

PLACES/SPACES



L'AFFICHISTE



Karen Etingin's L'Affichiste vintage poster gallery in Montreal

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We tend to think of the poster as an inherently ephemeral object, hung for brief periods in shop windows and on metro station walls, tied to the banalities and crudeness of commercial enterprise. Karen Etingin rejected this sentiment long ago, and the moment you step into her vintage poster gallery L'Affichiste, you will, too.

Those who wander in are inevitably struck by the glorious and often daring colours and lines, and the striking images and flourishes of the immense posters, hung from floor to ceiling. The gallery is dominated by Art Nouveau—Karen's first love—and Art Deco, and every poster is vintage, non-reproduction.

But this is no museum. "They've had a life and they should have a life," says Karen. "They're like women of a certain age. There are creases or there are little hairs where there shouldn't be or they're greying, but they have a life. If you look at a poster, you'll see that the lines aren't perfect, there's overprinting. To me that's what makes it special."



“You can tell a lot about when posters were printed by virtue of their size or what they were advertising,” says Karen, who loves these sorts of details. For example, early on, larger posters were printed in halves and later glued together because the presses were too small—only when presses became larger could they print posters as one sheet. Some posters were stamped to show that the advertiser had paid the required tax to hang the poster. Others were marked with the print run, and others show signs of folding.

“I like to see wear,” says Karen. “It shows that it’s authentic. You can find copies of these posters, but to me, if you’re going to spend money on something, it might as well be something real.”

Karen grew up around art—her grandmother was a sculptor and her mother a painter and engraver. But her own interests always went beyond fine art: “When I was in grade school I did a project on Toulouse Lautrec and became quite fascinated by him. Art Nouveau was full of sinuous lines and muted colours, florals and crinolines and things that make young girls’ hearts beat faster.”

Later she became equally drawn to Art Deco. “With Art Deco the colour started to pop more. Then in the ’40s the typography is more in your face, and way more graphic. By the 1950s the colour is really quite strong and joyous.”

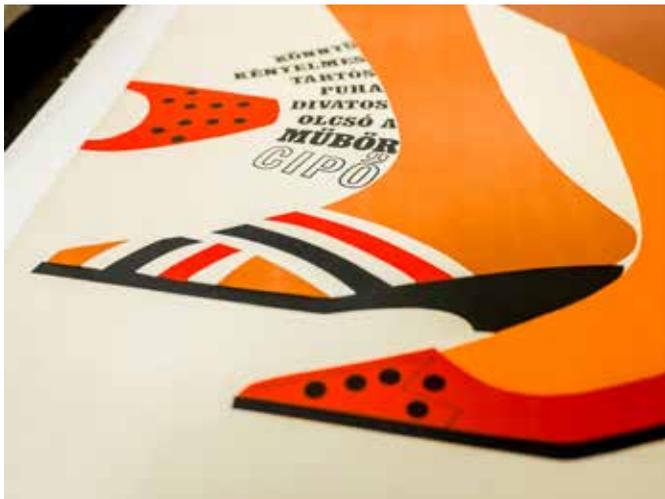
A move to New York and a job in marketing and advertising cemented her growing interest in commercial art and graphic design. Soon she was a serious collector. “Every time I got a new client or had a new contract or had a little extra money in my pocket I’d go buy a poster,” she says.

After collecting for 30 years, Karen opened her own gallery in Montreal’s antiques district. “I decided that Montreal needed a vintage poster gallery,” she says. “I found a great space on the second floor of an old Victorian bank building with giant floor-to-ceiling windows.” It was a beautiful location, but quiet: “When I opened I had great long afternoon naps because nobody would come in.”

After a number of years, Karen moved the gallery to Montreal’s historic Old Port, where she jokes she can’t nap anymore—here the gallery sees plenty of activity. The area draws tourists from around the world, who come to take in the popular waterfront, the narrow streets of ornate stone buildings and the impressive Notre-Dame Basilica, just around the corner from L’Affichiste. “This building is owned by the same folks who own the cathedral,” says Karen, “so I figured it was a divine choice.”

The gallery could indeed be described as divine. Though much cozier than a cathedral, it is an elegant space, full of sunlight; each wall a shrine to the vintage poster. The space pops with reds and oranges and greens. There are noble men and elegant women; steam engines and airplanes; bicycles, liqueurs and vistas. Posters crowd the walls. Every available space is used.

The French were the first to work with colour lithography, and led much of early poster design. French posters are thus some of the more common, though other countries have made their mark. “Polish posters are either really quirky and disturbing, or colourful and goofy. Hungarian posters are clean and crisp,” says Karen, who describes her own taste as quirky.



A COLOURFUL COLLECTION

From Art Nouveau to Art Deco to the modern, the collection at L’Affichiste boasts nearly 4,000 vintage posters, including promotion for France’s National Lottery (top right) to Hungarian advertisements for shoes (bottom left).



Top: Karen Etingin going through a pile of vintage posters in her gallery L'Affichiste, with a helping hand from her cherished employees Kristan and Kristina.

She also describes herself as a poster snob, which is unnecessarily self-deprecating. More accurately, she is a collector with impeccable taste and a clear sense of what she likes—and thus what she wants to share with those who stumble upon her gallery. For she is also a passionate host. “Hopefully I’m creating the same passion in others,” she says.

The job of gallery owner certainly has its perks. Karen travels several times a year to expand her collection, mostly to Europe, often to Italy. Some posters she finds at auctions, others are on consignment from other collectors.

L’Affichiste currently has close to 4,000 posters, making the collection remarkably varied. Many were made for cigarette and liquor producers, who often had the most money to pay for some of the best artists. Also common are railway and airline posters—travel promotion for Air France and the French National Railway Corporation.

