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Alphonse Mucha, *Le Pater: Le Grand Œuvre d'Alphonse Mucha*, ed. by Tomoko Sato
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First published in a limited edition of 510 copies in December 1899, the Symbolist masterpiece of Czech artist Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939), *Le Pater* [*The Our Father*] has just seen a re-edition from Les Éditions de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux and the Mucha Foundation in collaboration with an interactive exhibition of his work currently taking place at the Grand Palais Immersif in Paris.

This is not the first time that Mucha's illuminative manuscript has been reprinted in recent years: a hardcover edition was released by Somogy Éditions d'Art in 2001, and in 2019, for the 120th anniversary of *Le Pater*, the Century Guild published the work in two deluxe hardcover editions which reproduce the artwork in its original format, as well a third paperback edition featuring an introduction by science-fiction author Michael Moorcock. The most recent edition, *Le Pater: Le Grand Œuvre d'Alphonse Mucha*, is distinguished from the others by virtue of its supplemental material – both textual and visual – which shines new light upon the text and its creator. Beyond the fact that this edition features beautiful reproductions on thick, high-quality paper of the integrality of *Le Pater* at two-thirds of its original scale, it also features three illuminating essays about Mucha's life, work, and spirituality which enable the reader to better position the work both culturally and biographically.

Born in 1860 in Ivančice in the Czech Republic and rejected by the School of the Fine Arts in Prague in 1875, Mucha went on to study at the School of the Fine Arts in Munich (1885-1887), as well as the Julian Academy (1887-1888) and the Colarossi Academy (1888-1889) in Paris. His career as an artist began earlier than that however, in around 1880, when he found work as a professional artist in Vienna, creating stage décor for a theatre company. His rise to fame did not

start until later, near the end of 1894, when he was commissioned for two distinct projects for the play *Gismonda*, written by Victorien Sardou. The first of the commissions was a request to create illustrations of ‘the most remarkable scenes’ to feature in a special Christmas supplement of the newspaper, *Le Gaulois*.¹ The second commission concerned the creation of a poster featuring the play’s star, Sarah Bernhardt. The poster was hailed as an immediate success. Following its design, Mucha signed a six-year contract with Bernhardt to create not only posters for six other plays, but also the set decoration for her plays, the jewellery she would wear, and her costumes. The popularity of these posters made the name Alphonse Mucha synonymous with the term ‘Art Nouveau’ in the final years of the twentieth century and gave him the renown necessary to be hired for numerous other advertisements and creative projects.

Mucha’s first foray into literary illustration took place around 1885 when he provided drawings and illustrations for the Czech satirical magazine, *Krokodil*, which was edited by his brother-in-law. However, a few years later in 1890, following his arrival in Paris where independent literary revues were experiencing a period of unprecedented success and popularity, Mucha’s illustrations graced the cover of Catulle Mendès’ illustrated revue, *La Vie populaire*. Later in the decade, he would also provide illustrations for revues such as *L’Illustration*, *La Plume*, *Au Quartier latin*, *Le Chic*, as well as others. It was in 1897 that Mucha was, for the first time, able to contribute images to a work destined to stand on its own as an artistic object: *Ilseé princesse de Tripoli*, *Légende du Moyen Âge*, written by Robert de Flers and published by the editor Armand Colin & Cie.² With *Ilseé*, Mucha was able to explore freely the relationship between the idea, the image, the word, and the page, setting the stage for a creative process which would come to full bloom with the publication of *Le Pater* in 1899.

In 1898, Mucha began conceiving of an illustrated version of *Le Pater* during a period of great personal despair. Although his idiosyncratic style had become the driving force behind the Art Nouveau aesthetic and made him a tastemaker in the decorative arts of the early twentieth century, he found himself unfulfilled and increasingly frustrated by the growing distance between

the artistic ideals of his youth and the commercial success that he was experiencing. Seeking a project that could bring both artistic satisfaction and spiritual fulfilment, he developed the idea of creating an illustrated version of the Lord's Prayer, which might not only give a visual form to the words themselves, but illustrate his vision of the promise that they held and offer a source of guidance to the society of his day. Writing about the decision, he observed:

Bientôt je suis devenu la victime de mes propres procédés. D'ailleurs, je n'avais pas trouvé de véritable satisfaction dans ce genre de travail. Je voyais mon chemin ailleurs, un peu plus haut et un peu plus loin. Je cherchais des moyens de répandre une lumière qui illuminerait même les coins les plus reculés [du monde]. Je n'ai pas eu à chercher longtemps ! Le Notre Père ! Pourquoi ne pas donner aux mots une expression picturale ?

