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Performative femininity: a study of Mucha's posters from the perspective of Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity

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Abstract. As a major representative of the Art Nouveau movement, Alphonse Mucha is renowned for posters characterized by flowing curves, botanical motifs, decorative compositions, and idealized female figures. The women depicted in Mucha's works often appear gentle, elegant, mysterious, and highly ornamental, forming a distinctive and immediately recognizable visual style. Drawing primarily on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this study examines female imagery in Mucha's posters through literature review, theoretical interpretation, and visual analysis. It argues that the femininity presented in Mucha's posters is not a direct expression of an essential female nature. Rather, it is a gendered effect repeatedly constructed through visual elements such as bodily posture, clothing, hairstyle, decorative patterning, and relations of looking within the contexts of social aesthetic norms, commercial communication, and modern visual culture. On the one hand, Mucha's posters foreground the aesthetic appeal and visual centrality of female figures; on the other hand, they also incorporate the female body into systems of advertising and ornament, turning it into a visual sign to be viewed, consumed, and idealized. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity, this study moves beyond earlier Mucha scholarship that primarily emphasizes formal style and design-historical value. It further reveals the mechanisms through which "femininity" in Mucha's posters is produced, repeated, and naturalized. The study therefore deepens the understanding of the cultural meanings of Mucha's posters and provides a theoretical basis for critically reflecting on representations of women in contemporary visual design.

Keywords: gender performativity, Mucha posters, femininity, Art Nouveau, visual culture

1. Introduction

1.1. Research background

From the late nineteenth century to the early twentieth century, industrialization, urban consumer culture, and the expansion of mass print media made the poster an important form or medium of modern visual communication. Posters not only served commercial promotion and information transmission, but also participated in the construction of aesthetic taste, consumer desire, and social identity. As a major

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representative of Art Nouveau, Alphonse Mucha is known for posters marked by flowing curves, intricate botanical motifs, flattened compositions, and idealized female figures. The women in his works are usually characterized by flowing hair, graceful postures, elaborate dress, and mysterious expressions. They function both as the visual center of the image and as important symbols of commodities, theater, and modern consumer culture. Therefore, the female figures in Mucha's posters should not be understood merely as decorative aesthetic objects. Rather, they should be examined within the broader contexts of gender culture and visual communication.

1.2. Research purpose

This study takes Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as its main theoretical framework in order to reinterpret the femininity presented in Mucha's posters. Butler argues that gender is not an innate, fixed, or natural essence, but an identity effect continually constructed through social norms, bodily practices, and repeated acts. From this perspective, the graceful postures, ornamentalized bodies, flowing hair, botanical motifs, and spectatorial relations that recur in Mucha's posters can be read as visual forms of gender performativity. The purpose of this study is to analyze how these visual signs collectively produce femininity as "elegant", "gentle", and "mysterious", and to explore how such femininity is repeated, normalized, and naturalized in poster imagery.

1.3. Research significance

At the theoretical level, this study builds on existing scholarship that has already begun to connect Mucha's poster imagery with Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity. In supplementary online commentary, Margaryta Golovchenko analyzes Mucha's JOB cigarette-paper poster through Butler's theory and argues that the femininity represented in the image is performed rather than naturally given[1]. However, existing research has mainly focused on individual works, especially the JOB poster, and has not yet fully examined how performative femininity operates across a broader range of Mucha's posters and decorative panels. This study therefore extends the discussion from a single case to a wider visual system, including Gismonda, La Dame aux Camélias, the JOB cigarette-paper poster, The Seasons, and The Flowers. By doing so, it shows how flowing hair, bodily curves, floral motifs, ornamental frames, static gazes, and commercial contexts repeatedly construct, normalize, and naturalize femininity in Mucha's visual language.

This approach helps move beyond scholarship that focuses mainly on stylistic analysis, decorative language, and design-historical value. It allows Mucha's works to be reinterpreted through the intersecting lenses of feminist art criticism, queer theory, and visual culture studies. At the practical level, Mucha-style female imagery continues to influence illustration, advertising, packaging, and digital visual design. Analyzing the mechanisms through which this femininity is constructed can help us reconsider whether female images in contemporary visual design are still being simplified, idealized, and commercialized. It can also offer a reference for creating more diverse, active, and subject-centered representations of women.

[1] Supplementary online commentary (not a peer-reviewed academic publication): Margaryta Golovchenko, "The Female Body as Commodity: The Woman in Alphonse Mucha's JOB Poster (1896)", The Coalition of Master's Scholars on Material Culture, 9 October 2020, https://cmsmc.org/publications/the-female-body-as-commodity. This essay is cited here for contextual illustration and is excluded from the numbered references.

