

Leonetto Cappiello and Jean d'Ylen's posters: colour takes centre stage

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ABSTRACT

Undoubtedly, Frenchmen Jules Cheret and Henri Toulouse Lautrec laid the foundations of modern poster art. At the end of the 19th century, street walls were covered with bright, eye-catching, and colourful posters: the hurried and distracted passer-by was attracted by seductive and dynamic figures in bright colours. At the beginning of the 20th century, the advertising poster spread in France thanks to a few Parisian printing houses, including Imprimerie Établissements Vercasson and Maison Devambez, among the first actual advertising agencies. In 1900, the Leghorn-born Leonetto Cappiello, then a naturalised Frenchman, made his debut as 'Maître affichiste' in the Vercasson printing house for a collaboration that was to last until the advent of the First World War; his place, from 1919, was taken by Jean d'Ylen, until then practically unknown. Cappiello's prestige, quality and competence are unavoidable, but the many aspects they have in common are undeniable. Both draw their subjects with a comic, almost caricature-like verve, figures full of dynamism, reminiscent of photographic snapshots, but above all, the colour choices unite them. It is colour that permeates their advertisements: their characters stand out against the dark background of the scene, and from the black experiences emerge figures in brightly coloured clothes, playing with the contrasts of complementary colours. Red and green, blue and orange, and white with barely noticeable yellow brush strokes stand out against the black background, as do the lettering in a yellow ranging from lemon to intense chrome. Their colour choices are free and extrovert, vermilion elephants, red or green horses, animals, plants, and objects in the most varied shades, almost all unconventional: colour becomes the protagonist.

KEYWORDS Leonetto Cappiello, Jean d'Ylen, French poster designers, Billboards

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1. Introduction: French advertising graphics in the second half of the 19th century

The appearance of the first colour advertising posters in the second half of the 19th century was due to the perfection of the chromolithography technique of which, in France, the undisputed prime mover was undoubtedly Jules Chéret. His posters are distinguished by the high pictorial rendering that gives his works intense colour effects ranging from animated backgrounds to transparent glazes. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec deserves a special mention: his posters are characterised by an essential graphic language, sharp contours and evenly spread colours, whose style can be traced back to the most advanced artistic research of the late 19th century. However, at the turn of the century, the expressive graphics of Chéret and Lautrec were counterbalanced by

a group of authors, expressions of what has been defined as the '20th-century style', characterised by drawings imbued with lightness and redundancy [1].

In the French sphere, one recognises that linked to Art Nouveau, the leading creator of which was Adolphe Mucha, followed by equally prominent artists such as Eugene Grasset, Louis Théophile Hingre and Henri Privat Livemont.

At the same time, but outside France, we recognise another Mitteleuropean matrix, that of the Jugendstil, with leading artists such as Koloman Moser, Alfred Roller and Gustav Klimt. Finally, let us remember the Italian Art Nouveau poster designers, such as Aleardo Terzi, Giovanni Maria Mataloni and Adolf Hohenstein, followed by Marcello Dudovich and Leopoldo Metlicovitz.



Fig. 1. Jules Chéret, *Folies Bergère*, 1893; Fig. 2. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, *Jane Avril*, 1893; Fig. 3. Adolphe Mucha, *Biscuits Lefevre*, 1896; Fig. 4. Henri Privat Livemont, *Absinthe Robette*, 1896.



Fig. 5. Leonetto Cappiello, *Chocolat Klaus*, 1903; Fig. 6. Leonetto Cappiello, *Anis Infernal*, 1905; Fig. 7. Leonetto Cappiello, *Maurin quina*, 1906; Fig. 8. Leonetto Cappiello, *Pinerol*, 1912.

2. Advertising in France at the beginning of the 20th century

Paris, at the beginning of the 20th century, is known to everyone as the 'Ville Lumière': in fact, it is one of the first European metropolises to equip itself with public street lighting. Moreover, the French capital is the must-visit destination for artists, musicians and writers who find in the city a particularly fertile environment for creative activities, an ideal climate for innovative movements and artistic avant-gardes: it is completely useless (and almost impossible) to list the numerous personalities orbiting the French capital in those years.

