

Poster art from Galerie Murlot on view at Naples Art Association

By Janice T. Paine

Lithography from Galerie Murlot, New York

When: 10 a.m.-4 p.m Mondays through Saturdays through Jan. 14

Where: Naples Art Association, The von Liebig Art Center 585 Park St., Naples

Information: 239-262-6517 or online at <a href="www.naplesart.org;

Admission: Donation

Jules Chéret

Joan Miró

For many of us, "first love" in the visual arts means a quick seduction by the French. It's hard to resist the charms of the modern masters who lived and worked in France, guys like Picasso, Matisse, Miró, Dubuffet and Chagall. Even working in what they probably considered the minor art of printmaking, they brought their top game to the task.

Their talents are made abundantly clear in the Naples Art Association's current exhibit, "Lithography from Galerie Murlot, New York." It presents vintage posters, original works on paper, illustrated books and ephemera such as letters and photographs from the holdings of a historic Parisian printing house.

The prints and unique works on paper are the main attraction. However, humanizing artifacts, such as a hand-addressed envelope by Picasso, make

the show come alive.

Though Galerie Murlot is now located in Manhattan, under the direction of Eric Murlot, the prints and posters on view here were created in Paris at the century-old Atelier Murlot, mostly in the decades after World War II. The Atelier specialized in printing illustrated books and high-quality exhibition posters for French museums.

Inviting a legacy

Eric's grandfather, Fernand Murlot, who died in 1988, invited major 20th-century European artists to create lithographs in collaboration with his artisans. The artists provided original artworks that were then hand-copied and transformed into lithographic prints by the workshop staff. Occasionally, an artist would work directly on the studio's large and heavy lithographic stones, creating an original design to be printed by the shop's master printers.

Their collective efforts bring a pure dose of Parisian charm to the von Liebig, as if a time capsule had been broken open on the spot. Marc Chagall's poster, "Le Magicien de Paris, Grand Palais," printed in 1970, depicts a jester or harlequin figure who surveys emblematic scenes from the City of Light. There is a bridge over the Seine, a glimpse of the Eiffel Tower, and a line of people ambling along in the sky, all washed in a soft shade of blue.

Nearby hangs an original gouache (a type of opaque watercolor) painting on paper by Chagall, dated 1975. In it, an enormous bouquet of flowers is flanked by a bowl of fruit, a glass and wine bottle. Chagall's ever-present pair of lovers embraces in one corner. The effervescent composition suggests the essence of the "movable feast" that was Paris in the days of Chagall's youth in the 1910s and '20s.

Naples Art Association executive director Joel Kessler said recently that the Murlot exhibit is particularly appealing because it links the images to the historical context in which they were made. "When I was in New York back in

July, I went to see Eric, and looked at a lot of old photos and letters that took place between Eric's grandfather and Picasso, Matisse, Chagall and other artists, and looked at pieces of artwork. I thought it would be a great exhibition for Naples. This is a family that's been involved in printmaking, the lithography business, back to the 1800s."

Cocteau with a pen

From an art-historical perspective, the French practically invented the modern poster in the 19th century. The artist Jules Chéret wove together words and painterly images to convey a graphic message that could be mass-produced on paper. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec made many famous examples and numerous other artists followed in the early years of the 20th century. Even the playwright and filmmaker Jean Cocteau tried his hand at it, as evidenced by a poster he made in 1957 that is in this exhibit, promoting his murals in the St. Peter's Chapel at Villefranche-sur-Mer, near Nice.

Cocteau was not a fabulous draftsman, at least on the basis of the works in this show, but with the Villefranche poster he succeeded in creating an image with strong visual impact. St. Peter, holding a key to the heavenly gates, is envisioned as a stylized angel. The figure's outline is echoed by and entangled in the poster's lettering.

Pablo Picasso brought a more blunt sensibility to his graphic work with Mourlot. He enjoyed an extended relationship with the printmaking studio, lasting from 1945 through the late 1960s.

Three versions of a poster he made – drawing directly on the stones – to publicize a 1948 exhibit of his "pottery, flowers and perfumes" at Vallauris in southern France are strong and appealing. The lettering is done in a thick, sturdy hand. The posters are crowned by a faun's head, drawn slightly differently on each, but all rendered with a sense of humor and confidence.

The artist who epitomizes the notion of visual pleasure in French art is, of

course, Henri Matisse. In 1947, he designed an image for a tourist poster that was printed in large quantity by Atelier Mourlot the following year. The poster celebrates the city of Nice as a place of "travail et joie," or work and joy. Matisse's condensed forms, luscious colors and exuberant patterning convey both ideas perfectly.

Printed in an edition of 10,000, the Nice poster represents "a rare, old, beautiful interpretation" of Matisse's painting, according to Eric Mourlot. It required an experienced technician to copy Matisse's original painting in gouache onto lithographic plates to produce the poster. "It takes a skill that only a craftsman with 20 years of experience can have," Mourlot said.

Still for sale

The exhibit represents only a small portion of Eric Mourlot's personal collection.

"I have thousands of posters and prints. I have thousands of photographs and letters" from the studio archives, he noted.

Fortunately, in this season of power shopping, viewers who really feel the love can take home a memento of the show. Instead of an exhibition checklist, the gallery handout lists only those artworks that are for sale. Vintage posters range in price from \$1,200 to \$4,500. Unframed, open-edition lithographic posters can be had for as little as \$75 to \$700, with most in the vicinity of \$200.