



**Jan Matejko (1838-1893)**  
*Rejtan, or the Fall of Poland*  
 1866  
 oil on canvas  
 282 cm × 487 cm (111 in × 192 in)  
 Royal Castle, Warsaw

# Masters of Central Europe

## Beautiful and Monumental Painting from Poland and Czechoslovakia

Americans who lived during the Cold War may remember the countries of Central Europe primarily as the satellite buffer states dominated by the Soviet Union, their people living behind the “Iron Curtain” under the oppression of totalitarian governments. We also remember the Soviet repression of the Hungarian Revolution of 1956 and its invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968 to suppress attempts to reform the hard-line Communist regime.

Prior to these events we know from history how Nazi Germany invaded Czechoslovakia in 1938. British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain returned to England after his famous meeting with Hitler, optimistically reporting that his policy of appeasement meant “peace for our time.” It didn’t work. The following year the Nazis invaded Poland, igniting World War II. In 1944 the Hitler regime set about to systematically destroy the city of Warsaw (and others), using flamethrowers and explosives to raze

its notable buildings and edifices: castles, palaces, houses, bridges, and great libraries. Warsaw and its memory would be obliterated from the face of the earth.

Over many centuries, the Slavic regions of Central Europe were repeatedly overrun by their stronger neighbors. They continually struggled to affirm their ethnic and cultural identities and gain political self-determination. In the West, we scarcely learned anything in school about these regions—neither their long histories nor their cultural achievements. It was all too easy to dismiss these places as political sinkholes and cultural backwaters in the grand scheme of things. With the exception of musical composers like Chopin, Dvorák, Smetana, and Bartók, we in the West have not considered Central Europe as sources of great artistic achievement compared to places like France or Italy. For example, do we know anything about Polish painting and whether it even existed? Be assured that it *flourished*, and in the late 19th century and into the 20th,

Polish and Czech artists of great skill attained international renown.

After the sudden unraveling of the Soviet Union in 1991, many of the former Soviet satellites gained national sovereignty for the first time in centuries and formed democratic governments. As these regions opened up to greater freedom of travel and the influence of the Internet, we of the West gained greater access to the cultural heritage of the Slavic peoples of Central Europe. Let us take a look at some of the work of four outstanding artists of the region, three Polish and one Czech, whose names and reputations had for decades been eclipsed.

Jan Matejko<sup>2</sup> was born in and died in Kraków, one of the oldest cities in Poland and one of its major centers of academic and cultural life (mercifully, it survived WWII relatively unscathed). An ardent patriot, he is best known for his grand and majestically detailed paintings of the former glories of Polish history.



**Jan Matejko (1838-1893)**  
*Astronomer Copernicus: Conversation with God*  
 1872  
 oil on canvas  
 221 × 315 cm (87 × 124 in),  
 Museum of the Jagiellonian University, Kraków  
 The figure on the far right is thought to be Pukirev.

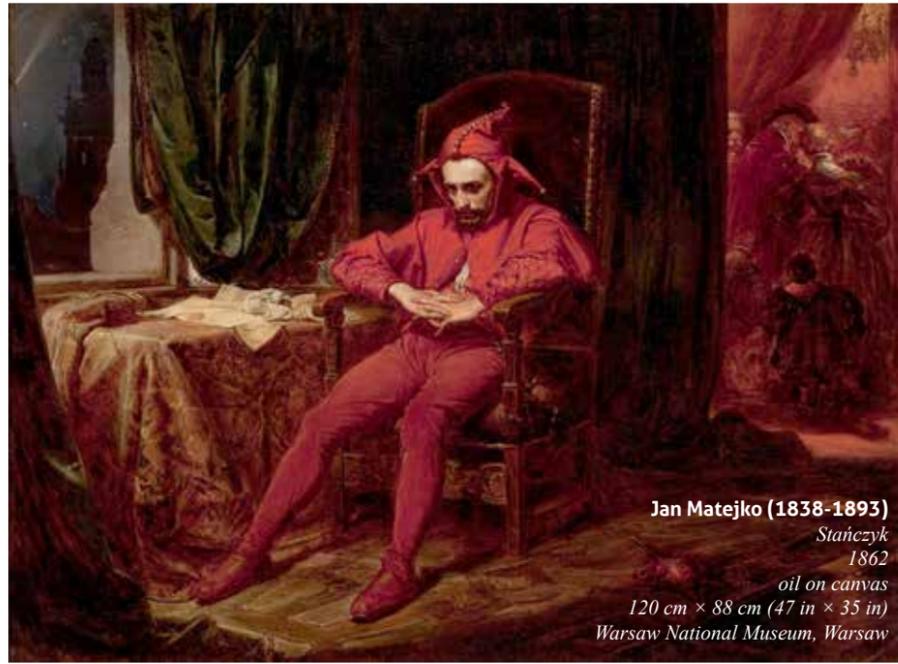


**Jan Matejko (1838-1893)**  
*Sigismund Augustus and Barbara at the Radziwill Court in Vilnius*  
 1867  
 oil on canvas  
 127 cm (50 in). Width: 107 cm (42.1 in).  
 [143 x 122.5 x 5] cm  
 National Museum in Warsaw



