In the same vein, Mánes's images of Czech peasants usually feature only one or two figures, and these figures appear in a relatively simple space. The generalized landscapes or simple, gold background of Mánes's works of art are a far cry from the intricately detailed, baroque backgrounds of Mucha's paintings for the *Slav Epic*. The gothic vaults of the Bethlehem Chapel are in fact Mucha's fabrication; the actual chapel in Prague does not feature such vaulting (Fig. 13).

Mucha departed from his predecessors in style. While figurative, Mucha's *Epic* is not painted in the same, naturalistic manner seen the paintings of Mánes and Brožík. The images taken from these earlier artists were fused together with elements borrowed from more contemporary source paintings, in part to add to the dramatic nature of the paintings. The peasants and other figures of the *Slav Epic* are typically bathed in a bright, light color. In the case of *Master Jan Hus Preaching*, the various figures are all washed in a pale blue tinge or light, the effect of which is a general obscuring of the figure's features. This effect is exacerbated by Mucha's pointillist technique.

The effects of Mucha's colored washes and pointillist paint application can be best seen in the *The Oath of Omladina under the Slavic Linden Tree: The Slavic Revival* (Fig. 14), where an emphasis is placed on the figures' silhouettes over the identifying details of their costumes. Mucha's use of bright, washing lights emphasizes the dramatic poses struck by Mucha's figures, but also obscures the finer details of clothing, which, if truly derived from the paintings of Mánes, were a symbol of Slav culture and of the Czech painting tradition. Because they lack specific iconic traits, the figures in *The Oath of the Omladina* become everyman figures with whom a foreign audience can identify. The focus on silhouette exhibited in the *Oath of the Omladina* can be interpreted as the artist's attempt to universalize the messages of the *Slav Epic*.

This hypothesis is strengthened when one considers the emphasis that the artist himself placed on the human body's expressive qualities in his lectures on art in which, Mucha declared, "to communicate with the souls of man the artist must address himself to the senses of the body."⁸¹

In using a more figurative painting style, Alphonse Mucha may have tried to make the ideas behind the Czech independence movement more accessible and appealing to foreign viewers.

Mucha incorporated other modern painting styles beyond the boldly colored washes and the pointillist technique seen in *The Oath of the Omladina*. Mucha's incorporation of Art Nouveau elements may be the most obvious; a figure in *The Oath of Omladina*, the young woman who sits in the left foreground holding an instrument (Fig. 15), was used a second time in an Art Nouveau-style poster advertising the *Slav Epic* (Fig. 16).⁸² This shared figure suggests a fluidity between the Art Nouveau style and the style of the *Slav Epic*, and adds yet another layer of depth to the style of the series. One could make the argument that the artist knowingly incorporated these Art Nouveau elements in his series because this style was successful in Paris. Mucha's use of Art Nouveau in the paintings of the *Slav Epic* can be seen as another attempt to draw foreign attention to the Slavs.

Mucha's *Epic* gives a more dynamic version of the Art Nouveau style. However, the clear incorporation of Art Nouveau elements in Mucha's painting seems at odds with the artist's own statement about the *Epic* and his late career. While making the *Epic*, Mucha argued for a purely Slav style of painting, disavowing what he perceived to be the foreign influences of his peers in Prague.⁸³ He also claimed that his move to Prague and subsequent work on the *Epic* led

⁸¹ Alphonse Mucha, *Lectures on Art* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1975), 9.

⁸² Dvořák, "The Slav Epic," 120.

⁸³ Mucha would complain that his peers in Prague were too dependent on foreign styles. In a letter to his wife Maruška he would write: "They don't exist in themselves, they only live in the reflection of others. Everything they do is imitation, copied from elsewhere and, what is worse copied from Germany." In contrast, Mucha would declare himself to be, "a servant of [his country]" Alphonse Mucha quoted in Dvořák, "Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings," 95.

