



Posteritati

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Sam Sarowitz of *Posteritati* on collecting and caring for original movie posters

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Sam Sarowitz is the owner of *Posteritati* in New York. The movie poster gallery presents an unprecedented collection of over 12,000 posters from 38 different countries. In 2005, Sarowitz collaborated with Spencer Drate and Judith Salavetz to publish *The Independent Movie Poster Book*.

Images

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How did you come to open *Posteritati*?

I collected movie posters for many years and worked in film as well. I burned out on production work and as a collector I had become a small time dealer. To furnish my own collection I would wheel and deal and I was doing that more and more. So I liked the idea of being my own boss, I loved posters, I had a lot of fun finding them. So I decided to make a go of being a fulltime business and retired from the film business. I started the company out of my apartment.

What changes have you seen in posters throughout the years?

I've seen a lot of changes. US Posters, as late as the seventies, (for each film) they would make a 24-sheet which is a billboard and something called a 6-sheet which is 81 inches square and then the 3-sheet and the 1-sheet. Nowadays, for US posters when they release a new film, they print basically the 1-sheet, they print the mylar banners, they'll do the three dimensional cardboard displays and that's pretty much it. So they've eliminated all the other sizes over the last 30 years.

A kind of related thing, which I talked about in the foreward of *the book* is that one of the great things about posters in general is the poster would--you can look on the walls here and see those two there above the computers those are both from Poland, *Strangers in Paradise* and *Breaking the Waves*--you see how interesting they are in design. One of other trends that we've seen is whereas the posters from country to country would be completely different, nowadays you're seeing a lot of homogenization in the design.

American poster design has always been less creative and less interesting than international poster design. That is attributable to contracts. Well, lack of imagination in America in general from a commercial standpoint or a corporate standpoint. Then also particularly with the major films . . . as the stars got more independence they started exerting their own power realizing how important the poster was. So they demanded that their name be a certain size, let's say, and that their image be a certain size. So all these demands limited the creativity of the poster designer who had to fit all these needs.

Unfortunately now the movie business has become more international for American companies, the grosses, the money from the international business has grown dramatically over the last 10 or 20 years. They seem to be exerting more power over the posters internationally. You're finding that a lot of posters, from countries like Poland or France or Italy that used to have the latitude to design their own posters, are now using the exact same design.

There are countries like the US where they'll do a lot of photo design but it's just usually awful heads . . . That's the curse of the movie poster, the worst movie posters are floating heads, they just kill anything good about a poster.

What tips can you give for someone just getting interested in posters?

First they should know that in terms of recent posters there are a lot of reproductions, they should be careful, if they want to collect. If they want to decorate, reproductions are fine. They're a less expensive way to display, that's why they exist. Lots of kids buy them to decorate a dorm room and so forth.

In terms of collecting, buy things that you enjoy. If you want to decorate, ideally you also want to (buy a poster) you like the image on and that is within your budget. Don't break your bank and don't expect to finance your kids' college education.

So in other words don't expect to make a lot of money buying and selling posters.

Yeah, I don't recommend that. It's not something that we promote. I don't promote buying them as an investment. Not to say they haven't appreciated, they've appreciated dramatically over the last 30 years, amazingly. But who knows, I can't predict what will happen in the future.

When you say a reproduction, so an original is a poster that was made by the studio to promote the movie?

Correct. Original movie posters were never made available. That's a little bit of a grey area now because I think there are companies like New Line who have websites that sell directly to the public. And there can be some originals there. The reproductions were made as cheaper versions, they were not made for the theatrical run.

How do you tell a reproduction from an original?

It can be very difficult with some of the newer ones. One way is with the newer ones is they doubleside the posters, which are used for the light boxes. Typically those are originals but there are some exceptions to that rule.

Is it difficult for you to figure out sometimes?

It can be. We will get posters that we will have to make calls and do research. That's one of the main reasons we don't specialize in newer posters.

Are there any books or other sources you can recommend to learn more about posters?

There are certainly a lot of good movie poster books. We carry as many as we can find. I don't know that there's one about collecting them as much as just seeing them. I'd certainly recommend our book for recent posters. There's a wonderful book that's called *Reel Art* on classic movie posters. It's an amazing, amazing book with incredible images. And there is some background history on movie posters going back to the earliest days going forward to the fifties or sixties.

As far as keeping posters in good condition, how are posters best kept and displayed?