**Jan Matejko (1838-1893)**  
*Reception of Jews in Poland in the Year 1096*  
 1889  
 oil on canvas  
 30 x 44.1"  
 Royal Castle in Warsaw

Having received sound artistic training first in his native city and later in Munich and Vienna, he won a gold medal in the Paris Salon of 1865, followed by another gold medal from the Universal Exhibition in Paris for his *Reytan at the Sejm in Warsaw in 1773*, purchased by the Emperor of Austria, Franz Joseph. Although the artist strongly supported Polish independence, the country remained partitioned among Prussia, the Habsburg Empire of Austria, Russia, and what remained of the former Polish Republic during his lifetime. It only became a unified sovereign state after WWI in 1918. The painting depicts an event when the de facto Polish parliament disputed over the partitioning of the Commonwealth. Legend has it that Tadeusz Rejtan, a deputy in the parliament, bared his chest to oppose the partition. Although Matejko was known to take some artistic liberties for the sake of overall effect, the main figures represent real individuals.



**Jan Matejko (1838-1893)**  
*Stańczyk*  
 1862  
 oil on canvas  
 120 cm × 88 cm (47 in × 35 in)  
 Warsaw National Museum, Warsaw

His earlier depiction of the court jester *Stańczyk* (1862) first launched the artist to fame. The story takes place in 1514, when Poland was at the height of its glory, and at war with Russia. Poland had just lost its important eastern fortress to the enemy. The ordinarily witty, eloquent, and intelligent man is portrayed as an almost Shakespearean character, brooding over what the future portends, against the backdrop of a gay and festive ball on the other side of the door.

The event took place during the reign of Sigismund I the Old (1467-1548, reigned 1506-1548). Another painting of that period shows a young Sigismund I with his even younger and beloved Barbara of Hungary (1495-1515). They were a pair of star-crossed lovers, a Slavic Romeo and Juliet with a twist. Their marriage is recorded as happy and she bore him children before her early death.

Matejko's monumental *Battle of Grunwald* celebrates the victory of the allied Kingdom of Poland and the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, over the German Teutonic Order of Knights in 1410—one of Poland's greatest military victories. During World War II, when the Nazis sought to destroy all artifacts of Polish culture, Joseph Goebbels offered a bounty of 10 million marks (\$4,000,000) for the painting. It remained hidden for the duration of the war.



**Jan Matejko (1838-1893)**  
*The Battle of Grunwald*  
 1878  
 Oil on canvas  
 426 cm (167.7 in). Width: 987 cm (388.6 in)  
 National Museum, Warsaw

## Władysław Czachórski (1850-1911)

Polish artist Władysław Czachórski received artistic training at the School of Fine Arts in Warsaw, the Dresden Academy of Fine Art, and the Academy of Fine Arts, Munich, from 1869-1873, where he studied under Hermann Anschütz, who had been one of Matejko's teachers some dozen years before. Upon his graduation he received the Grand Silver Medal and later became a member of the Prussian Academy of Arts in Berlin.

Czachórski's subjects included landscape, still life, portraiture, and Shakespearean themes, but he was most admired for what could be called exquisite pictorial confections: highly realistic depictions of beautiful young women in lavishly detailed interiors.



**Władysław Czachórski (1850-1911)**  
*A Moment of Repose*  
 1890  
 oil on canvas  
 21 1/2 x 29"  
 location unknown

**Władysław Czachórski (1850-1911)**  
*The Blossom of Youth*  
 1898  
 oil on panel  
 30 x 40.9 cm. (11.8 x 16.1 in.)  
 location unknown



Although Henryk Hektor Siemiradzki<sup>3</sup> was born in what is now Ukraine and his father was an officer in the Russian army, his family carried a strong sense of Polish nationalism. He considered himself Polish throughout his life, even when Russia sought to claim him as its own because of his international reputation. After seven years of schooling at the Petersburg Academy of Fine Arts, Siemiradzki received a gold medal in 1871 for his *Alexander the Great and the Physician Philip of Acarnania*, affording him another six years' study abroad.