Soon, I became the victim of my own practices. I had not, by the way, found any true satisfaction in that sort of work. I saw my path elsewhere, a bit higher and a bit further. I sought means to spread a light that would illuminate even the most distant corners [of the world]. I did not have to seek for long! The Our Father! Why not give a pictorial expression to the words? (p. 30)³

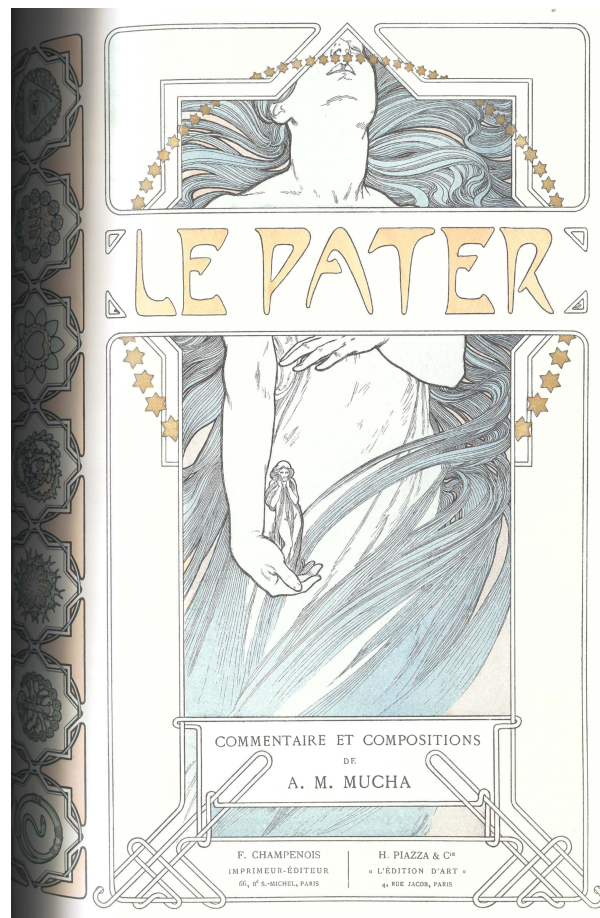


Fig. 1: Cover for the 1899 edition of *Le Pater*. Printed by Les Éditions F. Champenois et H. Piazza & C^{ie}, in Paris.

Le Pater: Commentaire et compositions de A. M. Mucha, to give its full title, first appeared in print on 20 December 1899 (fig. 1). Far more than just a simple book of verses, *Le Pater* is structured around a series of seven triptychs, each of which corresponds to a verse from the prayer and also transmits a message from the artist concerning the life of modern man and his place in the universe. On the first page of each group of illustrations is a chapter heading featuring a verse from the Lord's Prayer, as well as an elaboration of one of the different ornamental symbols shown on the cover of the book (fig. 2).

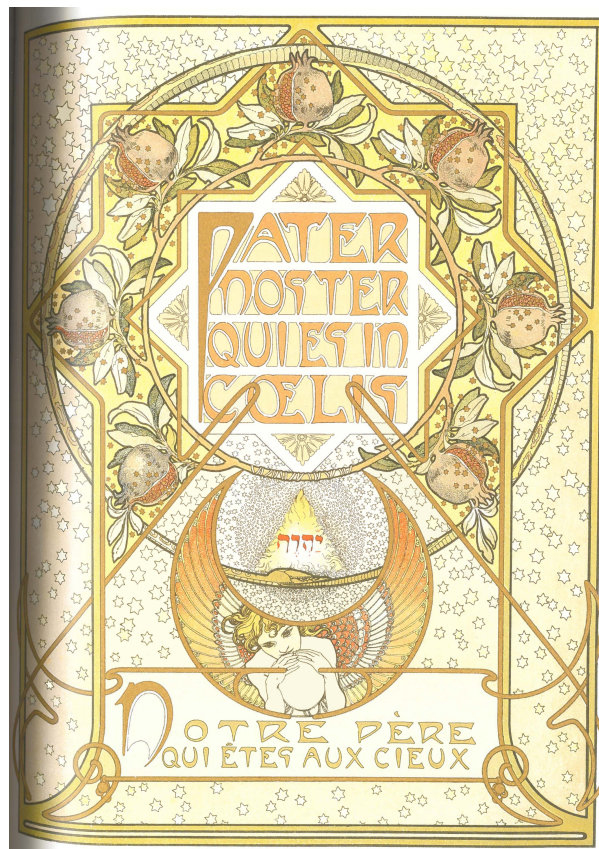


Fig. 2: Title page of *Le Pater: Commentaire et compositions de A. M. Mucha*. 'Our father, who art in heaven'.

