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Art that Sells By Ed Kiersh

VINTAGE FRENCH POSTERS GIVE A SLOGAN FLAIR

Parisians were enthralled. Standing on the city's most fashionable boulevards in the 1890's, they'd stare at the colorful, often frivolous images that were plastered onto the walls of buildings, and marvel at the depictions of mischievous green devils, impish harlequins and scantily clad dancers from the *Folies Bergeres*.

Utilizing color for the first time, the experimental stone lithography seizing their attention mirrored the rebellious spirit of La Belle Epoque and its revolt against Victorian traditions. It was the *affiche*—whimsical and striking poster art that was turned into an advertising tool by Jules Cheret, a struggling lithographer inspired by Rococo artists Jean-Antoine Watteau and Jean-Honore Fragonard.

But Parisians didn't just stop and admire these cognac, circus troupe and cabaret advertisements. They tore them down from the walls. Posters from the originator of the *Maitres de L'Affiche* art series (a publication comprising 256 color lithographs) and fellow talents like Toulouse-Lautrec (his most noted poster is the Moulin Rouge/La Goulue) and Leonetto Cappiello became avidly pursued collectibles.

"This was the art gallery of the streets. Interest exploded, and that's still true today. The market is surging," says collector-turned-dealer **Mickey Ross, the owner of Westport, Conn.'s Vintage Poster Gallery** which has assembled a



Eye Catching | "They had to convey so much with a single image," says Mickey Ross of Vintage Poster Gallery in Westport. This poster for Chablis by Henri Lemonnier uses bold colors—and a fetching red head—to sell wine.

collection of more than 30,000 original pieces. "New collectors are responding to the fact that these colorful works are very aesthetically pleasing. They're still affordable—many choice items are \$3,000 to \$10,000—and in today's homes, where the design trend is towards larger and larger spaces, even greater sized posters work very well."

After explaining passionately how name artists such as Alphonse Mucha and Adolphe Mouron Cassandre, whose 1935 *Normandie* ocean liner poster recently sold for \$30,000, impacts values, Ross points toward a colorful 1920s ad for La Maison du Porte-Plume, a Brussels pen shop. Featuring two large ink bottles and an orange and yellow harlequin festooned with ribbons, this Beaux Arts work was done by the well-known Jean D'Ylen. It sells for \$4,400, which is \$1,600 more than it was worth three years ago.

"This piece is rare since a small pen shop could only afford to produce a limited number of posters," explains Ross. "It's a whimsical item that underscores the first rule of collecting: New collectors should only buy pieces they definitely like looking at. D'Ylen is also an artist with a track record. Unknown artists don't have that history, so enthusiasts must instead study auction records or simply work with credible dealers. They know how to discover pieces."

One of Ross's most stunning recent discoveries is a 1905 beige and taupe ad for the literary journal *Le Frou-Frou*. In pristine condition, the Lucieir Henri Weiluc work pictures a red-haired cabaret performer sitting in a chair with one leg provocatively raised, surrounded by wisps of cigarette smoke. Yet despite this flouting of "family values" (allusions to sex, alcohol and tobacco reduce the general appeal of many posters), the Frou-Frou's imagery is so strong and "flawless," according to Ross, the piece is valued at \$60,000—double its 2002 value.

"The clarity and fullness of color make this *Frou-Frou* highly desirable," says Ross, who usually travels to Europe six times a year to unearth rarities. "This work hasn't appeared at auction in years," he says. (Posters are still not a major category at auctions, and that's kept market prices within reasonable (boundaries.) "But no matter how rare an item, buyers must run their hands over it to make sure there are no rips or folds. See that there's no bubbling." | Only by

Only by examining a wide array of material can novices begin to spot alterations and discolorations. (Preserving posters away from direct sunlight and in tubes is strongly recommended.) Once this eye for condition and aesthetics is developed, collectors can start to see the differences in value (between a \$2,800 Cognac Jacquet ad with an exquisitely colored peacock (valued at \$1,500 three years ago) and a \$9,000 Whitworth Cycles poster from 1895 that features several women in long puffy dresses.

"It's vital to understand the differentials that determine pricing, but it's a big mistake to just buy what's expensive," Ross insists. "I tell my clients to find imagery that appeals to them, whether it's one specific category such as travel recruitment posters (Uncle Sam's 1914 "I Want You" pieces soared from \$3,500 to \$10,000 after 9/11) or a certain artist and style they admire. Cheret's Saxoleine, an ad for a lamp oil company is only \$800. It's a great way to get into collecting."

If present trends continue, this Cheret time capsule will appreciate dramatically in value. But the greatest allure of poster art is its vast palette. A medium with wide-ranging stylistic boundaries, this world is a kaleido-scope of political propaganda, movie promotions, mere commercial hucksterism and the sensory fantasies of Art Nouveau romanticism. "Posters are a sheer delight," Ross exclaims. "They're all about history and the telling of wonderful little stories." ♦



Pen Pal | A poster done by Jean D'YJen in 1930 (LEFT) advertises fountain pens for a store in Belgium. **Lucky Logo** | Georges Richard bicycle posters, like this one by H. Gray (CENTER), always feature four-leaf clovers. **Settling** | Jules Cheret's 1895 piece (RIGHT) touts an after-dinner drink.