



BEYOND THE FILMS THEMSELVES HOLLYWOOD IS NOT JUST FANCY DRESSES AND GOSSIP:

Vermeer Rarity Exists in the Artwork

by Dwight Cleveland

Movies are arguably the most influential art form of the 20th Century. Everyone loves the movies the world over. U.S. film companies have averaged \$1.25 billion in global receipts each year for over 15 years. In terms of intellectual consumption it has been one of the U.S.'s largest exports every year since the early 1930's.

One can now view current films on hand-held devices like iPads and mobile phones, at home On Demand or with a purchased or rented DVD, or old-school style "at a local theatre near you." The options are ubiquitous by necessity.

Movies have given us words to live by, iconic phrases that are universal: "Make my day." "You look'n at me?" "I'll be back!" "You can't handle the truth." "Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn." Where on earth would one have to go to find someone who didn't understand these words? The movies are a way of life and an influence on everyone, everywhere.

So if the movies are such an integral part of our cultural fabric, why do the posters advertising those films mean so little to most people, especially industry insiders?

Back in the day, film posters started out as the only advertising agent for a newly released movie. During the early years, the entire ad budget went into the artwork, design and printing of the posters. From the teens through the 1930's, they were beautiful stone lithographs with sophisticated graphics and fully saturated color schemes.

These posters were designed to grab pedestrians by the lapels and yank them into the theatre screaming, "Get your butt in here and see this."

Then, as radio, television and magazine advertising developed, budgets were divided among these new media options. This was compounded when competition from other cultural entertainment options and professional sports put even more pressure on movie production budgets. Understandably, poster quality tended to decrease.





In Europe, where the poster was born, there was a history of one artist designing the entire poster (think Jules Cheret or Toulouse-Lautrec). The art and graphics remained more cohesive through the 1960's. In the Eastern bloc countries, where dialogue and subject matter were easily policed, graphics (which required artistic taste), easily escaped bureaucratic censor myopia. As such, graphic appeal of Polish and East German posters soared until political change leveled the playing field.

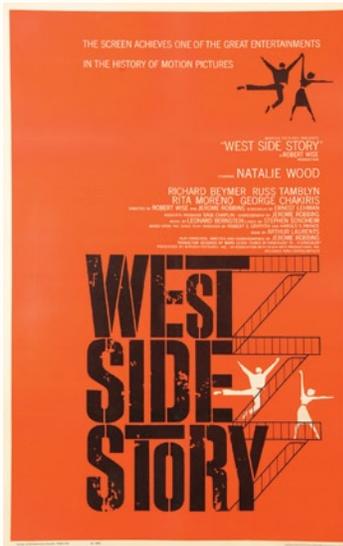
Film posters are inherently rare compared to other seemingly similar ephemera. Baseball cards were first sold with cigarettes and then chewing gum; they were designed to be collected and traded. Comic books were printed in runs of 100,000 and bought by an endearing public. They were read, and favorites were hoarded to be re-read over and over. Movie posters, on the other hand, were only distributed to theatre owners. A major film would only have 5 -6,000 1-sheets printed. When a film ended it's "run," they were supposed to be returned to National Screen Service from whence they were distributed with the film canisters.



Theatres are notorious for flooding basements and this, combined with paper recycling drives during WW1 and WW2, rendered the landscape void of most scrap paper including movie posters. The only ones that survived were by some miracle of fate. Perhaps they were used to save money as wall insulation during the Depression or liberated by an adoring projectionist or ticket taker. A few times a closet of posters was just walled over during a renovation.

A huge discrepancy exists between rarity and value between various collectibles. There are about 18 of the famous Honus Wagner T206 baseball card known to still exist (only about 200 were originally produced and distributed). Every 13-year old card collector (and not just a few adults as well) fantasizes about finding this card. The last one in mint condition sold for a staggering \$2.8M. One in un-rated condition, sold just last year for an impressive \$250K.

