Wilhide & Company
3019 West 43RD Street
Minneapolis, MN 55410

We went to France this summer. Here's just part of what we saw, learned and enjoyed.

OBSERVATIONS

October 2005 **A Journal Of Things We Find Interesting**

Art Posters As Advertising

Rockamador is the second most visited site in France, after Paris. It's a medieval village built into the side of a towering cliff that dominates a long and narrow valley in the midi-Pyrenees region of southwestern France. It's been a destination for centuries. Pilgrims used to expiated their sins by climbed up to its small church on their knees -- no easy task: hard stone steps have been worn concave by hundreds of years of faithful crawlers. Now tourists walk those steps and fill the steep streets of the small town.

Rockamador is also the subject of more than a hundred years of advertising posters. This medium is famous for many reasons, but few of them have to do with their function as advertising. They are discussed for their important role in the history of printing, for their aesthetic history, for how they represent women, for their value as collectible art, but not much as instruments of persuasion. (There's a thesis topic waiting for someone!)

French posters came of age in the 1890s for two reasons. First, a lithographer named Jules Cheret discovered a way to print large scale, full color prints that incorporated innovative typography . In the late 1880s he designed big, colorful street signs for Parisian cafes and entertainment events. This "street art" attracted extraordinary artists who turned the new printing technology into full scale works of art. The most notable was Toulouse Lautrec whose posters for the Moulin Rouge (and other venues) became the foundation for a mid-1890s French poster craze -- l'Affichomanie.

The big posters became a primary medium for two of the most important aesthetic movements of the 20th century -- Art Nouveau and Art Deco. They also became highly collectible both as originals, where they now fetch big bucks at auctions, and as smaller reprints, where they now decorate dorm rooms, apartments and offices around the world.

Advertisements first

As advertising they do what David Ogilvy said all outdoor advertising should do: create a "visual scandal." Lautrec's posters for Parisian cafes showed recognizable female dancers kicking up their heels (and their skirts) and made stars of nightlife roués like Aristide Bruant (there is still a street named for him in Montmartre).

They would never pass muster with the branding-besotted ad managers of today: the typography is impressive and changes from poster to poster; the colors and subjects are dramatic and full of life and color; there is no attempt to represent every race and gender n every illustration.

These posters don't fit easily into a brand standards manual. All they did was drive business, inspire creativity and light up people's lives for a century.

A lot of the posters were done for travel. An 1890 poster for Rockamador shows an exaggerated view of the church and battlements jutting out from its cliff like the superstructure of an aircraft carrier. The name is in bright red, elaborate script at an angle across the top. The poster was done by Hugo d'Alesi for the Chemin de fer d'Orleans, the Paris to Orleans railway (literally "iron road"). It may have been a holiday promotion: there's some holly and red berries in the middle of it.

A 1929 Art Deco poster emphasizes more of the village. The colors are bright and primary -- red rooftops, bright oranges and yellows in the trees and battlements. The typography is classic sans-serif and reversed out of black at the bottom. Both posters draw the eye with their distinctive illustration and graphic style -- both current for their times. The representation of Rockamador is not literal (as a photo would be) but emotional: these views create an image of what we want the place to be while still staying true enough to the actuality to be recognizable. They turn a place into an icon. They link the past and the present. They make you want to go.

A destination medium

Transportation and tourist destinations became the biggest users of "art" posters. The Canadian Pacific railroad created dozens of posters to attract travelers to created destinations like Banff and Lake Louise. They were the Disneyworlds of their day and they spread both tourism and industry across the continent.

American railroads did the same thing, advertising destinations like Yellowstone and the Grand Canyon to create a critical mass of business that helped the railroads become profitable. Automobile companies joined in: next time you're up on the north shore, check out the museum at Split Rock lighthouse and view the car travel posters from the 1930s and 40s.

The most famous travel poster, perhaps, was the "Normandie," A.M. Cassandre's classic, 1935 image of the world's largest ocean liner, steaming bow-on at the viewer. It defines the idea of using a single image to make an advertisement work. The outsized scale of the iconic image draws the eye and the typography makes us yearn to experience the "class unique" of the luxury cruise ship.

A boom in bicycling

Beyond their function as advertising vehicles, a quick study of these posters from 1890 to 1940 is illuminating in unexpected ways. You find out, for instance, that the Normandie was the largest, fastest, most innovative and luxurious ship afloat. Known as "the ship of light" because of it's thousands of Lalique-designed lights, it also had a children's dining area with hand painted murals by Jean de Brunhoff of Babar the Elephant.

