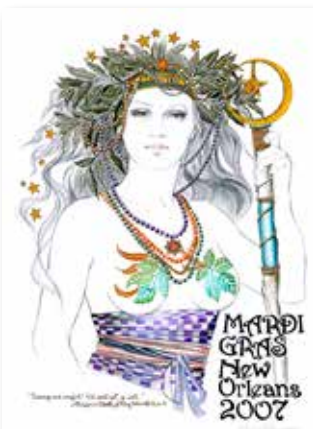




Andrea Mistretta



Mousie



Larry Harris



David Johnson



Robert Guthrie



Michael Hunt



Hugh Ricks



Manuel Ponce



Jamie Hayes



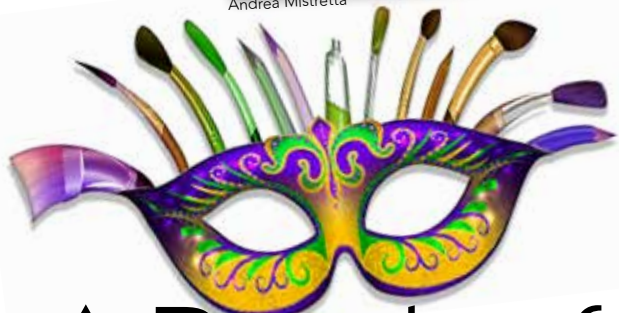
Lionel Milton



Richard Thomas



Terence Osbourne



A Parade of POSTERS

BY ANDREA MISTRETTA

Mardi Gras is a magical muse that has stimulated musical, literary, and visual artists through much of New Orleans's three-century history. Its multi-faceted culture is a gift to the creative world. A breathtaking variety of artworks, produced by an array of Carnival illuminati, numbering in the thousands, are designed to commemorate and decorate. The giant size and colorful matter of these visual platforms provide a rich space for artistically beautiful and innovative experimentation.

Historically, the original Mardi Gras posters were oversized chromolithographed Carnival parade bulletins that depicted each float in a singular parade of krewes such as Comus, Rex, Momus and Proteus. Published and distributed by newspapers in the 1880s, the images were created by parade krewes, float designers, and artists that chronicled Mardi Gras processions. Competition between publishers from New Orleans, New York, Chicago, and Baltimore for printing contracts was fierce because of the large format and significance of the bulletins. They were generally printed by newspapers and sold by street hawkers for a dime. Most bulletins were discarded after the parade but those that have survived have considerable value.

Following WWII, Mardi Gras culture became a more frequent theme in movie posters, book illustrations, and magazines. Spectacular images were created for travel posters from 1920s. In a poster category of its own, are the annual Rex Proclamations.

Starting in the 1890s, these were placed in train depots around the country to attract tourism.

During the mid-20th century an active art colony emerged in the heart of the French Quarter on Jackson Square. Art-

works worthy of reproduction were spawned there. This era seeded a movement that led to the proliferation of the present day popular commemorative souvenir posters.

In 1977, artist/designer George Berke and photographer Michael P. Smith produced the first of the collectible limited art edition prints, a posterized 3-color serigraph.

Many of the prints during the early 70s were inexpensive lower quality offset works of art for tourists; however, there were also very expensive limited-edition fine artworks produced. Bud Brimberg of ProCreations decided to apply fine art techniques, previously reserved for high-end works, and combine them with a pop style. Beginning in 1975, Brimberg produced, numbered, limited editions that were high quality, yet affordable collectibles, such as his now famous Jazz Fest poster series. Naturally, his success led to initiating ProCreations's limited-edition silkscreened serigraph Mardi Gras posters in 1978 that were published continuously through 1994. Artists included Hugh Ricks, Richard Thomas, Steve St. Germain and others.

Other entrepreneurial spirits realized the potential in selling posters from a wide range of emerging and established artists. Print publishers like Cunningham Enterprises, Persian Boy, Planet Publications, and Bergen Galleries expanded their distribution capabilities and mined art gems from local and migrant artists to be reproduced under license.