1900 is the year of the great Universal Exhibition and the Paris Olympics; the city has almost two million inhabitants and is experiencing an enormous wave of economic and social development; production and consumption are on the rise and, in parallel, new companies and brands appear, new consumer products and materials.

There was a need to publicise these new products and to relaunch existing ones; to meet this increased need for communication, print shops and advertising agencies were created or strengthened: essential companies such as

Devambez, Star, Dam, Publicis, Synergie and Vercasson operated in Paris. The Italian agency Maga, one of the most renowned of the time, opened a branch in the French capital in 1920; other paramount companies, such as, for example, Publivox in Geneva, Ricordi in Milan, and Chappuis in Bologna, had correspondents there.

Big brands demanded advertiser posters that could generate strong emotional reactions in consumers and, at the same time, convey positive, simple, and compelling messages.

The power of the image, sometimes of a slogan accompanying the poster, became an essential chapter in the history of collective communication: these were the premises of the excellent mass dissemination that would characterise the modern era.

The images of the way of life in the first decades of the last century, proposed by the posters, depict an idyllic, carefree lifestyle, combining happiness and consumption, as shown by the expressions on the always smiling faces of the young girls portrayed in the posters. Excellent and effective advertising should arouse desires for consumption or possession, new life habits aimed at profoundly transforming everyday life in record time.



Fig. 9. Leonetto Cappiello, *Végétaline*, 1928 – Fig. 10. Jean d'Ylen, *Rhum St. Georges*, 1926 - Fig. 11. Leonetto Cappiello, *Bourdou*, 1926.

3. Leonetto Cappiello

Leonetto Cappiello (Leghorn 1875 - Cannes 1942) arrived in France in 1898; within a few years, the artist's work would have created a kind of watershed in the field of advertising graphics: Cappiello, following in the footsteps of Chéret and Toulouse-Lautrec, introduced into the world

of 'affichés' a modern, incisive and synthetic language, with essential graphics, decidedly detached from the, albeit appreciated, but overabundant 'decorative ornamentation' that characterised Art Nouveau posters.

From the early decades of the 20th century, Leonetto Cappiello became a point of reference for many artists; his

innovative ideas would influence the creations of numerous poster artists of the following generations. He became a French citizen in 1930 and was awarded the Legion of Honour in 1914.

In November 1900, Cappiello signed his first contract with the 'Etablissements Vercasson'. At that time, the typographer's role was not only to have posters made but also to act as an advertising agent. Therefore, the customer who wanted a poster often contacted the printer, who found the most appropriate poster designer.

Until 1916, all but four of Cappiello's posters came off the presses of the Vercasson printing house [2]; some 3,000 posters and many sketches are attributed to him. In 1911, he was 'Maîtres de l'affiche' and signed a second contract with Vercasson regulating not only the economic conditions but also the number of works he had to supply: 'Mr Cappiello will have to supply Mr Vercasson, and Mr Vercasson will have to order and accept five sketches for at least one month for the creation of posters. Mr. Vercasson also

undertakes to order from Mr. Cappiello and to accept, and the latter to supply him monthly with a minimum of four large-format models of approximately one metre and forty centimetres in enlargement of the sketches already supplied, a total of 55 sketches and 44 models during the year" (AA.VV., 1981, p. 114). Sometimes in Cappiello's sketches, there was no link between the product for sale and the subject of the sketch, which meant that a rejected drawing could, with a few modifications, be reused for another client.

With the outbreak of war in 1914, Cappiello abandoned Vercasson [3]; in 1919, he set up his own company 'Affiches Cappiello', granting the publisher Devambez exclusive rights to his new works; in 1921, he signed a new contract with them until 1936. In addition to the print shop, Devambez owned an art gallery where Cappiello held an important exhibition of posters and sketches in 1923. Then, in 1937, he joined forces with the publisher Damour. Around 1940 he moved to the south of France to Grasse; he died in Cannes in 1942 following an illness.



Fig. 12. Leonetto Cappiello, Florio Cinzano, 1930; Fig. 13. Jean d'Ylen, Shell, 1927; Fig. 14. Jean d'Ylen, Shell, 1930.



