

ski posters

Mountains have a powerful hold on the human spirit, and the invention of ski tourism artists a new medium in which to explore the potent allure of snow, altitude and speed.

a century ago gave
By Ned Denny



MOUNTAINS that have been cultivated for skiing are a uniquely strange environment. The distant jagged peaks, radiant snowy whiteness and eggshell-blue sky all speak of the sublime, and yet the skier's immediate surroundings are deeply domesticated. Every sharp edge, every reminder of death, has been ironed out from the piste down which he or she flies. The slopes are, in fact, as neatly carpeted and meticulously cared for as any suburban lounge. Skiing, too, is strange. Seen from one perspective, it represents man at his most

and so the artists emphasised the calm beauty of the mountains and the serene expressions on the skiers' faces.

Later, as skiing began to develop as a competitive sport, the designs became racier and progressively more modernistic – the mountains depicted as clean lines against the sky, the skiers simplified into bright arrows of concentrated energy. Artists also found countless different ways to depict what is essentially a single subject. In one, the mountains are stark, blood-red forms that seem to be rising from the centre of the earth; in another, they're as clean and

often outstanding designs. A beautiful 1924 design advertising Chamonix – an orange-clad skier against a background of ghostly-pale mountains and a deep blue sky – sold at the Ski Sale at Christie's South Kensington last year for £1,380.

But perhaps the best method of all is to collect the work of a specific designer. A handful stand out as being particularly prolific, skilled or innovative, and a serious collector would probably want to focus on one or more of these. Possibly the most distinguished of all was the Art Deco designer Roger Broders (1883-1953), who produced sophisticated,

£2,000- £3,000, which will be coming up at its next ski sale on February 22.

The slightly later work of Bernard Villemont (1911-1989) is also highly sought after. Freer and more flowing, his designs emphasise the speed and grace of skiing itself. The luminous "Sports d'Hiver, France" (1954), which sold last year for £690, is a superb example of his work. A poster advertising the resort of Abelboden (1947) by another popular designer, the Swiss Herbert Leupin, depicts the mountain as a beaming, bearded snowman dotted with skiers and cradling a village in his left arm.

A more original approach would be to focus on one of the quirks of the genre, such as posters depicting skiing animals. There are numerous examples, all from Switzerland – a weird poster advertising St Moritz by Alex Walter Diggelmann shows a skiing rabbit (£1,995), an anonymous design for Le Valais has a skiing fox (£437), and another – for the resort of Stoos – shows a skiing penguin (£862).

Very early posters are another interesting area for the collector. An Art Nouveau-influenced design of two elegant women skiing arm-in-arm and dating from 1911 sold for £4,370. A charming lithograph by the Swiss designer Albert Muret and dating from 1913 (£1,000-£1,500) depicts a line of what look like black-clad friars skiing down from a distant monastery.

The chief sources of posters are ski and sporting memorabilia auctions, but websites such as Art-and-posters.com, Vintagepostersonline.com and Posterclassics.com also offer a steady choice at a range of prices. There does not yet exist a definitive reference book on the subject, so research is best done by looking up the artist in a general reference work.

Skiing encapsulates all the ambiguities of our relationship to the natural world: when man takes to the wilderness en masse, what of the wilderness remains? Looking at a ski poster, however, you can

participate in the dream of moving swiftly through the peaks without actually inflicting your presence on the mountain. And with the value of posters rising by 50 per cent in the past five years, it's an offer the enthusiast can hardly afford to refuse. ♦

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preposterous. Clad in lurid colours, the creature with more time than sense slides repeatedly and pointlessly downhill. Seen from another, it represents man at his most elegant – only in such activities does our slow and unwieldy body come anywhere near the kind of grace exhibited in the animal kingdom.

The multitude of posters depicting skiers and mountains are, above all, celebratory, enshrining TS Eliot's words in *The Wastland*: "In the mountains, there you feel free." The very first ski posters appeared in France – normally on railway billboards – around the beginning of the last century. Skiing at that time was perceived (much as the various "extreme" sports are today) as somewhat foolhardy,

soft as freshly-laundered towels. In some designs the skiers dominate the scene, and in others they're dwarfed by the empty majesty of their surroundings.

Although a single, carefully chosen poster would probably be the perfect present for a ski enthusiast, there are various approaches available to the aspiring collector. The most obvious is to collect posters from a certain country, the work of each nation having its own characteristics. The most prolific producers of ski posters were the French and the Swiss; posters from lesser-known skiing nations such as Italy or Finland are less common. Another option is to collect by resort, the most famous – Davos, St Moritz, Wengen, Chamonix – having produced unique and

stripped down designs for the Paris-Lyon-Mediterranean Railway (one of the main ski poster commissioners) throughout the 1930s.

One of the defining characteristics of Broders' work is his avoidance of primary colours – in a poster such as "Glacier de Bionnassay" (about £800 to £1,200), the mountains and sky are a bewitching blend of violet, grey, sea-green and peach. Another work, the charming "Les Sports d'Hivers, St Pierre de Chartreuse" (1930) was sold last year for £5,520 and Christie's South Kensington has another example of the same poster, estimated at

Top: detail from "Pontresina", £700-£900, by Alex Walter Diggelmann. Above, left to right: Bernard Villemont's "Sports d'Hiver, France"; Karl Bickel's 1927 "Arosa"; Roger Broders' "St Pierre de Chartreuse". Below: a Diggelmann rabbit.

