SILVAGO

2018 BIENNIAL EXHIBITION

American Art Posters of the 1890s

Mission

The Art Museum of the University of Memphis serves the University and its region as a resource and laboratory for the study, interpretation, and presentation of the visual arts and the dissemination of artistic scholarly research.

Vision

The Art Museum of the University of Memphis will be recognized for innovative, multidisciplinary programs that engage its academic, metropolitan, regional and professional communities in the appreciation of visual arts as expressions and shapers of cultural life and values.

The Art Museum of the University of Memphis, as an integral part of the University and its community:

Values

Pursues excellence in its exhibition and educational programs

Engages in interdisciplinary and community collaborations that leverage resources and multiply accomplishment for all participants

Presents and promotes the understanding of new and innovative visual art

Develops and uses its collections to support student research and achievement

Provides exemplary stewardship of its collections

Represents the best practices of accredited museums

Fosters new generations of artists, museum professionals, scholars, and museum audiences

Engages its community in dialogue and actions that enhance life in the region

Celebrates its multicultural heritage and encourages multicultural and international understanding

Arthur Wesley Dow
Modern Art
1895

Will H. Bradley
Bradley - His Book
"The Kiss," 1896

FOREWORD

This book celebrates the gift of a thoughtful and supportive friend of the Metropolitan Museum. In 1984, Leonard A. Lauder presented to the Department of Prints and Photographs his important collection of 158 American art posters of the 1890s, a collection he had assembled, winnowed, and perfected over a period of seven years.

He has since made additional gifts of key works and we are grateful as well for his commitment of funds toward the exhibition and cataloguing of the Museum's entire collection of American art posters of this period. This volume, the first to document such a collection in any American museum, has been made possible by Mr. Lauder's generosity and foresight.

This museum has had a modest collection of American art posters for many years, even as early as the decade in which they were first published, but it began somewhat haphazardly, with items entering the Museum merely as reference material. It was not until 1957 that many of these posters were transferred to the Department of Prints and Photographs, where for the first-time posters by such artists as Will H. Bradley, Edward Penfield, J. C. Leyendecker, and Maxfield Parrish were formally accessioned.

Additional donations over the years built up a collection with many strengths, as well as many weaknesses. In 1936, David Silve, a graphic designer long associated with Museum publications, donated thirty-six American posters to the Museum. Included in this gift was an imperfect but extremely rare impression of Will Bradley's large woodcut poster called "The Kiss" (Cat. 30), published in 1896. The Silve gift represented the first group of American art posters to enter the Museum officially as works of art.