“This is one of the first posters for Air France,” she says, holding up a poster dominated by an open sky. “I love this poster. It’s clean and elegant and very romantic. It gives one the urge to travel.”

The influence of travel companies was significant in Canada as well, where the Canadian Pacific Railway, or CP Rail, was prolific in poster advertising. “Their posters were so important in bringing immigrants

VINTAGE POSTER COLLECTING TIPS

Authentic vintage posters are generally only sold by vintage poster dealers.

They are often mounted on linen (to preserve the aging paper they were printed on), and generally bear some signs of age: tax stamps, old folds, imperfect lines, overprinting. These imperfections are not defects; they are evidence that the posters (may) be as old as they are advertised to be.

Many poster dealers are members of the International Vintage Poster Dealer Association (IVPDA), so if you are thinking about buying a *real* vintage poster, check the IVPDA website (ivpda.com) to see if the dealer is listed. It's a great way to check the bona fides of a dealer.

Buy what you love—you may be living with it for a long time.

Vintage posters by well-known artists can appreciate in value over the long term, potentially making them good investments (if the posters are genuine, in excellent/very good condition and fall within certain criteria). However, speculating on the market appreciation of vintage posters is not an exact science, leading us to the conclusion that if you are going to buy a vintage poster, make sure you like it, as you may be living with it for a long time.

If it's too good to be true...

Vintage posters are not, by nature, inexpensive. If you run across one in a small shop and the owner claims the poster is original, but you're not certain and the price is too low... then listen to the little alarm bells in the back of your head and back away slowly.

Do your research.

There are some great books written about vintage posters. Before you spend big bucks on a poster, spend a few dollars on education: many books are available used or secondhand on Amazon. If you'd like some specific suggestions, these are a good start:

Gallo, Max. *The Poster in History* (Mcgraw-Hill, 1974)

Le Coultre, Martijn F., and Purvis, Alston W. *A Century of Posters* (Lund Humphries, 2002)

Metzl, Ervine. *The Poster: Its History and Its Art* (Watson-Guptill, 1963)

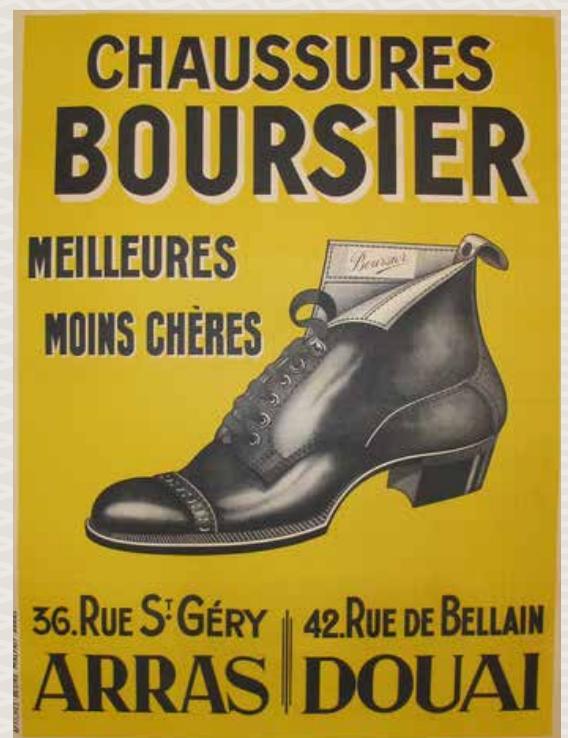
Rennert, Jack. *Posters of the Belle Epoque: The Wine Spectator Collection* (Posters Please, 1990)

Au Bon Marché, 1900

Le Bon Marché ('the good market', or 'the good deal' in French) was the name of one of the most famous department stores in Paris. It prided itself on being able to supply Parisiennes with the latest fashions, as this poster clearly infers.

Chaussures Boursier, 1920s

This 1920s Art Deco poster advertises a French shoe company. The bright yellow background emphasizes the oversized black shoe featured at the centre of the poster. The poster also features the company slogan "Meilleures, moins chères," suggesting that the store boasted the best prices and the best quality.



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VISIT L'AFFICHISTE'S WEBSITE. laffichiste.com



to Canada,” says Karen. “CP was so powerful that they had the capacity to do the first immigration interviews. If you went to a railway office in Dublin or Edinburgh or Hamburg at the turn of the century, you could get your interview, your crossing ticket on a CP boat and your CP railway ticket, and sometimes you would even get your land parcel—and you could buy it all at the CP office. It’s wild.”

Karen is about to get hands-on experience with that history. CP Rail is donating their archives to a railway museum on the outskirts of Montreal, and Karen will be one of two independent evaluators going through the collection. “I’m really flattered,” she says. “This is a huge honour. It’s a big responsibility but I’m very excited about it.”

Karen is also writing a book about a little-known but highly influential Austrian artist named Julius Klinger, who worked through the 1920s until his death in 1942. “Klinger was one of the first commercial graphic artists to come up with the concept of branding—letterhead and billboards and advertising and product packaging. Nobody had really thought of that before the 1920s.”

According to Karen, poster graphic art is infinitely more accessible than fine art. “I have come to believe that graphic artists actually present art in a more pure, more direct manner—creating documents of social, political and graphic history in a manner that fine artists cannot,” says Karen, who has taught a university-level course on posters, along with their connection to social history, literature and political movements. “Because posters were always designed to be temporary, they had the ability and the mandate to present contemporary ideas in the most compelling manner possible.”

“Poster art is now considered a bit of a lost art form. It’s making its resurgence. It’s a great way to learn about social, political, graphic history, and the history of printing and technology. It has a little bit of everything in it. You can tell a lot about the development of a country, an idea, a product. I think it’s fascinating.” 

laffichiste.com
posterromance.com

