



Marvelous Manhattan

STORIES OF THE RESTAURANTS, BARS & SHOPS
THAT MAKE THIS CITY SPECIAL

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ARTISAN — NEW YORK

ON THE WALL

CHISHOLM LARSSON GALLERY

I'M IN CHELSEA visiting with Robert Chisholm and Lars Larsson, a couple of old friends who own the best vintage poster shop in town. The walls of the small store are lined with framed posters; there are racks of posters, and in back still more of them—fifty thousand in all. Movie posters, political posters, sports posters, and, of course, those French posters advertising wine and aperitifs and holidays on the Côte d'Azur. Over my desk at home hangs a poster of *Stormy Weather*, a stylized piece of art in black and gray with sky-blue lettering that shows Lena Horne and Cab Calloway, with Fats Waller at the piano. I got it from Chisholm Larsson. Another piece I love, a poster for *The Earrings of Madame de . . .*, is in my bedroom. All it shows is the profile of a woman, an earring, a single gloved hand and, in elegant lettering: Charles Boyer, Danielle Darrieux, Vittorio De Sica, Max Ophüls.



"M&Ms?" asks Lars, offering me the yellow bag. We share an addiction to peanut M&Ms. I'm back to visit but also because a couple of years ago I produced a documentary about Ella Fitzgerald, and I'm desperate to track down the drawing Picasso made of her. The original lithograph is out of my price range, but the poster will be lovely.

Lars and Robert have been selling vintage posters for decades. Their gallery on Eighth Avenue near 17th Street in Chelsea has the old-world cool of a Parisian print shop. The window displays always give the passerby an original angle on the world: classic Swedish films of the twenties, Spanish Civil War propaganda, Egyptian movie musicals, and, my favorite, delectably kitsch Soviet political posters of the 1950s.



Lars Larsson (left) and Robert Chisholm, partners in the gallery.

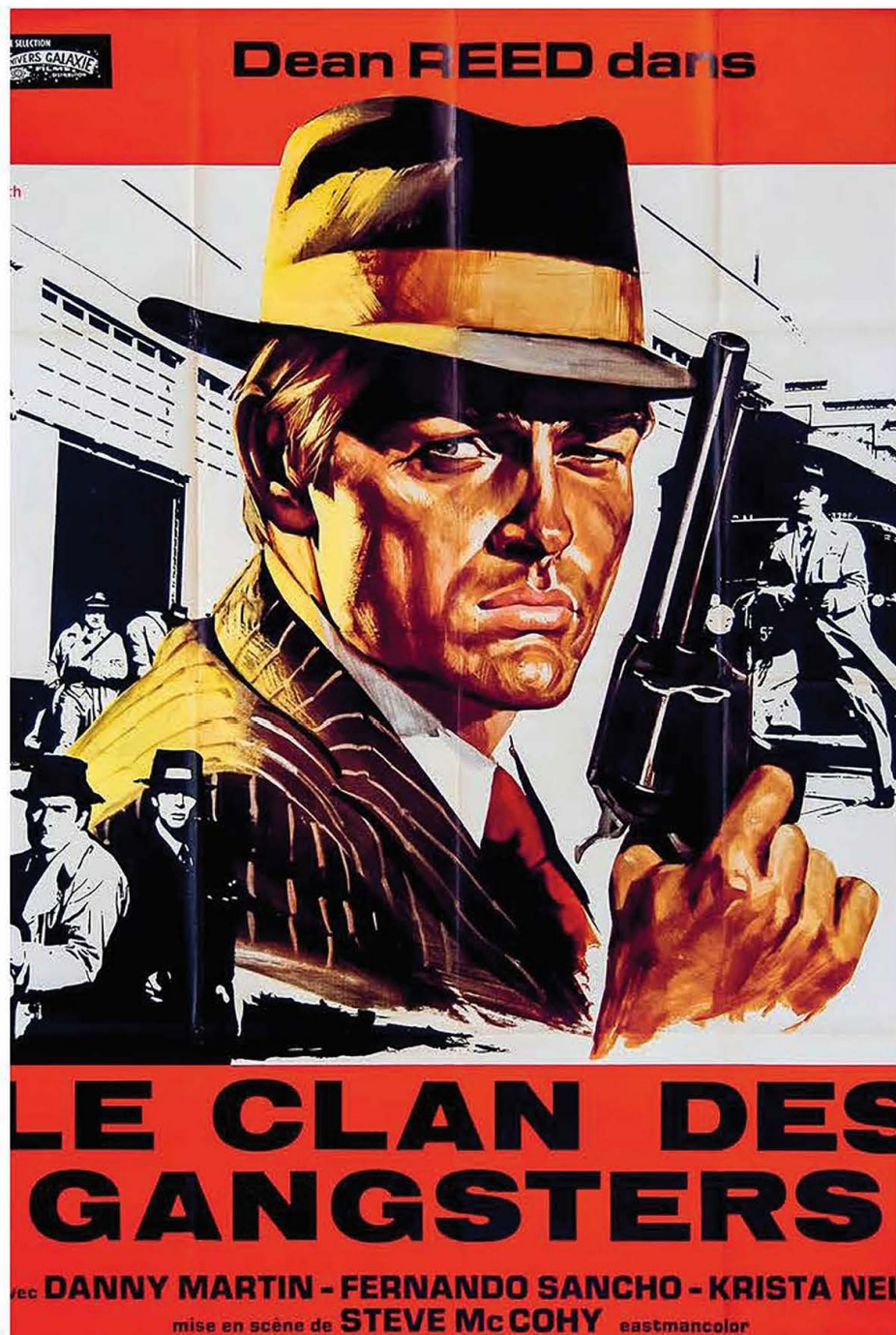
The owners are necessarily well informed about price and condition, the whole business of posters. For them (and me), the art and history, and the reasons people want a certain poster, are much more compelling. For instance, as Lars explains, as soon as Communism collapsed in the former Soviet Union, rich Russians, perhaps craving a piece of their history, grabbed them all—sometimes for an ironic taste of the once forbidden, sometimes because the Constructivist movement in the early Soviet years of the 1920s was spectacular. “Right now, the prices for posters featuring Soviet space subjects, especially the first man in space, Yuri Gagarin, are skyrocketing!” Lars says. I have my eye on a movie poster titled *Cosmonaut No. 2 in the U.S.A.* It’s seven hundred bucks. If I had my choice and a lot of dough, I’d want the original Steinberg Brothers poster for the 1925 film *Battleship Potemkin*, directed by Sergei Eisenstein.