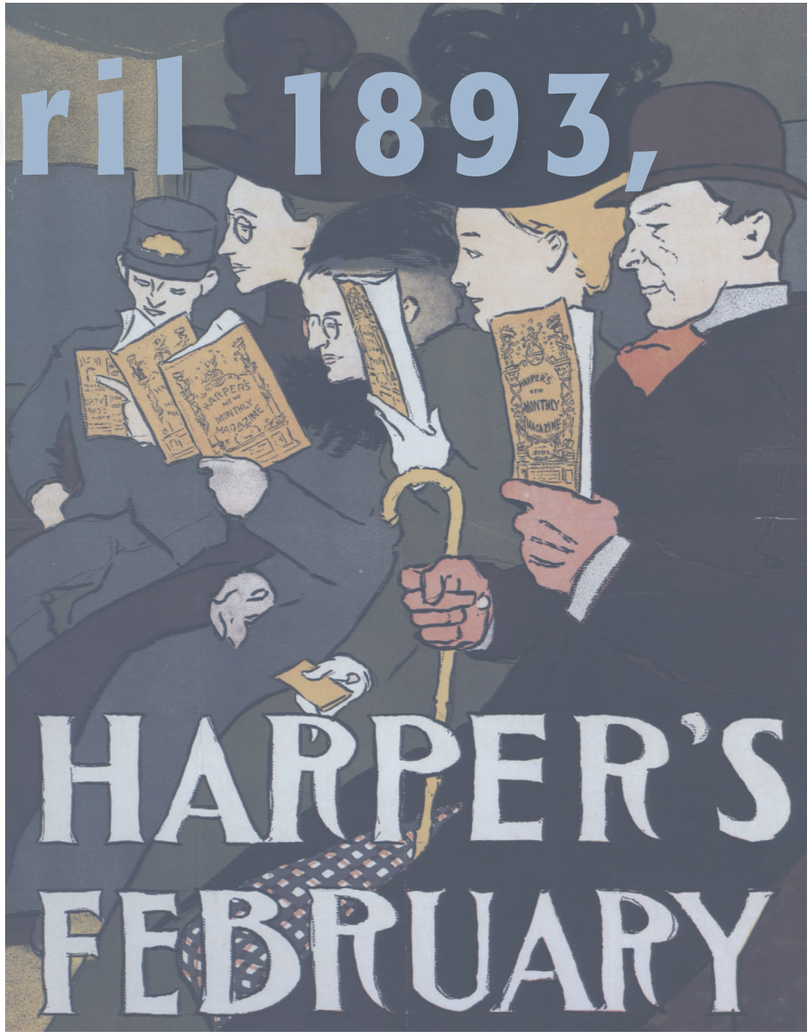
A particularly strong and early collection of American and French posters of the 1890s, which was formed by the painter Robert Vonnoh, was presented to the Museum in 1941 by Vonnoh's widow, the sculptress Bessie Potter Vonnoh. These posters, including more than 125 by American artists, date from 1893 to 1896. Many still bear numbered stickers and mounting pinholes from an 1896 exhibition of posters held at the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts that was organized by Vonnoh and Maxfield Parrish. Some of the posters are quite rare, having been made by lesser-known illustrators, while others are by well-known artists, such as the poster especially designed for the Philadelphia exhibition by Maxfield Parrish.

One other important donation to our holdings was made in 1952 by Fern Bradley Dufner, Will Bradley's daughter. Bradley designed some of the most sophisticated early posters, many for The Chap-Book. Included in the Dufner gift were rare trial proofs, preliminary drawings, and impressions of some of his posters.

In the years to come, selections from the Lauder collection will continue to be displayed on a rotating basis in the American Wing. It is our hope that this inaugural exhibition and catalogue, so splendidly supported by Leonard A. Lauder and carefully assembled by David W. Kiehl, Associate Curator in the Museum's Department of Prints and Photographs, will help acquaint the public with a lively and illuminating aspect of American art.

PHILIPPE DE MONTEBELLO, Director

In April 1893,



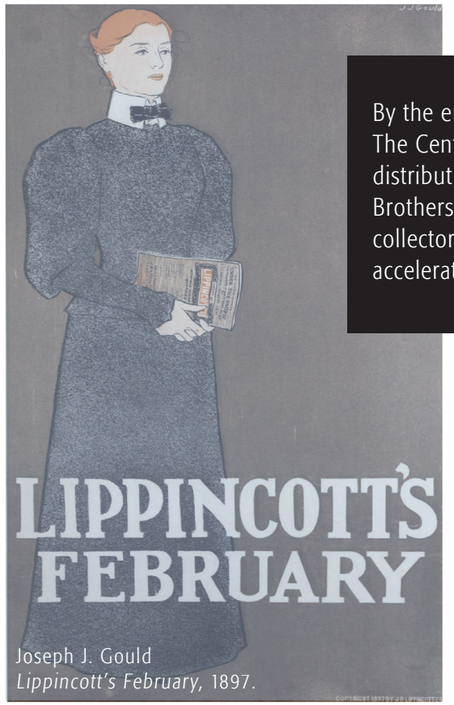
something new was spotted in the shops of American news vendors and booksellers. Amid the handbills and letterpress notices of topical interest, there was a small poster that pictured a man in a green overcoat and a hunter's cap, intently reading a magazine-and heedless of the falling rain. The only lettering on the poster was "HARPER'S FOR APRIL." The magazine that captured the man's undivided attention was Harper's Monthly Magazine.