1.4. Research questions

This study addresses the following questions. First, what are the typical visual characteristics of female figures in Mucha's posters? Second, how do these visual characteristics reveal the performative and constructed nature of femininity? Third, how can Butler's theory of gender performativity explain the mechanisms through which femininity is formed in Mucha's posters? Fourth, are the female figures in Mucha's posters an aesthetic celebration of female beauty, or do they represent the normalization and commercialization of the female body within structures of advertising and visual spectatorship? By examining these questions, this study aims to reveal the cultural meanings of femininity in Mucha's posters and the gendered power relations that underlie them.

2. Literature review: international and Chinese-language scholarship

Existing research on "*Performative Femininity: A Study of Mucha's Posters from the Perspective of Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity*" can be grouped into three broad areas: studies of Butler's theory of gender performativity; studies of feminist visual culture and the theory of the gaze; and studies of Mucha's posters, Art Nouveau, and female imagery.

In international scholarship, Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity provides the core theoretical foundation for this study. In "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution", Butler argues that gender is not a stable essence, but an identity effect constructed through the "stylized repetition of acts" [1]. In Gender Trouble, Butler further critiques the traditional feminist assumption of "woman" as a stable subject and emphasizes that gender is not a pre-existing fact, but a result continuously produced within social norms and discursive structures [2]. This theory enables this study to read the postures, clothing, hairstyles, gazes, and decorative signs in Mucha's posters as visualized forms of gender performativity.

In feminist visual culture studies, Laura Mulvey's theory of the "male gaze" argues that women in visual media are often constructed as objects to be looked at and desired [3]. Griselda Pollock, writing from the perspective of feminist art history, emphasizes that art-historical analysis must attend to "gender as a continuing axis of power" [4]. These studies provide an important theoretical basis for analyzing the viewing positions, aestheticization, and commercialization of the female body in Mucha's posters.

International research on Mucha's posters has examined Art Nouveau, commercial graphic design, and changing representations of femininity. Sarah Blattner places Mucha's female figures within the Belle Époque emergence of the "New Woman", relating sensual imagery and floral motifs to shifting images of women in public life [5]. Gonca Sönmez and Mehmet Reşat Başar analyze the influence of Japonism on Mucha's Art Nouveau posters, particularly their ornamental patterns and graphic compositions [6]. Clara Damasceno Zandoná, Marizilda dos Santos Menezes, and Gabriele Justino Sommer explore the depiction of women's dress in Mucha's commercial posters in relation to the social and aesthetic changes of the Belle Époque [7]. As supplementary online commentary, Margaryta Golovchenko's discussion of the 1896 JOB cigarette-paper poster argues that its female figure performs an image of modern freedom while also functioning within a commercial system that commodifies femininity[2]. Taken together, these studies illuminate the relationship between Mucha's decorative imagery, women's public representation, and consumer culture. Although Golovchenko explicitly draws on Butler's theory in her analysis of JOB, the repeated construction of

[2] For supplementary context on the 1896 JOB poster, see Golovchenko's online essay identified in footnote 1; it is not treated as peer-reviewed scholarship.

femininity across Mucha's theatrical posters, advertising images, and decorative panels still warrants more systematic comparison.

Chinese-language scholarship on Mucha has primarily focused on design history, decorative style, and visual language. Wang Bowei and Wang Lanting's "*A Study on the Relationship between Mucha's Creative Style and Art Nouveau Imagery*" begins with female imagery and observes that the women in Mucha's works often show little emotional change in their facial expressions, while their hairstyles and bodily postures are rich and varied, forming a "goddess-like image" [8]. Luo Zeyuan's "*A Study of Botanical Patterns in Alphonse Mucha's Graphic Design Works during the Art Nouveau Period*" emphasizes that botanical patterns are "iconic elements" in Mucha's works and important components of his decorative compositions [9]. Qiu Ziling's "*The Female Images in Alphonse Mucha's Paintings*" is an earlier study devoted to the styles and causes of Mucha's female imagery, focusing on the relationship between Art Nouveau style and the construction of female images in a modern context [10]. In relation to Butler, Du Lanlan's "*Gender Performativity Theory*" shows that Chinese scholarship has continued to discuss Butler's theory and to interpret its structure from multiple dimensions [11]. An Introduction to Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity also demonstrates that Chinese-language scholarship has wording Butler's theory to literature, art, and film analysis [12].

Overall, international scholarship pays greater attention to the relationship between Mucha's posters and modern advertising, consumer culture, and women's public image, while Chinese-language scholarship tends to emphasize Mucha's decorative style, botanical motifs, graphic-design value, and the influence of Art Nouveau. Although existing studies have recognized the importance of female imagery in Mucha's work, most remain at the level of formal aesthetics, design language, or individual case analysis. They do not sufficiently address how femininity is performed, repeated, and naturalized. By adopting Butler's theory of gender performativity, this study connects Mucha poster studies, feminist visual culture studies, and gender theory, thereby addressing a gap in existing research on the gendered construction of female imagery in Mucha's posters.