him to become a serious painter. While describing his earlier works of art, Mucha said, “I began to be haunted by yet another thought: for the past five years my works had largely met the needs of day-to-day life, but the energy I had put into them had not been in proportion to their mission.”⁸⁴ Mucha’s continuation of Art Nouveau can be interpreted as his own vote of confidence in the style. His use of Art Nouveau elements in the *Slav Epic* suggests that the artist did not see the Art Nouveau style as a strictly French style. One could even go so far as to suggest that Mucha intended these Art Nouveau elements to bridge the gap between French and Czech audiences. In this light, the style of the *Slav Epic* is carefully crafted both to glorify the Czech culture and to communicate this glory to a wide, international audience. In addition, the fact that the bold outlines and silhouettes of the Art Nouveau style heighten the dramatic impact of the *Epic’s* paintings could be a sign of the artist’s confidence in Art Nouveau as a flexible style capable both of appealing to the eye and of conveying drama and impact effectively to audiences.

Mucha carefully crafted the paintings of the *Slav Epic* to reflect the ideology of pan-Slavism and chose painting styles that could help the ideas chosen for his *Epic*. Examination of the paintings of the *Slav Epic* leads one to the conclusion that Alphonse Mucha created a style that would engender a patriotic spirit in his local viewers while also endearing foreign audiences to the Slav cause.

⁸⁴ Alphonse Mucha quoted in Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 138.

CHAPTER 5

THE ABOLITION OF SERFDOM IN RUSSIA

As a result of their connection with ideas from the Pan-Slav movement, the paintings of the *Slav Epic* engage with the history of the Slav states. Specific paintings of Mucha's *Epic* not only draw parallels between Slav history and the Czech independence movement, they also demonstrate Mucha's interest in the contemporary positions of other Slav nations. Due to Mucha's interest in Pan-Slav ideology, the *Slav Epic* becomes not only a propaganda piece for Czech independence, but a commentary on other nations and their relationships. The study of a specific painting within the *Epic* namely, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia: Work in Freedom is the Foundation of a State* (Fig. 17) demonstrates these various layered references and meanings in Mucha's series, and no painting better illustrates Mucha's awareness of and desire to stop the slow death of the Neoslav movement than does this painting. This painting, made in 1914, is the nineteenth painting of the series. The depth of meaning to be drawn from within *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* can also help to explain Mucha's decision to return to a more naturalistic figural style.

The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia shows a Russian official reading the Emancipation Reform of 1861 outside of St. Basil's Cathedral, the spiritual, cultural, and political center of Moscow. Czar Alexander II ordered the Emancipation Reform of 1861 which freed the serfs of Russia. With the passing of this law, the Russian serfs gained the status of full citizenship, and were therefore no longer property of the owners of the estates where they worked. The serfs were granted the right to own property and to marry without the consent of their landlords or

masters.⁸⁵ In the painting, a crowd of peasants surrounds the bureaucrat who reads the reform aloud to the peasants; probably because they were illiterate. One assumes that their lives were about to be deeply impacted by the Emancipation Reform but the serfs seem to have little interest in the announcement.

Although this painting can be seen as a reflection of Czech and Pan-Slav interests, the subject matter may also have been intended to serve as a message for a specifically Russian audience, and in a sense, to address another divide among proponents of the Neoslav movement. Russia held a contentious position in the eyes of other Slavs. On the one hand, the nation held a place of honor because it was an independent nation, the most powerful state that explicitly represented Slavs.⁸⁶ Russia was the home of strong Pan-Slav sentiment; some of the original Pan-Slav organizations in Russia and many Russians supported the desires of other Slavs for independence. As such, other Slav peoples hoped that Russia would use its political weight to promote the Slav cause on the international stage, and that when they gained their independence, Russia would protect the interests of a coalition of Slav states.

Proponents of Pan-Slavism within Russia had a different vision of their nation's involvement in a Slav union. In their view, if the newly freed Slav states were to form a sort of Pan-Slav coalition, then Russia would serve as its leader, ideally influencing the member states' internal and external policies.⁸⁷ This more domineering vision of "Mother Russia" was at odds with the Russian role envisioned by non-Russian Slavs who promoted a coalition in which each

⁸⁵ For more on the serf's emancipation in Russia and its effects see: David Moon, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* (London: Pearson Education Limited, 2001) 70-83.

