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What's in a Label: The Golden Age of Beer Art

Dan Matthews · Wednesday, July 4th, 2018

Diversity is quite the catalyst. During a renaissance, a profusion of people create new things. A Cambrian Explosion of creativity makes natural selection operate in high gear. That's why the Renaissance gave us Leonardo Da Vinci, Michelangelo, Raphael, et al. When there are a wide variety of people making art, great artists have to be that much greater in order to distinguish themselves from the rest.

Are we in a renaissance period for beer art? Admittedly, when you see a work of art on a bottle or can, oftentimes the next place you see it is in the trash (or hopefully recycling). Yet the original work of art lives on, somewhere, in a dark cellar, or on the wall of a brewery, or in the artist's own collection. And there has never been more beer art than there is now because there are over 6,000 craft breweries in America. There are a ton of homebrewers too — over 1.1 million people brewed about 1.4 million barrels of beer in 2017.

A couple of different factors make this a fertile time for beer art. For one, independent breweries can sell their product directly to consumers. When a brewery crafts a limited release, it can choose to create a collector's bottle with it. The consumer doesn't need any branding on a collector's bottle, nor does the law require the brewery to label the bottle like it would for a regular release, meaning the entire label is open to art. Two, custom labels allow homebrewers to create their own art and paste it on a bottle. For the enthusiast interested in marrying the craft of brewing with the art of design, this is a good time to be alive.

From the design/branding perspective, legendary graphic designer Milton Glaser (I ? NY) points out that "The one thing you don't want to look like is Budweiser." In many ways, the craft beer industry's beer art is a reaction to Budweiser's careful, studied use of the psychology of color in marketing. According to the psych studies, both men and women prefer blue over all other colors, but men even like it more than women. Thus, when Budweiser's graphic designers created the Bud Light label, they went for the appeal of pure blue — in order to capture as wide a customer base as possible, they wanted to subtly appeal to a male audience that might not be interested in a light beer.

Unlike the genericism and complete lack of art on the Bud Light label, many craft beer labels showcase art from design agencies or individual artists. Witness the art for 21st Amendment's "Watermelon Funk" ale:

Courtesy of 21st Amendment Brewery

Artist Drew Millward created this illustration for 21st Amendment.

One of the original artist/brewer collaborations is practically legendary. A co-owner of Flying Dog Brewery was Hunter Thompson's neighbor, and after the famous author died, the brewer enlisted Ralph Steadman, who did art for Thompson's books, to make beer label art. Flying Dog's chief marketing officer, Ben Savage, told SevenFiftyDaily that they provide Steadman with the name and style of the beer, but "he turns around and draws whatever the hell he wants.… He's an artist."

The first time around, Steadman included profanity on the Road Dog Porter illustration, for which Flying Dog faced an obscenity charge from the Colorado Liquor Commission. The brewer won the case, it brought Flying Dog some publicity — as well as visibility on shelves — and Steadman continued making art for Flying Dog. Now, you can see Steadman's work on the Gonzo Imperial Porter:

Milton Glaser's take on Steadman's art is that it's "dealing with masculinity, heroic figures and death. There's a real narrative. It's a demonstration that this beer is not playing by the rules."

Just as the art on a book jacket interprets the spirit of the writer's work, the art on a beer label gives you an impression of the brewer's spirit of creation. Good beer art interprets the character of the beer in the container, adding visual and intellectual character to a visceral experience.

AJ Keirans is the host of a podcast on this subject called "16oz. Canvas." In an interview with American Express Essentials, Keirans said,

"Each week I see a larger focus on the art and artists who are bringing our favourite beers to life. Label artwork is now more than ever a key piece of the craft beer experience. Brewing great beer is an art form, and so it is only logical that its vessel – the can or bottle – reflect that. It has been exciting to see the different directions and styles that are popping up around the world."

The combination of label art and the liquid art in the container creates a unique hybrid art form, a new form that is just beginning to enter its golden age. Unless something very strange happens, people will always have a taste for beer and artists will always create art. As far as fans of good beer and art are concerned, it can't get better than this.

(Feature photo – pxhere)

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