

# Poster Art: Social History With A Sporting Design

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Forms of posters can be traced to Sumerian or Egyptian times; the walls of Herculaneum and Pompeii bear evidence of their use. It is clear that for centuries man has used visual means to announce events, promote services, sell products, or develop attitudes. So pervasive has the presence of posters become that artists who produce them are sometimes termed the “social historians of the streets.”

While colorful bills, printed on wooden blocks, were common to England by mid 19th century, “modern” poster design began with French artist Jules Cheret. The endless search for enjoyment in the brilliant festivals of Paris is captured in Cheret’s vivacious works. In a 97-year life, he created 1200 posters. His artistry, springing forth in the 1800s is the real genesis of today’s poster art.

While Cheret “fathered” this art form Toulouse Lautrec earned the title of the “master” of the medium of color lithography, but in a brief 37 year life, he left only 31 posters. Like

Lautrec, Steinlen explored social commentary in the visual arts from domestic scenes to the high society of France. Artists used sex, visual wit, human interest, and artistic style to capture attention through posters. The chief public amusements of Parisian society, music halls and cafes, the impact of the Paris Exposition of 1900, the fin de siecle prosperity on both sides of the Atlantic, all were mirrored in poster art of the time. Graphic arts gave new dimensions of vitality to new products and the benefits they gave to the buyer: i.e. not just the bicycle, but the mobility, fun and freedom possessed. A common thread in graphic design has consistently been sex. From Choubrac's censored 1898 poster to the multitude of cycling posters, elegant and adventurous ladies were popular subjects. A 1903 classic by Pennfield perhaps best represents this theme. Chic ladies of the early 20th century rode the train, smoked, drank alcohol, and read the latest magazines. Misti's women joined the "Age of Sport" as well dressed tourists, ready for hiking and perusing the forerunner of Michelin Guidebooks. By the Edwarian Age, magazines of social criticism were popular in the USA, France and Germany. Poster artists were major contributors to these publications. Recruiting efforts of WWI demanded their skills as well. In a world without radio and TV, with newspapers the province of a literate minority, "the poster was the one big instrument of mass communication." Posters in the '20s reflected the restlessness of society as life acquired new dimensions via the motor car, aeroplanes and trains. The social revolution of the postwar years - in fashion, dance, and ever-increasing mobility- emerged from the graphic arts of era. Speed, adventure, power, and excitement were conveyed in simplistic designs of artists like Cassandre.

As regular patrons and supportive money disappeared, many American artists of the 1930s developed into vigorous social propagandists. Their art became social work at its most convincing. Increasingly American advertisers delegated the job to agencies; often poster ads were merely supplemental. With radio, then television making inroads, poster art barely survived. Photography became a major focus for poster messages, and true posters became sidelines to the TV circus. By 1942, however, 1100 artists volunteered to aid the war effort in the USA alone. The "Artists for Victory" effort of art societies led to support by trade unions and businesses. By war's end painter's efforts were accepted by major companies as legitimate ways to reinforce advertising slogans. This continues to the present.

Since the 1950s attractive ads promise a world of elegance. The real message - that the exclusive is now available to all - is operative in the 1980s. With beautiful Olympic photo images by artists such as Kamekura, posters attained a new level of sophistication. Commercial advertising, involving both magazine advertisements and parallel posters, reveals much about our global values. Their appeal is to the "beautiful people" - strong, young, mobile. As Ruskin reminds us, "The art of any country is the exponent of its social and political virtues." The subjects of today's posters/ads/media hype reveal us for what we are or what we would be. It began with Jules Cheret in the 1880s. The millions of posters that have been created since provide graphic evidence that sports has remained an accepted theme. In the process, our leisure pursuits, the machinery and tools of sport, changes in fashion and corresponding societal standards are stripped for closer scrutiny. Poster art is a genre communicating social values and expectations. Its images are intimately interwoven with sport history of the past century.

NASSH members are never reluctant to have their pictures taken.