⁸⁶ Andrzej Walicki studies the contentious position Russia held within the Panslav and Neoslav movements in his book. Andrzej Walicki, *The Slavophile Controversy* (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 1989) 394.

⁸⁷ Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 37.

state was equal and all protected the Slav cause from foreign incursions.⁸⁸ The Neoslav movement was again divided by these contrasting views held by Slavs living outside of Russia.

Russia's actions towards Poland were a second cause for concern to non-Russian Slavs. Since 1772, Poland had been divided between Prussia, Austria, and Russia.⁸⁹ This oppression of one Slav state by another was bad enough, the fact that Russia essentially collaborated with Germany and Austria to do so strengthened suspicions of Russia's commitment to the Pan-Slav cause. To be fully supportive of the right of other Slavs to gain independence, it was believed that Russia should relinquish its control over Poland.⁹⁰ This issue was debated at various Pan-Slav Congresses, and Russia's reluctance to cede control over Poland further fractured the Neoslav movement.

Mucha's choice of subject matter in the *Abolition of Serfdom* can be seen as the artist's own response to the debate surrounding Russia's position in the Neoslav movement. Given that proponents of Neoslavism hoped that Russia would support the independence of other Slavs, it is no surprise that Mucha in similar wishful thinking selected a scene of Russian liberation for his *Epic*. Yet, Russia's support of Pan-Slavism is, in a sense, contested in Mucha's painting. By downplaying the serfs' interest in their own liberation, Mucha's painting asserts the Russian state's involvement in liberating and elevating the serfs. The modern Russian state could support the independence of other Slavs, specifically allowing greater freedom for the Slavs of then divided Poland, just as the Russian State supported the abolition of serfdom in 1861.

While the liberation of the serfs was an important, progressive occasion in Russia's own history, this liberation came considerably later than similar movements on the world stage. As

⁸⁸ Ibid., 16.

⁸⁹ Vladislav Savic, *South-Eastern Europe: the Main Problem of the Present World Struggle* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1918), 238.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

mentioned before, the Emancipation Reform of Russia was passed in 1861. Although America's own Emancipation Proclamation would not be made until 1863, and the fourteenth amendment would not be passed until 1868, Russia's emancipation seemed shamefully late in the eyes of western European states. If anything, the lateness of the serf's emancipation cemented the Western perception of Russia as a backwards nation, late to see the benefits of enlightenment thinking.⁹¹

The struggles of Czechs, Russians, and indeed of all Slavs are made even clearer when set against a bright promising dawn. The onion-domed towers of St. Basil's set against a rose-tinged sky can be seen in the background of Mucha's painting; Dvořák is right in her belief that the towers of St. Basil function as a symbol of the past achievements of the Slavs, and as an emblem of the accomplishments that they can achieve in the future.⁹² This church and Russian culture were an important source of artistic inspiration for Mucha. In preparation for the *Slav Epic*, Mucha traveled to Russia, returning with photographs and sketches. He spoke very approvingly of the country later on, and with particular fondness for Russian spirituality. In the words of his son Jiri Mucha, the artist "Found himself in the age of the icon, golden domes, troikas, and crazed pilgrims...He recognized his origins, he was caught up by the nostalgia of the centuries which bound him to that origin."⁹³

Traveling to Russia was for Mucha a journey to study the origins of Slavdom itself or, as described by Jiri, a journey to the "dark maternal womb."⁹⁴ Given Mucha's high regard for Russia as the source for Slav culture, his representations of Russian history and culture in *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* are all the more poignant. The lofty ideals promised in the domes

⁹¹ Lavrin, *Russia, Slavdom, and the Western World*, 36. Savic, *South-Eastern Europe*, 238.

⁹² Dvořák, "The *Slav Epic*," 122.

⁹³ Jiri Mucha, *The Master of Art Nouveau*, 245.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*

of St. Basil's are a far cry from the serfs' humble state as represented in the painting's foreground. Mucha saw Russia as the root of all Slav cultures, and therefore Russia's perceived lack of support and commitment for the promotion of Slav culture would have been all the more disturbing. In this sense, the *Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* can be seen as a rallying cry to Slavs far from Prague to support the failing Neoslav movement.