When he first came to Rome in 1872 his heart was so captivated by the city that he settled there for the rest of his life. Siemiradzki drew most of his celebrated subject matter from the ancient world and the Roman environs. A thoroughgoing academician, superb draughtsman, and master of composition, color, and lighting, he was proficient with landscape, portraiture, and the human figure. His subjects were taken from Greek, Roman, and Russian history, classical mythology, and the New Testament. He especially focused on scenes set during the time of the early Roman Empire, whether depictions of Roman orgies or the fate of early Christian martyrs, and small-scale bucolics with a few figures at leisure, set in idyllically beautiful landscapes.

The first monumental painting that gained the artist great acclaim throughout the capitals of Europe was *Nero's Torches*, which portrayed, without comment, the sophisticated barbarity of showmanship on the part of the emperor Nero, as early Christians went to their deaths. Siemiradzki was criticized by one writer at the time for focusing on the pictorial externals of the event and failing to portray its emotional drama.<sup>4</sup> His sumptuous settings prefigure the widescreen motion picture epics by 20th century director Cecil B. DeMille and the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer movie *Ben Hur* (1959).

## Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)



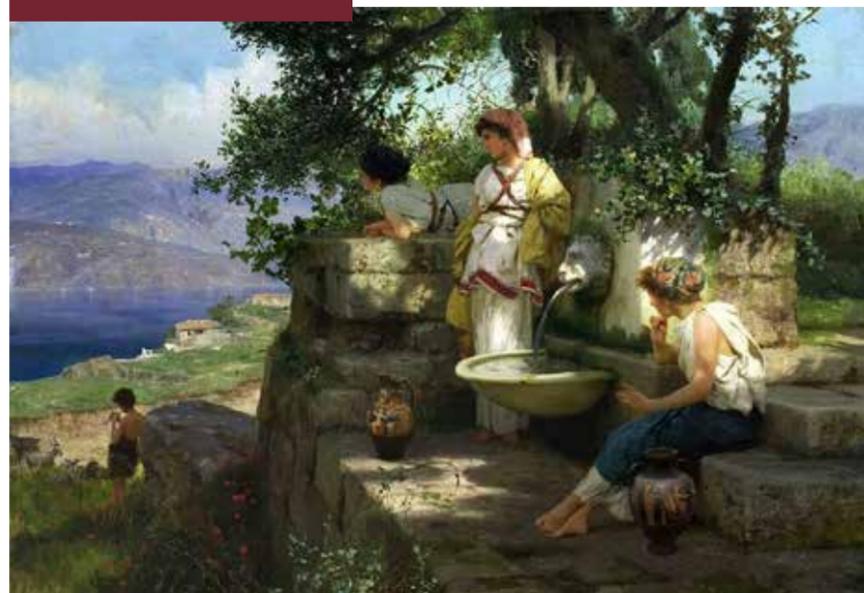
**Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)**  
*Alexander the Great and the Physician Philip of Acarnania*  
1870  
oil on canvas  
96.5 x 136.4