Fig. 15 - Leonetto Cappiello, Contratto, 1922; Fig. 16 - Leonetto Cappiello, Cognac Monnet, 1927; Fig. 17. Jean d'Ylen, Sandeman's, 1925; Fig. 18. Jean d'Ylen, Cusenier, 1924.

4. Jean d'Ylen

Jean-Paul Béguin (Paris 1886-1938), pseudonym of Jean d'Ylen, was a French painter and illustrator mainly active between 1920 and 1930. He attended the Bernard Palissy Ecole, a Parisian school of Applied Arts and later L'École des Beaux-Arts, where he became a pupil of the painter Fernand Cormon. Before entering the advertising world, he tried his hand as a landscape painter, jewellery designer, decorative painter, and cartographer during the Great War. Towards the end of the first decade of the 20th century, he embarked on a career as a poster artist in

Pierre Vercasson's print shop, succeeding Cappiello as "Maîtres de l'affiche" in 1922 [4]; from him derived shapes and colours and that exotic imagery typical of the Leghorn artist's posters. The latter had left numerous sketches to Vercasson under contract: it cannot be excluded that Jean d'Ylen reworked Cappiello's sketches for some signs.

From 1934 onwards, following disagreements with Vercasson, he worked directly with the Weiner agency in London, going so far as to disseminate his posters in Europe and the United States. When he was at the peak of his career, death caught him prematurely in 1938.



Fig. 19 - Leonetto Cappiello, Longines, 1927; Fig. 20. Jean d'Ylen, Zenith, 1928; Fig. 21. Leonetto Cappiello, Barbier Dauphin, 1937; Fig. 22. Jean d'Ylen, Filver, 1926.

5. Colour the posters of Leonetto Cappiello and Jean d'Ylen

The 1903 Chocolat Klaus poster marks a milestone in Leonetto Cappiello's career, which he called 'the second stage of my evolution' [5]: inaugurates the dark background, the dissonance of colour planes, and the contrast of pure colours.

The poster must stand out on the wall, impose itself on its surroundings, and be a 'visual shock' to the beholder. In the advertising scene for his audacity, Cappiello is defined as a forerunner of the Fauves' painting; in his 1910 article, critic Camille Mauclair described his posters as follows: "Cobalt blues, phosphoric yellows, blinding vermilion, purples and blacks, oranges and greens vibrate, clash, struggle and panic in struggles and unlikely alliances" [6].

Cappiello often expresses simplicity through an association of ideas and images suggested by the product's name: as in Anis infernal (1905) depicts a red devil in his burning hell, with the lettering in green, the complementary colour. In Pinal (1912), the black

background enhances the yellow lettering, the orange tree, and the red devil, which in Maurin Quina (1906) is coloured a glowing green. Sometimes what arouses curiosity, what attracts the observer, is not, for example, the exotic animal, unrelated to the product to be advertised, but the colour with which it is portrayed: like the elephants in Vegetaline (1928), Bourdou's (1926) or Jean d'Ylen's Rhum St. Georges (1926). Fancifully coloured animals: Cappiello's zebras for Florio Cinzano (1930) or the decidedly surreal mechanical horses for Shell by Jean d'Ylen (1927 and 1930).

Jean d'Ylen often takes up the style and spirit of the early Cappiello posters, characterised by imaginary, cheerful, costumed characters, or pierrot, clowns and circus performers, painted in bright colours against a dark, black, blue, or deep red background.

Joyful maidens seem to dance in Cappiello's posters for Contratto (1922) and Cognac Monnet (1927); they find compositional and chromatic correspondences (the black background and the abundance of yellows) with those of Jean d'Ylen's Port Sandeman (1925) and Cusenier (1924).



Fig. 23. Jean d'Ylen, *Fiorino Asti Spumante*, 1922; Fig. 24. Leonetto Cappiello, *Bitter Campari*, 1921; Fig. 25. Jean d'Ylen, *Teinture Idéale*, 1928; Fig. 26. Leonetto Cappiello, *Lane Borgosesia*, 1927.

In the posters for the Longines (1927) and Zenit (1928) watches, the subject is the same, Kronos the inexorable lord of time, a winged older man, whom Cappiello depicts in an intense yellow that stands out against a background of black and ultramarine blue and reproduced by d'Ylen with a scarlet red body standing out against the dark background. Instead, an environment shaded from black to green is found in the advertising for Barbier Dauphin (1937) by Cappiello and for Filver (1926) by d'Ylen.