Mucha's depiction of the liberated serfs may have been intended to reignite the passions of the Slavs of Prague and to galvanize a diminishing Neoslav base. One can hypothesize that their distraction from the declaration of their own freedom was not because they were uninterested but because they were ignorant of the impact that the declaration would have on their lives. Mucha's painting can be read as a warning to the Czechs then living under Austrian rule who were abandoning the principles of the Neoslav movement. An insufficiently roused Czech public would be ignorant of the benefits of freedom in the same way as the serfs in Mucha's painting. Given the fact that the *Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* depicts a scene of independence being granted to a politically unrepresented people, the painting could have spoken to a contemporary Slav audience.

The apathetic reaction to liberation seen in *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* parallels a large crack in the steadily crumbling Neoslav movement. When Karel Kramář founded the Neoslav movement, he did so with the intent of simply promoting Czech representation within the Austrian Empire.⁹⁵ At the 1910 Sofia Pan-Slav Congress, when Serbian and Bulgarian delegates declared their intention to sever ties with the Empire, Kramář insisted that the Congress was not a universal stand against Austria.⁹⁶ The Neoslav movement's other voice, Tomáš Masaryk, however, was a proponent of complete separation from Austria. Masaryk's

⁹⁵ Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 13.

⁹⁶ Vysny, *Neo-Slavism and the Czechs*, 209.

point of view was that German-speaking and Slav cultures were too disparate to be equally represented within one body of government.⁹⁷ The passive portrayal of the serfs in *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia* may betray Mucha's support of the principles of Masaryk over those of Kramář.

To better analyze the crowd's reaction in *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia*, I will compare it with the painting that immediately precedes it in Mucha's *Epic, The Oath of the Omladina* (Fig. 14). This painting takes its subject from recent Czech history; the Omladina was a youth organization of the 1890s, characterized by its anti-Austrian principles.⁹⁸ The anti-Austrian sentiment the group expressed was so pronounced that in 1904, the leaders of the Omladina were imprisoned.⁹⁹ In Mucha's painting, the young members of the Omladina form a circle and raise their hands in prayer to the goddess Slavia, an embodiment of the Slavic ideal, and perhaps more specifically, of Slav independence. Outside of the circle of bare-chested, praying youths is a second circle of onlookers. The members of this outer circle are dressed in simplified versions of traditional Slavic clothing. They seem to represent a similar part of the population as did the group of Russian serfs in the next painting of the series. The key difference between the organizations of these two groups is that the figures radiate outward from a central point in *The Oath of the Omladina*, namely the figure of the goddess Slavia. This radiating organization suggests that the figures of this painting are all focused on and wholly devoted to a common goal, independence from Austria.

The argument for complete autonomy gained greater weight in the early twentieth century, when Austria's treatment of Serbia revealed the flaws in the proposal that Slavs remain a part of the Austrian Empire. While Serbia had been a territory of the Austrian Empire since

⁹⁷ Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 20.

⁹⁸ Dvořák, "The *Slav Epic*," 120.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

1882, the Austrian government had promised never to annex the region formally.¹⁰⁰ One could say that Serbia held a privileged space within the Empire of the sort that Kramář envisioned the Czechs having as well.¹⁰¹ The appeal of Serbia's status was concretely dashed when in 1908 Austria annexed Serbia, breaking its earlier promise.¹⁰² Austria's annexation of Serbia was seen as a sign of the Empire's lack of respect for its Slav territories. If Austria was willing to revoke the liberties of one Slav state when it ceased to be convenient, it was reasonable to expect the Empire to take the same dismissive attitude towards its Czech citizens.

While preparing for and painting the *Slav Epic*, Mucha relied heavily on earlier styles of Czech painting. But the *Epic* was not exclusively directed to a Czech audience nor did it only promote the matter of Czech independence. As evidenced by *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia*, the paintings of Mucha's *Epic* also conveyed messages for those living outside of Prague. In this light, the *Epic* may have been a distinctly international enterprise with layered meanings meant for a much wider audience than the City of Prague alone could provide.

¹⁰⁰ Kalvoda, *The Genesis of Czechoslovakia*, 36.

¹⁰¹ Ibid.

¹⁰² Vsny, *Neo-Slavism and the Czechs*, 200.

