

Painting national character

A comparison of nationalist art by A.M. Mucha and V.M. Vasnetsov

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Abstract – This paper examines how nationalist sentiments are differently manifested in the works of Alphonse Mucha and Viktor Vasnetsov. In order to understand the nature of these sentiments, the biographies of the painters and the socio-political circumstances of their relative homelands are considered. Additionally three works from each painter are analyzed to establish how these nationalist sentiments are translated into the style and subject matter. Finally a comparison is drawn between the two painters.

The paper has established that Mucha grew up in Moravia, which had been struggling for independence from the Austro-Hungarian Empire. This struggle motivated Mucha to create art that would legitimize Czech independence and would emphasize that the various Slav nations were not inferior to their German oppressors. His nationalist art therefore mainly focused on various scenes from Czech and broader Pan-Slavic history.

Vasnetsov lived in the Russian Empire, where progressives promoted Western liberalist policies as a possible solution to class inequality and poverty. Vasnetsov saw this Westernization as a threat to his heritage and therefore decided to preserve aspects of Russian culture that he deemed beautiful. He therefore painted in the folkloric and religious genre, since they symbolized an abstract strength and hope in a local solution of the problem.

Consequently the nationalist sentiments in Mucha's work are intended to institute change in Czech society, while Vasnetsov's nationalism is less politically involved, but aims to provide comfort in times of despair.

Key words – Alphonse Mucha, Viktor Vasnetsov, Pan-Slavism, Russian Revival

Introduction

The European socio-political landscape during the Fin de siècle is characterized by tension and unrest. Especially in Eastern Europe nationalist sentiments become more common, reactionary to both political and cultural supremacy of Western Europe. This sentiment has caused the pan-Slavist movement in the Czech lands, which sought independence for Slavic nations from the Austro-Hungarian empire. The painter Alphonse Mucha belonged to this movement and captured his nationalist sentiments in many of his works. Simultaneously the Russian Empire, which had been striving for Westernization ever since emperor Peter I, experienced a resurgence of nationalism after the Napoleonic War. This nationalism stimulated the painter and architect Viktor Vasnetsov to start a revivalist movement in art and architecture.

In this paper I will analyze works of Mucha and Vasnetsov to find out how those were influenced by the nationalist sentiments of the painters. I will compare their works to find how the different political climates of their homelands translated into artistic differences. Therefore my research question will be:

How are nationalist sentiments differently manifested in the works of A.M. Mucha and V.M. Vasnetsov?

To answer this research question I will start by mentioning relevant socio-political circumstances for each country: Moravia (contemporary Czech Republic) and the Russian Empire (specifically Moscow and St. Petersburg). Then I will elaborate on Mucha's and Vasnetsov's biographies, with an emphasis on their positions within these socio-political climates. I will then consider how these positions are represented in the works of the painters. I will conclude the paper by pointing out the differences and similarities in the choice of subject and painting styles and how this relates to the background of the painters.

The present literature on Mucha focuses primarily on his Art Nouveau posters: the advertisements for Sarah Bernards plays and various Parisian companies. Mucha always resented this favoritism, since he was proud of his Czech heritage and considered his later pan-Slavist works to be his most important. There is also close to none literature present that compares Vasnetov's paintings to works outside of the Russian Empire, despite the similarities in the aim to recover national identity.

1 Socio Political Circumstances

In order to understand the meaning that Alphonse Mucha and Viktor Vasnetsov assigned to their works, it is important to understand the socio political context in which the painters lived. Both painters are known to have had nationalist sentiments, so in this chapter specific emphasis will be placed on historical events, which might have fostered these sentiments.

In the first part of the chapter the situation in Mucha's homeland, Moravia and later Czechoslovakia, will be discussed. In the second part of the chapter, the situation in the Russian Empire will be analyzed. Both countries will be considered within a timeframe that matches the lifespan of the writers. Therefore Moravia and Czechoslovakia will be considered roughly in the period 1860-1939, and the Russian Empire in the period 1848-1926.

Situation in Moravia and Later Czechoslovakia

Moravia had been a part of the Austrian Empire since 1526. As a result the German-speaking population held a privileged position within Czech society. In order to achieve social advancement, the Czech population needed to communicate in German, practically distancing themselves from their Czech origin and culture. However in the beginning of the 19th century the consequences of the French Revolution slowly awakened a national consciousness in various layers of Czech society. (Bradley et al., 1998)

Throughout the 19th century a political movement was created, Pan-Slavism. The main purpose of this movement was to find sovereignty for various Slavic peoples, through their unified efforts against their Austrian or Ottoman (in case of the Balkan Slavs) oppressors. (Kostya, 1981) Many Pan-Slavists hoped to reach their goals through annexation of their lands into the Russian Empire, since it was the sole powerful and independent Slavic state. They did not consider that annexation would mean simply a different kind of despotic rule by a distant centralized power and that under Russian rule their language and cultural identity would be similarly oppressed. This blindsided movement is best described as "A desire to escape from smallness" by T.G.Masaryk, the first president of Czechoslovakia. Unsurprisingly Pan-Slavic activities were illegalized in the Austrian Empire, which only gave them more appeal as a rebellious movement against the system. (Bradley, 1961)

After defeat in the Austro-Italian war in 1859, the Austrian Empire was forced to install a constitution, which established basic human rights for the entire population and allowed for the creation of various democratic parties. Throughout the 1870's the circumstances for the Czechs slowly began to improve. In 1880 Czech became an official language on the same level as German. These developments were however met with opposition from the Germans living in Bohemia and Moravia, who were consistently losing all their privileges and were pressured into learning Czech. They formed their own Pan-Germanist groupings, which often clashed with Pan-Slavists. (Bradley, 1961) However Germans were the minority group and Czech identity became more visible in various cultural festivals and performances, which were often affiliated with radical nationalist and Pan-Slavic groups. Despite the growing number of pan-Slavic and nationalist support, the movements were not sufficiently organized and lacked consensus on foreign policy. Additionally annexation of Czech lands into the Russian Empire would be impossible due to the alliance between the Habsburgs and the Romanovs. The Pan-Slavists therefore did not manage to achieve independence until after World War I. (Bradley, 1961; Kostya, 1981)

The animosity against the German population culminated during World War I. Strict censorship and wartime trials against "traitors" suppressed any Pan-Slavic sentiments, only fueling the resistance against the Austrian regime. Czech soldiers were ordered to fight for the Central Powers, but often switched sides and joined the Entente in so-called Czechoslovak Legions, which later joined the fight against Bolsheviks in the Russian Empire. (Volkov, 2014) In 1917, when it

became evident that the Austro-Hungarian Empire was on the losing side, strikes and protests against the war became increasingly common, since the army was no longer in a position to suppress opposition. Meanwhile the leaders of the resistance, were negotiating with the Entente leaders for recognition of an independent Czechoslovakia. (Bradley et al., 1998)

Partially due to the efforts of the Czechoslovak Legions against the Austrians and the Bolsheviks, and partially to weaken the Austro-Hungarian Empire, the Entente recognized Czechoslovakia as an independent republic on October 28th of 1918. (Bradley et al., 1998) The newly achieved independence and simultaneous fall of the Russian Empire made Pan-Slavic sentiments outdated and unnecessary. (Kostya, 1981)