National Arts Museum of the Republic of Belarus



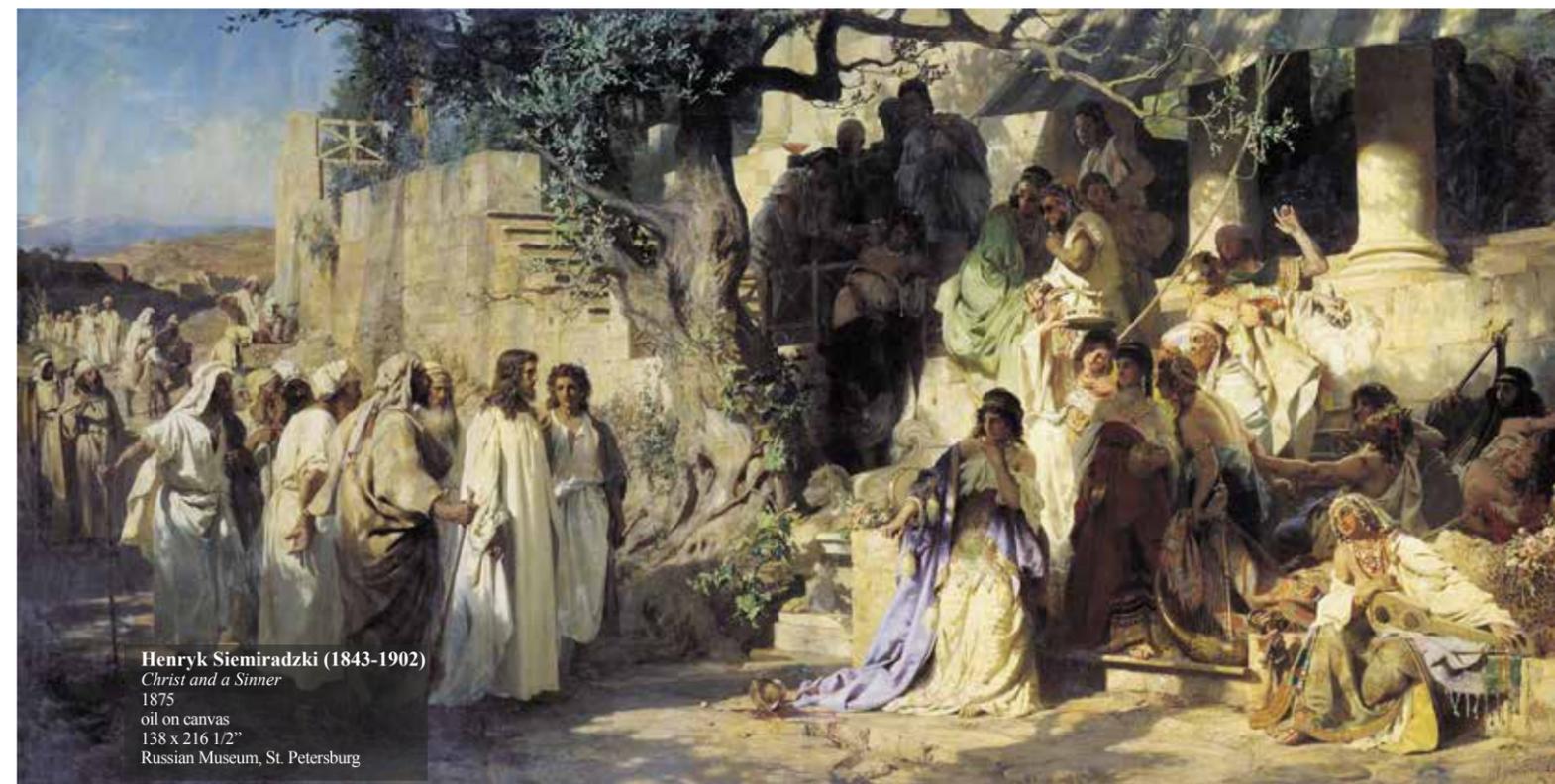
**Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)**  
*The New Bracelet*  
c. 1883  
oil on canvas  
22 1/2 x 1 1/2"  
location unknown [private collection, sold at auction]

**Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)**  
*By a Spring*  
1898  
oil on canvas  
30 x 43 1/4"  
Lviv Picture Gallery, Lviv, Ukraine)



**Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)**  
*Dance Among the Swords*  
1887  
oil on canvas  
47 1/4 x 225"

Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow  
There are several versions of the painting. One, entitled *The Sword Dance*, which sold at Sotheby's in 2011, and measures 31 x 61". It went for \$2,098,500, far above the high estimate of \$800,000.00



**Henryk Siemiradzki (1843-1902)**  
*Christ and a Sinner*  
1875  
oil on canvas  
138 x 216 1/2"  
Russian Museum, St. Petersburg

An example of the artist's ease in moving between both pagan and Christian subjects can be seen by comparing his *Dance Among the Swords*<sup>5</sup> and *Christ and a Sinner*. Both pictures are similar with their wide horizontal formats. The former, a strictly pagan subject, is presented with no hint of moral critique, while the latter portrays a dramatic moment in the life of the woman in yellow and purple who has just dropped her cup of wine. The source for the picture is not strictly biblical; it's an apocryphal event derived from a poem by A. K. Tolstoy (a second cousin of Leo Tolstoy) entitled "The Sinner" (1857), and represents the first meeting between Jesus of Nazareth and Mary Magdalene.

The name of Alphonse Mucha is far from unfamiliar, though it is mainly associated with his work in Paris during the late 19th century: the many posters of stylized, beautiful young women with flowing hair and garments that came to epitomize the Art Nouveau style. His artistic training began in his Czechoslovakian homeland, continued in Munich, and later in Paris when he moved there in 1887. His rise to fame and material success started when he wandered into a print shop just when an advertising poster was needed for a performance of the play *Gismonda* starring the legendary dramatic actress Sarah Bernhardt. She was so pleased with Mucha's artwork that she gave him a six-year contract, after which he could scarcely keep up with the commissions that flowed in for designs of all kinds, from jewelry to theater sets.

