

Rail Travel and Tourism:  
Poster Art in the 1920s

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The period in America between the two world wars was a time of incredible change, innovation, and instability. Never before had so many new innovations in travel, industry, consumerism, and host of other related issues been introduced so quickly or caused such an identity crisis of the nation itself. Writing of consumerism and envy in this period, Susan Matt noted, “advertisers, journalists, social scientists, and consumers of the 1910s and 1920s were influenced by Darwinian theory, which seemed to endorse movement, change, and competition...”<sup>1</sup> In considering the poster art of the 1920s designed to promote this movement and change, two key issues must be considered at once: the Art Deco movement and the shift in moral codes that recast envy and desire as normalized functions of consumerism.

Briefly, the Art Deco movement began in France and quickly spread to America. “La Societe des artistes decorateurs” or the Decorative Artists Society was founded following the Universal Exposition of 1900.<sup>2</sup> Art Deco was both intensely popular and short-lived, reaching its pinnacle in 1925 with the Exposition Internationale des Arts Décoratifs et Industriels Modernes (International Exhibition of Modern Decorative and Industrial Arts), held in Paris.<sup>3</sup> According to the History Channel’s discussion of Art Nouveau and Art Deco, “Art Deco was a sprawling design sensibility that wound its way through numerous early 20th Century art and design forms, from fine art and architecture to fashion and furniture, as well as everyday appliances and even modes of transportation.”<sup>4</sup> Art Deco was important to the travel industry because its form and choice of materials cast travel as an enviable, yet attainable form of opulence.

A booming graphic design industry created advertisements for all forms of travel, often in the Art Deco style which allowed designers to (re)use generic landscapes and vivid colors to promote an ideal or imaginary of travel that played to consumer desires for luxury and entertainment. In Chapter Four of *Postcard America*, Jeffrey Meikle discusses the consumer-

driven aesthetics of the linen postcard craze. In Meikle’s analysis a postcard image titled “Greetings from St. Charles, Michigan,” is significant for its generic yet desirable pastoral imagery—what Meikle described as the “pastoral mode of the picturesque.”<sup>5</sup> The point Meikle made is that this image, in its generic nature, is mundane, boring even. That because of its generic quality it could be overprinted with the name of any number of places and would be considered just as credible. Such was also true of the 1920s poster art designed to promote travel. For example, in Figure 1, the same image is reused to promote at least five different locations around the world. The poster appealed to the imaginary of various locations through its vivid



Figure 1 Recyclable Imagery

colors and formless location. In relation to the linen postcard, Meikle claimed “Collectors often come across several cards based on the same photographic image, variously retouched and altered by different publishers, yielding postcards with widely differing degrees of verisimilitude of outline and color.”<sup>6</sup> Though this image of the bathing beauty does not appear to be altered except for the overprint, it clearly experienced the same kind of use and reuse as that of the landscape postcard.

To analyze travel posters in more detail, I turn to graphic designer and artist Maurice Logan. Born in San Francisco, California in 1886, Logan acquired an impressive education in art and “by the mid 1920s, was one of San Francisco’s best known commercial illustrators and poster designers.”<sup>7</sup> According to one biography of Logan, there were few advertisers at the time

and he was well-liked and versatile as an artist which netted him many poster jobs.<sup>8</sup> Logan specialized in the bold lines and vivid colors of Art Deco, but also in his ability to create the idealized, albeit generic, landscape.

In the mid 1920s, Logan produced several promotional travel posters for Southern Pacific Railroad. Among them, he produced posters advertising “California Beaches” and “Yosemite”

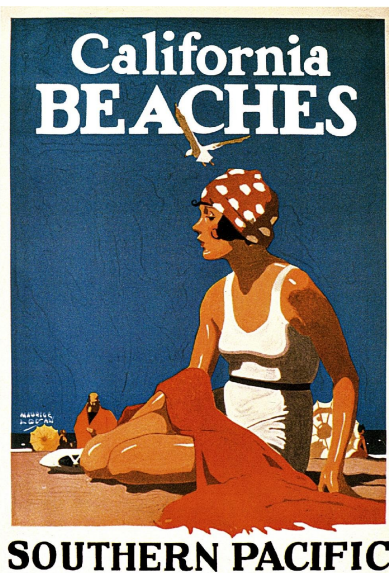


Figure 2 Logan, *California Beaches*

(Figure 2 and 3 respectively), which best exemplify both the allure of Art Deco and the generic quality of the landscapes he portrayed. Figure 2 used the bright, vivid colors of Art Deco appealing to the eye through the red towel juxtaposed with the white bathing suit. Both of these sit against a sea of blue, appealing both to the illusion of ocean but also subliminally using red, white, and blue together to imply that traveling and spending time on beaches is what it means to be American.