Now all efforts were directed at creating a new Czechoslovak state and improving living conditions for the Czechs and Slovaks, who had previously been oppressed by the Austrian regime. However these policies caused Germans and other minorities to protest against the new government. As a result Czechoslovakia became decentralized and lost various densely populated territories. This significantly weakened Czechoslovakia from a military point of view and on March 15th 1939, Bohemia and Moravia became an official protectorate of the Third Reich. (Bradley et al., 1998)

Situation in Russian Empire

A prominent theme in the history of 19th century Russia is the search for identity, both from a political and a cultural point of view. Previously the empire had been on a track of westernization and modernization. West European cultures were seen as progressive while the Russian language, culture and arts were considered to be backwards and reserved for the lower classes. French immigrants were in high demand as teachers, governors and professors. However the French Revolution created a lot of suspicion for enlightenment and western liberalism. If those ideals ultimately undermined the autocratic rule of the Czar, then it threatened the entire foundation of aristocratic legitimacy. The nail on the coffin for Francomania in the Russian Empire was the Napoleonic War in 1812, during which more than half a million Russians died and Moscow, the old capital, was ravaged by fire. The French were therefore seen as destructive invaders and lost their idealized perception. (Ivshin, 2018)

The Russian Empire ended up playing a significant part in the defeat of Napoleon and the emperor Alexander I saw this as a sign that God was protecting him and his people. He turned to mysticism and came to believe that Russia had its own path, guided by God, distinct from other West European nations. As a result, the government became increasingly conservative, but simultaneously a newfound interest for Russian culture and tradition was found. This interest created a new scientific field, artistic archaeology, which was the study and documentation of various traditional arts, crafts and architecture. The people who favoured this conservative worldview for Russia would later be called Slavophiles. (Chernyh, 2015)

This conservatism created a lot of backlash. The serfs, who expected a reward for their efforts in the war against Napoleon, instead ended up with worse living conditions and fewer rights. Therefore serf uprisings became more frequent and various intellectuals formed oppositional groups. (Uskova, 2011) Raised on western ideals by their French governors and having been to France during the “expulsion of the Grand Armée”, they were opposed to these regressive policies. They believed that Russia was still very behind other European countries, especially due to the persistence of serfdom, lack of public education and constitution. In December 1825, after the death of Alexander I, these progressive thinkers attempted a coup, but due to poor organization it was put down and the so-called Decembrists were executed or sent off to Siberia by the new emperor Nicholas I. (Uskova, 2011)

To prevent future opposition, Nicholas I established a police state and even went as far as aiding other European monarchies in suppressing revolutions in 1848, to prevent any “toxic ideas” from

spreading. Despite these persecutions, the opposition, often referred to as Westerners, firmly believed that Russia was continuously straying further from the path of progress. (Chernyh, 2015) Nicholas's reign ended after his shameful defeat in the Crimean War of 1853-1856 against an alliance of Turkey, France and Britain. The war showed that the Russian Empire was significantly behind in terms of technological progress and confirmed once more the fear of the Westerners about the regressive state of their country. (Britannica, 2021)

The new emperor Alexander II had learned from the mistakes of his father and passed various liberalist reforms. He is especially known for abolishing serfdom in 1861. (Britannica, 2021) These reforms however felt insufficient to the Westerners. Especially the status of the former serfs was disappointing: they were technically free but needed to repay their former masters a compensation for the following 50 years. The absence of censorship, helped spread these ideas throughout various layers of society and numerous "secret societies" were formed, which ultimately committed regicide in 1881. (Ivanova, 2016)

Despite the public discontent, the progressive period of Alexander II greatly improved welfare of the population and boosted the economy. As a result the bourgeois merchant class grew in size and prominence. This class, emerging from poverty and rural areas, suddenly found itself in an abundance of wealth. The class felt affiliation with Slavophile movement and Russian Revivalism, since it resonated with their rural origin. It felt like now they could afford all those lavishly decorated objects, that were precious to them in their indigent youth. They therefore popularized the Russian Revivalist style in interior design and architecture. This again reinforced the interior economy, since luxury products were no longer imported, but created by craftsmen inside the country. (Chernyh, 2015)

Alexander III who became emperor after the murder of his father again reinstalled the police state and passed various counter reforms. His conservatism also fostered the Russian Revivalist style, since it did not carry the "Western threat". It therefore became the "official government" style and a massive church building programme was carried out along with a program of Russification, which involved the displacement of minority groups and promotion of Russian language and Orthodox Christianity to border territories. (Chernyh, 2015)

Nicholas II continued the conservative legacy of his father in 1894. However his policy was also aimed at rapid industrialization of the country, which effectively created a large working class that lived in extreme poverty. These conditions, combined with the disparities of the freed serfs, reignited the discussions between the Westerners and Slavophiles, who now precipitated into various political parties. After the defeat in the Russo-Japanese war, Nicholas II was forced to establish a Duma, a form of parliament. The Duma however proved to be ineffective, since the Czar still had the final say in the "democratic" process. (Britannica, 2021) World War I brought to light all the problems that were present in Russian society. Poverty and starvation increased drastically and disturbing news of losses returned from the front. On 8th of March 1917 the revolution overthrew the Czar and the country fell into civil war. Slowly but surely the Bolsheviks established dominance over the vast territory and in 1922 the declaration of the creation of the Soviet Union was officially signed. The period of 1917-1923 is characterized as an era of extreme violence and bloodshed; an estimated 10 million have died in this period. (Samorodov, 2014) The Bolshevik regime brought an end to the Russian Revivalist style, due to its bourgeois and nationalist tendencies. The new communist styles were linked to socialist internationalism: Constructivism and Rationalism.

Conclusion

We can see that both Moravia as well as the Russian Empire were faced with questions of national identity in the second half of the 19th century. However they were present for different reasons and were manifested in different ways: In Moravia there was a struggle against both cultural and political supremacy of Austria. Pan-Slavism was a way of achieving independence from the empire and a pursuit of power against the oppressor. In the Russian Empire nationalism and Slavophile ideology were rooted in a conservative fear of western liberal ideas, which threatened the power of the monarchs and nobility. Therefore even though the nationalist sentiments may seem similar at first, they are different at their very core: The Pan-Slavic movement in Moravia defies the status quo, while the Slavophile movement in Russia aims to preserve it.

Mucha took part in the Pan-Slavic Movement. He made his Slav Epic as a response to the oppression by the Austrian Government and as a way to show the world that the Slavs were an ancient people, worthy of recognition. He finished the series in the interbellum period, in a time of great optimism about the regained independence. We can see this in the celebratory nature of his last paintings.

Vasnetsov is considered to be one of the founding fathers of Russian Revivalism. Growing up in a small village in the Russian countryside, he was a big proponent of traditional Russian arts and crafts. His artistic and architectural designs were applauded by the Slavophiles and set the stage for later designers and craftsmen. The civil war and victory of the Bolsheviks was a heavy blow for Vasnetsov, so at the end of his life he pulled back into his home and escaped into his painted dreamscapes of Russian fairy tales.

2 Biographical Context

Based on the previous chapter we can speculate how the various events influenced the painters. However in order to prevent big leaps of logic, we have to examine their biographies to see what the painters did in various time periods and how they reacted to certain events. Therefore this chapter will give an overview of the painters' lives with a specific emphasis on involvement in nationalist movements. The part about Mucha is largely adopted from the two biographies, written by his son Jiri Mucha. (1965,1966) The part about Vasnetsov is adopted from a biography by Morgunov & Morgunova (1962) along with several papers, which focus on specific aspects of his life.