This was unprecedented. There was no listing of contents, no headline stressing an important story or new serialized novel. Moreover, nothing in the image made any reference to a holiday season. It was just April. The poster was bold in its simplicity: the singular, isolated figure of the man; the magazine; a mere suggestion of the weather proverbially associated with the month; and bold lettering carefully integrated into the design. The implication was quite clear. Harper's Monthly Magazine was worth a walk to the news vendor even in the pouring rain.

The next month, Harper and Brothers sent a new placard to replace the man in the green coat. For May - and again the presentation was simple-a young girl in a white frock, a floral wreath on her head, held up a copy of Harper's. As in the April poster, the lettering, "HARPER'S FOR MAY," was carefully integrated with the design. In each succeeding month, a new poster appeared, carefully designed. Some made discreet references to adages characterizing the month, others to seasonal activities. The regularity of appearance and the singularity of design attracted the attention of the literate public and, moreover, of editors of rival periodicals intended for the same middle- and upper-class readership.

William L. Carqueville,
Lippincott's August, 1895.

William L. Carqueville,
Lippincott's February, 1895.



Joseph J. Gould
Lippincott's February, 1897.

By the end of 1893, Charles Scribner's Sons, J. B. Lippincott Company, The Century Company, and other publishers had plans for or were distributing their own posters in competition with those of Harper and Brothers. The race had begun and, with the added encouragement of collectors, the enthusiastic interest in the poster already rampant in Paris accelerated across the United States during the rest of the decade.

There are no records of the deliberations preceding the decision of the editors of Harper and Brothers to inaugurate this experimental advertising campaign. Some of these men undoubtedly were familiar with the posters by Jules Cheret, Theophile-Alexandre Steinlen, Eugene Grasser, and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, which covered Paris hoardings and kiosks and were first exhibited in New York at the Grolier Club in 1890. 1 In part, though, their decision was also influenced by the success of the cover commissioned from the French artist Grasset for the Christmas 1892 issue of Harper's.

Special holiday covers and art supplements had become a routine feature of American magazines in the last quarter of the century; these holiday supplements succeeded in increasing readership. Some Christmas covers in the early 1890s were specially printed as placards for the use of news vendors. On the other hand, during non-holiday months, covers were comparatively dull - a masthead, a listing of contents, and sometimes a wood-engraved illustration of topical interest. Could a monthly poster unrelated to a special holiday issue attract enough attention to encourage the purchase of Harper's?

Will H. Bradley
The Chap-Book, Thanksgiving Number, 1895

The poster, as a medium for advertising, was not at all new to the American public. In the eighteenth century, letterpress and woodcut handbills were posted regularly in taverns, inns, and shops. Nineteenth-century revolutionary advances in color printing by means of lithography were quickly marshaled: by businessmen and merchants for household products and other goods; by theatrical producers and circus owners; and by political organizations for elections and other issues. To meet the growing demand, many of the larger lithographic firms in New York, Boston, Chicago, Philadelphia, San Francisco, Buffalo, and Cincinnati employed skilled artists to produce a continual flow of images suitable for the advertising needs of their clients.

Few records survive for these large firms, and even less information is known about the artists they employed. Yet the surviving posters are testaments to the imaginative skill and quality of the products of commercial printing firms. These posters were ubiquitous across the United States and even in Europe, where American circus posters may have had an influence on Cheret.

Harper and Brothers chose not to employ the services of one of these large lithographic firms. They wanted a poster that would attract attention because it was completely different from its fellows. Also, they chose not to commission a well-known French artist; not only was there an impending deadline, but also they feared that the exuberant young ladies so frequently found in French posters might offend their potential readership.

Instead, the editors turned to the head of their art department, the young Edward Penfield. He had run the art department for Harper and Brothers since 1891, after his studies at the Art Students League. Amid the hectic duties of overseeing the artistic needs of this important publishing firm-supervising staff and contractual illustrators; planning layouts of books and magazines and designs of covers; and working with printers Penfield had little time to devote to his new assignment. His first poster was reportedly the product of an overnight spurt of creative activity. The achievement clearly illustrated his understanding of an effective poster, its simplicity and good composition, which he coupled with subtle humor most often expressed by visual references to the proverbial qualities of the seasons and by quiet comments on the lifestyles of the more leisured classes of American society. These qualities insured the attention of the desired readership, of other publishing houses, and of the artistic community.

