The Age of the Poster: Parisian Fin du Siècle Chromolithography

In late 19th-century Paris, a significant cultural revolution unfolded not in the streets, but on the city's walls through the lithographic poster. These posters, characterized by vibrant colors and bold portrayals of women, became a medium through which artists challenged traditional gender norms and reshaped perceptions of femininity. This period, known as the fin de siècle, marked a time of profound change in Paris, both physically and economically. The Haussmann Renovation transformed the city's landscape, while a growing middle class fueled a demand for leisure and entertainment. This demand, coupled with the emergence of new public spaces and a burgeoning market for non-essential goods, led to a proliferation of advertising materials, with the lithographic poster dominating the city's streets. This paper examines how these converging factors facilitated the rise of the lithographic poster as a prominent feature of the urban landscape in fin-de-siècle Paris. Affordable and durable, lithographic prints captured the essence of fin-de-siècle Paris through their distinctive style. However, it was the prevalent depiction of the female form in these posters that truly embodied the era's evolving socio-political milieu.

Advertisements for the theatre and the café-concert played a significant role in redefining the place of women in society, as actresses and dancers from various socio-economic backgrounds were elevated to celebrity status through their portrayals in lithographic advertisements. This not only reflected the changing social dynamics but actively contributed to shaping them. Artists such as Jules Chéret, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Alphonse Mucha capitalized on the possibilities of chromolithography, using their gendered approaches to advertising prints to mirror and influence shifting perceptions of gender roles. Through their vibrant posters, these

artists elevated actresses, dancers, and women of the demi-monde to icons of modern art and popular culture. Rather than redefining these women, the artists extended their images from cabaret dancers and courtesans into symbols of modernity. In fin du siècle Paris, Chéret, Toulouse-Lautrec, Mucha emerge as artists who successfully take advantage of chromolithography printing, and whose gendered approaches to advertising prints not only mirrored, but helped to actively shape the shifting perceptions of gender roles through the varying degrees of autonomy they gave their subjects.

Jules Chéret

Jules Chéret emerges as the figure responsible for popularizing the chromolithograph in Paris.[1] Beginning his career in lithographic publishing houses, he honed his skills in color printing during a stint in England before returning to Paris, where he quickly rose to prominence. His theater posters, characterized by a unique fusion of text and imagery, swiftly captured the public's attention, transforming into coveted collectibles that adorned both private collections and city streets. Chéret's posters not only reflected but also contributed to the burgeoning culture of celebrity, particularly among the women he depicted. Although these women did not attain enduring fame, they collectively became known as "chérettes," a term blending Chéret's name with the French endearment "chérie," meaning darling or sweetie. This recognition of his subjects, combined with his innovative approach to chromolithography, not only solidified Chéret's place as a pioneer in the field but also set the stage for the growing trend of models and entertainers seeking out artists to elevate their public images. Thus, Chéret's work stands as a

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[1] Phillip Dennis Cate, *Prints Abound: Paris in the 1890s: From the Collections of Virginia and Ira Jackson and the National Gallery of Art.* Washington D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2000, 25.

testament to the early evolution of chromolithography in Paris and its significant influence on the cultural landscape of the time.

Jules Chéret's visual style, exemplified in works like *Pantomimes Lumineuses* (figure 1) not only reflects but also actively shapes the evolving landscape of Parisian entertainment. *Pantomimes Lumineuses* is particularly noteworthy for its innovative approach to advertising and promotion, as it was displayed at the Musée Grévin, a prominent venue that integrated built-in locations for Chéret to showcase his posters.[2] This strategic placement allowed Chéret to effectively advertise the productions featured at the theatre, utilizing his distinctive style to captivate audiences and draw attention to the performances. One of the striking features of *Pantomimes Lumineuses* is its incorporation of recognizable models within the composition, framed by bold, eye-catching text. This technique not only highlights Chéret's ability to capture the essence of the performers but also underscores his role in elevating these individuals to celebrity status through his art. By portraying these models in a manner that is both glamorous and accessible, Chéret helped to redefine societal perceptions of beauty and fame, paving the way for a new era of celebrity culture in Paris.[3] Furthermore this print serves as a testament to Chéret's mastery of chromolithography, the printing technique that allowed for the vibrant colors and intricate details that became synonymous with his work. The use of color and composition in this piece not only attracts the viewer's attention but also creates a sense of dynamism and

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[2] Fleur Roos Rosa de Carvalho *Prints in Paris from the Elite to the Street* (Brussels: Mercatorfonds), 2017, 71.