There are several comic books (first in their series Action, Fantastic Four, Flash, Captain America, Spiderman, Batman, Superman, Avengers, X-Men) that have sold for prices around \$1.25M to \$1.5M. There are 100+ known copies of most of these expensive books, but only 2 or 3 with the highest grading.



By contrast, there are only a few movie posters that have even approached a similar price level. A BRIDE OF FRANKENSTEIN 1-sheet poster sold at auction in 1997 for \$254K and an original UFA METROPOLIS poster from Fritz Lang's expressionistic landmark sold privately for \$875K in 2006. Most movie posters, however, sell for under \$500.

Posters in mint condition from the greatest films of all time sell in a thin market for \$5 - \$25K (JEZEBEL, FORBIDDEN PLANET, OUT OF THE PAST, SNOW WHITE & THE SEVEN DWARFS, WIZARD OF OZ). You can buy a James Bond GOLDFINGER 1-sheet for \$750. The perennial most popular movie of all time, SOME LIKE IT HOT can be had for only \$1200. And one of the highest grossing films ever, THE GODFATHER, sells regularly for a mere \$150. The last CITIZEN KANE Style B 1-sheet (considered by poster aficionados as the best example from one of the most highly respected films in motion picture history) last sold in 2009 for \$33K. The Style A 1-sheet sold for only \$9,500 in 2011.



The difficulty in finding these poster treasures, however, cannot be underestimated. Compare them to candy wrappers designed to package a candy bar and discarded even before the last bite of chocolate is devoured, movie posters' survival had everything going against them. Most would-be collectors become discouraged over time because of a dearth of availability. If you wanted to buy a Mickey Mantle rookie baseball card and were in any medium sized U.S. city with a population over about 500K, you would have your choice of probably 6 cards within a few short hours of calling merchants listed in the local yellow pages. Depending on condition, you could spend between \$5K and \$50K that day.

If you wanted to buy a "letter of transit" lobby card (the famous scene in *CASABLANCA* where Humphrey Bogart and Claude Rains negotiate control over the exit papers and subsequent departure of Ingrid Bergman and Paul Henreid) with a global internet search you would probably need 6 – 12 months before you had the opportunity to plunk down \$4,000. Only a truly rabid cinephile addict would endure this torturous wait to satisfy a fix.

Understandably, there are only 6,500 film poster collectors worldwide, while there are 75,000 comic book collectors and 3,000,000 baseball card collectors.

Comic books and baseball cards also have embraced the concept of encapsulation, a third party system of preserving the item in tamper-proof plastic with a specific grading score. Collectors can then compete on who has the best condition item. Because of their size, movie posters don't lend themselves to this opportunity.

Furthermore, posters are commercial art. Their primary purpose is to advertise a product or service. Fine art is created for aesthetic reasons. And because they were originally mass-

produced and had such colorful lives, surviving quantities of posters are hard to ascertain without years of intimate market knowledge. The fact that Sotheby's, the largest auction house in the world which had a thriving Entertainment Department during the late 1980's and 1990's, has dropped it's department altogether, indicates just how rare these posters really are. Even they couldn't assemble enough landmark posters for a regular auction schedule.

There is no shortage of annual international awards for movies, but there is only one single award given annually for film poster design, The Key Awards. And this award is rarely covered beyond advertising and marketing executives in Los Angeles despite its importance at the epicenter of filmdom, graphic design and movie marketing.

The film industry also only rewards the latest project. Newly released films are a confluence of creativity, technology and artistry and once those elements are "in the can" it is time to move on to the next story. While past projects lend credibility to one's career; the primary question seems to always be "what are you working on now?" Industry insiders are celluloid obsessed. To them, film posters are just a means to the main event: the film itself.

Will the recent success of *THE ARTIST* and *HUGO* draw more film admirers into the esoteric hobby of collecting these insanely rare and sometimes exquisitely beautiful odes to cinematic history? What will it take for the fine art community to recognize film posters as beautiful representations of our most influential and commercially popular art form?