In a recently discovered letter of December 7, 1895, to John Hilliard, editor of The Union and Advertiser, a Rochester, New York, newspaper, Penfield looked back at his early posters and his impact on American design.

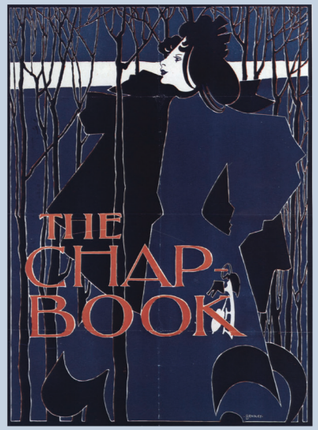
"My original intention was to be an illustrator, and I followed that branch for several years, making drawings in pen and ink and wash for various purposes. Lately, I have given my attention to decorative work, such as posters, book covers, etc., as I find it interests me most. My first decorative poster was done for Harper & Brothers for their April "Magazine," 1893. It was only an experiment and was done long before I ever heard of Lautrec or Steinlen as poster designers. To be sure I was familiar with Steinlen, but only as a caricaturist. Later on, Richard Harding Davis asked me to make a poster for his book "Our English Cousins" [Cat. 158, issued 1894}, and showed me about a dozen French posters, which were the first I had seen. I think the American Poster has opened a new school whose aim is simplicity and good composition. One can see its effects in all directions, especially in our daily papers ... "

Joseph Christian Leyendecker
The Inland Printer
August, 1896

Will H. Bradley
Victor's Bicycles,
The Knickerbockers, 1895

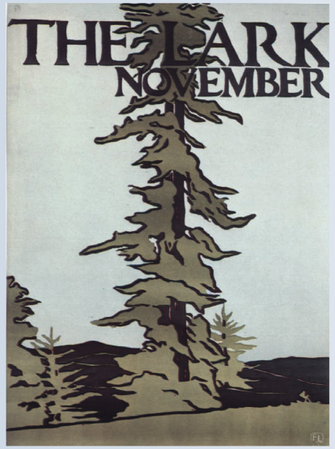
William L. Carqueville
International
1897

Will H. Bradley
Extra Tivioli,
1896



Will H. Bradley
The Chap-Book,
Blue Lady, 1894

Florence Lunborg
The Lark
November, 1896



Alice Russell Glenny
Buffalo Courier,
Women's Edition, 1895

From the beginning, American art posters of the 1890s were distinguished by their acknowledgment of -the creative personality responsible for a poster's artistic statement. Penfield started the tradition, signing his first Harper's poster with his initials, the second with his full name, and succeeding posters with either initials, signature, or his logo, a bull's head. In France, posters were signed regularly since the artist often held the copyright to an image. This had not been the practice in America. Prior to Penfield and his posters for Harper's i poster images rarely carried any mention of the artist's name. Instead, the name of the lithography or printing firm was often prominently printed, proudly advertising the quality of the printing job itself. Artistic quality was of tertiary or at most secondary importance. The primary function of a poster advertising a circus or a stove was to succeed in getting the product sold and to exhibit the quality and reputation of the printing firm. Since manufacturers depended on the printer to provide the best quality in a poster to sell products effectively, artistic issues were the concern of the printing firm.

Although the art poster of the 1890s was associated primarily with the publishing world, its effects on the commercial world in general have continued to the present day. Increasingly in the new century artists were hired to provide suitable images for posters and other advertisements for a growing range of products. The pioneering efforts of such artists as Penfield, Reed, Bradley, and McManus thus foreshadowed the burgeoning activity of the modern advertising agencies of Madison A venue.

David W. Kiehl

The Museum Wishes to Thank

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Time Warner Communications

Time Customer Service, Inc.

USAA Realty

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Verizon