It's important to note that the celebration of Mardi Gras

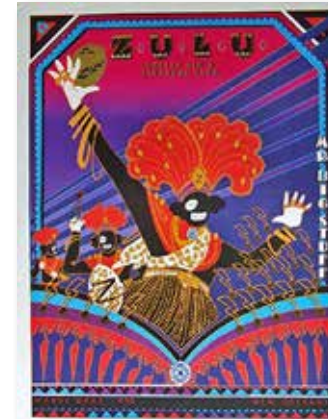
has never been granted official status. Like the Christmas season, Carnival belongs to all people to celebrate as they wish. Posters produced under the auspices of specific krewes, however, are considered official to the organization that publishes them. Krewes such as Zulu, Endymion, Bacchus, and Orpheus began to follow suit and commissioned artists to develop their annual poster themes. The modern day Rex Proclamations began in 1980

and were produced by such noted artists as George Dureau, George Schmidt, Leroy Neiman, Patti Harris, Ann Scheurich, Mignot Faget, and Ida Kohlmeyer. The Zulu poster series began in 1990 and has featured artists such as Benford Davis, Harmani Johnson, Dwayne Conrad, and Terrance Osbourne. The Krewe of Orpheus series (1994-2005) included artists Manuel Ponce, Tony Green, Ralph Chabaud, and Philip Sage.

Sometimes krewes would enlist established printers/publishers to distribute the posters to the public. Renowned local artist Michael Hunt

took on the mantle of artist, designer, publisher, and distributor for several super krewes as well as his own series, including posters by *Mardi Gras Guide* artist David Johnson. Hunt's addition of celebrity signatures in his series of 13 Bacchus posters (1996-2008), created a collectible art sensation.

Whether posters remained local or were taken away, Mardi Gras themed art evolved quickly to satiate public poster frenzy as they became a remembrance of a year's Carnival season. Today these posters may be seen majestically framed in grand homes, push-pinned onto college



Bob Coleman



Artist Andrea Mistretta

EDITOR'S NOTE:

As the creative force behind the longest running series of Mardi Gras posters (1986-present), artist Andrea Mistretta presents the history of this unique and important art form. New Orleans is the adopted city of the award-winning New Jersey artist whose clients include Forbes magazine, NBC, and ABC. A collection of her work appears in her book, *Mardi Gras Parade of Posters* (Pelican Publishing, 2010).



Dawn Dedeaux



Tony Green



George Rodrigue

dorm walls, used as décor in themed establishments, raising funds for good causes, seen in resale shops...and many may still be rolled in tubes in closets across the land.

The collecting crescendo lasted from 1986 until 2008 when the economy declined. During the peak selling years of the early 1990s as many as 40 different poster editions were produced. The larger publishers with established local distribution channels produced the high-count, popular, open editions that also included signed and numbered editions.

Cunningham Enterprises innovated the effective use of hand constructed cylindrical poster dispensers that were strategically placed at points of sale. This simple device became the standard that helped influence the craze

By the mid-1980s the phenomenal wave of sales of Mardi Gras posters grew as competition among artists fueled a vibrant era of creativity over the next three decades. At times poster production became lucrative enough to warrant significant advertising support from publishers, retailers, and artists who developed followings

The adult beverage industry hurried to commission commemorative posters from recognized artists to tie-in their products with the Mardi Gras brand. An example is an international beer company, which launched a first ever U.S. national promotional campaign in 2000, aptly named "The Mardi Gras Spectacular." Such promotions spurred competitors' ad campaigns and increased awareness of Mardi Gras.

For various reasons in recent years the poster collecting boom has decreased. The millennial generation may not buy into collecting and opt to spend their dollars capturing experiences instead. Buying in-the-moment impulses are now quelled by making online purchases. Several poster galleries have closed. Because of these changes, there will likely be a scarcity of large format, high-count edition posters.

Speculation over collectability and value of the commemorative poster genre remain. It's difficult to ascertain value in a poster industry comprised mostly of small, unregulated businesses. Proof of an edition's abundance or rarity is hard to find.



Michael Cacy



Philip Bascle

Long-established publishers and printers may have records of the number of existing past editions versus any current inventory. Value will likely be determined with individual consideration of availability, both past and present, with an eye to the future of the market.

The intrinsic value now is, do you enjoy the poster's image or the nostalgia of the year it represents to you? Will a poster enliven your environment? Are you excited to have a poster and give one to someone?

The Mardi Gras poster genre is spectacular and simple, grand and humble, audacious and entertaining, as are the artists who make them. For certain, Mardi Gras is the essence that cultivated this era of posters that are more than just ephemera. Posters are emotion-backed artistic creations that serve as a catalyst for memories. As an aficionado of New Orleans' and international art, socialite and former gallerist, Margarita Bergen claims, "Mardi Gras posters are a visual slice of American culture and history."

Hopefully, parades of Mardi Gras posters both past and present march forth to a future, where inspired creativity reigns supreme, to continue wielding these imaginative souvenir scrolls as evidence of a Mardi Gras season well spent.

To see more examples of Mardi Gras poster art, check Andrea's website, MardiGrasGraphics.com