

Turn of the Century Art Nouveau on Display in Longmeadow

Art Nouveau was the name given to somewhat self-conscious efforts to create a new style in the decorative arts from the 1890's until the beginning of the First World War. It received news publicity in the International Exhibition in Paris in 1900. Among the best exponents of this style was Alphonse Mucha, who was born in Moravia in 1860 and died in Prague in 1939. Mucha's great chance came in 1894 when he was asked to design a poster for a play in which Sarah Bernhardt was appearing. It is said that the "Divine Sarah" inspired his ideal of the female form which he presented so often. One of his drawings is on the book cover of Gertrude Lawrence's recent biography of Sarah Bernhardt.

Here is an interesting letter

"My very dear Mucha,

"You ask me to present you to the Parisian public. Well, my dear friend, follow my advice: exhibit your works: they will speak for you, I know my dear Parisian public. The delicacy of your drawing, the originality of your compositions, the lovely colours of your posters and your pictures, all that will charm them, and after your exhibition I predict fame for you.

"My two hands in yours, my dear Mucha,

Sarah Bernhardt"

Lee Sheridan, the Springfield Daily News art critic, had an interesting story on Nov. 26 about Peter Max, an artist who, she said, would be known to a museum director as well as the proprietors of gift, clothing and book stores.

In her story about Peter Max, whose meditations began Monday, Nov. 29th, in the Daily News, Lee Sheridan quoted George Walter Vincent Smith Museum director, Donald Reichart, as follows:

"Some of Max's drive stems from the turn of the century, art nouveau Paris artist, Alphonse Mucha, the first of the real poster artists, who did the Sarah Bernhardts and all the women with flowing hair."

Reichart recalled that Springfield artist Charles Sheldon, who painted the pastel paintings for Breck Shampoo advertisements, studied with Mucha in Paris.

The late Charles Sheldon, whose studio and home were on the corner of Trinity Terrace and Sumner Avenue, was born in Worcester in 1894, moved to Springfield as a boy and attended local schools. After graduation from Central High School, he attended the Art Students League in New York City and spent a year in Paris studying under Alphonse Mucha in the very early 1900's.

Charles Sheldon's first poster art used for advertising the products of a large manufacturer was for the Fiberloid Company, the origin of the Monsanto Plant in Indian Orchard. The Joseph Bates Advertising Agency in Springfield, Massachusetts, commissioned Sheldon to paint a poster to be used in advertising a dresser set which was one of the early consumer products made from the new Fiberloid plastic material. At this time, Sheldon was painting in oils. Later, he went on to do all the fashion drawings for the Ladies Home Journal and Woman's Home Companion in the late teens and early twenties at which time he maintained the largest studio in Carnegie Hall. Most of his work, however, was done in the studio in his home on Sumner Avenue.

In the middle 20's, he was asked by the publisher of Photoplay to do a painting a month for the front cover of Photoplay. He painted all the motion picture actresses of that period and they appeared month after month on the front cover of Photoplay until the depression set in, in the early 30's.

The first paintings that Sheldon made for Photoplay were in oil, but the medium was slow. At some point, the publisher, to aid Sheldon in meeting on time publishing dates, gave him a set of pastel crayons and all of his future paintings were in pastel.

Mr. Edward Breck, then General Manager of John H.

Breck, Inc., met Charles Sheldon in 1936. The motion picture magazine industry was not flourishing as it had been in the 20's and during these depression years Photoplay was no longer able to afford the price per painting that they had been paying Sheldon prior to the start of the depression. A painting was made for Breck Shampoo. The model was Olga Nelson, a Springfield woman. This painting was reproduced by Walter Whittum Printing and appeared in beauty shops in the late fall of 1936 as a poster advertising Beautiful Hair Breck.

Sheldon painted 103 original pastel paintings before his death that appeared in hundreds of millions of copies of Ladies Home Journal, Harpers Bazaar, Vogue, Woman's Home Companion, Seventeen, Glamour, and True Story Women's Group.

This advertising campaign is now 25 years old and is one of the oldest advertising campaigns for the same product ever to have been on the American scene. The original pastel paintings now used in the Breck advertising program are painted by Ralph William Williams of Canton, Mass., whom Mr. Breck hired in 1957 to supplement Charles Sheldon's work.

Around 1940, Charles Sheldon formed an advertising agency, handling all of the Breck advertising, which he operated in Springfield until his death.

Mr. Edward Breck spent 25 years working with Charles Sheldon. Over the years, Charles Sheldon had mentioned with great frequency Alphonse Mucha as being probably the world's greatest poster artist.

In 1965, when Mr. Breck learned that Mucha's sons were displaying in London and New York art galleries lithographs of their father's poster work, he purchased four lithographs known as "The Four Seasons" and also an original pencil sketch.

A collection of Sheldon's and Mucha's work is exhibited at Lovely Coiffures Beauty Salon, Longmeadow Mall, 805 Williams Street, Longmeadow, Mass.