3. Theoretical framework

This study takes Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as its primary theoretical foundation. In feminist theory and gender studies, Butler argues that gender is neither a natural essence determined directly by biological difference nor a fixed identity attribute within the individual. Rather, gender is repeatedly produced through social norms, discursive mechanisms, and bodily practices [2]. In other words, what is commonly understood as "femininity" or "masculinity" does not exist naturally. It is an identity effect continually confirmed and reinforced through posture, clothing, language, movement, behavior, and bodily presentation under long-term social discipline and cultural expectation.

For Butler, "performativity" is not the same as "performance" in the ordinary sense. Performance usually implies that a subject can freely choose a role to play, whereas gender performativity emphasizes that the subject always acts within existing social norms. An individual is recognized as "female" or "male" because their bodily behavior and external appearance repeatedly reproduce socially recognized gender signs. Through this repetition, gender identity gradually appears stable, natural, and real. Gender, therefore, is not an essence that exists before behavior; it is an effect produced through the repetition of acts and signs.

When this theory wording Mucha's posters, the femininity presented in his works can be understood not as a direct expression of an essential female nature, but as a visualized, stylized, and aestheticized construction of gender. The female figures that recur in Mucha's posters are usually marked by flowing hair, soft curves,

elegant postures, elaborate clothing, botanical motifs, and mysterious expressions. These elements are not isolated decorative forms. Instead, they collectively participate in the production of femininity. Soft bodily postures reinforce ideas of gentleness and elegance; flowing hair and botanical motifs connect the female image with nature, softness, and vitality; and elaborate clothing and decorative borders incorporate the female body into an aestheticized and ornamental visual system.

From the perspective of gender performativity, the female figures in Mucha's posters demonstrate clear repetition and normativity. Similar bodily postures, hairstyles, clothing, facial expressions, and compositional structures appear repeatedly across different posters, continually confirming an idealized form of femininity. As viewers repeatedly encounter these images, they may come to understand qualities such as gentleness, elegance, mystery, and ornamentality as natural attributes of women. In fact, this sense of "naturalness" is the result of repeated visual performance. Through pictorial form, Mucha's posters transform social and cultural norms of femininity into images of beauty, making femininity appear reasonable and natural within aesthetic spectatorship.

This study also draws on the theory of the gaze in feminist visual culture to interpret the female body in Mucha's posters. Visual culture studies suggest that female images in art and advertising are often positioned as objects to be looked at, admired, and consumed. Although women in Mucha's posters are often placed at the center of the image and possess a strong visual presence, they usually appear in static, gentle, and display-oriented postures. Their function is often to attract the viewer's gaze and convey commodity desire. In commercial posters especially, the female body becomes part of a promotional system that includes products, brand names, and advertising text. As a result, femininity is transformed into a source of visual appeal within commercial imagery.

Butler's theory of gender performativity therefore provides a productive framework for analyzing female imagery in Mucha's posters. It enables this study to move beyond a purely formal discussion of curves, colors, and decorative motifs and to ask how these visual elements participate in the construction of femininity. Through this theoretical lens, the study can reveal the gender norms, viewing mechanisms, and consumer logic behind Mucha's female figures. It also shows that the supposedly "elegant", "gentle", and "mysterious" femininity in these works is not naturally produced, but repeatedly produced, displayed, and consumed within modern visual culture.

4. Analysis of Mucha's works

This study selects representative posters and decorative panels by Mucha as case studies, including Gismonda, La Dame aux Camelias, the JOB cigarette-paper poster, The Seasons, and The Flowers. These works present typical female figures in Mucha's art: soft bodily postures, flowing hair, elaborate clothing, botanical ornament, and symbolic spectatorial relations. Through these examples, it is possible to analyze how femininity in Mucha's posters is visualized, stylized, and naturalized.

Gismonda is a key work through which Mucha established his poster style. The female figure is represented as a Byzantine-style noblewoman with religious and sacred associations. Her body is elongated, her posture dignified, her clothing intricate, and the area around her head produces a halo-like decorative effect. This treatment transforms the woman from a theatrical character into a noble, mysterious, and idealized visual symbol. From the perspective of Butler's theory of gender performativity, this noble and static female image is not a natural expression of femininity, but a feminized effect repeatedly constructed through clothing, posture, composition, and ornament.

