

# The 6 Greatest Artists From The Golden Age Of Pin-Up

Originating as a tactic to sell calendars and then used as war propaganda, the Pin-Up craze produced some great 20th Century American pop art...

Pin-Up was a peculiarly American phenomenon which originated in late 1800s magazines like Life, boomed in the 1930s with the mega-selling calendars of Brown and Bigelow, and peaked in the Second World War.

From one point of view, it was little more than an unsubtle tactic of publishers and admen, using images of sexy girls to sell men everything from cigarettes to cars to joining the army. In 1940 Franklin D Roosevelt's War Advertising Council co-opted the advertising industry to make propaganda, and what it made was very specific pictures of women: beautiful, idealised women who were desirable yet wholesome, sexy yet innocent, cheeky but never lewd.

These images were sent to servicemen stationed abroad along with their rations, to boost morale and remind them of the lovely all-American gals back home that they were fighting to protect. Soldiers were officially encouraged to pin them up in their barrack rooms and messes (hence the term), and then after 1945 the War Advertising Council simply became the Advertising Council and carried on using the same methods to sell virtually anything.

But from another point of view, Pin-Up was a trend that produced a wealth of stunning original art. The top painters employed by Brown & Bigelow and by magazines such as Esquire were celebrated and famous in their day to a degree that is unfathomable now. There was a brief golden period when Pin-Up was everywhere, and the best of it really is good: sumptuous, witty, bursting with life and vibrant colour.

The form petered out as a commercially viable industry in the mid-1950s when the likes of Playboy came along, carrying photos of real women really naked, as opposed to imaginary ones in cheeky uniforms. Soldiers were now family men and Pin-Up was too naughty to display in the front room but not naughty enough for the private stash in the garage. It fell completely out of fashion for a few decades, its superstar artists forgotten, but then began to become collectible in the 1980s. Pin-Up's stock has continued to rise ever since, with the best original paintings changing hands for close to \$300,000.

Here are six of the best Pin-Up artists of the 1930s-1950s Golden Age...

## George Petty IV

In his day, George Petty was the King of Pin-Up and quite remarkably famous. His stylised, unfeasibly leggy Petty Girl appeared in the first issue of Esquire in 1933 and over the next decade became ubiquitous in ads, movie posters and in the US military (the famous nose artwork on the Memphis Belle Flying Fortress bomber plane is copied from his work). In 1950 General Motors commissioned

a Petty hood ornament for its Nash car and in the same year Columbia Pictures made a movie tribute The Petty Girl.

As with the Barbie doll, the Petty Girl created an (impossible) ideal female attractiveness, so it is odd that George Petty is not better known today. His works now fetch sums in the region of \$10,000, but some other Pin-Up artists command ten times that amount, or even more. Perhaps his little fetish counts against him: he had a weird insistence on putting virtually all his girls in ballet shoes, no matter what they're actually doing in the picture.

### **Art Frahm**

Though a highly skilled artist, Arthur 'Art' Frahm's work is at the cartoony end of the Pin-Up genre, often verging on what we British would think of as saucy seaside postcard humour. He was the master of what is known in the trade as the 'ooh face' - the expression of shock on the pretty girl as her clothing is partially removed in some silly accident, much to the amusement of onlooking fellas. Frahm preferred painting wholesome suburban housewives for his comical fantasies, avoiding glamour girls, but it's undeniably sexist stuff by today's standards.

### **Enoch Bolles**

At the other end of the Pin-Up spectrum to Frahm is Enoch Bolles, the saddest and maddest of the great cover artists. In magazines with names like Film Fun and Cupid's Capers, Bolles painted joyous flapper girls and burlesque beauties in bizarre situations: perhaps perched atop the mouth of a cannon, or diving through a flaming hoop, or playfully petting a dangerous wild animal. Bolles was diagnosed as a schizophrenic and underwent the torments that passed for psychiatric treatment in the 1950s, but he continued to produce and sell artworks even while institutionalised in a state-run mental asylum.

### **Zoë Mozert**

By far the most famous female Pin-Up artist, Zoë Mozert (born Alice Moser) was a fast-living, pint-sized dynamo and a serial wedder of much younger men. She often modelled for her own pictures and preferred to work topless in the studio even when not doing so. Mozert mastered the art of conveying nudity without crossing into the realms of pornography: she would ensure that the subject was looking at another object in the picture, not meeting the viewer's gaze. If a naked girl looks at viewer her nudity might be inviting or lascivious, whereas if she is engaged in some innocent activity we are the guilty ones, intruding on her natural state. Mozert painted the famous portrait of Jane Russell for The Outlaw movie poster - though she reduced the size of the actress' breasts, complaining that they were unattractively large.

### **Gil Elvgren**

Gil Elvgren's paintings are perhaps the apotheosis of the Pin-Up genre and his works command the highest price amongst collectors today. Like Art Frahm he often painted silly scenes of girls accidentally revealing their underwear, but his jokes are wittier, his brush strokes more expert and his girls more gorgeous. Elvgren apparently claimed that the ideal Pin-Up model had a 15-year-old's face on a 20-year-old's body, which is the sort of thing you could say in the 1940s without being thought creepy. That quote may be apocryphal but he did base most of his paintings on the model Myrna

Hansen, who started working for him when she was just 13 (chaperoned by her mother, it must be said).

### **Alberto Vargas**

When George Petty (see above) became too famous and started demanding \$1,000 per painting, Esquire magazine started looking for a cheaper alternative. They found the Peruvian artist Alberto Vargas and, paying him just \$75 a week for all his output, replaced the Petty Girl with the 'Varga Girl'. They removed the 's' from 'Vargas' because it apparently sounded zingier but this was to have terrible financial consequences for the artist, who later signed a contract without reading it and unwittingly given Esquire the rights to everything under the Varga name in return for a pittance. Ironically, given his role in destroying the Pin-Up industry, it was Hugh Hefner who saved Vargas financially when he gave him a regular spot in Playboy in the 1960s.

Vargas' works are second only to Elvgren in their value today, and as an artist he transcends the Pin-Up genre with his expertly-realised, idiosyncratic, occasionally rather mysterious paintings. The best Pin-Up works celebrate women in a way that has much more in common with Velasquez or Titian than with soft porn magazines, and if anything comes across in Alberto Vargas' pictures it is that: a man's love for, and endless delight in, female beauty.

*Images courtesy of TASCHEN, who have recently released [The Art of Pin-Up](#) – a comprehensive collector's guide to the Pin-Up genre.*

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