CHAPTER 6

CONCLUSION

The twenty canvases of Alphonse Mucha's *Slav Epic* were given to the City of Prague in 1928.¹⁰³ After its display in Prague, several paintings within the *Epic* traveled across Europe and the Atlantic to be displayed in Brooklyn and Chicago between 1920 and 1921.¹⁰⁴ In the United States, Alphonse Mucha's images of the Czech people were warmly received. William H. Goodyear, the curator of the Brooklyn Museum of Art, complimented Mucha's paintings in a letter, "I consider your mural paintings to be the greatest works of their class since the time of the sixteenth-century Italian artists."¹⁰⁵ Dr. Goodyear would go on to call Mucha, "the foremost of contemporary painters, including all those of the nineteenth century."¹⁰⁶

The critical response to Mucha's *Slav Epic* within Prague was not as encouraging. When the *Epic* was displayed in Prague, it was a popular attraction, but the critical response to Mucha's *Epic* was overwhelmingly negative. One critic went so far as to call the paintings, "a crime against the Holy Spirit." Another critic was more guarded in his

¹⁰³The people of Prague would have been well acquainted with the *Slav Epic* before Mucha's donation. As early as 1919, finished paintings within the series were being exhibited both in Prague and abroad. A detailed account of the *Slav Epic's* exhibition history, and the history of its reception can be found in Dvořák, "Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings," 143-152.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 145.

¹⁰⁵ An excerpt of the letter written by William H. Goodyear to Mucha is quoted in Dvořák, "Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings," 147.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*

response, though his dislike for the *Epic* is still clear, "everything was showy, theatrical, and garish, or on the other hand, broken down into insignificant episodes."¹⁰⁷

The criticism of Mucha's *Epic* seemed to have a common theme. In 1919, the Czech critic Stanislav Neumann complained, "Now Prague is expected to accept and permanently exhibit [Mucha's] *Slav Epic*...It is simply a sugary monstrosity of spurious artistic and allegorical pathos."¹⁰⁸ The same critic later demanded that, "The *Slav Epic* must not be allowed to be permanently exhibited in [the] Czechoslovak Republic."¹⁰⁹ A second critic said that the *Epic* was nothing more than a "bible historiée," that is not representative of Czech art."¹¹⁰ These critics all took umbrage at the fact that Mucha claimed to represent all Czechs in his painting series. They seemed particularly upset at the thought that the outside world might take Mucha's *Slav Epic* as being truly representative of Czech culture. Neumann responded to a positive review published in Milwaukee with the cool reply, "The pitiful American taste! If of course the admiration of a journal from Milwaukee truly reflects it."¹¹¹

Mucha's historicizing style did not reflect contemporary developments in Czech painting, and this disjoint can be seen as one root of the Czech critic's response to the *Slav Epic*. While Mucha looked to the paintings of his Czech predecessors to create new works of art, his peers were looking abroad to the artistic developments taking place among the French avant-garde. The great disparity between these two artistic styles make the critic's passionate pleas that Mucha's paintings not be seen as a representation of Czech culture more understandable. One

¹⁰⁷ V. Dvořák, "Muchova Slovanska Epopej," *Budoucnost*, 2 (1919), 106. Excerpt translated in Dvořák, "Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings," 145.

¹⁰⁸ Stanislav Neumann publishing under the pseudonym Sigma, "Vlastenecky pripad Alfonse Muchy," *Kmen*, 3, No. 3 (22 May 1919), 17. Excerpt translated in Dvořák, *Ibid.*, 144.

¹⁰⁹ Stanislav Neumann publishing under the pseudonym Civis Bohemicus, "Potreba kulturniho teroru," *Cerven*, 2, No. 11 (15 May, 1919), 101. Excerpt translated in Dvořák, "Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings," 144.

¹¹⁰ Frantisek Zákavec, "Kukončení Muchovy Slovanské Epopeje," *Umení*, 2 (1929), 244. Excerpt translated in Dvořák, *Ibid.*, 148.