The female figure in La Dame aux Camelias conveys fragility, elegance, and tragedy. The woman wears a long white dress, assumes a gentle posture, and displays a restrained and sorrowful expression. As an important decorative sign, the camellia not only identifies the character but also strengthens the association between women and purity, vulnerability, and emotional sacrifice. Mucha therefore does not simply depict the female body. Through flowers, clothing, and bodily posture, he visualizes a form of femininity shaped by social expectations. Women are assigned symbolic meanings of beauty, fragility, and devotion, and this femininity is both aestheticized and naturalized within the image.

The JOB cigarette-paper poster is an important case for analyzing the relationship between the female body and commercial consumption. In this work, the woman is shown in profile. Her flowing hair creates decorative curves, while the cigarette smoke intertwines with her hair and the background pattern. The female body in the image serves not only an aesthetic function, but also a directly promotional one. Her posture, hairstyle, and smoking gesture together produce an effect of sensuality, fashion, and seduction. According to Butler's theory, this form of femininity is repeatedly performed through action, bodily posture, and decorative signs. At the same time, within the advertising context, the female figure becomes part of the product's visual appeal, and the female body enters the system of consumer imagery.

The Seasons and The Flowers more clearly reveal Mucha's naturalization of female imagery. In these works, women are associated with seasons, flowers, and botanical patterns. Their bodily postures, hairstyles, and surrounding decorations create visual effects of softness, nature, vitality, and mystery. Here, the female body is not only a human figure; it also becomes a symbol of the seasons, nature, and decorative beauty. The repeated association between women and nature reinforces ideas such as "women are naturally gentle" and "women are close to nature" within the image.

Overall, femininity in Mucha's posters is jointly constructed through bodily posture, hair, clothing, floral patterns, decorative borders, relations of looking, and commercial contexts. Whether they appear as sacred women in theatrical posters, sensual women in advertising posters, or naturalized women in decorative panels, these figures display highly stylized and repetitive visual characteristics. From the perspective of Butler's theory of gender performativity, these female images are not direct expressions of an essential female nature. They are produced, displayed, and consumed through repeated visual signs in modern visual culture.

5. Key issues and their causes

5.1. The idealized female image in masculine discourse

In Mucha's posters, female figures are often represented as perfect, elegant, mysterious, gentle, and highly idealized. Whether in the religious and aristocratic image of Gismonda, the fragile and tragic femininity of La Dame aux Camelias, or the female figures combined with nature, flowers, and seasons in decorative panels such as The Seasons and The Flowers, these women are largely detached from the everyday experiences of real women. Instead, they are transformed into aestheticized, symbolic, and idealized visual signs. Such figures have an obvious unreality: they usually have slender bodies, graceful postures, restrained expressions, and elaborate clothing, and they rarely show fatigue, conflict, labor, aging, or emotional complexity. They do not appear as women with specific social identities and lived experiences, but as carriers of beauty, symbols of nature, or decorative media for commodities.

From the perspective of Butler's theory of gender performativity, this idealization is not merely artistic exaggeration. It is a visual repetition of specific norms of femininity. In Mucha's posters, women are repeatedly represented as gentle, elegant, mysterious, docile, and attractive. These qualities recur across different works and gradually form a stable visual pattern. When viewers repeatedly encounter such images,

they may mistake these artistically processed female figures for what women are naturally supposed to be. In this sense, idealized female imagery is naturalized through aesthetic form, while social and cultural expectations of women are packaged as seemingly pure artistic beauty.

This issue is closely related to commercial visual culture between the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Many of Mucha's posters functioned as theater promotion, product advertising, and mass communication, so their images had to attract attention quickly. Idealized female imagery has strong visual appeal and can immediately generate beauty, desire, and consumer interest. Art Nouveau itself also emphasized curves, ornament, natural motifs, and formal beauty. Because of its association with curves and softness, the female body was easily incorporated into this aesthetic system. At the same time, cultural imaginaries of women were still shaped by strong gender norms. Women were often expected to be beautiful, elegant, gentle, mysterious, and emotionally appealing. To some extent, Mucha's posters inherited and reinforced this social imagination, idealizing female imagery through the combined mechanisms of art and commerce.

5.2. The ornamentation of the female body

Another prominent issue in Mucha's posters is the ornamentation of the female body. In his works, the female body is often combined with flowers, vines, flowing hair, ribbons, jewelry, clothing, and decorative borders to form a complex yet unified visual structure. Women do not appear as independent subjects, but are often integrated into an ornamental system. For example, in the JOB cigarette-paper poster, the woman's hair intertwines with smoke, background patterns, and product lettering, while her bodily posture and the advertising composition jointly serve product promotion. In The Seasons and The Flowers, the female body is closely linked with plants, flowers, and seasonal imagery, turning women into symbols of nature and decorative beauty. The female body in Mucha's posters is therefore frequently transformed into part of the pictorial ornament and sometimes becomes the core of the overall decorative structure.