Or take bicycle posters. They were a medium unto themselves in the mid 1890s, and you can find reproductions in bookseller stalls up and down the Seine. One for "Cycles Gladiator" shows a mustachioed gent outracing a bunch of jockeys on horses. Another shows a biker in full club gear for the bicycle "Society Parisienne." Another for "Motocycles Comiot" shows a woman in full skirts riding her bike through a flock of scattering geese. Another shows a man holding up his Bayliss Thomas & Co. biking light to read a sign that says (my translation) "there is no danger when riding an Excelsior bicycle."

The early history of bicycling itself is quite a story. Between 1890 and 1910 there was a huge boom in the industry -- similar to the dot.com bubble a hundred years later. It began when manufacturers discovered how to make bikes safer by using a chain drive and same-sized wheels on the front and back.

Bikes not only became safer, but were designed so that women could ride them. French fiscal policies helped drive sales, with taxes being lowered as consumption increased. Prices also fell, making this "luxury purchase" available to a rising middle class. Riding a bike became a status symbol. Between 1893 and 1910, French bicycle sales rose from 151,000 to over two and half million. (Note: most of this information comes from a quirky paper by one Thomas Burr. It's unpublished but I'd be happy to provide a pdf.)

The story in America was dramatically different. In the early 1890s, bicycles became the first durable luxury item to be mass marketed. Magazines and newspapers, as well as catalogs from Sears Roebuck and Montgomery Ward were full of ads. Maxfield Parrish and other famous artists of the time created posters showing people "taking wing" on their bicycles. Nude, or scantily-dressed women on bikes were a common theme. Railroads advertised special tours, carrying riders and their bikes to destinations then bringing them home again.

American bikes were a classic luxury item. Wealthy trend setters traded in their bikes every year for the latest model. Installment credit policies were available to lower out-of-pocket costs for tighter budgets. Around urban centers smooth roads were built to accommodate bicyclists. Special academies modeled after equestrian schools helped novices learn to ride. The "League of American Wheelmen" published maps and guides and posted signs. Preachers railed against the "immodesty" of women riding bikes, which only helped fuel the growth. In 1890, 40,000 bikes were sold in America. By 1900 that had risen to 1.2 million.

This cycling boom, however, was short lived. In 1900, much of America's population was rural, and even with lower prices, farmers didn't have time to go cycling. As prices became more affordable, more of the middle and lower classes (including, in the South, African-Americans) began riding. The cachet of exclusive luxury was gone.

Then automobiles began to appear and the rich ditched their bikes in favor of the newer, showier cars. The fall was dramatic. The number of bicycle shops in the U.S. fell nearly 75% between 1898 and 1908. Prices tanked. In 1894 the cheapest Sears bike was $55.95. By 1902 it was $9.75. It's little wonder that the Wright Brothers, bicycle makers from Dayton, Ohio, switched their interest to airplanes.

Dipping into the history of advertising posters leads to this sort of stuff. They are remarkable in many ways: touchstones to both advertising style and the evolution of many industries. Why don't we see them today?

One reason is the switch from illustration to photography which tends to be more literal and less iconographic. I think it's also less visually engaging. We may get a clearer image of the product, but we aren't touched with the same kind of emotional resonance. A pretty face is a pretty face, but it doesn't necessarily drive one to action the same way those early ad posters did.

Photography, even good photography, starts to look the same. Stock photography, responsible for so much of current me-too advertising, is an indication of our lack of creative engagement with audience sensibilities. Today the Paris underground is full of huge pictures of models (selling personal care goods) and actors (selling movies). They become visual background noise pretty quickly.

We spent most of a day at Rockamador, hiking the pilgrim trails, admiring the dedication and craft that went into building and carving a town and a holy site out of sheer cliff face. We took dozens of pictures. We stopped for lunch (and some fine, local wine). And we did some shopping. The only thing I bought were reproductions of decades-old advertising posters.

Tom's Burned Down Bar

An update on wisdom from the bar on Madeline Island whose promotional slogans include "Let's make getting into trouble fun again" "You've got to be tough if you're going to be stupid" and "We cheat the other guy and pass the savings on to you."

"If your mind goes blank, be sure to turn off the sound."

"Only you can prevent narcisism"

"Sometimes it's just easier to do it the hard way."

"Free beer. Tomorrow."

Einstein's Legacy

The 41st annual Nobel Conference was held in St. Peter, MN in late September. The topic was a commemoration of the 100th anniversary of Einstein's publication of his special theory of relativity. There was a lot of theoretical physics, discussions of string theory, cosmology and Einstein's role as an icon as well as a physicist. Interested? Contact me and I'll send you my notes in a Word file.

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Doug and Jean Wilhide