¹¹¹ Stanislav Kostka Neumann, "O vystave Alfonse Muchy," *Moravsky kraj*, 12 (24 January 1907), 3. Excerpt translated in Dvořák, "Book Illustrations and Mural Paintings," 144.

can argue that Mucha and these critics wanted to project different images of Czech identity to the wider world. Mucha, using images of the past, wanted the foreign viewer to understand that although a diverse group of people had been banded together by the creation of the Czechoslovak state, they were united by their Slav heritage. Even though the Czechoslovak Republic was a newly-formed state, the *Slav Epic* showed that its people had a culture and artistic tradition that stretched back for centuries. In contrast, the Czech critics wanted foreign audiences to understand that Czech artists were in tune with the artistic developments taking place in among the European avant-garde, and in this light, Mucha's historicizing paintings could be seen as backward.

The conflict between Alphonse Mucha and his contemporary critics can be described as a conflict over the image of Czech identity. In criticizing Mucha, these writers and artists alike demonstrated their awareness of the fact that the *Epic* was being promoted as an image of Czech culture to audiences outside of Prague. Because this image did not accord with the critics own ambitions for the Czech people, the *Slav Epic* was rejected by them. The friction between these two parties demonstrates that the Czech people's image abroad was an important subject not only to Alphonse Mucha, but also to his contemporaries in Prague.

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Figure 1. Alphonse Mucha, *The Slavs in their Original Homeland: Between the Turanian Whip and the Sword of the Goths*, 1916. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.



Figure 2. Alphonse Mucha, *The Apotheosis of the Slavs: Slavs for Humanity*, 1926. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.



Figure 3. Alphonse Mucha, *Murals for the Pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina, Exposition Universelle, 1900*. Photograph.



Figure 4. Alphonse Mucha, *The Slavs in their Original Homeland* (detail 1), 1916. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.



Figure 5. Alphonse Mucha, *The Slavs in their Original Homeland* (detail 2), 1916. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.



Figure 6. Alphonse Mucha, *The Apotheosis of the Slavs* (detail 1), 1926. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.