This ornamental treatment has a double effect. On the one hand, it gives Mucha's posters a highly recognizable aesthetic quality and helps form the distinctive Mucha style. On the other hand, it may weaken women's independence as subjects. When the female body is excessively integrated into flowers, curves, and decorative backgrounds, women no longer appear primarily as figures with thoughts, actions, and social identities. Instead, they become formal elements to be viewed, admired, and consumed. The meaning of the female body is shifted toward visual beauty and decorative effect, while its reality and subjectivity are reduced.

The ornamentation of the female body is also a visual mechanism of gender performativity. Social culture often associates women with beauty, nature, softness, sensibility, and refinement. Mucha's posters repeatedly reinforce this association through botanical patterns, curved compositions, flowing hair, and elaborate clothing. The female body is floralized, naturalized, and patterned, causing the idea that woman equals beautiful ornament to be repeatedly confirmed visually. Over time, this aesthetic coding may lead viewers to overlook the objectification and symbolization of the female body and to perceive only its surface elegance and splendor.

The ornamentation of the female body is caused first by Art Nouveau's strong emphasis on decoration. Art Nouveau rejected rigid historicist styles and pursued flowing curves, natural motifs, and integrated decorative effects. The female body could therefore be used easily as a carrier of curved and ornamental beauty. Second, commercial posters required strong points of visual memory. Combining the female body with decorative elements quickly created visual attraction and gave products, theatrical performances, and brands greater communicative power. Third, modern consumer culture tended to transform the human body, especially the

female body, into a visual resource that could be viewed, desired, and marketed. Although Mucha's posters have clear artistic value, they cannot be separated entirely from the logic of advertising and consumer culture in their historical moment.

5.3. The weakening of female subjectivity

Although women in Mucha's posters often occupy the center of the image and possess strong visual presence, this does not mean that they have full subjectivity. In many works, women appear in static, display-oriented, symbolic, or ornamental forms. They rarely show clear aims, social identities, real-life situations, or self-directed agency. Instead, they mainly function to attract the viewer's gaze, symbolize a particular quality, convey the appeal of a product, or strengthen the decorative effect. For example, the woman in Gismonda is shaped as a noble and sacred theatrical figure, but her meaning comes primarily from clothing, posture, and stage role. The woman in the JOB cigarette-paper poster appears modern and sensually appealing, but her smoking gesture, flowing hair, and bodily curves ultimately serve the advertisement. The women in The Seasons are assigned seasonal symbolic meanings, and their individuality is replaced by natural allegory.

Female subjectivity in Mucha's posters therefore takes a contradictory form. These women are placed at the center of the image, but they are not necessarily active makers of meaning. This point corresponds to Laura Mulvey's argument that, within patriarchal visual culture, woman is positioned as "bearer of meaning, not maker of meaning" [3]. In Mucha's posters, female figures are visually emphasized, yet they often function as objects of the gaze rather than as autonomous subjects. As Mulvey further argues, women in visual representation are frequently "looked at and displayed", their appearance coded for visual impact and "to-be-looked-at-ness" [3]. In this sense, the women in Mucha's posters possess beauty and mystery, but they lack social complexity and meaningful agency. This contradiction shows that visual centrality is not the same as subjectivity. Women may be placed at the center of the image while still being governed by structures of spectatorship and commercial logic.

From the perspective of gender performativity, the weakening of female subjectivity is closely related to the repetition of gender norms. Social culture often positions women as those who are looked at, admired, and emotional, rather than as active agents and producers of meaning. Through static postures, gentle expressions, elegant curves, and ornamental compositions, Mucha's posters repeatedly present women in this position of being viewed. Gentleness, quietness, mystery, and elegance are continually reinforced, while action, strength, conflict, and subjective expression are relatively compressed.

This issue is partly caused by the functional limits of the poster medium. Posters must communicate information quickly within a limited pictorial space, so they often rely on highly generalized and symbolic figures rather than complex narratives. In Mucha's posters, female figures are frequently used as visual signs, and their subjective complexity is therefore reduced. Second, the communicative logic of commercial advertising requires female imagery to serve products, theater, or brands rather than to present women's lived experience. Third, mainstream visual culture in the late nineteenth century remained deeply shaped by the male gaze. Women were often represented as objects to be admired, imagined, and consumed. Although Mucha's female figures are elegant and noble, they still cannot fully escape this structure of looking.