The latter, for Fiorino Asti Spumante (1922), presents, against a black background, a figure of a dancer in action, dressed in predominantly eighteenth-century fashion yellow, from the wig to the shoes, and who seems almost to be dancing, holding at arm's length an oversized bottle of sparkling wine, about the size of himself. Two graphic details suggest the nearly human personification of the bottle: the features of a female face with eyes, nose and

mouth can be sensed in the ochre to gold colour patterns of the cork that covers the neck of the bottle; then in the dazzling white foam that gushes from the newly uncorked bottle and gathers in shape like the white wigs of eighteenth-century ladies.

One of Leonetto Cappiello's most iconic posters is the one for Bitter Campari (1921), printed by Devambez: a dynamic and brilliant figure floating on a black background. The clown, or a little spirit, emerges from the peeled orange peel in a spiral with Campari in his hand. The character dressed in a tight red polka-dotted jumpsuit echoes the carmine colour of the drink.

Jean d'Ylen uses a similar colour scheme for *Teinture Idéale* (1928), where a white maiden dances amidst a swirl of small spherical lanterns of multicoloured lights, and by Cappiello for *Lane Borgosesia* (1927), where a girl dyed white knits surrounded by balls of colourful wool.



Fig. 27. Jean d'Ylen, *Diablerets*, 1928; Fig. 28. Leonetto Cappiello, *Asti Robba*, 1921; Fig. 29. Jean d'Ylen, *Porto Constantino*, 1928; Fig. 30. Leonetto Cappiello, *Isolabella*, 1912.

In the poster for Diablerets (c. 1928), Jean d'Ylen draws two embracing pierrots dressed in green and red on a black background, depicting full-length and dynamic movement as if dancing.

The author employs the effects of depth and harmony due to the juxtaposition of complementary colours; the bottle also exploits the same colour codes obtained from the green and red shades, further emphasised by the white labelling. In the poster for Asti Robba (1921), Cappiello also depicts two dancing pierrots holding a cup of the product in unison, touching the container with their lips, and almost kissing it in a decidedly delicate and sensual pose.

There is no direct mention of Italy, but the product's designation of origin is given by choice of emblematic national colours: white for the pierrot's dress, green and red for the lettering.

In the advertisement for Porto Constantino (1928), Jean d'Ylen invents a clownish character dressed elegantly in white, which raises the bottle of the product to the sky in a pose almost as if it was a coveted trophy and engages in an acrobatic dance, remaining for a moment suspended in space against the black background.

Worthy of note is the characterisation of the staggered shadows, in dark green and red, as if generated by two different light sources. In the poster for Isolabella (1910), Cappiello presents us with a graceful polychrome harlequin with tawny hair, dancing among a whirlwind of bottles of liqueurs made by the Milanese company Isolabella; the drawn spiral of products with colourful labels is ideally connected to the central figure's colourful lozenge costume, drawing the viewer's attention.



Fig. 31. A street in Paris, with posters by Jean d'Ylen and Leonetto Cappiello, c. 1930.

6. Conclusions

In the bibliographies and biographies on the two artists, almost nothing is found about Jean D'Ylen, we have no information on their professional relationships at the time of their employment at Vercasson.

Severo Pozzati, a.k.a. Sepo, a well-known French-Italian advertising poster artist, recounts: 'Vercasson had two painters of very little value on staff, in addition to Cappiello: Jean D'Ylen and an Englishman specialising in portraits of children (...). During the war, Cappiello left the company for political reasons (...). Jean d'Ylen took Cappiello's place with the task of copying the master's sketches that had remained unsold, as the publisher's low revenge against Cappiello who had abandoned him" [7]. This observation by Sepo casts a shadow on Jean D'Ylen's career; indeed, the lack of precise biographical information on the artist is somewhat strange, given the enormous success he enjoyed in France and England.

Despite his production of over three hundred posters, and although recognised by some contemporaries as a master of the modern poster, Jean d'Ylen, unlike Cappiello, was soon forgotten. Within a decade, the characters in his posters would appear exaggerated and anachronistic, eclipsed by the models proposed by the emerging poster artists Cassandre, Paul Colin, Jean Carlù, Charles Loupot, and Sepo, by their posters created in a new, modern, synthetic, essential style.