Alphonse Mucha

Alphonse Maria Mucha was born in 1860 in the little town of Ivančice, in Moravia. This town, situated near the Austrian border, was particularly influenced by Imperial Germanization efforts. Disputes over Czech property ownership were commonplace and there was a struggle to keep a Czech school open. The strongest Czech nationalist sentiments were spread by priests, due to their relatively high degree of education. Young Mucha, who spent most of his childhood as a chorister, could not help but pick up on this sentiment. These sentiments of nationalism organically mixed with his admiration for the architectural beauty of churches and the joys of traditional Moravian festivals.

At the age of nineteen he found his first job as an artist, painting the decorations for a Viennese theatre firm. Spending two years in the capital of the Austrian Empire had a double effect on Mucha's life: on one hand with all its luxurious beauty and splendour, it must have inspired him as an artist, on the other hand this luxury was afforded through the exploitation of annexed regions, such as his homeland. It is probable that in that moment he would get his first ideas about rectifying this injustice and bringing wealth and beauty back to his own Moravia.

After a fire had destroyed the theatre Mucha was working at, Mucha moved to Mikulov, where he was discovered by a local count, who became his patron and sponsored his education at the Munich Academy of Arts. During his studies he befriended fellow Moravians, a few Poles and some Russians. This must have been Mucha's first encounter with a diverse group of Slavs and inspired his later feelings of unity across various Slavic nationalities.

After completing the academy Mucha moved to Paris at the age of 27 to continue his studies. He joined the Académie Julian and, not knowing any French, became part of a small Czech immigrant society. Of all the painters living in Paris, Mucha was most excited about meeting two established Czech painters, Brožík and Hynais. This tells us that living abroad has made Mucha love his homeland even more.

In 1892 Mucha's patriotism was challenged; he was commissioned to illustrate a book on German history. Mucha did not like the prospect of his first serious illustrative work to be associated with the nation that oppressed his people. He therefore took the job, but decided to picture events of German history, where Czechs played an important role too.

In January 1895 Mucha gained popularity within the broader Parisian art scene for painting Sarah Bernard. He got a permanent contract with the actress and contributed to her costume and stage design. Mucha got increasingly many commissions for various purposes and his income and status grew. He never associated himself with the Art Nouveau movement, rather he believed that he was painting in his own style, inspired by nature and Moravian folk art.

Mucha's fame made him a desired artist and decorator. He was asked to paint murals for the pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the World Exposition. The Austrian government wanted to present the newly annexed Bosnia and Herzegovina as a model colony. Mucha was very excited

about this task, since he felt like for the first time his efforts would be put to a truly great cause: the pride of a nation. He travelled to the Balkans to perform extensive research on his subject. Upon his return he was very satisfied, because he was doing important historical painting of a "brotherly Slav nation". He felt very close to his subject, since he saw the similarities to his own Czech heritage. It was then that Mucha got the idea for the Slav Epic, a series of paintings that would illustrate important events in Slav history and prove their independence from Germanic nations.

However the popularity of *le Style Mucha* significantly hampered this resolution; he was overwhelmed with various commissions. Additionally despite having a large income, he was unable to save money, which meant that he had to continue taking orders. Therefore in 1904 he decided to go to New York, since he was aware of his popularity there and aimed to quickly gather funds in order to create his Slav Epic. However his life in New York quickly became similar to Paris. The works were just as materialistic and he still did not manage to earn enough savings. Mucha was very distressed about this, he felt as though his life and art were ultimately wasted and he had no way of putting it to a higher purpose.

In 1906, at the relatively late age of 46, Mucha married a Czech woman. His wife turned out to be better at managing his budget and helped him maintain profitable connections. One of those connections was Charles R. Crane, an American millionaire and Slavophile. Mucha shared the dream of the Slav Epic with the Crane, who showed great interest in the project. Excited about support for his idea, Mucha returned to Prague in 1909. Upon arrival Mucha made historical fresco's in the Municipal Building of Prague. This was his first gift to his nation. He was so excited about this project that he insisted on not being paid for the job. (Mucha, 1966)

In order to gather research for his Slav Epic, Mucha consumed a great amount of historical literature and consulted experts on Slavonic history. Meanwhile he also accepted commissions for posters to promote various Czech purposes. In 1912 he completed his first three canvases of the Slav Epic. He then undertook a trip through Eastern Europe to learn first-hand about the customs and traditions of his fellow Slavs. He took numerous photographs of their folk art and costumes. He then continued to work on the Slav Epic throughout World War I and despite staying uninvolved in the fighting, he maintained connections with various nationalist groups.

The independence of Czechoslovakia in 1918 brought intense joy to Mucha and he continued to gift various designs to the new government: stamps, banknotes, the coat of arms and police uniforms, also without payment. He believed that it was his patriotic duty to earn money in other countries than his own and thus he toured with an exhibition of the unfinished Slav Epic through the US. The American public was very impressed by his works, seeing a truthfulness, magnificence and serene beauty in the vast canvasses. In 1928 Mucha completed the final paintings of the Slav Epic. The series was officially gifted to the City of Prague to mark the 10th anniversary of the Independence of the Czechoslovakia.

After fulfilling his lifelong dream, Mucha grew increasingly anxious of the fate not only of the Slavs, but of all humanity. The interbellum period was ominous; with news of Stalin's terror arriving from the East and Hitler's rise to power in the West, Mucha felt the advent of war. His art became increasingly melancholic, aiming at providing hope in times of darkness. His last work, a triptych, he made not for his nation but for humankind. It remained unfinished and would have depicted The Three Ages: The Age of Reason, Wisdom and Love. In 1939 the troops of the Third Reich invaded Czechoslovakia. Being a vocal Czech nationalist and Freemason, Mucha was captured by the Gestapo. He was already ill with pneumonia and so a few days of questioning had a harsh impact on his weakened health. A few months after his release, Mucha passed away. (Mucha, 1865)

Viktor Vasnetsov

Viktor Mikhailovich Vasnetsov was born in 1848 in the little town Lopyal, in central Russia. He started painting at a very young age, depicting the rich green landscapes around his home and portraying the neighbouring peasants. As a return for the favour, they told him local fairy tales, which he remembered for the rest of his life. His parents noticed his artistic talent, but being unable to afford sending him to art school, they sent him to a seminary. Here Vasnetsov first came into contact with ancient orthodox architecture, biblical ornamentation and iconography. This experience possibly made Vasnetsov associate Russian traditionalism with Christianity. Throughout his education, his talent and passion for painting only increased, so in 1867 he decided to drop out of the seminary and apply for the academy of fine arts in Saint Petersburg. He organized a lottery with his paintings as the prize and with the collected revenue embarked on a journey to the capital.

During his studies in the academy he was inspired by Russian Realism (Peredvizhniki). Coming from a small village, he could not relate to the polished and idealistic academic style. Ethereal Greek Muses and allegorical scenes felt fake and pretentious to Vasnetsov. Instead he wanted to portray the real people around him, like he used to in his hometown. After finishing the academy he worked on more serious Realist paintings; he was moved by the struggles of the lower class and aimed to portray their strength of character in times of hardships.