5.4. The naturalization of femininity

The most important issue in Mucha's posters is the naturalization of femininity. In this study, naturalization refers to the process through which socially and culturally constructed gender traits come to appear natural, stable, and self-evident through repeated representation. This understanding is grounded in Butler's argument that gender is formed through repeated bodily acts that gradually produce the appearance of "a natural sort of

being" [2]. In Mucha's works, women are often associated with gentleness, elegance, mystery, docility, nature, sensibility, and ornamentality. These qualities are continuously reinforced through hair, curves, flowers, ribbons, soft colors, static postures, and restrained expressions, making it easy for viewers to believe that they are natural qualities of women.

However, from the perspective of Butler's theory of gender performativity, femininity is not an innate essence. It is an identity effect formed through social norms and repeated practices. The femininity in Mucha's posters is produced through the repetition of visual signs. Long hair does not naturally signify feminine softness; flowers do not naturally belong to women; and gentle posture is not the natural state of the female body. These elements are read as feminine because they have been repeatedly combined and confirmed in visual culture over time. Through highly stable pictorial patterns, Mucha's posters organize these signs into aesthetically appealing female images, making constructed gender norms appear natural.

The naturalization of femininity is problematic because it conceals the social power relations behind gender construction. When qualities such as gentleness, elegance, docility, and being looked at are understood as women's natural attributes, women can easily be restricted to specific roles. They are expected to remain beautiful, refined, gentle, and attractive, while female images that do not conform to this model may be seen as insufficiently feminine. This visual norm is not merely a matter of artistic style. It can also influence how people understand women's bodies, behaviors, and identities in social life.

Several factors contribute to this naturalization. First, the repetitive mechanism of images gives a particular feminine image stability: similar postures, flowing hair, curves, and floral ornaments appear again and again in Mucha's posters. Second, aesthetic pleasure can conceal gender norms. Because Mucha's works possess strong formal beauty, viewers are often first attracted by line, color, and ornament and may not question whether such beauty contains gender coding. Third, modern commercial visual communication is skilled at presenting social norms as personal desire and aesthetic taste. In advertising, femininity appears as pleasurable beauty rather than as a cultural construction that requires critical examination. Finally, traditional art history has long emphasized form, style, and artistic achievement while paying less attention to power relations and gender mechanisms in female imagery. This scholarly tendency has also helped sustain the naturalization of femininity.

In summary, the issue is not that Mucha's posters lack artistic value. Rather, these highly aestheticized female images also participate in the visual production of gender norms. The idealization of female imagery, the ornamentation of the female body, the weakening of female subjectivity, and the naturalization of femininity are interconnected. Together, they constitute the central problem of performative femininity in Mucha's posters. From Butler's theoretical perspective, these issues are not isolated. They are concrete manifestations of gender performativity within visual culture. Through repeated postures, clothing, ornament, gazes, and commercial communication, femininity in Mucha's posters is produced as a seemingly natural, stable, and universally appealing visual image. Analyzing these issues and their causes therefore helps reveal the mechanisms of gender construction behind Mucha's posters and encourages reflection on the production of female imagery in contemporary visual design.

6. Implication and recommendation

6.1. Strengthening gender-theoretical approaches in Mucha studies

Because Mucha studies have often emphasized formal style, decorative language, and design-historical value, future research should more fully incorporate gender theory. Traditional studies of Mucha usually highlight flowing curves, botanical motifs, flattened composition, rich color, and decorative style, arguing that these

elements together form the typical Mucha style. This approach helps clarify Mucha's significance in Art Nouveau and in the history of graphic design. However, if the analysis remains only at the formal level, it may overlook the gender concepts and cultural mechanisms behind the female imagery in his works.

When analyzing Mucha's posters, researchers should therefore ask not only how Mucha represents beauty, but also how that beauty is constructed, what viewing relations the female image serves, and why qualities such as gentleness, mystery, and elegance are repeatedly presented as feminine. Butler's theory of gender performativity provides an important method for this inquiry. According to Butler, gender is not an innate and fixed essence, but an identity effect continuously formed through social norms and repeated practices. From this perspective, the flowing hair, curves, flowers, gentle postures, elaborate clothing, and static gazes in Mucha's posters can all be understood as concrete ways in which femininity is visualized and normalized.

In future research, the female imagery in Mucha's posters can be analyzed within the contexts of late nineteenth-century European urban consumer culture, modern advertising, changes in women's public image, and Art Nouveau aesthetics. Such an approach can preserve art history's attention to style, technique, and visual form while also revealing the gender norms, body politics, and viewing mechanisms embedded in the images. In this way, Mucha's posters are no longer merely beautiful decorative art. They can be understood as important cases in which femininity was produced, circulated, and consumed within modern visual culture.

6.2. Avoiding simplified female imagery in visual design

Mucha's posters continue to influence contemporary illustration, advertising, packaging design, cultural and creative products, and digital visual design. Many contemporary designs that draw on Mucha's style reproduce such visual elements as long hair, floral backgrounds, soft curves, elaborate ornament, and elegant postures. This borrowing is not inherently problematic. However, if designers merely copy the Mucha-style female template mechanically, they may continue to reinforce simplified, idealized, and objectified female imagery.

