



Commercial gains

Whether contemplating a dabble in the world of art investment or a stultifying blank wall, gems from the golden age of Art Deco menswear advertising offer a perfect solution.

by **christian chensvold**

There comes a point in the life of any instinctively elegant man where he must face the question of how to appoint his living quarters. And, those for whom sartorial obsession is all-consuming will likely find inner tranquillity in covering the walls of their home — their haven from the vulgar world that lies beyond — with depictions of masculine panache.

If that sounds like you, look no further than these European posters from a golden age when stylish advertising images greeted the boulevardier as he strolled, boutonniere abloom and malacca cane in hand, along the continent's urban avenues. The original Pop Art posters — viewable cost-free on trolleys, in train stations and on street-side kiosks — rose to prominence at the close of the 19th century, drawing such talents as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Alphonse Mucha to the public's attention. Inevitably, as Western affluence grew, companies selling gentlemanly paraphernalia soon began tapping consumers' dreams of distinction with beautiful and arresting advertising imagery.

This rise in the prominence of advertising posters was aided by new developments in lithography. Its name coming from the Greek 'lithos' for stone, lithography was invented in 1796, and

Some of the most highly prized vintage posters were those commissioned by Italian department store E. & A. Mele & Co., such as the one pictured opposite, circa the 1900s, which depicted the elegance of prewar high society.

is based on running paper through a press over ink-covered stone blocks. It is a time-consuming process requiring multiple colour proofs, but the results are just the kind of vividness necessary to catch the eye of an ambulating flaneur. "What you

get from lithography is pure, solid colour," says poster dealer Jim Lapidés of the International Poster Gallery in Boston, Massachusetts. "It's not dots like in the offset printing used for newspapers. Lithography provides a richness of texture, even the texture of the stone, and depth of colour — there aren't many artisans around today who can do it."

The most famous maker of menswear posters was the Swiss clothing firm of PKZ, which stood for Paul Kehl, Zurich. Dazzling in their variety and creativity, from the 1920s to the 1960s, they made some of the finest examples of the genre. One of its masterpieces, a single minimalist button depicted by artist Otto Baumberger, hangs in New York's Museum of Modern Art. "The Swiss were fanatics on print quality and really wrote the book on how to do it right," says Lapidés.

PKZ, who sold their posters in a gallery, rose in advertising prominence quite serendipitously, as Kehl was neighbours with Johann Edwin Wolfensberger, Switzerland's greatest printer. It was a perfect match: Wolfensberger had the printing technique, while Kehl had the shrewdness to sponsor art contests, with sophisticated critics as judges, amid the economic depression of the 1930s, thereby drawing hundreds of samples to choose from — each, says Lapidés, "more beautiful than the last". PKZ drew in all the best artists at the time and gave them complete freedom, with the company's own logo represented differently by each artist.

It's hard to know how many examples of each poster were printed, Lapidés says, as well as how many remain. Suffice it



E. & A. Mele & C. commissioned various artists, such as famed Italian poster artist Leonetto Cappiello and Polish artist Franz Laskoff (responsible for the posters opposite and above, respectively), to design their posters.



Above: a foxy poster from 1933 by Alois Carigiet for PKZ, a Swiss chain of clothing stores. PKZ often commissioned the best Swiss artists to design their (now highly sought-after) advertising posters.

to say, there aren't a lot. "Every once in a while, a group of them will come on the market from a collection, or [released by] the company, and then they'll just disappear," he says. "I actually haven't run across a PKZ in a few years." This scarcity, combined with their superb printmaking quality and huge artistic appeal, accounts for the high tariff: top posters fetch up to US\$10,000.

The silver and bronze medals in menswear posters should probably go to the Italian department store E. & A. Mele & C., which made some 185 exquisite examples up through World War I, and the Swiss luxury firm Bally, whose images are also highly sought-after for their artistic quality.

Long ignored by the art market as also-rans — after all, they are printed in mass quantities — posters today garner much more respect, and their buyers have become notably educated about what they're purchasing, says Gail Chisholm of Chisholm Gallery Vintage Posters (vintagepostersnyc.com) in New York. That said, they remain a great entry point into the art-buying world. "My recommendation

to anyone getting started is just to relax and look at the poster," says Chisholm. "A visceral response is the most important thing to start with. Trust your instincts on what you're drawn to."

Vintage posters start as low as US\$200, with the bulk of the market falling between US\$500 to US\$1,500. The more coveted




Above: a PKZ poster from 1944 by Swiss artist Hans Falk. Right: a 1915 poster by Swiss artist Burkhard Mangold for Chemiserie Wegmann, Zürich.



examples — such as those by PKZ, Bally and Mele — show small but steady appreciation; they aren't buffeted by the winds of fashion and don't suffer the wild fluctuations seen in the contemporary art or photography markets. Still, the poster market isn't entirely immune to trends, and lately there's been a growing interest in posters from mid-century works — the twilight of posters' golden age. Chisholm attributes this to the *Mad Men* mania — the show being set, of course, in an early-'60s advertising agency.

It's the rich graphic styles and their historical context that make posters compelling examples of the ever-changing pop-culture zeitgeist, according to Chisholm. She was also drawn to specialise in them by the bold immediacy of their imagery. "More so than the fine arts, posters give an immediate sense of what people were seeing on the streets, what they were wearing, so there's historical as well as visual interest," she says.

For Lapides, the appeal is also multifaceted: "Posters are the interface of art, commerce and culture. There's a lot to say about the artist, the style, the country, the product and the printing. Actually, 'poster' is a terrible word: walk into a shop and these artistically crafted images just explode off the wall in a riot of colour."

So, buyer beware: line your home with a few of these compelling menswear examples and, just like the flaneurs of yesteryear, you might find yourself stopping to indulge in a gaze each time you pass them by. 

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Left: an 1895 poster by an unknown artist advertising the shirts from a store in Milan, Italy.



Above and right: posters for Italian fashion brand Facis, circa the 1960s.