Many of his Realist friends, who resided in Paris, urged Vasnetsov to visit them: "If you wish to learn more of the Russian soul, you must go abroad to understand what makes it unique." Vasnetsov decided to follow their advice and arrived in Paris in 1876. There he visited various exhibitions, studio's. Being a Realist painter, Vasnetsov was mostly interested in the Parisian lower class. He therefore soon left the city to live on a French farm, where he painted the local peasants and a passing circus. He realized that the French peasants had a lot in common with the Russian peasants and he was deeply fond of their earnestness and simplicity. Meanwhile news was arriving from the Balkans about the oppression of the revolting Bulgarians by the Ottoman Empire. Vasnetsov, like many Russian artists, was convinced that the Russian Empire ought to protect its fellow Slav nation. These events together with a general feeling of nostalgia might have inspired Vasnetsov to create a sketch for his first non-realist, folkloric work: *The Bogatyrs*. These mythical warriors were the protectors of Russian lands and would be an appropriate reaction to the "Ottoman Threat" near her borders.

In 1877 he returned to Moscow and became an official member of the Peredvizhniki movement. He aimed at portraying the recently freed serfs, whose situation had only worsened due to unfair liberation conditions. (see chapter 1) He made numerous sketches, which depicted monstrously drunk peasants, who were trying to drown their sorrows in alcohol. Yet he did not manage to turn any of these sketches into paintings, for their subject matter was too painful to work on. Instead Vasnetsov decided to portray determination and strength of character, the virtues that in his opinion saved Russian souls in the past. He saw these emotions manifested in a figure of a mythical medieval Russian warrior. And thus he once again abandoned realism and painted "A Knight at a Crossroads" in 1878. (Morgunov & Morgunova, 1962)

This painting did not impress Vasnetsov's contemporaries, who respected him for his Realist works, but it did catch the attention of Savva Mamontov, a prominent art patron, Slavophile and philanthropist, who bought the painting and decided to support Vasnetsov. And so he invited Vasnetsov to his artistic brotherhood, which was situated in his rural estate Abramtsevo. Here heated discussions were held between Westerners and Slavophiles about which direction the Russian Empire ought to progress in. The members of the brotherhood were very interested in their heritage and researched traditional arts and crafts by traveling to the countryside and learning from peasants. There was a multitude of artistic projects running in the estate, both personal and collaborative. Those projects involved writing and staging plays, playing traditional musical instruments and crafting various objects. The estate was inhabited by recently freed serfs, who were actively involved in Abramtsevo's creative affairs. (Gray, 2000) In this

environment Vasnetsov completely left behind his realistic tendencies and turned to the mythical genre. Indorsed by Mamontov, he recalled the fairy tales that the peasants told him as a child and decided to portray their magic. (Lobanov, 1928)

Having spent his youth in a seminary, Vasnetsov was especially fascinated by religious architecture. Having the freedom to experiment at Abramtsevo, he produced drawings for a small church, which was then built on the estate. (Lobanov, 1928) Becoming an established member of the Abramtsevo brotherhood had significantly improved Vasnetsov's reputation. He was no longer a Realist, but his mythical works were applauded by the mostly bourgeois admirers of Revivalism. He was consulted in the design of various neo-Russian architectural projects and was asked to paint murals for the newly opened Historical Museum in Moscow in 1885. (Morgunov & Morgunova, 1962)

Religion remained very important for Vasnetsov; he considered Christian Orthodoxy to be an important part of being Russian. Consequently when he was asked in 1885 to decorate the Cathedral of St Volodymyr in Kiev, he gladly accepted. He spent over eleven years working on this project, painting over 2000 m² of the interior walls, aided by over 400 schetches. Vasnetsov considered this to be his most influential work both from a spiritual and an artistic point of view. The saints he portrayed were not in academic baroque style, but were closer to the orthodox iconographic style, which previously had been neglected for not being "advanced" enough. (Morgunov & Morgunova, 1962) After his success there, he continued to paint murals in various new religious buildings, which were erected during Alexander III's church-building program. (see chapter 1)

In the final decennium of the 19th century Vasnetsov was fully acknowledged for all his efforts in discovering and spreading the previously forgotten Russian traditional art and craft. His works were therefore sent to the World Exposition in Paris in 1900. They however remained unappreciated by the European public, which deemed the works to be too thematically simple and not experimental enough. Vasnetsov was rather upset by this lack of enthusiasm and therefore wanted to create a magnum opus that would impress an international audience (Vasina, 2019). He planned to create an artistic series, the "Poem of Seven Fairytales", that would celebrate Russian folk character, which he discovered and grew to love. However the revolutions of 1905 and 1917 completely altered Vasnetsov's attitude and intent for this series. He was a devout monarchist and was deeply disappointed by the violence of the civil war and the victory of the Bolsheviks, who brought about new norms and values, which Vasnetsov disliked and deemed "deeply un-Russian". Especially secularization was a painful aspect. To deal with the pain of these changes, Vasnetsov buried himself in work, painting the idealized world that he longed for. (Vasina, 2019). He barely left his home, since outside he would be confronted with the erasure of his beloved homeland. There was a lack of provision and so his health slowly declined. In 1926 one of the cathedrals, which Vasnetsov had decorated was exploded and demolished. Possibly after hearing this news or due to a continuous state of distress, the painter had a heart attack and passed away. (Morgunov & Morgunova, 1962)

Conclusion

We can see that both painters were very moved by the socio-political circumstances, described in the previous chapter. Mucha's nationalist art was aimed at preserving his Czech heritage and legitimizing the sovereignty of his people from the German oppressors. He considered this to be his life mission and felt very discontent when he was forced to work for less meaningful, materialistic purposes. Vasnetsov's art was similarly aimed at preserving his heritage, but not from a foreign threat, but from internal problems, like class struggles and Westernization. His art did not depict literal struggles and victories like Mucha's, but focused more on the abstract strong aspects of his culture and aimed to to inspire faith and hope.

3 Nationalist paintings

In this chapter a selection of paintings from both artists will be analyzed. Particular attention would be paid to the socio-political and personal events, which may have influenced the choice of subject, painting style, format etc.

From each painter three works will be selected: their first nationalist painting; a later work, where the nationalist sentiment has matured; and a prominent religious work (since both Vasnetsov and Mucha deemed Christianity to be an important element of their heritage).

Works of Alphonse Mucha



The allegory of Bosnia and Herzegovina, a mural in the pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the World Exposition in Paris - 1900

Composition

Central in this painting we see a woman, sitting on a throne with an ornamental circular back, surrounded by luscious flowers, trees and shrubs. There is a group of people on each side of the woman, who she seems to be presenting to the spectator. All people appear to be clad in traditional Serbian, Slovak or Croatian attire and hold various products of their nation.

To the left of the woman are figures of four men of various ages. In the front is a young shepherd boy, carrying a lamb and supporting himself with a rudimental cane. He is accompanied by several domesticated animals: a dog, sheep and a goat. Behind the boy is an older bearded man, presumably a horse breeder, since he is surrounded by a horse and a foal. The man is holding an Ottoman çubuk long pipe and is wearing a turban, which might suggest him to be Muslim. To the right of the shepherd boy, is a young man, clutching a grey object; presumably a piece of rock salt or iron ore (those being major Bosnian export goods in the 19th century). Behind him we can see a half of a man's face. Despite being almost invisible the facial expression seems to be rather extreme: with eyes opened wide and eyebrows raised, he seems to be either surprised or scared.