Well we talk on the website about linen-backing. Linen-backing is an archival method dealing with movie posters that have defects--I mean generally, there are people that linen-back a mint poster, but I wouldn't recommend it.

So (Linen-backing is) an archival way of dealing with defects. Most American movie posters prior to 1980 were folded. They would actually come out of the printing presses into folding machines and they would be shipped to the theater folded, they would fold down to a 11 by 14 rectangle. When they put it on the linen they do restoration to try to make the folds less visible. So that's something people can do or we will have done for them before they're framed. But it's a subjective thing, it depends on your attitude, it's not required.

Now there are cases where you'll have a poster that's just really damaged and then really unless you linen-back it, it can't be displayed and then there are some very good restorers around the country who can make it look almost as good as new.

You wouldn't recommend linen-backing a new poster?

I don't think any poster deteriorates without mishandling. The example I always use is I bought a collection of posters from a studio that existed in the twenties. The collection was in Fort Lauderdale, Florida which is a pretty humid area, you would think that the weather wouldn't be that conducive to paper. I opened one of the boxes of posters and they looked like they had been printed the day before. They were unbelievable and mint and had had no deterioration whatsoever.

Some people talk about the acid in the paper, the paper that they are printed on has acid in it and theoretically through time that acid will damage the poster. I think when the acid hasn't damaged the poster one percent in 80 years, then when is it going to start damaging it? So I'm just not a believer in the acid being that big a deal. Though it's nice because when they linen-back they de-acidify the paper.

I guess it is the proper thing to do and it is a nice thing to do but it depends on the value. If someone is buying a \$5000 poster, it costs anywhere from \$100 and up to linen-back. To spend a \$150 to linen-back a \$5000 poster is no big deal, I wouldn't hesitate to recommend it. But if somebody buys a \$100 poster, to put another \$100-150 into it to linen-back is something I think you should do only if you really want to.

How much can posters be restored?

They're miracle workers. Posters can have pieces missing and as long as you have a reference photo, they can paint it back in to where it's almost imperceptible. I mean it does not then become a mint, it becomes a poster that's had major restoration done to it but still in a case where something is very rare, very hard to find, you take what you can get.

Is there a standard for describing a poster's condition?

There's no industry standard. Basically people use either our (system) which is near mint to poor and the other system some people use it A, B, C, D, E, which are basically the same. Again if you go to look at different dealers they'll use a combination of systems. We did our website before we had a retail space or gallery and the majority of our business still comes from our website. Because of that we tend to be really conservative. We sell a lot of stuff sight unseen, we want them to be pleasantly surprised when they receive it. We also try to do our best of pull a poster out and describe it, all the flaws, so the person knows exactly what they're getting.

Are foreign posters generally worth more than American posters?

Less. In terms of value, generally American posters are worth more. But that's a big generalization. There are some people who love what's called the country of origin. So if you want *My Private Idaho*, the person who's the country of origin collector will want the US poster and then if they wanted *La Strada*, they'd want the Italian poster. So in certain instances like that, like the Fellinis, the Italian poster goes for about twice the US poster. It also gets into the design too, the design of the Italian poster was a lot more interesting than the American poster.

It's a very complicated question about values because it ranges here and there and everything. One of the biggest changes I've seen in posters in the last 10 years is that people are much more into the design regardless of where the poster is from. When I first started collecting, the collectors only wanted the US poster, except for the country of origin posters like the Italian poster for a Fellini film. They didn't want the Italian poster for an American film, they sneered at it.

But, for example, the Italian poster for *Gilda* is spectacular, absolutely spectacular, and now it sells for as much if not more than the American poster. So people have again become more open in realizing that it shouldn't matter where the poster is from--if it's original and it's got a good image and it captures the film then that's what should matter.

How big is your collection and what you have been collecting recently?

Too big. I'm an addict, but I love them. My passions right now are Eastern European posters, (like) the Polish posters. And Japanese posters, Japanese posters are wonderful in a completely different way with photo montage design and the calligraphy of the text of Japanese characters. It's very unique, there are very few countries that do anything like a photo montage design like that and it's very unusual. There are countries like the US where they'll do a lot of photo design but it's just usually awful heads. A head here, a head there, it's the curse. In the movie poster business it's called "floating heads." That's the curse of the movie poster, the worst movie posters are floating heads, they just kill anything good about a poster.

Posteritati is located in New York, although you may also browse their selection online. Check out some of the posters in the store's collection in [The Independent Movie Poster Book](#), published by Harry N. Abrams in 2005.

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