

# La Belle Époque

La Belle Époque is the name commonly given to the time period between 1890 and World War One. La Belle Époque was a time when people thought there “would never be another war,” where everyone was having a good time, and extravagant self-indulgence eventually led to political upheaval. The upper class lived in unimaginable luxury while the poor were ignored, shut outside the fairytale land of the rich, who wore “exquisite blindfolds” to the reality surrounding their utopia. There were only two classes in this time period: the Elite, and everyone else. There was a burst of inventions and new technology, which led to the Exposition Universelle in Paris in 1900. The famous Russian fashion designer, Erte, was there when he was just seven years old. It was a celebration of new technology; electricity, wireless communication, and the newest weapons were on display.

Its vibrant street life culminated in colorful posters on streets and squares. La Goulue danced in the Moulin rouge, and chansons vibrated in the literary cabarets in the Montmartre and the concert-café along the spacious boulevards. In the salons traditional styles and forms came up against the new Art Nouveau designs. Photographs record the Paris of old alongside the modern symbol of the city, the Eiffel Tower. The whole world seems to be strolling the streets. Indulging in Parisian luxuries: fashion, jewelry, precious items for the home and table.

In the galleries people, caught between official art and the avant-garde, are confronted with the complex painting of the age and trend-setting modern prints. Sculpture can be seen all over the city, celebrating its triumphs in the world exhibitions of 1889 and 1900. The otherwise gray and bleak streets of Paris were decorated, as if for a festival, with colorful advertising posters by some of the finest artists of the time. Renowned art connoisseurs and critics as well as people in the streets, were delighted by this new contemporary art. The artists considered the advertising poster the best way of exhibiting their talents to the widest public without compromising their artistic sensibilities, thus, Paris became an open air museum.

At the turn of the century it became fashionable to collect advertising posters. The “open air museum” was brought into the home and was viewed as a charming and new way of decorating. The passion for poster collecting crossed the Atlantic and by 1896 there were an estimated 6000 American collectors. Had it not been for these zealous collectors, few vintage posters would be available today.

Many artists immersed with creativity and talent. Jules Cheret, who perfected the advertising poster with his gaiety and talent, made this new art form so desirable that in 1899 he was awarded the Legion of Honor. Toulouse-Lautrec created posters that reflected the bohemian culture and joie de vivre of Montmartre, often incorporating his notorious associates in the images. Some of the other master posterists of the era were PAL, Gray, Lefevre, Meunier, Pean, Choubrac, Misti, Grun, and of course, Alphonse Mucha and his numerous followers who perfected the Art Nouveau style. In fact, many posters of anonymous origin of the Belle Epoque era are equally wonderful and collectable. Cappiello became famous as a posterist in 1900 and continued to be very popular throughout the Art Deco era as well as posters by Cassandre, D’Ylen, Cappiello, Villemot and others.