Robert pulls out a Polish film poster for *Nocny Kowboj* (*Midnight Cowboy*). Its blue-black silhouette with a cowboy hat and a pair of large, lewd red lips has mysterious and seedy implications. It’s a fine example of

the exquisite graphics that have made these pieces by Polish artists so potent and so desirable in the booming vintage-poster market.

Scouring the world for the rarest, most graphically inventive posters, Robert and Lars, along with their protégé, Jason Pellecchia, often hunt down pieces for clients with very specific taste—say, a person looking for *West Side Story* posters in every language. But they also pursue works that catch their own interest: posters from Sweden, posters for films by Italian, French, Chinese, and Hollywood directors.

Part of the thrill is in the hunt. Lars and Robert relish it. I first dropped by the shop years ago looking for a movie poster featuring an unknown American named Dean Reed who became a rock and movie icon in the USSR and East Germany. “Dean who?” most people asked. Lars just said they’d find one for me. And some time later, he called, and I went in, and there was a poster for a 1970 Italian/Spanish Western titled *Saranda* with Dean Reed in it. Lars had known the exact person to contact in the former East Germany.



A poster for *Le Clan des Gangsters*, a 1970 film with Dean Reed, sometimes known as Comrade Rockstar.

Mention posters, and most people think of cramped souvenir stores with cluttered walls, but Chisholm Larsson presents its stock like a top auction house. The posters are beautifully displayed and cataloged. When you ask for a particular poster, one of the staff will disappear into a back room, then bring out your choice, clip it to a giant artist's board, and leave you to sit, stand, walk around it, and appreciate the graphics to scale (many movie posters are five feet high or more).

The market for vintage posters is constantly on the rise. An “international” version of designer Heinz Schulz-Neudamm’s *Metropolis* poster went for \$690,000 in a private sale in 2005, making it the most expensive one ever sold. A perfect Dubonnet triptych by A. M. Cassandre, father of the Art Deco poster, has been valued at \$200,000.

I’m not in it for the investment. I haven’t got that kind of dough anyway. I buy the posters because they are touching and funny and evocative.

Vintage posters serve as a record of sorts, affordable art for people with imagination, style, curiosity, a sense of history—their own and the rest of the world’s. The great posters are invested with an entire culture, the way it sees itself, the angle from which it sees others.

An Italian poster for Mel Brooks’s original *The Producers* (1967) shows a cartoon of a huge woman, two little men, and the title “Per Favore, Non Toccate le Vecchiette,” which translates roughly as “Please Don’t Touch the Little Old Ladies.” Lars, Robert, Jason, and I spend some time laughing at the old ladies, and then we go out for lunch.