To the right of the central woman are two women and two men. The front woman is squatting and holding a tray with grapes. Standing next to her, with a hand on her shoulder is another woman, clutching a Tobacco plant. Behind the two women are two woodcutters; one of them is supporting a newly harvested tree trunk and the other has an axe resting on his shoulder.

Light, Style and Color

Mucha has painted this work in his famous art nouveau style: all objects are clearly distinguishable from each other, due to their thick contours. The colors are flat and light and there appear to be almost no shadows in the painting, which distorts the perception of depth and disconnects the characters from each other and their surroundings. This creates a dreamlike sensation of experiencing the entire painting at once, without prioritizing any of the elements.

Context

This painting is one of the murals in the pavilion of Bosnia and Herzegovina at the World Exposition in Paris in 1900. (see chapter 2)

Themes

Mucha aims to depict a nation that lives in pastoral harmony with nature. These people are quite diverse in their age, gender, profession and religion, but they all seem united by the woman sitting in the middle. Perhaps she is an allegorical representation of Bosnia and Herzegovina herself, sitting on a circle-shaped throne, the symbol representing Slavic unity. We can then speculate that Bosnia is represented on the left, since here we can find the shepherds and miners of the Dinaric Alps. Herzegovina is represented on the right, with its Mediterranean products, such as wine and tobacco.

Despite the perceived idyll, there is a solemn sadness in the eyes of the characters. They are not happy, perhaps because they are in submission of Austria.



Apotheosis of the Slavs – 1926

Composition

This vast painting of 480 x 405 cm depicts a large number of people at different scales and in different colors, existing in an abstract open space. Central in the painting is an enormous bare-chested man, holding up two linden wreaths. Blessing the man from behind is Jesus, surrounded by various red figures, fading away into the background.

In front of the central man is a group of much smaller people. United through free-flowing fabrics and ribbons, the people radiate ecstatic joy and hold various tokens of their happiness: children, wreaths, flowers and each other. To their right are flags of the Entente of WWI, which to establish Czechoslovakia's independence. Meanwhile to their left are four men in military uniforms.

Closest to the viewer are the figures in the lower left corner who greet the central group with linden branches. In the bottom right corner is a group of hunched over figures, that fade into the blue background. Rising above the central group, nearly indistinguishable, are black silhouettes. Some appear to be armed with whip and spear, while others are pleading.

Light, Style and Color

We can see in this painting, that Mucha has developed a new style. The heavy Art Nouveau contour lines have been replaced by shading and highlighting. Mucha distinguishes between the foreground and background by playing with contrast and color. Both the large man and the central group of people are well articulated and appear to shine with a warm white-yellowish glow. They attract the most attention. The figures in the background are less pronounced and appear only after close examination. There are three color themes distinguishable in the background: red, blue and black. All four color themes have their own symbolic meaning: the group in blue represent the mythological origins of the Slavs, while the red group embodies the Czech Kings in the Middle Ages, the black theme represents the oppression experienced by the Slavs and finally the bright yellow theme represents the present Czechs, liberated after WWI and ready to create a bright peaceful future. These colors refer to various color themes that can be found in previous paintings of the Slav Epic.

Context

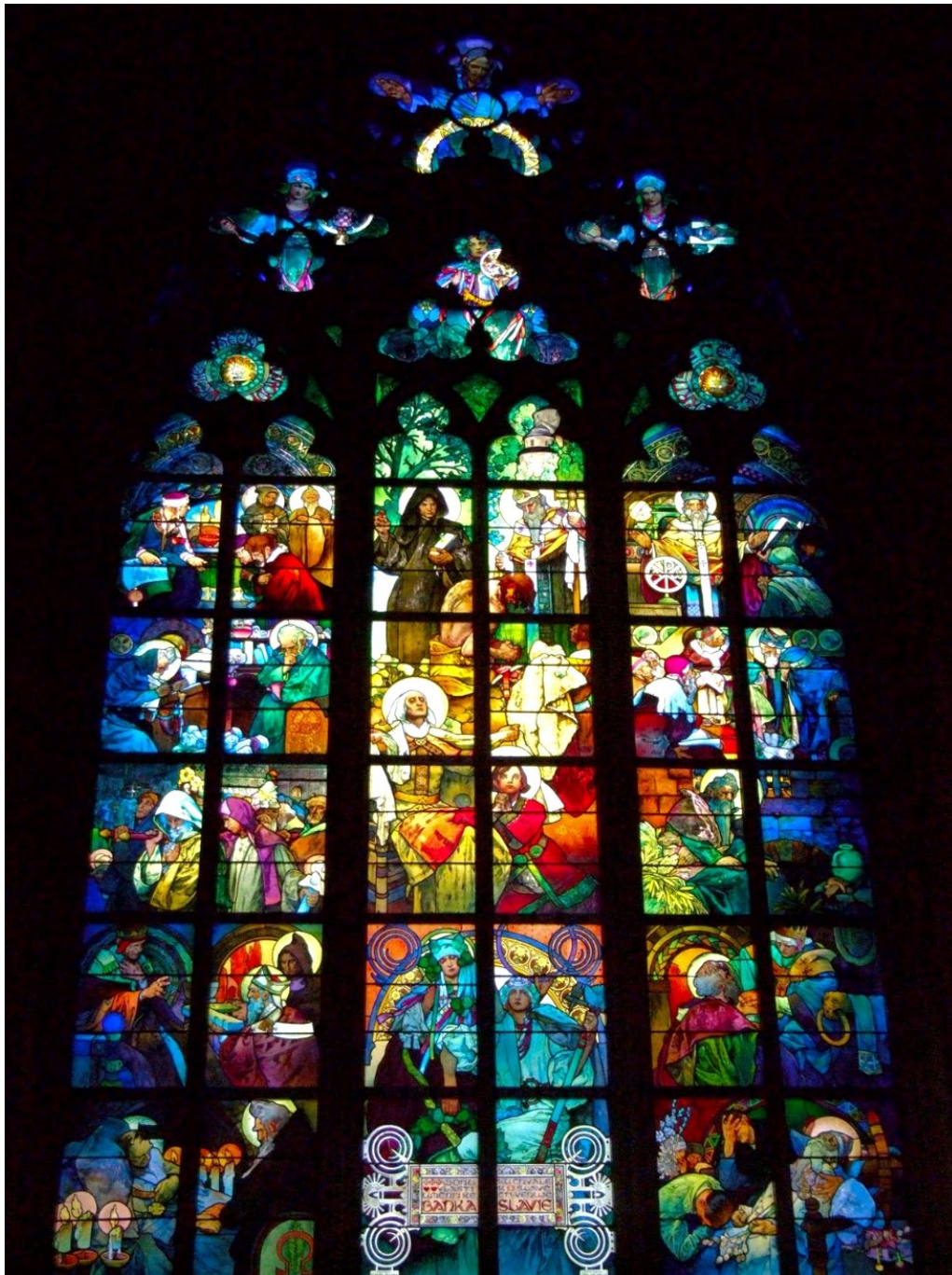
Mucha made Apotheosis of the Slavs as a conclusion to the Slav Epic, his ambitious series of 20 enormous paintings that showed historical and mythological events in the history of the Slavs. This painting is therefore not only a celebration of the independence of Czechoslovakia, but is also a celebration of Mucha's completion of the series.