Following this page of verse is a short text written by Mucha which resembles an illuminated manuscript from the Middle Ages in form, and which acts both as an address to the reader and as an explanation of the illustration that is to follow (fig. 3). For example, the text that accompanies the first verse begins:

Au sein de la matière dormante l'homme s'éveille peu à peu, et, péniblement, parvient à se reconnaître. Pour atteindre là haut, vers l'Idéal, il faut que son âme s'oriente, se dégage, quitte la région des ténèbres où le retient son corps.

Within dormant matter, Man slowly awakens, and, painfully, struggles to recognize himself. To attain that higher level, that of the Ideal, his soul must orient itself, disengage itself, leave the realm of shadows where it is held back by the body. (p. 118)

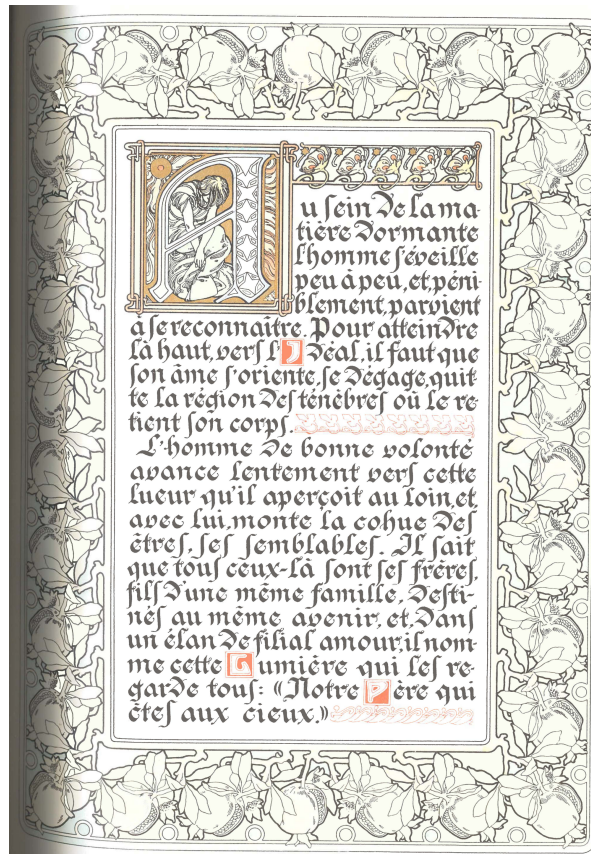


Fig. 3: Page two of *Le Pater*. Translation in body text above.

This page is followed by a full-page black-and-white illustration which visually expresses the preceding text and reinforces Mucha's written message. In the case of the first verse, the illustration depicts a man rising from a tangled heap of naked bodies and stretching his arms outwards towards the sun (fig. 4). Each section of *Le Pater* is an address to humanity from both God and Artist, displaying the redemptive and salvatory promises of a life lived in faith. With the illustrations accompanying the verses, Mucha, through classical religious symbols as well as images born of his own artistic vision, shows the abundant richness and promises of faith and the decrepit state of modern spirituality.



Fig. 4: Page three of *Le Pater*. Illustration to accompany the text.

Le Pater, therefore, is an attempt to offer a sort of antidote to the vacuous commercialism of France's Third Republic – for both reader and artist. In it, Mucha was not only able to offer a visual, symbolic interpretation of the prayer which could transcend the familiar words themselves, but also provide a deeper, more compelling form for them, one which might pique the interest of the average individual. In this sense, with *Le Pater*, Mucha's work can be compared to that of a number of other spiritual fin-de-siècle artists, such as Jean Delville or Gustave Moreau, who believed that their own artistic vision could offer the keys to salvation to a public grown weary of materialistic endeavours and diluted, exoteric dogma. With *Le Pater*, however, Mucha manages to distinguish himself from a painter such as Moreau who, beyond disparate and cursory elucidations, never wrote any sort of spiritual missive explicitly for his public.⁴ This choice, which is surprising

at a time when many artists favoured mystery over clarity, underscores Mucha's desire to not enshroud the path to salvation in enigma, but to render it clear and accessible for all who might happen upon his book – an indication of his fundamentally benevolent intentions. Mucha is significant within his time for his attempts to reach the public with his message of spiritual reform not only through his images, but also by means of literary language – the two primary means at his disposal.

Mucha's illustrations go beyond a literal interpretation of the Lord's Prayer, and indicate a singular and important moment within his œuvre. Inspired more by the religious art that he contemplated in the church where his devoutly Catholic mother worshipped than by the dogma of the church itself, Mucha remained intuitively spiritual throughout his life. Upon moving to Paris, he developed a deep friendship with the Swedish writer and artist August Strindberg, whose writing of 'mysterious forces' that guide the life of the individual had a great influence on Mucha's spiritual thought. Mucha frequently depicted 'invisible powers' at play in his work in the form of towering figures standing behind the main subjects and tacitly guiding them (p. 34). This idea of invisible forces acting upon the individual and conducting them in secret and hidden ways was very important to Mucha, who, although both spiritual and Christian, was not partisan to the notion of exotericism.

