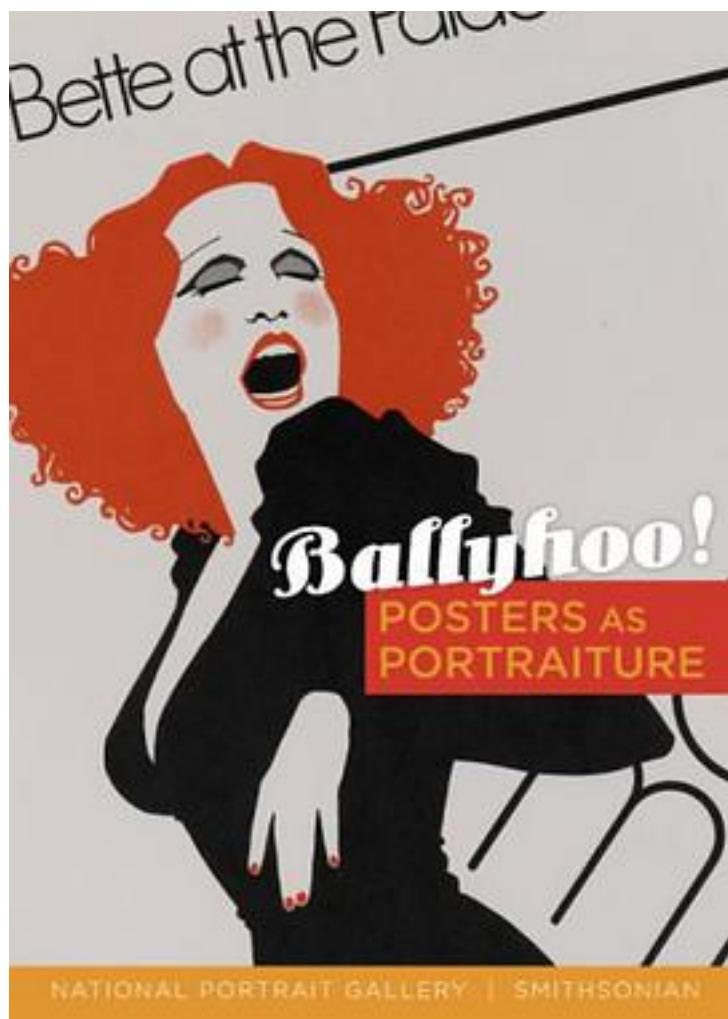


Ballyhoo!



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著者:Reaves, Wendy Wick

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What could be less subtle than the pictorial poster, blaring out its message with large

scale, loud colours, and bold graphics? Yet as print historian A. Hyatt Mayor once pointed out, posters competing in a busy visual environment are 'pictures meant to be seen by people who did not mean to see them'. Viewers may absorb the persuasive message on an inattentive or even subconscious level. We are used to decoding the poster as advertising or propaganda. But what if we consider the poster as a form of popular portraiture? How does the presence of a recognizable figure operate on our consciousness? These celebrity likenesses are dramatic - and often enormous - but in fact, what a poster communicates about an individual is usually secondary to its principal message: Barnum and Bailey announcing the arrival of their circus, the Woodbury Soap company using Veronica Lake to promote its 'matched make-up', Greta Garbo advertising the Swedish version of "Queen Christina", or Bette Midler publicizing her 1973 concert at the Palace Theater. By interweaving the three themes of poster art, celebrity promotion, and advertising, this exhibition from the collections of the National Portrait Gallery suggests how a famous face can enhance the message of the poster and, conversely, how posters have defined and disseminated images of prominent Americans. Furthermore, posters provide an instructive glimpse of an era's prevailing ideals, prejudices, and presumptions. These images remind us of the ubiquitous presence of portrait images outside the world of fine art. Widely disseminated forms of popular portraiture - like the poster - remain a profound influence in our culture.

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