Themes

The bare chested man, who bears a clear resemblance to a crucifix, seems to be an allegory of the Czech nation: the kingdom existed a long time ago, was defeated by Holy Roman Empire, but is now resurrected (like Jesus). The man shines with the light of hope, but his skinny figure suggests at the years of suffering he had to endure. The real Jesus figure behind him is blessing the scene, thereby legitimizing the Czechs with his holy authority.

The numerous flower and linden wreaths symbolize Slavic unity. The people are wearing different costumes, which hints that they come from various Slavic countries. Yet they are all related and united in their peace and joy.

This painting also represents the continuity of the Slavs throughout time, creating a complete history. Red, blue and yellow represent Slavs in various periods, but they all exist in this painting together. Therefore Slavic Unity through time is established.



Stained-glass Window designed by Mucha at St. Vitus Cathedral, Prague – 1929

Composition

The Gothic window is split into three main panes, each containing a 5x2 grid of smaller frames. The window is crowned by three small rosettes. Typically each pane would be self-contained and equally balanced, but Mucha decided to create emphasis in the central frame by applying a light and color gradient.

Central in the composition is a figure of a seated woman, St. Ludmilla, with her grandson, St. Wenceslas, kneeling and praying next to her. The royal duo were sanctified after legalizing Christianity in the previously pagan Bohemia. Occupying the frames above them are the holy Cyril (left) and Methodius (Right), performing a baptism. These two saints are known for bringing Christianity to Eastern Europe and inventing an early variant of the Cyrillic alphabet. In the lower

four frames are two allegorical women, dressed in Czech traditional attire, representing the sponsor Slavia Bank and bearing the message: "Bless the Lord! Praise the Homeland! Honor the art!"

On the flanking panes important episodes from the lives of Cyril and Methodius are depicted. The two figures are easily recognizable by their attire: Cyril is depicted as a monk, while Methodius is dressed as a bishop with an omophorion. We can see them preaching at various courts, translating the bible, their visit to the Pope, Methodius's captivity by Frankish missionaries and their deaths.

The top rosette above the window contains Jesus with the message: "Behold those who I've sent to you!" Below Jesus are three women, holding various symbols: the central woman bears the coat of arms of Bohemia, a lion rampant, nested in a circle; the woman on the left seems to be carrying the combined coats of arms of Moravia and Silesia. The woman on the right holds Slovak double cross. Together the three women presumably represent the newly-formed Czechoslovakia, receiving a blessing by Jesus.

Light, Style and Color

The stained glass window offers an interesting interpretation of Mucha's famous Art Nouveau style. The heavy contouring is translated into the lead strips and the women in the bottom center definitely remind the spectator of his Parisian decorative panels. However since this window was completed in 1929, a year after the conclusion of the Slav Epic, we can see that Mucha's style has definitely evolved. In Mucha's original style most characters were painted in flat colors, however in this work we can see that all characters have clearly defined, contrasting shadows. Perhaps Mucha has grown fond of painting these shadows in his more realistic Slav Epic series and therefore decided to keep this technique in this reinterpretation of his old style.

The color in this window is quite similar to the Apotheosis of the Slavs; the center of the painting is dominated by a bright yellow and red light, while the borders hue towards a darker blue. This gradient creates a hierarchy in the window and guides the eye of the spectator from the main subjects in the center, to the Saints Cyril and Methodius in the top and finally to an elaborated story of their lives in the flanks.

Context

The St Vitus Cathedral, which had been burned and plundered by iconoclasts in the 16th century, stood damaged and unfinished for several centuries. In 1860 a thorough restauration was initiated, which had been festively concluded in 1930, on the millennium anniversary of the foundation of the Cathedral by Duke Wenceslas I in 930. Slavia Bank commissioned Mucha to design a stained glass window, that would be one of the finishing touches in this restauration.

Themes

The main theme of this window is the origin of Christianity in Bohemia. The missionaries first introduced Christianity in Bohemia, while St Ludmilla (who was baptized by Methodius herself) together with her grandson legalized and promoted the religion in their lands.

The theme of rewarded suffering also appears in the window: St Wenceslas and St Ludmilla were both declared martyrs. Similarly the two missionaries had suffered throughout their lives, yet they continued their holy work to save the Czechs from heresy and they have succeeded in spreading the Words of God to the Slavs. The figure of Jesus at the top is the epiphany of suffering. This theme of suffering can be an allegory of the Czech nation, which had been oppressed by the Austrian Empire, but then finally found freedom and peace.

Works of Viktor Vasnetsov



Bogatyrs – 1877~1898

Composition

In this painting we can see three mythical knights (bogatyrs) sitting on their horses, scanning their surroundings. They are stationed in an open field in a hilly landscape, in the background we can see a dark forest against a tempestuous sky.

The left bogatyr, Dobrynya Nikitich, seated on a white stallion, is ready to draw his sword at any moment and holds onto his red round shield. The length of his beard and his more subtle build, suggests that he is the oldest and wisest of this group. He looks to the left of the painting with stern determination and is ready to strike his imaginary opponents at any moment.

In the center we see Ilya Muromets, mounting a massive black draft horse, resting his spear on his saddle and casually wearing his shield on his left elbow. Effortlessly he holds up his right hand to his eyes, to better look into the distance, while his heavy mace is dangling from his wrist. Ilya is the largest of his companions and clearly surpasses them in sheer physical strength.

On the right we see the bogatyr Alesha Popovich. Having no beard, he is clearly the youngest of the trio. His weapon of choice is the bow and arrow, which suggests that his talent is stealth and speed. Besides weapons, he has a lyre-like instrument (gusli) hanging from his saddle, perhaps because he has a more joyful and youthful character than his friends.

Light, Style and Color

The painting has a heavy, smoky atmosphere. The colors are dark and a bit yellowish, which along with the purple clouds hint at an imminent storm. This creates a certain tension in the painting, which supports the subject matter.

Vasnetsov paints his bogatyrs in a realistic style, but he accentuates and highlights the ornaments in the clothing, equipment and weapons, perhaps to emphasize these unique traditional details. The landscape and sky however are very abstract and almost impressionist. This is done to focus the attention of the spectator on the trio and perhaps to suggest that the bogatyrs are not bound to a specific place, but will offer protection wherever their help is needed.

Context

The first sketch for this painting was made in Paris, possibly as a reaction to the Russo-Turkic War. (see chapter 2)

Another motivation could be nostalgia and home-sickness. Vasnetsov grew up in the Russian countryside and did not feel very comfortable in Paris. He did not appreciate the new styles which were emerging in this environment and it is possible that he made this sketch to re-establish his own values and patriotic ideals.

The painting was finished in 1898 in Abramtsevo estate, after numerous sketches and studies. This painting was very dear to Vasnetsov and he would not accept anything less than perfection as a result. This endearment can be explained by the fact that this was Vasnetsov's first painting in the Folkloric genre and he therefore wanted to grant it the attention that it deserved.

Themes

It is hard to pinpoint exactly what message this work carries. Primarily it romanticizes the legendary Russian warriors, with the beautiful armor and impressive physical strength. But perhaps it is also Vasnetsov's call to himself and fellow countrymen to find their inner strength, which they ought to have inherited from these Bogatyrs. It is this inner strength that would salvage the country not only from external threats, but also from internal struggles.