Eventually, however, he wearied of the perpetual demands of commercial art and longed to leave a more enduring and spiritual artistic legacy on behalf of his native land and its people. Returning to his homeland with his wife and children in 1910 he settled in Prague, where he took up what he would consider his crowning achievement: a series of 20 paintings of monumental scale on the history of the Slavonic people: the *Slav Epic* cycle, a massive project that would occupy him from 1911 to 1926.

In the *Slav Epic*<sup>6</sup> the artist selected significant high points in the history of the Slavic people generally, and illustrated them in a kind of metaphysical style, where events on earth are shown in synchronicity with a spiritual realm above them. While in Paris, Mucha had become profoundly interested in Masonic philosophy and would later become Grand Master of the Freemasons of Czechoslovakia, when that country (along with Poland) received national independence after WWI in 1918.

When Nazi Germans entered Czechoslovakia in 1939, Mucha was soon arrested by the Gestapo because of his fervent Slavic nationalism. He contracted pneumonia during their interrogation. Though eventually released, he failed to recover from his illness and died on July 14, 1939.<sup>7</sup>

## Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939)



**Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939)**  
The Slav Epic cycle No.1: *The Slavs in Their Original Homeland*  
1912  
Egg tempera on canvas  
20 x 26 1/2"  
Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Prague, Czech Republic



**Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939)**  
The Slav Epic cycle No.2: *The Celebration of Svantovit*  
1912  
egg tempera on canvas  
20 x 26 1/2" [6.1 x 8.1 meters]  
Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Prague, Czech Republic

**Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939)**  
The Slav Epic cycle No.3:  
*Introduction of the Slavonic Liturgy in Great Moravia*  
1912  
egg tempera on canvas  
20 x 26 1/2" [6.1 x 8.1 meters]  
Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Prague, Czech Republic

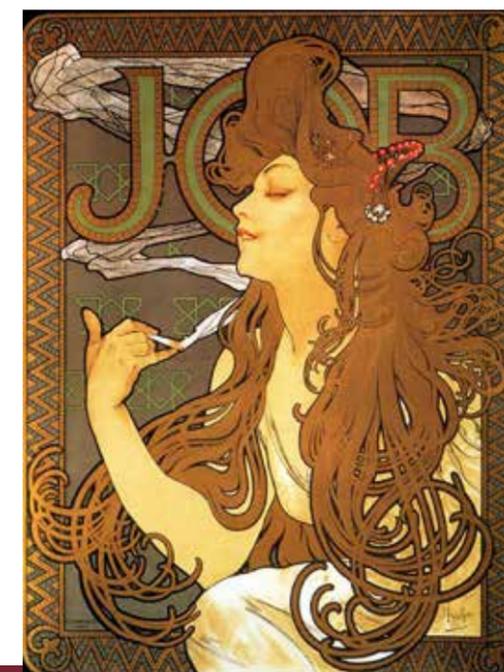


**Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939)**  
Poster for *Gismonda* starring actress Sarah Bernhardt  
1894  
color lithograph on paper  
85 x 29 1/4"  
Printer- Lemerrier, Paris



**Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939)**  
The Slav Epic cycle No.4: *Tsar Simeon I of Bulgaria*  
1923  
egg tempera on canvas  
159 1/2 x 189"  
Galerie hlavního města Prahy, Prague, Czech Republic

**Alphonse Mucha (1860-1939)**  
Advertising poster for Job cigarette papers  
1896  
color lithograph on paper  
26 1/5 x 18 1/4"  
Printer- F. Champenois, Paris



1. Also called Eastern Europe, the distinction is sometimes fuzzy, but the area essentially included Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary, Romania, and Bulgaria.  
2. For pronunciation of the names of Polish illustrated here see: [https://forvo.com/word/jan\\_matejko/](https://forvo.com/word/jan_matejko/); <http://www.pronouncenames.com/pronounce/Czachorski>; and [https://forvo.com/word/henryk\\_siemiradzki/](https://forvo.com/word/henryk_siemiradzki/)  
3. A detailed biography of the artist can be found here: <http://culture.pl/en/artist/henryk-siemiradzki>  
4. Ibid  
5. There are several versions of this painting. One, entitled *The Sword Dance*, which sold at Sotheby's in 2011, measures 31 x 61". It went for \$2,098,500, far above the high estimate of \$800,000.00. <http://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2011/russian-works-of-art-n08733/lot.11.html>  
6. For detailed information about the works of Mucha and the *Slav Epic* see here: <http://www.muchafoundation.org/gallery/themes/theme/slav-epic>  
7. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphonse\\_Mucha](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alphonse_Mucha)