[3] Vanessa R Schwartz. “Museums and Mass Spectacle: The Musée Grévin as a Monument to Modern Life.” *French Historical Studies* 19, no. 1 (1995): 7–26. https://doi.org/10.2307/286897.

movement, effectively conveying the excitement and energy of the performances being advertised.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec

Shifting towards Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, we can begin to understand more fully the culture of fin du siècle paris, and the most prominent figures who inhabit it. Toulouse-Lautrec is maybe an unlikely candidate to serve this role, he faced many health issues and disabilities throughout his life beginning in his early childhood, however this afforded him the opportunity to hone his craft. Toulouse-Lautrec is also synonymous with Monmartre and the demimonde. He found affinity with the prostitutes and performers, and found them to be emblematic of the “real” Paris. His posters, notably those featuring his close friend and muse Jane Avril, offer a glimpse into the landscape of Parisian nightlife and the various, often marginalized personalities that populated it. Lithographic posters became then a form of visual protest against the type of societal marginalization that members of the demimonde faced, including not only the dancers and prostitutes that Toulouse-Lautrec befriended, but also the challenges he faced concerning his own physical disabilities. Through his lithographic depictions of Montmartre's nightlife, Toulouse-Lautrec challenged prevailing societal norms and prejudices, using his art as a means of social critique. It was due to him specifically portraying images of prostitutes, and the members of the demi-monde who may not have been given a respected place in sociery that we see Toulouse-Lautrec branching into a kind of social critique. Simultaneously, his lithographs were deeply influenced by his relationship with Jane Avril. Her own struggles and triumphs, from a difficult upbringing to her rise as a star dancer, are vividly captured in Toulouse-Lautrec's lithographic posters.

One of the most well-known of Toulouse-Lautrec's lithographs, *Divan Japonais* (figure 2), showcases Montmartre nightlife, as well as three major personalities which inhabited it during the fin du siècle. The print is set at the café, the Divan Japonais, and features Jane Avril in the forefront of the composition, recognizable from her orange hair. She is shown here as a spectator shaking the hand of an unidentifiable figure and sat with Édouard Dujardin, one of the prominent figures of the Montmartre nightlife scene. They watch another of Toulouse-Lautrec's muses, Yvette Guilbert, whose head is not shown, but can be identified by her signature black gloves.[4] This scene strongly exemplifies Toulouse Lautrec's style as it features a flat composition, boldly contrasting colors, and focuses on the personalities and specific characteristics of the figures. He does not create anonymous images, but instead shows how the demimonde is defined by the people who inhabit it, and takes care to include their signature features, such as Avril's orange hair and Guilbert's gloves.[5]

Given the lack of anonymity which Toulouse-Lautrec adheres to, we must return to the figure of Jane Avril. By this point, she was the literal poster-child of Parisian night-life and the demimonde. Toulouse-Lautrec chooses to portray her not as engaging directly with the performance, but as shaking the hand of an unidentifiable figure. This is meant to draw the viewer into the image and persuade them to go to the Divan Japonais; by coming to a performance here, you too can meet Jane Avril and enter the circle of Parisian nightlife's most

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[4] Colta Ives. *Toulouse-Lautrec in The Metropolitan Museum of Art.* New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1996, 20.

[5] Catherine Pedley-Hindson, "Jane Avril and the Entertainment Lithograph: The Female Celebrity and fin-de-si`ecle Questions of Corporeality and Performance," in *Theatre Research International* 30, no. 2, (2005), 117, https://rave.ohiolink.edu/ejournals/article/335554520.

famous members. Again, Avril is not shown as a performer, she is outside of her professional capacities, as an independent woman who inhabits this circle.

Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's pioneering exploration of lithography stands as a cornerstone of his artistic journey, emblematic of his desire to transcend conventional artistic boundaries and expand the horizons of artistic expression. Rather than relegating lithography to a secondary role, Lautrec embraced it as an integral component of his creative arsenal, imbuing his lithographs with the same passion, innovation, and boldness that characterized his paintings.[6] This integration of lithographic techniques into his broader oeuvre is exemplified in iconic works like *At the Moulin Rouge*, where Lautrec seamlessly translated lithographic methods such as distinctive drawing styles and bold color palettes, onto traditional canvas, blurring the distinction between lithographs and paintings.

Toulouse-Lautrec further imbues his images with the air of Parisian fin du siècle nightlife. Avril's composed and relaxed figure contrasts against the movement of the orchestra sitting in front of her and the performance of Guilbert. This composure and sense of calm throughout the image differs greatly from Toulouse-Lautrec's other lithographs and paintings of Avril, such as the lithograph *Jane Avril* (figure 3), which shows the frenzy of her movements during performance. Here, we see Avril on stage, and then contrasted with a painting of her leaving the theatre. It is the variation of the scenes, the independence, and the personality that he affords his muses that helps to illuminate and shape the changing roles of women.