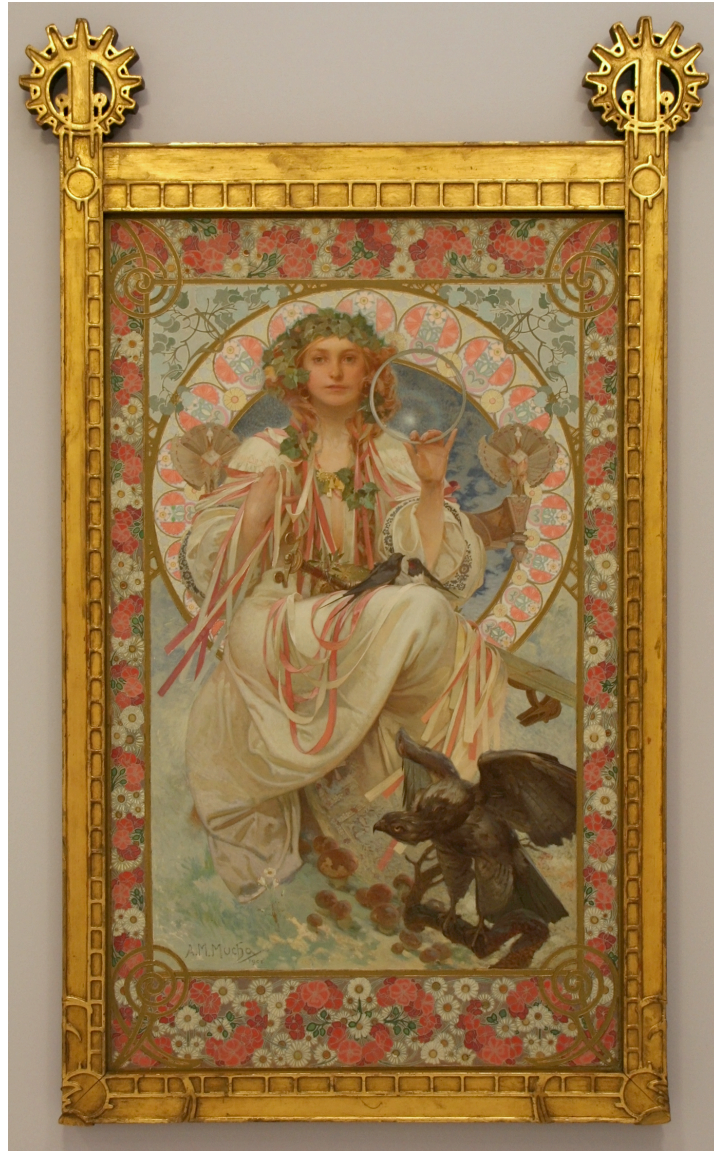


Figure 7. Alphonse Mucha, *Josephine Crane Bradley as Slavia*, 1908. Národní Galerie, Czech Republic.



Figure 8. Alphonse Mucha, *Josephine Crane Bradley as Slavia* (detail 1), 1908. Národní Galerie, Czech Republic.

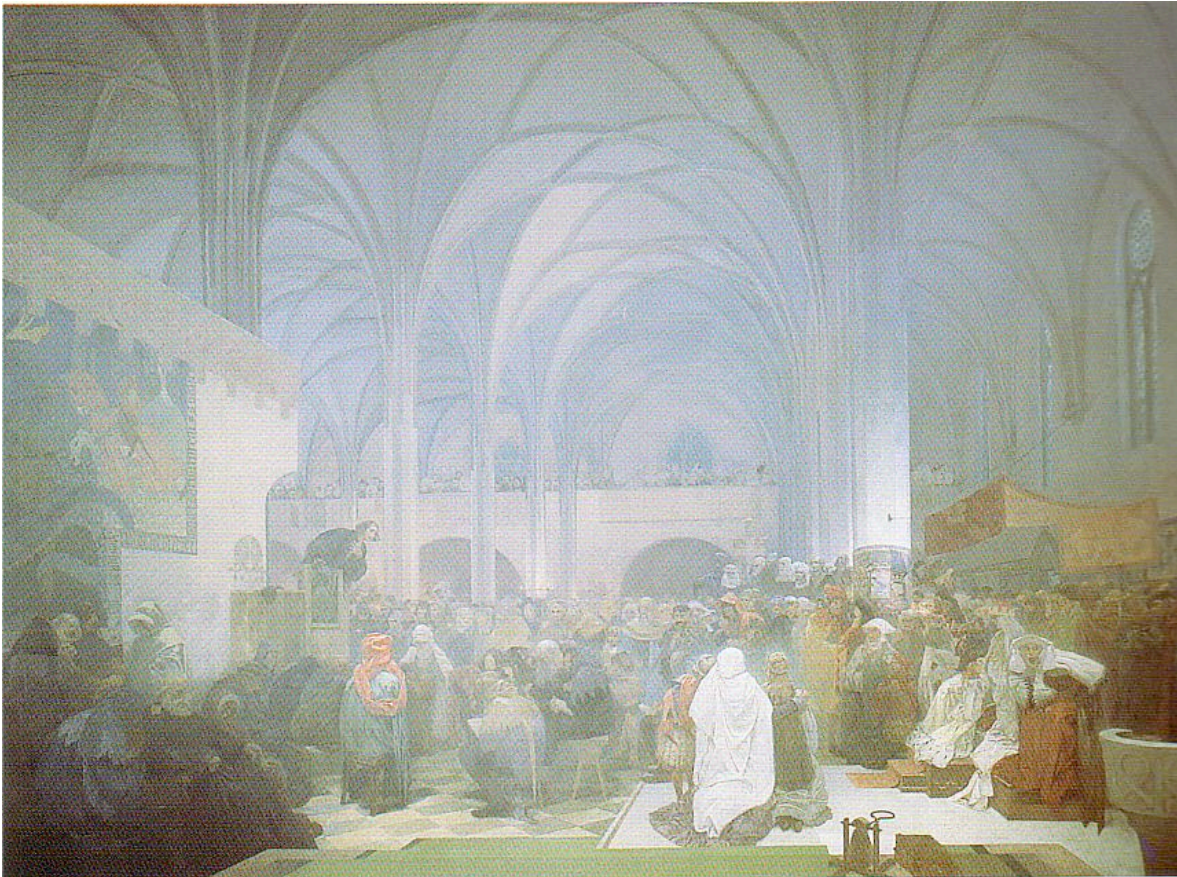


Figure 9. Alphonse Mucha, *Master Jan Hus Preaching at the Bethlehem Chapel: Truth Prevails*, 1916. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.



