

L'Estampe Moderne

For a period of approximately ten years at the end of the nineteenth century, color lithography flourished in France as the printmaking medium most preferred by artists of the avant-garde. Much of this was prompted by the proliferation of print publications which were designed for the burgeoning collectors of the middle classes. One of the last of these to appear was L'Estampe Moderne. This series was published as a more popular series for the masses. It was issued monthly, comprising twenty-four issues from May, 1897 to April, 1899 with four prints per issue and one extra print gratis to subscribers each year. The total publication included ninety-eight prints by some of the most renowned printmakers of the avant-garde including Mucha, Steinlen, Ibels, Grasset and Rhead. Each contains the "blindstamp" imprint of the series: a head of a young woman in the lower right corner. The publication was distributed by Imprimerie Champenois, Paris. Such a publication best exemplifies the process of democracy that was taking place in the graphic arts by enabling the production of modestly priced, true works of art and placing them within reach of even larger groups of people.

Les Maitres de l'Affiche

Les Maitres de l'Affiche (The Masters of the Poster) refers to one of the most influential art publications in history. The 256 color plates that make up this suite represent a wide-ranging selection of outstanding original prints from the turn of the twentieth century, when this popular art form first reached its peak.

By the 1890's the streets of French cities were enlivened by large, colorful posters. The poster had not only caught the fancy of the public, but its best examples were already being regarded as true works of art (specifically, as fine prints) to be exhibited, reviewed in journals, collected and reproduced in a more manageable form. In the last five years of the 19th century, Imprimerie Chaix was to play a great part in codifying, hallowing and perpetuating the ebullient spirit of the Belle Epoque. It was in those years that Ch•ret's print shop published smaller chromolithographic versions (in authentic colors) of over 200 highly regarded posters of the times. These prints were created by more than 90 great artists, each bringing this fabulous period to life for us today. The renowned set of 256 prints were created by Imprimerie Chaix, forever to be known as a set as Les Maitres de l'Affiche. Each print was rendered as a separate sheet measuring 11 x 15 inches. The set was compiled in a unique way. Every month for 60 months - from December 1895 through November 1900 - subscribers received a wrapper containing four consecutively numbered prints. On 16 occasions (each of the five Decembers, each of the Junes, and the March and September of the final three years) the monthly wrapper also contained a bonus plate, not a poster reproduction but a specially created lithograph. The compilation of this set of original prints makes up the complete suite known as Les Maitres de l'Affiche.

A month's offerings (four Maitres) could be had at the same price as an original poster by Toulouse-Lautrec, Cheret or the other greats of the poster era, being sold through print dealers at the time. This is not at all surprising since the larger posters were printed in quantity on ordinary paper and, to boot, the one-time art and plate costs were assumed by the company whose product it advertised; the dealers paid printers only for the overrun they wished to acquire. Hence, we must consider it normal that "Les Maitres de l'Affiche", specially produced by means of lithography on quality paper, was offered for sale at the price of an original poster. The people did not perceive these two types of products as being in competition. They were infatuated with small prints and with this kind of compilation.