The young woman in the poster is glistening with suntan oil and is seemingly unconcerned with the world around her, content to merely soak up the luxury of travel. Importantly, she is stylish, wearing her red bandana with white polka dots well before Rosie the Riveter would make it famous during World War II. Her white bathing suit is fashionable but not overly revealing. In Susan Matt’s discussion of the shift in attitudes toward envy, she noted that “Stylishly attired women of moderate means no longer ran the risk of being condemned for their envy and emulation; instead, they were congratulated for their judgment and taste.”<sup>9</sup> Indeed, in designing this poster, Logan “lauded her visible symbols of aspiration.”<sup>10</sup> And, as Matt argued, “This transformation in envy’s meaning and legitimacy was significant because it was part of an emerging emotional and behavioral style that supported the expansion of the

consumer economy.”<sup>11</sup> Logan used this emotional appeal of image and style to promote travel and his idealized landscapes further supported the emotional appeal of travel and consumerism.

The beach on which the poster lady sits could be anywhere in the world for all its specificity. Seated serenely on an ochre-colored field meant to represent sand, the only indication viewers have that this is actually a beach is the faint traces of beach umbrellas in the distant horizon and the seagull floating overhead. Because the image feeds into consumer desires, the woman, visibly displaying her aspirations of wealth, does not have an umbrella to shield her from the sun, or from viewers. In the distance, merging with the red of her towel shifting into a bright orange, what appears to be a blond man is wrapped in his towel. We can see no distinguishing features of this man because he is meant to serve as part of the nebulous beach scene. Not unlike the duplicated image in Figure 1, what makes such images appeal to an emotion of consumerism is its generic landscape promoting travel to *any* beach, even while suggesting this is a California beach.

In another poster appealing to consumer desires for the appearance of wealth and taste, Logan portrayed a similarly generic landscape promoting rail travel to Yosemite National Park. As Matt explained, “In the second decade of the twentieth century, a far-flung group of advertisers, economists, sociologists, journalists, and consumers spread a new view of envy.”<sup>12</sup> This shift in the moral resonance of envy meant that “Keeping Up the Joneses” was attainable by the middle-class as well and Logan worked to portray travel as one form of consumerism. The poster of Yosemite appeals to female consumers through the stylishly dressed traveler and an appeal

