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Ads meet art at Sonoma County Museum

George Rose exhibit shows commerce, creativity blending in Wine Country

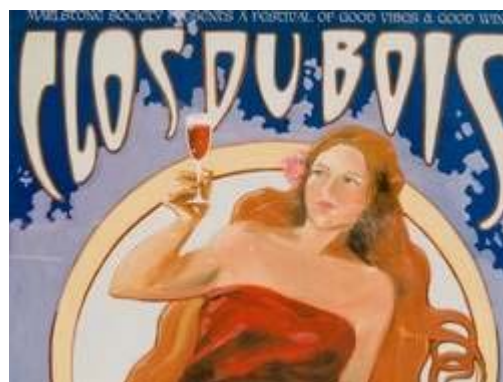
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Question: When does advertising rise to the level of high art?

Answer: When you climb the stairs up to the second-floor gallery at the Sonoma County Museum, and enter the "Wine Country Poster Art" exhibit.

From the colorful bread-and-wine, still-life, cross-promotional poster for Clos du Bois and Sur La Table, to the explosive abstract painting for the 2000 Napa Valley Wine Auction, there's no doubt these posters are works of art.



The balance between commerce and creativity makes sense, because the man behind this exhibit, George Rose of Healdsburg, has a history both as an artful photographer and a wine industry promoter.

"The fun thing about this exhibit is that there are a number of posters that I had a hand in getting designed," Rose said. "There are quite a few posters that I actually did the photography for."

Rose worked at the Los Angeles Times from 1977 to 1983, scoring two Pulitzer Prize nominations, and contributed regularly to Rolling Stone magazine. He worked in public relations for Fetzer Vineyards and Clos du Bois in the '90s, and served as vice president for public relations at Kendall—Jackson from 2003 until last October.

The exhibit features 46 colorful prints from a collection of some 300 winery posters that Rose and his wife, Denise, donated to the museum late last year.

"I have been collecting these posters for over 25 years," Rose said. "And when I married Denise in '94, she had been working at Korbel for 20 years, so she had a few posters of her own."

While the larger collection includes posters from all over the country, the current exhibit concentrates on those from Sonoma County.

"I've always gravitated toward design and photography, and it was just a great chance to collect quite a number of Northern California artists," Rose said.

One of the artists represented is '60s rock concert poster and album cover artist, Stanley Mouse, who also lives in Sonoma County.

"In the collection, there's a wonderful Stanley Mouse poster for Clos du Bois, for what they called the Marlstone Party, featuring Big Brother and the Holding Company, in his classic San Francisco, psychedelic hippie look," Rose added.

One poster parodies the cover of the Beatles' "Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band" album.

"That's from Bonnie Doon Winery," Rose said. "Randall Gramh, the gentleman that owns Bonnie Doon is the philosopher king of the wine industry, and he is always spoofing famous literature and art."

Curator Eric Stanley has added some supplemental items from the museum's own permanent collection, including a miniature wood-carved model of a winery barrel room.

A 1955 promotional film for Italian Swiss Colony, featuring Hollywood character actor Ludwig Stossel as the "little old winemaker," runs continuously on a small video screen.

"It's fun just because it's so cheesy," Stanley said on a recent tour through the exhibit. Meanwhile, in the background, the film's narrator sonorously described wine as "slumbering" in casks, "slowly attaining perfection."

Rose said he's delighted with Stanley's contributions to the exhibit, which also include additional framed posters.

"Eric is really this wonderful secret weapon there at the museum," Rose said. "He is the consummate North Coast wine historian. He's been quietly collecting wine memorabilia all these years and squirreling it away."

For his part, Rose believes his donated collection was easy for the museum to put to use.

"One of the advantages of my being a photographer is that everything was well-documented," he joked. "Not only was the entire collection curated and dated, but all the artists' names were spelled correctly."

"Wine Country Poster Art" continues through June 13.

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