The Frog Princess – 1918

Composition

This painting serves as an illustration to the fairy tale of *The Frog Princess*. In the story a prince accidentally marries a frog, after giving a careless promise. To his surprise the frog turns into a beautiful princess and impresses everyone at court with her magical dance, where she turns the food leftovers into a beautiful scene: the chicken bones transform into flying swans and the drops of mead turn into a lake.

In the center of the painting we can see the Frog Princess, performing her magical dance at the royal palace. She is twirling with a handkerchief raised up in one hand, which is a common element of Russian folk dance. She is surrounded by various musicians, playing medieval instruments.

The princess is wearing a traditional double-sleeved gown; the emerald color is reminiscent of her frog-like nature. Her sleeves, the trim of her gown and long braids are flowing around her, adding to her magical elegance. Vasnetsov painted the princess from the back, perhaps to purposefully keep her appearance ambiguous, so the spectator could imagine his own ideal of beauty.

Both on the left and on the right of the princess are three musicians. They wear brightly colored traditional costumes and their legs are inadvertently dancing along with the princess. The musicians seem to be mesmerized by her and have adoring looks on their faces. They play various ancient Slavic instruments: a balalaika, domra, gudok, rozhok and gusli.

The painting is set in a medieval Russian palace, which is decorated with traditional painted carpentry. Through the palace doors we can see the scene, created by the princess: there is a lake,

with swans swimming and soaring through the slightly dawning sky. Behind the lake is a peasant village, the inhabitants seem to be celebrating something by dancing in large circles.

Light, Style and Color

This painting is very bright and colorful. This creates an atmosphere of joy and celebration. The shadows and highlights are not very prominent, which causes the colors to fall flat. Together with the central and symmetrical composition, the painting is reminiscent of traditional “lubok” patterns, which were used to decorate objects, cakes and houses. Therefore Vasnetsov does not only reflect folklore in the chosen theme, but also in the style he used for his painting.

The only deep shade that can be found in this painting, appears in the gown of the princess. This focuses the attention of the spectator on her figure, accentuating her as the main character.

Context

The Frog Princess was the fifth painting in the series “Poem of Seven Fairytales” and it was completed in 1918. Compared to the harsh circumstances, the painting can be interpreted as a combination of an escapist fantasy and a coming to terms with reality. Vasnetsov, like many in this period, was lacking resources. He was painting in a studio that was heated to a mere 7 C, but found solace in his colorful, painted, imaginative world. (Korotkina, 2004)

Themes

Vasnetsov in this painting expresses his love for Russian traditional art and craft. The heavy detailing of the architecture, furniture and clothing, shows a thorough knowledge and respect for this style. In his earlier paintings Vasnetsov preferred painting natural settings, but we can see a clear shift to Russian wood-carved interiors in the 20th century. This can be explained by his architectural experience in traditional church decoration. Alternatively it can be seen as an attempt to document this architectural style in his paintings to preserve it from the Bolsheviks, who were actively destroying buildings that were deemed “too bourgeois”.

Various art historians (Vasina, 2019; Bachrevsky, 1989) speculate that The Frog Princess is not a complete escape from reality. Through the palace doors, in the far background a village on a riverbank is visible. The peasants of the village are dancing and celebrating. The revolution of 1917 forever changed farming practices and peasant life and therefore these peasant dances would cease to exist too. The princess in the foreground seems to be aware of this last celebration and is waving her handkerchief to bid the old lifestyle farewell.



The Baptism of Rus, a fresco at the St Volodymyr's Cathedral in Kiev– 1896

Composition

In this fresco we can see Volodymyr The Great (grand prince of Kievan Rus in 978~1015) asking God to bless the newly baptized people of Kiev. According to chroniclers, Volodymyr ordered all the people of Kiev to bathe in the Dnieper river to get baptized by the Orthodox priests, who were sent over from Greece.

The figure of Volodymyr The Great is central in this fresco, he is dressed in extravagant red and golden robes, that represent his status as ruler of whole Kievan Rus. His arms and gaze are raised up in prayer to God. Behind him is his wife grand princess Anna Porphyrogenita, who gazes into the sky with a solemn gaze.

Accompanying Volodymyr is a diverse group of clergymen, dressed in white: a bishop, priests and choristers. They all carry various religious elements, such as bibles, icons, a thurible and a huge cross. Standing out in this crowd is a man dressed in black. The sword and chainmail suggest that this is Dobrynya, Volodymyr's military advisor, who later forcefully converted the people of Novgorod into Christianity. His dark and gloomy appearance might hint at the excessive violence he used in the process. His army is not far behind him.

In the very front of the painting, we see the people of Kiev. Naked, wet and insecure, they await their turn to be baptized. They look up at the priests with hesitant hope. In the very back of the painting, spread until the horizon we see an immense crowd, that supposedly represents the whole of Kievan Rus, waiting to transcend into a new Christian era.

Observing from the clouds above, and blessing the baptism with holy light, is Jesus, holding an Orthodox cross, surrounded by angels.

Light, Style and Color

In this painting Vasnetsov uses literal light and shadow to differentiate between the characters "enlightened by Christianity" and the people who are still "in the dark". We can see this effect in the naked people in the river, who are shaded in dark unremarkable colors, while the clergymen are clad in white (color of purity and virtue) and their faces appear to be more highlighted. Most blessed of all however is Volodymyr, with rays of light falling onto his shoulders. With his brightly colored robes, he catches the most attention and becomes the main character in this painting, exemplifying Christian virtue. The rays of light however fall down on people in the back of the painting too, which can be interpreted as the blessing of Christianity slowly spreading through the whole of Kievan Rus.

Context

In 1885 Vasnetsov was commissioned to paint murals for the new St. Volodymyr's cathedral in Kiev. He was chosen because he was deemed an expert in ancient Russian traditional art and would be able to display events from the life of St Volodymyr in historical accuracy. This cathedral was to be the new residence of the Kievan Patriarch and was to be consecrated during the 900 year anniversary of the Baptism of Kiev by Volodymyr The Great.

Themes

This painting emphasizes the sheer grandness of Volodymyr's achievement of baptizing the entire Kievan Rus. The people spread infinitely towards the horizon and have all been converted towards the "true religion". Volodymyr, who is standing above this massive crowd, becomes even more impressive, saving all these lost souls from heresy.

4 Similarities and differences

In this chapter a conclusive comparison will be made of the works and social engagement of the two painters. First we will look at similarities in their motivation and works, then the differences will be explained.

Similarities

The painters had rather similar motivations to explore the topic of national character; they shared an existential fear for the culture that was dear to them. Mucha felt that his Moravian culture was threatened by the Austrian government, which was promoting its own art and values in the Czech lands. Similarly Vasnetsov was afraid that his traditional Russian values would disappear with the arrival of the “foreign” revolution, civil war and communist ideals. These fears however manifested in different stages of the painters’ lives: Mucha started with this sentiment, while for Vasnetsov it appeared towards the end of his life. Both painters also profited from a patriotic boost that was present in their relative countries: Mucha’s Slav Epic was well received by the Czech people, who had recently become independent and were establishing their national identity. Meanwhile Vasnetsov’s works were popular among the new bourgeoisie and the simultaneous policies of Russification.