What is certain is that the two authors share numerous formal and compositional choices. For example, they share the search for dynamism in the characters that animate their posters, figures that always appear in movement, in plastic poses, almost dancing; these are beautiful and graceful maidens in light, fluttering dresses, or funny clowns, white or coloured pierrots, Venetian damsels and noblemen in 18th-century dresses, devils and Mephistophelean characters, exotic animals in imaginative, bright colours. The two Authors adopt almost identical chromatic solutions for the backgrounds, which are usually black or monochromatic, with a prevalence of red, green and blue tones; the choice of fonts is also similar, 'stick', sans serif, usually coloured in yellow or teal, chromatic solutions that guarantee legibility and prominence.

From the little information we have found, we deduce that there was no great collaboration between the two: Cappiello began his experience with the 'Etablissements Vercasson' as early as November 1900, and from 1911 he was 'Maîtres de l'affiche' in a decidedly top position; Jean d'Ylen arrived at Vercasson around 1910, and is described as a collaborator of the already famous master: from this we deduce that he acquired his style and manner of composition from him. Cappiello left Vercasson between

1914 and the following year, leaving the printing house with a large number of sketches and drafts that would most likely be reworked and finished in the following years by Jean d'Ylen; the latter, however, would only become 'Maîtres de l'affiche' for the "Etablissements Vercasson" in 1922, a position he would leave due to disagreements 12 years later in 1934.

The chromatic choices experimented by Cappiello in his posters from the first decade of the 20th century had already proved to be appropriate and adequate to attract the viewer's attention. In the following decades, both the Leghorn master and later Jean d'Ylen would continue to employ identical compositional and chromatic choices in their works that had proven to be highly effective in the communicative language of street posters.

Colour in the posters of Leonetto Cappiello and Jean d'Ylen will never be forgotten; the latter stated in 1921: "A poster must be expressive, colourful and have an attraction that captures the attention of a passer-by".

Cappiello stated in a French radio interview of the 1939: "(...) the poster must above all be a visual experience, an act of authority over the passer-by. A well-designed and well-coloured poster can quickly introduce a new product or revive an old and forgotten one" [8].

7. Conflict of interest declaration

The author states that there are no potential conflicts.

8. Funding source declaration

The author states that no funding was involved.

9. Short biography of the author

Marcello Scalzo - Ph.D. and Associate Professor (Icar/17) at the Department of Architecture - University of the Studi in Florence (Italy), where he teaches in the disciplines of Drawing, Survey, Design, Representation, History of Poster, Graphics and Communication. In the latter fields, he produces publications exploring links and connections between visual arts and video; he has also organised exhibitions, performances and installations in the most important squares in Florence.

Notes

[1] Gallo Max, *I manifesti nella storia e nel costume*, Arnoldo Mondadori Editore, Milan 1976, p. 79.

[2] Le Frou-Frou (New Asnières lithograph), *Le Journal* (Imprint Charles Verneau, Paris), Les Folies Bergères e Hélène Chauvin (Imprint Chaix,

Ateliers Chéret, Parigi) in: AA.VV., *Cappiello 1875-1942*, Edition de la Réunion des Musées Nationaux, Paris 1981, p. 114.

[3] "World War I, which broke out in Europe in 1914, provided Cappiello with a natural break to escape the gruelling contract with Vercasson". (Jack Rennert, *Cappiello. The poster of Leonetto Cappiello*, The Poster Art Library, New York 2004, p. 16).

[4] Jack Rennert, *Cappiello*, 2004, (cit.), p. 16.

[5] AA.VV., *Leonetto Cappiello - L'affiche et la parfumerie*, Editions Faton, Dijon 2020, p. 32.

[6] AA.VV., *Leonetto Cappiello*, 2020, cit., p. 32.

[7] Forni Dante, Forni Romeo, *Sepo - settant'anni con l'arte*, Pendragon, Bologna 2008, p. 79.

[8] Monti Raffaele, Matucci Elisabetta, *Leonetto Cappiello - dalla pittura alla grafica*, Artificio, Florence 1985, p. 104.

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