Those interested in his spirituality and the impact that it had on his artistic work will not be disappointed by the critical texts included in this new edition of *Le Pater*. Thanks to their depth and insight, these essays contribute to the recent scholarship connecting key works by individual artists to the esoteric faith behind them (such as the volume *Les deux Prométhée de Jean Delville* (2021), which features essays on Delville's masterpiece, *Prométhée*, by scholars such as Sebastien Clerbois, who also wrote *L'Ésotérisme et le symbolisme belge* (2013)). Through this supplementary scholarship, this edition manages to offer a new and illuminating perspective on *Le Pater* by explaining how it is the product of Mucha's identity not only as a mystical Christian, but as a Czech nationalist as well.

As this book illustrates marvellously, Mucha was a very active member of the Freemasons – first in Paris, and later in Prague – and believed ardently that certain knowledge is conveyed to the uninitiated by means of an intermediary. As the text explains, the completion of *Le Pater* marked a turning point in Mucha’s career, after which he decided to devote himself to more fulfilling projects, namely works which would serve the goal of supporting the growing movement for Czech independence against the Austrian Empire. Because of the amount of writing dedicated to this subject in the volume, it also deserves a place among a growing list of titles focused on the connection between symbolist art and the national independence movements in Eastern and Central Europe at the start of the twentieth century.⁵

As Jacob Sadilek’s essay ‘Alphonse Mucha, franc-maçon’ explains, Mucha’s desire for more serious artistic projects also coincided with an increasing involvement in the Freemasons, whose emphasis on universal fraternity resonated deeply with him at the time (pp. 50-85). Initiated first in Paris, Mucha was later active in the founding of two different Czech lodges, and later appointed as a national representative for the Czech Republic on the international stage. Beyond his intellectual involvement, however, he was also able to put his artistic talents to use for the Masons, designing pins, badges, chalices, and mallets, as well as executing murals to decorate the walls of their lodges. Indeed, one of the great benefits of this edition is that beautiful photographic reproductions of these objects are provided (see fig. 5), as well as photos of other masonic ephemera pertaining to Mucha and his lodges.

The essays centring around Mucha’s spirituality, as well as his involvement in both the Freemasons and the Czech independent movement, give this edition a distinct purpose and make it a valuable contribution to the growing interest in both Mucha and his non-commercial artwork. The three essays that comprise the text of this edition are accompanied by a truly impressive number of images – there are 80 illustrations and images over the book’s 176 pages – both of *Le Pater* itself, as well as other texts, illustrations, and objects pertaining to Mucha’s life and work. These additions help to flesh out an area of his career which was clearly quite important to him,

but which has been largely neglected. While less known and more difficult to explain than his commercial projects, works such as *Le Pater* were no doubt more significant to Mucha as an artist and an individual.



Fig. 5: Alphonse Mucha, enamel badges for the Freemasons lodges, Parvda vítězí, Prague.
Top: Badge for the founders of the Parvda vítězí loge, 1928. Coloured enamel on bronze, 8.5 x 6 cm.
Bottom: Badge for the regular masons of the Parvda vítězí loge, 1928. Coloured enamel on bronze, 12 x 8.5 cm.

¹ *Le Gaulois*, 25 December 1894.

² More on the fin-de-siècle phenomenon of elaborate and artistically designed literary texts is given in the recent collection of essays *Éloge du parergon. L'art décoratif du livre fin-de-siècle*, ed. by Sophie Lesiewicz and Hélène Védrine (La Fresnaie-Fayel: Otrante, 2021).

³ All translations are my own.

⁴ The majority of Moreau's writings on his paintings were small explanations intended for friends or gallery owners. See Gustave Moreau, *L'Assembleur de rêves. Écrits complets de Gustave Moreau* (Fontfroide: Fata Morgana, 1998).

⁵ See, for example the exhibition catalogues *Âmes sauvages. Le symbolisme dans les pays baltes* (RMN/Musée d'Orsay, 2018) and *Decadence: Aspects of Austrian Symbolism* (Museum Belvedere, 2013), *Silent Rebels. Symbolism in Poland around 1900*, ed. by Roger Diederer (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2022), or even Amalia Wojciechowski's doctoral dissertation 'Visions of their Land: Młoda Polska & The Making of Landscape' (Bryn Mawr, 2020).