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[6] Reinhold Heller, "Rediscovering Henri de Toulouse Lautrec's 'At the Moulin Rouge,'" in *Art Institute of Chicago Museum Studies* 12, no. 2 (1986), 129.

Alphonse Mucha

Lastly we will turn to Alphonse Mucha, who is known for his large-scale commercial posters. While his is Czech by birth, Mucha's career unfolds in Paris, and his commercial and private prints offer further insight into the complex role of the female body in print media and its implications for evolving concepts of femininity. His work can be seen as standing in opposition to the changes shown by Toulouse-Lautrec, but I propose that especially the commercial prints he makes for the theatre are still nuanced. In Mucha's work, as was the expected artistic convention, women continue to be depicted as decorative, and he seems to lean into the convention proposed by Chéret that is that sex sells.

Gismonda (figure 4) is Mucha's first lithographic poster, and it received immediate widespread success. Commissioned by actress Sarah Bernhardt on Christmas Eve of 1894, to announce a production of the play of the same name, Mucha was thrown into the limelight as one of the stars of Parisian printmaking. His style breaks from Toulouse-Lautrec, who, as we have established, uses boldy contrasting colors and a flat, Japanese inspired composition. Mucha instead uses a softer, warm color palette and allows the figure to extend from her space just enough to create a sense of dimension. His treatment of the face seems to defy the nature of the lithograph as it features smooth color transitions in the shadow of the neck, appearing almost like a wash of watercolor. From the figures face the viewer's eye is led up the palm leaves to the title of the play in bold, navy letters, and down to Bernhardt's name, featured in an arc which the figure stands under. The arc then leads the eye down the impossibly tall column of Bernhardt's costume to the name of the theatre, the Theatre de la Renaissance, where the play will be shown.

Mucha's poster commands the viewer's attention, and where he departs from the bold colors of Toulouse-Lautrec, he makes up with scale. This poster is over seven feet tall, so viewers would have confronted this life size poster on the streets of Paris, in a completely new style.

Alphonse Mucha's lithographs represent a significant shift in the portrayal of femininity, bringing the visual language of commercial advertisements into the domestic sphere and blurring the lines between art and commerce. His work, such as *The Arts: Dance* (figure 5), employs similar artistic conventions and styles to commercial advertisements, yet diverges by featuring anonymous figures that align more closely with traditional art historical narratives of beautiful women embodying virtues, goddesses, or seasons.[7] In *The Arts: Dance,* the model inhabits a fantastical space where a loose fabric drapes over her body, seamlessly transitioning into the ground beneath her feet, while her hair defies gravity, elegantly lifted in a manner that complements the ornamental decorations. These decorative lithographs, while purely aesthetic in nature, highlight the possibilities of the medium to reflect the changing roles of women in society.

Mucha's prints also underscore the nuanced relationship between representation and authority in the depiction of women. While his anonymous images are purely decorative, his more recognizable and sexualized prints demonstrate how real women can assert a degree of control over their public image through art. By portraying identifiable individuals, Mucha's work suggests that these women possess agency and authority over how they are depicted, challenging traditional notions of femininity and empowerment. Mucha's lithographs not only exemplify the

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[7] Jan Thompson. "The Role of Woman in the Iconography of Art Nouveau." *Art Journal* 31, no. 2 (1971): 158–67. https://doi.org/10.2307/775570.

potential of the medium to depict new roles for women but also underscore the complex interplay between art, representation, and the construction of identity.

Through the comparison of Jules Chéret, Henri de Toulouse Lautrec, and Alphonse Mucha, we have seen the stark differences in advertising methods, but ones which still inform a shift in the role of women in society. Jules Chéret launches the lithographic poster into popularity, and his prints start to inform the changes in celebrity culture, and the roles that women play in entertainment and the public eye. His images are not anonymous, however it isn't until Toulouse-Lautrec that we see the lithograph helping to define celebrity status and launch specific figures into the mainstream, especially with Jane Avril. Mucha builds on this trend, however his work is more nuanced, and does not show as much of the individual personality as he does the spectacle of the figures. Even with Sarah Bernhardt, he portrays her as the character, and does not show the figures outside of their professional capacities. Thinking in particular about the history of the Gismonda print, we see women commanding their public persona and seeking out lithographic artists to promote their image. It is in this way that the chromolithographic poster helps to define the new perceptions of femininity as it shifts towards independence.

List of Illustrations

Figure 1: Jules Chéret, *Pantomimes Lumineuses,* 1892.

Figure 2: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Divan Japonais,* 1892-83

Figure 3: Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril,* 1983

Figure 4: Alphonse Mucha, *Gismonda,* 1892

Figure 5: Alphonse Mucha, *The Arts: Dance,* 1898

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