When contemporary visual design adapts Mucha's style, it should avoid fixing women as gentle, quiet, mysterious, sensual, or decorative objects. Designers should recognize that female images are not merely aesthetic elements and that female bodies are not naturally suited to function as decorative signs. Women can be agents, creators, and thinkers; they can also possess strength, complexity, diversity, and real lived experience. Female imagery in design should not represent women only as beauty to be looked at. It should also give them clearer subjectivity and space for expression.

Designers can make adjustments in three specific ways. First, in bodily posture, they can reduce static, fragile, and display-oriented poses and increase representations of action, agency, and situated experience, so that women are not merely decorative centers but subjects with clear purposes. Second, in visual symbolism, designers should avoid mechanically linking women with soft-coded elements such as flowers, vines, flowing hair, and ribbons. Instead, they should select richer symbolic systems according to the theme. Third, in commercial communication, designers should reduce the use of the female body as a tool for attracting consumer desire and avoid replacing the product's own value with the display of the female body. Such design practices can inherit Mucha's decorative aesthetics while reducing the repeated reinforcement of traditional feminine templates.

6.3. Introducing feminist visual criticism into art education

In the teaching of art history and design history, Mucha's posters are usually treated as important examples of Art Nouveau and modern poster design. Teachers and students often approach these works through line, composition, color, ornament, and stylistic features. This method helps students develop formal analysis skills.

However, without gender awareness, students may see only the elegance and splendor on the surface of the works while overlooking the construction of female imagery within them.

It is therefore necessary to introduce feminist visual criticism into art education and to guide students toward more complex interpretations of canonical artworks. In teaching Mucha's posters, instructors can analyze curves, colors, and composition while also asking: Why do female figures appear so frequently in Mucha's work? Why are women so often combined with flowers, flowing hair, soft curves, and decorative backgrounds? Do these female figures possess subjectivity? Are they expressing themselves, or are they being looked at, consumed, and symbolized? Through such questions, students can recognize that artworks are not neutral aesthetic objects. They are closely connected with historical contexts, social ideas, and gendered power relations.

The introduction of feminist visual criticism does not deny the artistic value of Mucha's work. Rather, it aims to understand the complex cultural meanings of these works while acknowledging their formal achievements. Mucha's posters can be viewed both as classic achievements of Art Nouveau and as typical texts in which femininity was constructed and circulated in modern visual culture. If art education attends to both aesthetic value and gender mechanisms, it can help students develop a more comprehensive, critical, and open capacity for visual analysis.

6.4. Combining theory and case analysis in visual interpretation

When wording Butler's theory of gender performativity to Mucha's posters, researchers should avoid separating theory from the works themselves. Butler's theory is philosophically rich and abstract. If a study simply repeats claims such as "gender is constructed" or "femininity is performed" without connecting them to specific visual details, the argument may remain conceptual and unpersuasive. Researchers should therefore closely connect theoretical interpretation with the analysis of particular works.

Specifically, the analysis of Mucha's posters can focus on bodily posture, clothing and hairstyle, decorative patterns, modes of looking, composition, and commercial context. In the JOB cigarette-paper poster, for example, one can analyze how the woman's profile, tilted head, cigarette-holding gesture, flowing hair, and smoke curves together produce a sensual, relaxed, and consumable femininity. In The Seasons, one can examine how the female body is combined with flowers, seasons, and natural landscapes to create a naturalized femininity. In Gismonda, one can analyze how clothing, halo-like composition, and dignified posture make the female figure sacred, aristocratic, and idealized. Only by grounding theory in specific visual elements can researchers convincingly explain how femininity is repeatedly produced through images.

Researchers can also use comparative analysis to examine different types of Mucha's works. For example, theatrical posters, commercial advertising posters, and decorative panels present female figures in different ways. Theatrical posters emphasize the sacralization and theatricalization of female roles; commercial advertising posters foreground the relationship between the female body and consumer desire; and decorative panels emphasize symbolic connections among women, nature, flowers, and seasons. Such comparison can more clearly reveal the multiple ways in which femininity is constructed in Mucha's work.

In conclusion, this study recommends strengthening gender-theoretical perspectives in Mucha studies, avoiding the reproduction of simplified female imagery in contemporary visual design, introducing feminist visual criticism into art education, and combining theory with close case analysis. These recommendations do not deny the artistic value of Mucha's posters. Rather, while acknowledging their aesthetic achievements, they seek to reveal the gender norms and visual-cultural mechanisms behind their female imagery. Through this approach, Mucha's posters can be understood more fully as modern visual texts with artistic value, commercial function, and gender-cultural significance.

