

# travel posters

The vivid images used to advertise holidays in the 1920s and 1930s still have the power to transport, says Simon de Burton.

If ever George Koenigsaecker tires of the breathtaking views of the Mississippi river meandering beneath his hilltop Iowa home, he needs only to step into his own drawing room to enjoy a realistic glimpse of a Hawaiian island, the Norwegian fjords or even the Amazon jungle.

Koenigsaecker is just one of an ever-growing number of armchair travellers to have fallen beneath the spell of the first-class travel posters created during the early decades of the 20th century to entice the adventurous into a world that was gradually being made smaller by trains, planes and automobiles. At the time, such ephemera seemed like a cheap and cheerful way to promote the services of shipping companies, airlines and railways and was designed to be entirely disposable – but in recent years surviving examples have become highly collectable.

"I began collecting about 10 years ago simply because I saw a poster I liked the look of," says Koenigsaecker, a private equity investor. "Now I have more than 20 on display around my home and others that I keep rolled up in tubes. They combine so many elements – nostalgia, superb artwork, dramatic depth of colour and an insight into the travel history of the 1920s and 1930s. I find it



in some of the best images but, by the very nature of their role as short-lived advertisements, relatively few have survived: "Sometimes travel posters are numbered, but in most cases we never really know what the print runs were. What is certain is that only a small fraction of those produced actually survived, because they were either pasted over or torn down. A number of collections were saved, however, by people who had connections to the printers, the artists or the railway companies."

One notable cache of posters advertising Britain's rail networks recently emerged, surprisingly, in Australia. The owner's father, a teacher, had written to the various train companies during the 1920s asking for examples of their travel posters to use in his geography lessons; he received more than 200 which Christie's has gradually dispersed for a total of around £200,000.

Although posters promoting trips to once-popular British holiday resorts ranging from Skegness to St Andrews sell well, it is those depicting more glamorous Continental destinations such as Monaco, Sainte-Maxime, Paris or Rome that many collectors find the most uplifting.

Bruce Skilbeck runs Poster Classics near Annecy, France, and specialises in travel posters from France and Italy. The former produced many notable

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remarkable, for example, that even at the height of the Great Depression there were still cruise ships sailing from New York to Europe, or that you could go to Hawaii from North America by flying boat."

Values of travel posters have been steadily rising since the subject began to attract serious collectors after New York's Swann Galleries staged the first dedicated poster auctions in 1979. The best examples by leading artists such as Frenchmen Roger Broders and Adolphe Mouron Cassandre, Britain's Norman Wilkinson and Frank Mason, or Irishman Paul Henry can reach over £13,000.

Nicolette Tomkinson of Christie's in South Kensington, London, which began selling travel posters in 1982, says the golden age of Britain's railways during the 1920s and 1930s resulted

Clockwise from top: Mouron's *Nord Express*, 1927 (£8,000-£12,000; Christie's). D'Alesi's *Venise*, 1899, \$4,500, International Poster Gallery. Clérissi's *Monaco*, c1930s, £1,400, Poster Classics.

works commissioned by PLM (Paris-Lyon-Méditerranée) Railways from leading artists such as Roger Broders, Alfonse Mucha, Geo Dorival and Julien Lacaze. "When PLM was formed it united many different train companies, which went to different destinations, meaning a huge number of posters were created," says Skilbeck. "Many of these were archived and a great deal came to the open market about 10 to 15 years ago so there is quite a wide selection available. An average example costs £600 to £800, an above average one £1,300 to £1,500, and you'll pay anything from £3,000 to £10,000 for a top-quality piece by someone such as Roger Broders. Italian railway posters are rarer and often more expensive because ENIT, the national railway, didn't keep an archive, and many posters were destroyed



during the war. And whereas the French are not especially interested in collecting their own travel posters, the Italians are."

But the beauty of travel posters is that they are not categorised merely by country, but also by modes of transport and activities, meaning there are images that hold appeal to fans of cars, trains and aeroplanes, others that attract those drawn to the glamour of steam-driven liners and still others that are bought by habitués of top ski resorts such as St Moritz and Gstaad.

One such collector of ski-themed travel posters is Joanna Yellowlees-Bound who

owns Erna Low, an independent ski holiday company that was founded in London 77 years ago by a female Austrian graduate of the same name. "My interest in travel posters related to skiing came through my job," says Yellowlees-Bound. "Erna Low used to collect anything to do with the history of the sport and, because I have a passion for skiing, I decided to do the same by buying ski posters. I bought my first one about 15 years ago, at which time they could be picked up at auction for around £150 – those same posters are now worth £1,000 or more. I find them very evocative of the sport I love and the colours are extraordinarily bold and warm."

Indeed, it is that strength of colour that makes travel posters so appealing to so many. It is the result of a special, multicoloured stone lithography technique that was pioneered by artist Jules Cheret in the 1870s. If you are in the market for a poster, ensure that the colours are as vibrant as possible.

"Just like any other work of art, condition is very important," says Bruce Skilbeck. "The colours in a poster that has been kept rolled and out of sunlight for the best part of 100 years will look totally different to those of a poster that has been hanging on the wall. Unless the poster is very rare, values are also reduced if margins are missing, if there are folds or if there have been restorations. But different collectors look for different things. An Italian is likely to be more accepting of a poster with tears and creases. American collectors, however, want their vintage travel posters to look virtually brand-new." ♦