Figure 10. Václav Brožík, *Master Jan Hus Before the Council of Constance*, 1883. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.



Figure 11. Josef Mánes, *Veruna Cudova*, 1854. Museum of Prague, Czech Republic.



Figure 12. Josef Mánes, *June* (medallion from the Prague Astronomical clock), 1865-1866. Prague, Czech Republic.



Figure 13. Interior of Bethlehem Chapel, Prague.



Figure 14. Alphonse Mucha, *The Oath of Omladina under the Slavic Linden Tree: The Slavic Revival*, 1926. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.



Figure 15. Alphonse Mucha. *The Oath of Omladina under the Slavic Linden Tree* (detail 1). 1926. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.



Figure 16. Alphonse Mucha. *Slovanská epopej* (*The Slav Epic*). 1928. Mucha Trust.

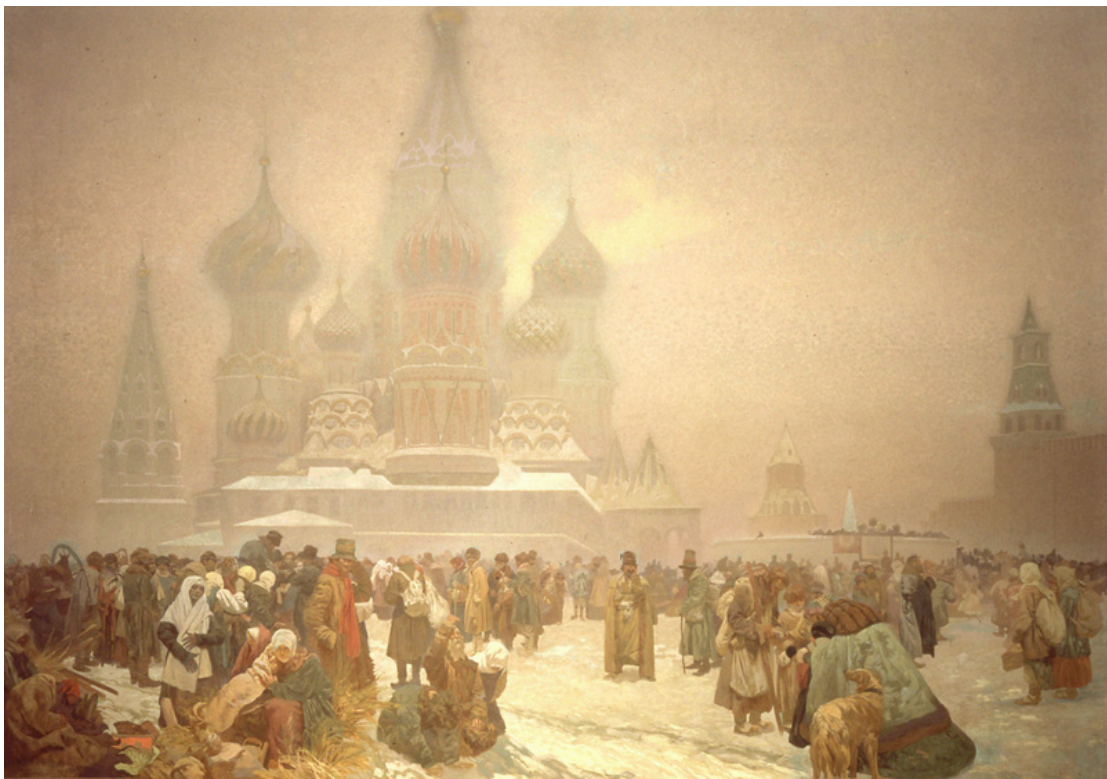


Figure 17. Alphonse Mucha, *The Abolition of Serfdom in Russia: Work in Freedom is the Foundation of a State*, 1914. Moravský Krumlov, Czech Republic.