

EXPERT ADVICE

Sofia Suarez

Poster power

How should I go about collecting those Chinese posters with communist slogans? Which are the best to collect?

WHAT THE EXPERT SAYS

Anna Ning of J Gallery says propaganda posters date from 1948, when the Chinese Communist Party first began using them as a tool to educate people. "The last posters were made around the early 1980s," she says. "By then, there were more broadcasting channels. It became easier for the party and the government to spread their policies through radio and television."

Since the posters were used to increase awareness of the party and its guiding principles, they were usually displayed in schools, factories, offices and even homes.

The slogans are a window into historic communist campaigns. Sometimes the slogan was a quote from Chairman Mao Zedong: "The most spectacular of landscapes is found on the most dangerous of summits";

"Continue the march to victory"; "Shining path, glittering future".

POSTER CHILDREN

"Artists painted the original images, then they were printed in factories in big quantities," Ning says. The prints numbered in the hundreds to thousands, according to each campaign's regional or national reach. The figures that most frequently appeared, she says, included Mao, soldiers, farmers, factory workers, and school-

children. "There are a few particularly famous artists who created original paintings for printed posters," says Ning. "One of the most famous was called Li Mubai. They didn't sign the poster images, but their names were usually printed on the lower part of the poster, together with other information, like the printing company's name."

Other well-known poster artists include Ha Qiongwen, Song Mingyuan, Jin Meisheng, and Qiu Baiping.

According to Ning, propaganda-poster art is a style in itself, but an expert might be able to distinguish nuances of different artists or eras. During the Cultural Revolution, for example, the images were "high spirited". Because they were linked to political movements, dating original posters is relatively straightforward.

Chairman Mao posters are always in demand, and this example cost \$4,500



says: "You can tell which is real just by looking at it. Look at the paper and the condition. Fake posters usually look new."

Beyond authenticity, she recommends readers look for what appeals to them.

"How to choose the most collectable depends on the content. Posters with Mao are always sought after. Also the ones with people holding the red book."

Prices range from about \$3,000 to tens of thousands of dollars, depending on content and condition. It's sometimes possible to buy the original paintings; not surprisingly the value is significantly higher.

"There was an original painting auction some time ago, and the prices went up to almost \$300,000," says Ning.

RESOURCES

Books from Paddyfield.com: *Chinese Propaganda Posters* by Anchee Min, Taschen (\$300). *Picturing Power in the People's Republic of China: Posters of the Cultural Revolution* by Harriet Evans (\$273). *Chinese Propaganda Posters: From Revolution to Modernization* by Stefan Landsberger (\$105). J Gallery, The Peninsula, TST (tel: 2369 9062)

Send questions about collectables to sofiasuarez@yahoo.com

TIPS FOR NEW COLLECTORS

"The posters are quite popular in the western world right now," says Ning. "Although they were often printed in large quantities, it's not easy to find authentic posters in mint condition. People didn't treat them as

collectable items, and not many were kept. The paper was quite cheap, thin and easy to damage, but the colours keep pretty well over time."

Fakes do exist, she says. Apart from the usual advice to buy only from reputable sources, Ning