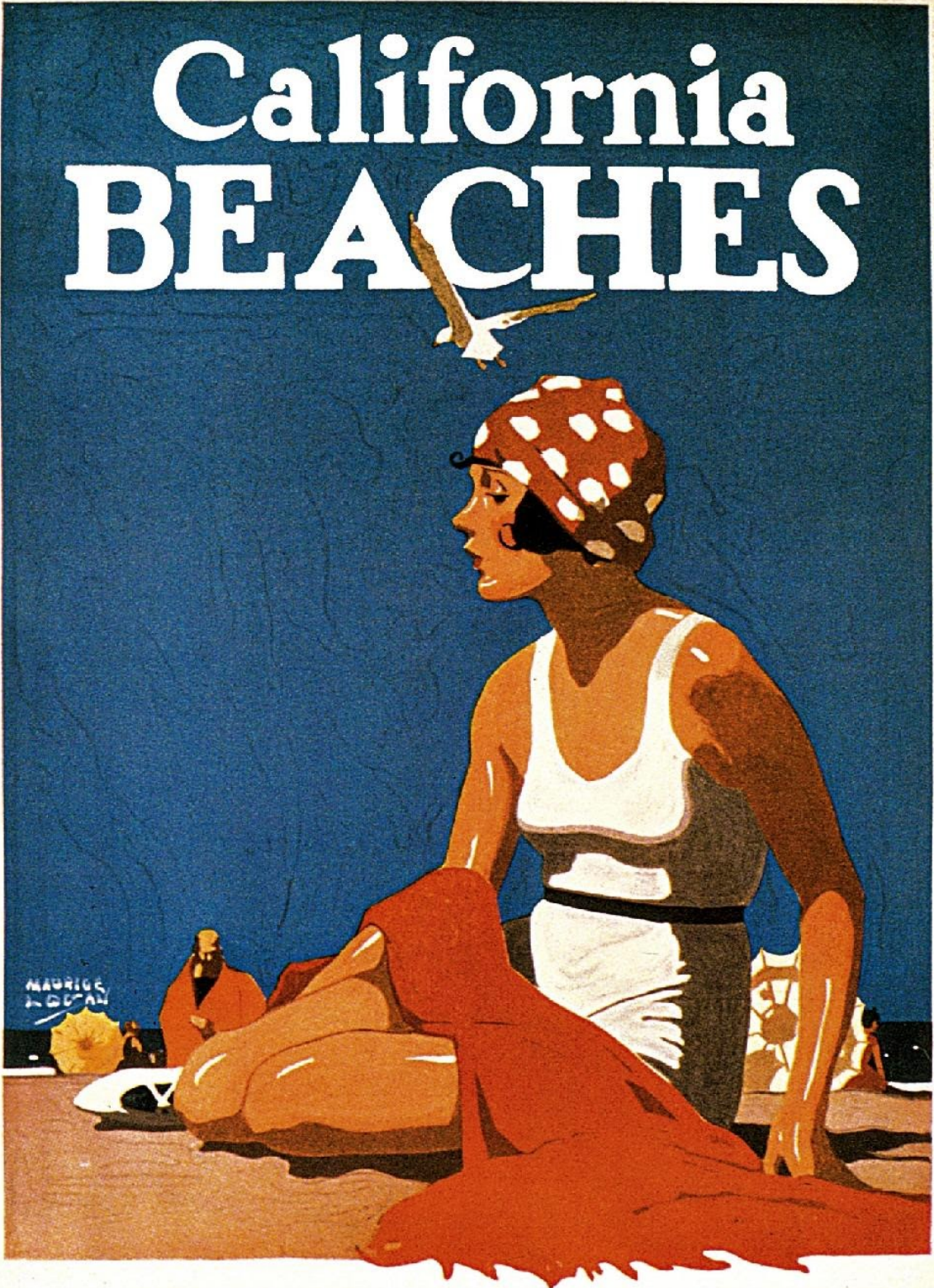


Figure 3 Logan, Yosemite

to a “can-do” attitude and independence brought about through rail travel to seemingly exotic, yet everywhere-present locations. Drawing on the vivid colors popular in Art Deco, the bold orange background draws a sharp contrast with the mountains below. Nondescript mountains, one capped with snow, were generic enough to appeal to a broad audience promoting travel to Yosemite, but also travel in general. Not even the birds in this poster image tip us off as to an exact location. Seated comfortably on a mule, the woman’s grasp on the reigns is relaxed with one hand holding the reigns and the other on her hip. Her body language says “This is easy! Anyone can do it.” Her bobbed dark hair, crisp white shirt, and stylish orange ascot scarf caught lazily in a breeze illustrate the modern 1920s woman who could do anything and go anywhere she pleased. This subtle combination stoked consumer desire and promoted travel as an enviable commodity that would allow the traveler to display their aspirations and taste.



# California BEACHES



**SOUTHERN PACIFIC**







## References

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- <sup>2</sup> Art History, “Art Deco” <http://www.arthistory.net/art-deco/>
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- <sup>5</sup> Meikle, Jeffrey L. *Postcard America: Carl Teich and the Imagining of a Nation, 1931-1950*. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2015, 75.
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- <sup>7</sup> California Watercolors, “Maurice Logan, N.A. Biography,” Hillcrest Press, Inc., 2002. <https://www.californiawatercolor.com/pages/maurice-logan-biography>
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- <sup>12</sup> Matt, Susan J. *Keeping Up with the Joneses: Envy in American Consumer Society, 1890-1930*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2003, 4.