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April 21, 2008

**Public only:** (202) 633-1000

## **“Ballyhoo! Posters as Portraiture”**

### **Opens at the Smithsonian’s National Portrait Gallery May 9**

The National Portrait Gallery is pleased to present “Ballyhoo! Posters as Portraiture.” This exhibition explores how posters function as portraiture and interweaves the histories of poster aesthetics, celebrity promotion and advertising. Featuring 60 posters that range from John Wilkes Booth on a “Wanted” poster to a life-size stand-up of Johnny Depp as Captain Jack Sparrow in “Pirates of the Caribbean,” “Ballyhoo!” will be on view at the National Portrait Gallery through Feb. 8, 2009.

“‘Ballyhoo! Posters as Portraiture’ demonstrates how famous faces draw attention to the verbal message of the poster and, conversely, how the poster—a popular art form widely distributed in public venues—enhances the reputation of the personalities portrayed,” said Carolyn K. Carr, acting director of the National Portrait Gallery. “This exhibition also shows how, throughout the course of time, posters reflect stylistic changes in American art.”

Poster art is a form of communication that has roots in antiquity. Painted announcements and proclamations were found on the walls of Pompeii; the Romans used poster-like signs to advertise gladiator fights and chariot races. But it was the increasing urbanization of the industrial revolution that set the scene for the printed poster to flourish. By the late 19th century, posters had become a fundamental element of advertising. Images of the famous were used for all sorts of marketing: wartime propaganda; product advertising; presidential campaigns; protest movements; and film and music promotion.

Examples of the promotional value of posters include a circus poster dated c. 1881–1885 that uses the images of P. T. Barnum, James Bailey, James Hutchinson and men on stilts and an 1878 wood-engraved poster with an image of Thomas Edison that uses circus-style rhetoric to promote the feats of his phonograph—“It Talks! It Sings! It Laughs! It Plays Cornet Songs!”

The first poster craze—in the late 19th and early 20th century, when posters began to be collected as works of art—is represented with several pieces, including an 1893 poster of Loïe Fuller by Jules Chéret and an 1896 self-portrait poster of Edward Penfield. The second “postermania” happened in the 1960s. Some of the exhibition pieces from this time include a 1966 profile of Bob Dylan, as well as psychedelic band posters, which appear to drip with neon, created by poster artist Victor Moscoso for Junior Wells, the Butterfield Blues Band and Jefferson Airplane.

The show also includes posters that feature celebrities in unusual roles. Heavyweight champion Joe Louis appears in a World War II government poster; Bette Davis, Shirley MacLaine and Judy Garland appear in three separate advertising spreads enrobed in furs for Blackglama’s “What becomes a Legend most?” campaign; and more recently, Pete Sampras appears in a “Got Milk?” advertisement.

The curator of this exhibition is Wendy Wick Reaves, curator of prints and drawings at the National Portrait Gallery. A 160-page catalog by Reaves (National Portrait Gallery, 2008), distributed by University of Washington Press, accompanies the exhibition; it is available for purchase in the museum store for \$19.95.

### **The National Portrait Gallery**

The National Portrait Gallery tells the stories of America through the individuals who have shaped its culture. Through the visual arts, performing arts and new media, the Portrait Gallery portrays poets and presidents, visionaries and villains, actors and activists who speak American history.

The National Portrait Gallery opened to the public in 1968. The museum’s collection of nearly 20,000 works includes paintings, sculpture, photographs, drawings and new media. Located at Eighth and F streets N.W., Washington, D.C., it is open every day, except Dec. 25, from 11:30 a.m. to 7 p.m. Smithsonian information: (202) 633-1000; (202) 633-5285 (TTY). Web site: [www.npg.si.edu](http://www.npg.si.edu).

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