7. Conclusion

This study, entitled "*Performative Femininity: A Study of Mucha's Posters from the Perspective of Judith Butler's Theory of Gender Performativity*", takes female imagery in Alphonse Mucha's posters as its primary object of analysis and Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as its central theoretical foundation. It examines the visual construction of femininity in Mucha's posters. Through analysis of female bodily posture, clothing and hairstyle, decorative patterning, relations of looking, and commercial context in representative works, this study argues that female imagery in Mucha's posters is not a direct expression of an essential female nature. Instead, it is a visual effect repeatedly produced within specific historical, cultural, aesthetic, and commercial structures.

The study finds that femininity in Mucha's posters is characterized by softness, ornamentation, idealization, naturalization, and being positioned as an object of the gaze. First, the women depicted by Mucha usually appear in soft, extended, static, or light bodily postures. Their bodily curves and gestures produce images of women as gentle, elegant, and visually appealing. Second, elements such as flowing hair, ribbons, elaborate clothing, flowers, vines, and decorative borders continually strengthen the ornamental quality of the female body, linking female imagery with nature, flowers, and curved beauty. Third, in commercial works such as the JOB cigarette-paper poster, the female body serves not only an aesthetic function but also becomes a medium of product promotion and consumer desire. Female imagery in Mucha's posters is therefore both the center of artistic aesthetics and a significant symbol within modern commercial visual culture.

From the perspective of Butler's theory of gender performativity, femininity in Mucha's posters does not exist naturally. It is constructed through repeated visual signs. Butler argues that gender is not an innate and fixed essence, but an identity effect formed through the repetition of social norms and bodily practices. The flowing hair, curves, flowers, soft postures, and static gazes that recur in Mucha's posters are key means through which femininity is visually performed. These elements repeat across works, gradually stabilizing ideas such as "women should be gentle, elegant, mysterious, docile, and decorative" and encouraging viewers to mistake them for natural attributes of women. The femininity presented in Mucha's posters is therefore an aestheticized, normalized, and naturalized gender performance.

The value of this study lies in two main areas. First, at the theoretical level, it introduces Butler's theory of gender performativity into the study of Mucha's posters and moves beyond approaches that focus primarily on formal style, decorative language, and design-historical value. With the intervention of gender theory, Mucha's posters can be understood not only as classic visual works of Art Nouveau, but also as important texts in which female imagery is constructed, displayed, and consumed in modern visual culture. Second, at the practical level, this study encourages critical reflection on representations of women in contemporary visual design. Mucha's style continues to influence illustration, advertising, packaging, cultural products, and digital visual design. However, when designers draw on his decorative aesthetics, they should also be alert to the repeated reproduction of simplified, idealized, and objectified female imagery. Designers should pay greater attention to the diversity, subjectivity, and lived experience of women and avoid reducing the female body to a decorative sign or medium of consumption.

This study also has limitations. The selected cases mainly focus on Mucha's representative posters and decorative panels, including Gismonda, the JOB cigarette-paper poster, La Dame aux Camelias, and The Seasons, and therefore do not cover all types of Mucha's work. In addition, the study mainly adopts theoretical interpretation and visual analysis, while its discussion of late nineteenth-century European gender structures, advertising and consumer culture, and changes in women's public image could be further deepened. Moreover, the study analyzes the topic primarily through Butler's theory of gender performativity and pays relatively

limited attention to audience reception, media circulation, and comparative analysis with other artists of the same period.

Future research can expand in several directions. First, the range of cases can be broadened to include more of Mucha's commercial posters, theatrical posters, decorative panels, and illustrations, allowing for a more systematic examination of the repetitive mechanisms of his female imagery. Second, Mucha can be compared with contemporaries such as Toulouse-Lautrec, Klimt, and Beardsley in order to analyze how different artists constructed femininity within Art Nouveau and modern visual culture. Third, future studies can further combine consumer culture studies and media studies to explore how Mucha-style female imagery has been inherited, transformed, and reproduced in modern advertising, illustration, fashion imagery, and digital art.

In conclusion, female imagery in Mucha's posters possesses significant artistic value while also containing complex gender-cultural meanings. Through elegant curves, botanical motifs, elaborate clothing, and idealized bodies, Mucha's works create highly attractive female figures. However, this femininity is not a natural essence. It is the result of repeated performance and normalization within visual culture. By applying Butler's theory of gender performativity, this study reveals the construction mechanisms of femininity in Mucha's posters and further demonstrates the gender norms and viewing relations embedded in canonical works of art. Studying this issue not only deepens the understanding of Mucha's posters, but also provides a basis for critically reflecting on female imagery in contemporary visual culture.

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