

Classic Posers - The Roots of Sixties Poster Art

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by Michael Erlewine

Something I always wondered about was where all of the sixties posters art came from. Did people like Stanley Mouse and the others just make it up or were they reflecting art from a previous time into the present. Well, the answer is both. They made a lot up and they also were inspired by artists (even poster artists) from around the turn of the century.

The earliest posters that resemble what we would today call posters were created in the late 1890s and early twentieth century, in a artistic period that has been termed the "Belle Epoque," and some of the major artists of that period include Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Jules Cheret.



Poster by Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Cheret liked to have his collection of butterfly wings by his drawing board, to inspire him in the brightness and clarity of colors.



Poster by Jules Cheret

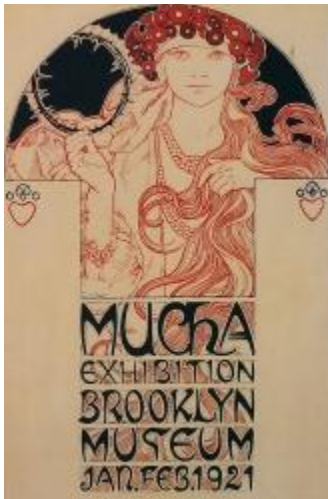
More important as a direct influence on San Francisco art of the '60s, was Art Nouveau, which arose around the turn of the century, and was decidedly modern and different. Art Nouveau made use of fluid, organic shapes, often used in a highly decorative and ornamental manner. Art Nouveau was not something intrinsic to just the United States and the U.K. In Germany, it was called "Jugendstil," after the magazine "Die Jugend," which arose in Munich in 1896, while in Austria this style of art was linked to the Secessionist movement. French termed it 'Le style moderne,' in Spain "Modernista," and in Italy, 'Stile Liberty.'

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Poster by Alphonse Mucha

Some of its main artists included Eugene Grasset and, above all, Alphonse Mucha. In all its forms, the accent was on the 'nouveau', the "new." And 'new' here did not just refer to new art forms, but also to new cultural trends, and shifts in mass consciousness. This movement, and its influence lasted beyond the turn of the century, until well into the early 1930s, although the organic/floral motifs gradually became more and more abstract. The discovery of Eastern art, in particular that of Japan, had an enormous influence on Art Nouveau.



Poster by Alphonse Mucha

Of course, the poster work Jules Cheret is still popular and the posters of Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec are known to everyone, even though Toulouse-Lautrec only made some 30 or so posters in his entire life. But more important to the roots of sixties posters are Art Nouveau artists like Alphonse Mucha and Aubrey Beardsley, since their influence can clearly be seen in the work of sixties artists like Stanley Mouse and Bob Masse.



Poster by Aubrey Beardsley

To really follow the history of the rise of commercial posters would require a book of its own, and there are plenty of those already written. Here we will just make sure that readers can get a look at some of the earlier posters that affected the sixties artists.

In passing, however, it may be important to note that there was a great poster heyday in the 1890s, that spread all over Europe and subsequently to the United States. During this time posters were prized by the general public, as well as by the hardened collector and connoisseur. There were numerous exhibitions and many articles on posters and even poster collecting. It is

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estimated that in 1896 there were over 6,000 poster collectors in the U.S. alone, with the average collection being some 500 or more posters. And the U.S. was slow on the uptake on this fad.

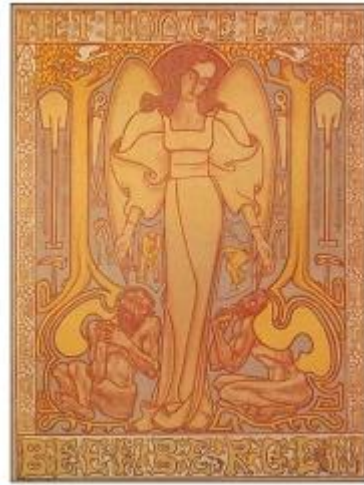
Another interesting fact is that the poster that adorned the streets of Paris and London in the late 1890s, were not all the telephone pole-sized sheets that we collect. Many were huge, by our standards, stretching 10 or 15 feet high and 10 feet wide. Few of use would have a wall large enough to display them.

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Poster by Jan Toorop

Aside from the impact of Art Nouveau on sixties posters, the other great influence came from the Symbolist movement, in France and throughout Europe. In brief, the Symbolists sought to take the organic shapes and fluid forms of Art Nouveau and apply them to spiritual matters, something beyond the ordinary, the profane. This can be seen in the works of the Dutch artists Jan Toorop.



Poster by Jan Toorop

So, the two greatest influences on the emerging San Francisco poster scene were the organic forms and ornamentation of the Art Nouveau period brought to bear on spiritual or meaningful topics.



Poster by Alphonse Mucha

As for influences, Stanley Mouse and Alton Kelley roamed the stacks of the San Francisco Public Library searching for images that they could incorporate into their poster work. It was often more than inspiration, such as direct pulls from old images, giving them extended life and sometimes very much renewed

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life, reaching a whole new audience and generation. Witness the Family Dog poster FD-29, which features the Mucha print above.



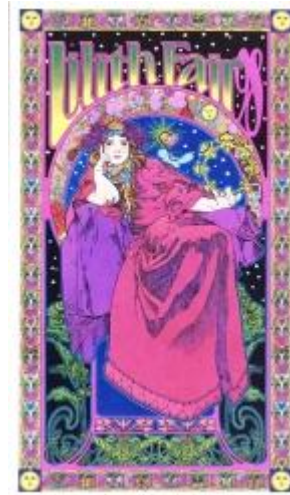
Poster by Stanley Mouse FD-29

Or Vancouver artist Bob Masse, who makes no apologies for his love of Art Nouveau in general and Alphonse Mucha in particular. Here is a Mucha poster.



Poster by Alphonse Mucha

The Masse version of the same pose.



Poster by Bob Masse

Many of the artists in the San Francisco poster scene were searching for inspiration and images in the past, not just Mouse and Kelley, artists like Randy Tuten, Victor Moscoso, and many others. It was what was happening. And, of course, there is David Singer, who was creating montages throughout the entire period, all composed of images that he carefully collected from past publications.

Michael@Erlewine.net