Both painters saw their unique national identity reflected best in the rural areas, where they spent their childhoods. Young Mucha was fascinated by the rural festivals and religious feasts. He loved to watch women dance in traditional costumes, to eat the local delicacies and to attend communal prayers in the richly decorated byzantine churches. Mucha always remembered this idealized version of the peasantry and depicted it in a sometimes naïve romantic light in his historical paintings. Meanwhile Vasnetsov, who grew up in a village, felt deeply connected to the vast natural landscapes and respected the peasants who used their century-old knowledge to cultivate their land. He therefore eagerly listened to their fairy tales and was amazed by their craftsmanship. However he later became disenchanted with this idealized image, when he learned about the suffering of the serfs. Perhaps he therefore decided to shift to a more folkloric genre, since painting idyllic pastoral images would feel insincere, but painting miserable drunk peasants would be too depressing.

Another shared characteristic is the role of religion. Both Mucha and Vasnetsov grew up in a thoroughly Christian environment. They therefore both saw it as a vital element of their national identity, which we can see in their paintings. Both painters have works that represent the arrival of Christianity into Eastern Europe as a great milestone for the development of their culture and language.

Finally both painters were keen on spreading awareness about their cultural heritage. Mucha has toured with his Slav Epic around the United States to educate people in the West about the history and importance of the Slavs. Vasnetsov intended his Poem of Seven Fairytales for the World Exposition. He was afraid that West Europeans only knew Russia as a backwards militarist empire and therefore wanted to show her most beautiful aspects. It is interesting to see that both painters were not well received by their fellow artists and contemporary art critics, who deemed them too conservative and realistic. Simultaneously they were admired by the common public, which could relate to the bright colors, rich detailing and mythical themes.

Differences

A key difference that can be observed in the motivations of the two painters is the perceived legitimacy of their nations. Mucha, unlike Vasnetsov, needed to prove that Czechs existed as a separate nationality from Austrians. This explains why he preferred painting real historical events: in his eyes, if a nation exists as a separate phenomenon, it should be traceable throughout

time and have its own unique milestones and heroes. It should be made clear that there used to be a time of sovereign government, which legitimizes the demand for independence. Mucha was eager to present the proofs to all these criteria in his Slav Epic series. Additionally he shows that the Czechs are strong and will persevere through this threat of cultural existentiality. We can see this in the fierce characters of his Czech posters: his Slavic women have a more strict and resolute look than his dreamy Parisian poster women. By creating these stern and strong characters, Mucha was motivating his surroundings to protest against the oppressive Austrian regime.

Vasnetsov reacts very differently to the threat of the communist regime. Instead of painting motivating heroic characters, who would inspire the spectators to fight for their beliefs like Mucha, he instead draws back into his home and paints his escapist fantasies there. Perhaps Vasnetsov had developed an aversion to violence due to the revolutions or maybe because of his older age, he preferred to stay out of this conflict and find solace for himself in his colorful art. Much like with the disenchantment of the drunken peasants, Vasnetsov does not want to confront the tragedy he is facing; he prefers to instead focus on the positive things left in his life.

Finally, despite both being inspired by Slavic colors and ornaments, the painters have a very different artistic style. We can generally state that Vasnetsov has a vibrant, but realistic style and that Mucha has a more dreamlike and ethereal aesthetic. This can be attributed to various creative differences: Firstly the characters in Mucha's compositions are often floating freely and occupy an allegorical position or scale within the painting. Meanwhile Vasnetsov typically creates realistic scenes, with consistent physical backgrounds and perspective. Secondly the painters use different media: Mucha works with tempera and lithography, while Vasnetsov paints in oil. This makes Mucha's works less grimy and gritty than Vasnetsov's. Finally Mucha also has a tendency of using colors to send a particular message or establish a mood, while Vasnetsov sticks to real colors, lit by natural lighting. It is interesting how Mucha portrays his historically accurate scenes in an unrealistic mystical style, while Vasnetsov gives his magical illustrations a physical earth-like gravitas. I do not think however that this contradiction is anything more than an amusing coincidence, stemming from the formative years of the artists: Mucha started his career with stage design and illustration, which are inherently dramatic and symbolic styles, while Vasnetsov was part of the Peredvizhniki (Russian Realism) movement, which portrayed life in its excruciatingly gritty detail.

Conclusion

We have established that the painters both portrayed their national character to preserve their culture when faced with a political threat. They saw simple religious life in rural areas as a perfect manifestation of this national character and they were intent on spreading this culture in other parts of the world. A significant difference is that Vasnetsov primarily focused on the folkloric genre, while Mucha preferred painting historical scenes. This is possibly due to the fact that Mucha sought to historically legitimize the sovereignty of the Czechs, while Vasnetsov wanted to promote folklore, the beautiful part of his culture, which was untainted by the grittiness of reality. Finally we can state that Mucha was more politically involved than Vasnetsov, since Mucha painted works that encouraged the spectator to fight for independence, while Vasnetsov had a more escapist attitude, portraying beauty as means to endure the pain of life.

5 Conclusion

This paper has examined how the socio-political context influenced the lives and art of the painters Alphonse Mucha and Viktor Vasnetsov.

When Mucha was born in 1860, Moravia was under the influence of the Austro-Hungarian Empire. The young artist was surrounded by Czech rural tradition and various pan-Slavists, who were fighting for independence. However in an effort to find education and work as a professional artist, Mucha was temporarily uninvolved in the political scene. Nevertheless once his livelihood and popularity were established, he aimed to contribute his talent to the mission to free his homeland. In an effort to prove the legitimacy of the Czech lands and other Slavic nations, Mucha began the grand project of the Slav Epic, a series of paintings that depicted major historical events of the Slavs. He worked on the project throughout World War I, consequently the second half of the paintings were influenced by the joy of the newly independent Czechoslovakia. The independence was also an opportunity for Mucha to design money, post stamps and various other attributes for the new Czech government. His works were received with gratitude by the Czech public, who could relate to Mucha's patriotic pride.

Vasnetsov grew up in the Russian countryside, close to nature and simple peasant life. This gave him a deep respect for the peasants and their traditional folklore, religion, arts and crafts. They were the first subjects of his art, which later motivated Vasnetsov to join the Russian Realism movement. This movement however opened his eyes to the misery that his beloved peasants endured, partially caused by the poorly executed emancipation of the serfs. Feeling powerless in the face of this inequality, Vasnetsov turned to the folkloric and mythical genre, which gave him hope for a brighter future. This genre proved to be quite popular due to a patriotic boost, instantiated by the conservative government and maintained by the newly established bourgeoisie. His popularity however did not spread to the West and so Vasnetsov conceived the project Poem of Seven Fairy Tales, to introduce Russian folklore abroad. His motivation changed with the advent of the Revolution and the violence of civil war. These aggressive forces caused Vasnetsov to dissociate from his environment and to escape into the magical world, painted on his canvas.

To answer the question: *How are nationalist sentiments differently manifested in the works of A.M. Mucha and V.M. Vasnetsov?* We can state that nationalist sentiments in Mucha's work are intended to institute change in Czech society and serve as a historical proof for Czechoslovakia's legitimacy. Vasnetsov's nationalist sentiments are less politically involved and are intended to provide hope in times of darkness and despair by depicting the most virtuous elements of Russian culture, folklore and religion.

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