The art of beer advertising on tap at MOWA

Diane M. Bacha, Special to the Journal Sentinel

3:58 p.m. CDT August 5, 2016

First reaction upon hearing that a museum was exhibiting beer art: Can’t I visit my neighbor’s basement for that?

First reaction upon visiting the exhibit: Wow, who knew?

Aside from the fact that what’s now on view at the Museum of Wisconsin Art in West Bend contains far more valuable artifacts than any home breweriana collection you’re likely to see, it’s about much more than lighted bar signs.

In “Art on Tap: Early Wisconsin Brewery Art and Advertising” (http://wisconsinart.org/exhibitions/art-on-tap.aspx) curator Erika Petterson uses a mainstay of the Wisconsin identity — breweries — to inform us about the intersections of opportunity and ingenuity, commerce and technology, advertising and art that took place in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. The exhibit makes the case that Wisconsin’s mighty brew barons were on the front lines of shaping modern marketing practices.

A luminous 1907 image of Miller Brewing Co.’s girl in the moon greets us as we enter. The gallery is hung with posters and calendars, lithographs and bottle labels, tin trays and tin signs. The first challenge here is to go beyond the familiar and help us see these objects differently.

It’s a challenge well met. We learn, for instance, that those iconic bird’s-eye view depictions of sprawling brewery complexes (executed long before aerial photography) were a popular way to demonstrate a company’s stature after the Civil War, as if to intimidate and awe with a show of brick-and-smokestack might. We’re told interesting tidbits about why bock beer is associated with goats, where Pabst’s “blue ribbon” tagline came from (there was never a literal blue ribbon) and how the Great Chicago Fire led to a slogan for the Schlitz Brewing Co.

During the same era, technological advances in printing meant bigger, better and more inventive imagery. And technological advances in bottling meant consumption could move out of the tavern and into the home, dramatically enlarging the breweries’ customer base.

Combine these last two developments, and you get “Camping on the Mississippi,” a tin tray produced in 1901-’09 by the Potosi Brewing Co. It depicts a wholesome family picnic in which two young men share bottled beer with their rosy-cheeked lady friends while a boy sneaks a bottle out of a crate, a studious father figure smokes a pipe and anglers row by in the background. There you have it: every demographic group the Potosi Brewing Co. had in its sights, plus the next generation, too.

It’s just one reminder of many in this exhibit that marketers have always had our number. Celebrity endorsements, sex symbols, subliminal messages, aspirational identities — it’s a little startling to see that they’re all in this exhibit, being employed by breweries not just in Milwaukee, but in Monroe and Merrill, Plymouth and Port Washington. And, just like the girl in the moon, they have all withstood the test of time.

None of the work here is signed; these were commercial artists with a job to do. But they often did that job with an impressive level of skill and inventiveness.

True, some of it’s downright corny, such as romanticized domestic scenes and jolly depictions of elves and cupids. There’s some sly humor and a fair amount of sentimentality, too.

But elsewhere we see higher ambitions and Old Master stylings from artists who wanted to burnish a brand’s reputation and vie for a place on the parlor wall. I was particularly taken with a majestic buck enlisted to advertise the Plymouth Brewing and Malting Co. on a lithographed tin tray from 1905-’10. Backlit by a sunset-golden sky and gazing heroically into the distance, he speaks to nobler sentiments.

The big attention-getter is an almost billboard-sized lithograph from 1903 that just about glows as it advertises “The Beer of Quality,” Pabst Blue Ribbon. In it, a racing yacht in full, billowing sail masters its environment and suggests the thrill of speed and adventure. It’s glorious.

“Art on Tap” is both reassuring and revealing. It speaks to commercial success, regional identity, pride of place. It celebrates tradition, it encourages nostalgia and it’s fun. But dozens of images evoking the rewards of a crisp, cold beer can go to your head a little. Once you realize you’re seeing a piece of Wisconsin heritage through an amber-colored advertising lens, you might find yourself doubting your perceptions. What’s marketing, and what’s real?

If this exhibit feels a little like the salty peanuts that get you thirsty for more, you’re in luck. MOWA has organized a full schedule of events that include a talk about the aesthetics of Wisconsin taverns, a tavern tour, a lecture by historian John Gurda, and even a “Yoga on Tap” program.
"Art on Tap" is on view through Sept. 25 at the Museum of Wisconsin Art, 205 Veterans Ave., West Bend. For more information, visit [www.wisconsinart.org](http://wisconsinart.org/exhibitions/art-on-tap.aspx).

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