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MAM's Must-See 'Posters of Paris'

Curtis Carter

Marquette University, curtis.carter@marquette.edu

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MAM's Must-See 'Posters of Paris'

By Curtis L. Carter

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Today, when we think of street art, we think of graffiti tagged by artists on the run from civil authorities or at odds with landlords who resist having their properties marked with satire or more aggressive forms of visual expression. This was not the case for the Paris artists in the Milwaukee Art Museum's summer exhibition "Posters of Paris: Toulouse-Lautrec and His Contemporaries" (through Sept. 9). To the contrary, Paris poster art was quickly acquired from the street and often became a prized

possession.

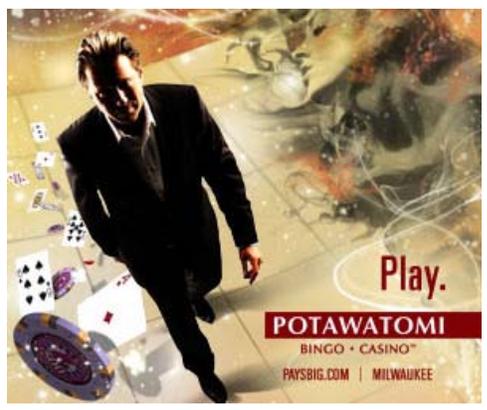
As one expects, there is a generous sampling of Lautrec, including his first poster, *Moulin Rouge La Goulue* (1891), which shocked Parisians for its bold display of the dancer's undergarments. His *Divan Japonais* (1893) celebrated his friends, dancer Jane Avril, actress Yvette Guilbert and critic Eduard Dujardin. This work stands as a monumental achievement among Paris posters for its striking visual form and color and its poignant glance into a scene from Parisian life of the times.

Jules Chéret is also well represented in the exhibition. Effortlessly, he draws our attention to exotic poses of dancer Loie Fuller at the Folies-Bergère, and easily brings us face to face with the wild animal trainer Delmonico, performing at the same theater.

Possibly the objects closest to the Belle Epoque Paris street images in today's world would be commercial billboards and plaques that support our commodity culture. Unlike the American Pop artists Andy Warhol and James Rosenquist, who initially fed upon popular commodity images, the poster artists of Paris actually created the visual culture that dominated the streets. Their images helped shape how the public would experience life in their time. These images also preserve for us a special look that words could not transmit.

Content of poster images was often closely linked but not limited to the entertainment culture of well-known sites such as the Moulin Rouge, Folies-Bergère and other theaters where the likes of actress Sarah Bernhardt and dance wonder Loie Fuller performed. Striking, colorful images showcasing socially provocative issues are present throughout this exhibit. Théophile-Alexandre Steinlen's *La Traite des Blanches* promoted a novel on the white slave trade. A bare-breasted matron featured in the poster drew the artist into controversy with the censors. An advertisement for *Déesse* (Goddess) bicycles by the artist Pal features a scantily clad woman above a sea of faces representing different ethnic groups. It is as if the artist might be an avant-garde herald of cultural diversity.

Apart from engaging visual experiences and a touch of art history that is less well known, this exhibition informs us about the cultural and social climate of Paris of nearly a century and a half ago. Given their attractiveness and accessibility, it is not surprising that posters from the Paris streets became the focus for poster parties at home, where coveted posters could be enjoyed with friends.



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- Judy Nugent:** Do you mean to tell me a first term senator from Illinois who spent most of ...
- mindy portmann:** Ryan has more decent character in his little pinky than the entire staff of this rag. ...
- anonymous:** Insurance companies help keep our economy in line. We need redlining. Without redlining, poor ...
- WaukeshaGuy:** The problem with banks making sub-prime loans was not the fault of the inner-city people ...
- Sandy:** I think the answer is there is a range of normal. From personal experience I ...
- WaukeshaGuy:** New Republican agenda... save our public deficits from lack of tax revenue. Cannot tax those who ...
- Richard Ehler:** Your article on the truth about Paul Ryan really rings a bell. I have been ...

Posters became highly collectible items affordable to everyone—or at least for those clever enough to recognize their value and nimble enough to catch them off street venues or purchase them from galleries. For those who were wise enough to carefully store away their prized posters, the art market has been kind. Today, posters of the quality represented here are sought after, and often have significant market value.

For anyone who loves Paris or colorful and accomplished art, this exhibition is not to be missed. The scholarship brought to the exhibition by curator Mary Weaver Chapin, a former MAM associate curator of prints and drawings and a specialist on Toulouse-Lautrec, is excellent. And the visual display itself will bring both pleasure and knowledge to those who visit the museum. The exhibition travels to Dallas after its Milwaukee premiere.

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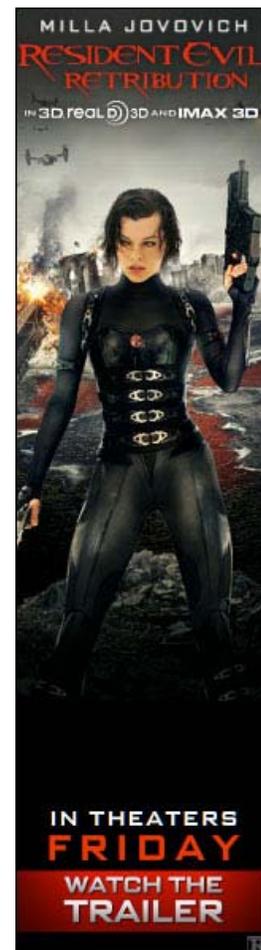
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