

Biking memorabilia hits its stride

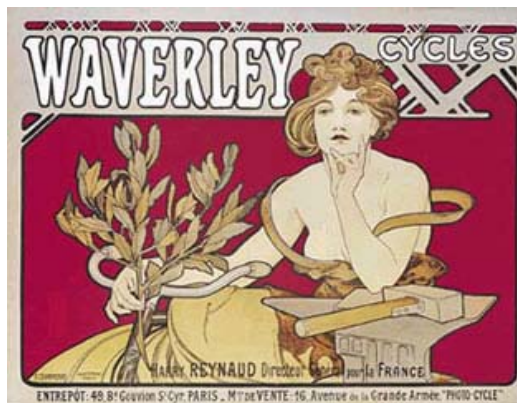
Posters take us back to favorite pastime at turn of the century

By Regina Kolbe
For Antique Trader

For the past 14 years, spring officially has arrived in upstate New York when Michael Fallen of Copake Auction Inc. drops the hammer on the annual Antique & Classic Bicycle Auction.

At about that same time of year, in New York City, people like Harvey Kopel, a 60-year-old video editor, rolls his bike out of an apartment decorated with more than 100 cycling posters and wedges it into an elevator designed to hold seven people. On his 50-block ride to work (about 2 1/2 Big Apple miles) he will jockey with taxis and trucks for a slice of the road.

An hour north, in Westport, Conn., the main cycling action takes place on weekends. That's when Mickey Ross, a vintage poster dealer and owner of The Ross Group, sees the



Clockwise from top left:

*Cycles Clesse Poster.
Approximately \$300.00*

*Singer Cycle Poster.
Approximately \$4,000*

*Alphonse Mucha for Waverly Cycles is
typical of his Art Nouveau style.
Approximate value: \$5,000.*

Bright yellows and greens of lycra-clad athletes' streak by his shop window on diamond frame speed machines, ready to take on the challenging hills of Fairfield County.

These three men — auctioneer, collector, dealer — each with a different eye on cycling and cycling collectibles, are the tip of a collecting category that is picking up enthusiasts with every turn of the wheel. Although bicycling collectibles span everything from antique high-wheelers to recent Olympic one-offs, parts and posters, this article focuses on the wealth of images the sport has inspired since the invention of the pneumatic tire in 1889 made it a fashionable pastime. In the decade before the turn of the century, hiking was considered a necessary social skill, one that required proper dress — knickerbockers, Norfolk jacket, and for the ladies, a petite chapeau.

The mere mention of such delightful words conjures up the very images of romance and grace that artists have contrived to deliver.

The reason for the current surge in popularity of cycling posters, Ross said, is because "Bicycling is something enthusiasts relate to easily. From a residential standpoint, in homes with young children, bicycles are appropriate images."

Kopel's collection is a prime example of what can

happen when a collector finds a theme and expands on it. His eclectic mix of prints, photographs, posters, and whimsy, accumulated over 20 years, is peppered with a few rare treasures like a Currier and Ives print, a Wyeth, and a complete set of Players cigarette cards.

The visuals range from Art Nouveau drawings of beautiful women seemingly airborne on their bikes to modern still lifes of bicycles and baguettes. There is the joy of a misty morning seen from the seat of a two-wheeler, the caprice of a monkey balancing on a bike, the vaudeville antics of Laurel and Hardy double heading. All of this just goes to show that when it comes to capturing the rush of freedom a good bike ride offers, there are as many visions as there are riders.

For collectors interested in mining original images, the world of vintage posters abounds with cycling art. As Ross explained, entry level originals start at \$300 and go up from there. Rarity, image, condition, and artist impact value. Higher-priced posters tend to bear the signatures of Cheret, Mucha, PAL, and Toulouse-Lautrec, among others.

Antique graphic art

Vintage posters, which came into collectors' consciousness in the 1970s, are the surviving remains of the 19th-century fascination with lithography, the first inexpensive way to mass

produce printed material. As the category emerged, collectors focused on the works of artists in France, where the genre was born.

Prior to 1860, posters contained only type. Then Jules Cheret (1860-1942), a Romanian-born artist in Paris, created a process of three-stone lithography that allowed for multicolor printing. A new medium was born.

Printmaking became the rage of artists. Henri Toulouse-Lautrec once proclaimed, "The poster, that's all there is!" Posters, however, were not considered fine art. They were advertising art, printed by the hundreds or thousands, hung on walls, viewed by everyone, rained on, pasted over, and left to disintegrate.

Although many of the stirring images on posters were designed to lure customers to nightclubs, cycling posters became strong contenders for the attention of consumers when bicycle makers discovered that the sport was threatened by such radical inventions as the aeroplane and automobile. Singer, Humber, Peugeot, Gladiator — manufacturers of bicycles and bicycle parts — desperately sought to hold onto their market share with lavish posters proclaiming the glories of bike riding.