

Paying Homage to an Illustrator From the Industry's Golden Era

By STUART ELLIOTT

AN artist whose work is emblematic of what was once a golden age of illustration on Madison Avenue is being celebrated with a coming retrospective at the Museum of the City of New York.

The artist, McCauley Conner, who turned 100 in November, says he hopes to attend a reception for the opening.

The exhibition, scheduled to run from Sept. 10 through Jan. 11, is titled “Mac Conner: A New York Life.” It commemorates the era along with Mr. Conner, who illustrated ads from the late 1940s through the early 1960s for brands like American Machine & Foundry, Bell Telephone, Blue Bell denim, Carrier, Ford, Hi Ho Crackers, Moore business forms, Plymouth and United Air Lines. Mr. Conner worked with leading agencies of the period, including N. W. Ayer, and illustrated short stories and other fiction in major magazines like Collier’s, The Saturday Evening Post and Woman’s Home Companion.

Mr. Conner and other commercial artists helped define the graphic look of an industry as well as the popular culture in postwar America at a time when illustration was an integral part of the marketing machinery, often preferred over photography to help pitch products. Their work was in a modernist style that might be described as optimistic realism, which has drawn renewed attention decades later as a result of the popularity of “Mad Men,” the television series about a make-believe Manhattan agency in the ’60s.

Illustrations by McCauley Connor, known as Mac, who is being commemorated by the Museum of the City of New York in a coming exhibition, “Mac Conner: A New York Life,” include ads for United Air Lines.

“This is the real story of how a piece of that worked,” Sarah M. Henry, deputy director and chief curator of the museum, said on Wednesday as she accompanied this reporter on a walk-through of the exhibition space, “and how a single person’s life interconnects with the story of New York in his era.”

To play up the “Mad Men” connection, an ad promoting the retrospective, appearing in magazines like New York and The New Yorker, bills Mr. Conner as “one of New York’s original ‘Mad Men.’” Along with artwork, the exhibition includes an oversize map of Manhattan in the ’50s that depicts how clustered the big ad agencies, magazine publishers and artists’ studios were.

“It gives you a sense of this kind of hub of an industry these illustrators were serving,” Ms. Henry said, adding that many of the premier

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illustrators like Mr. Conner would create art for articles as well as ads. It was, after a fashion, an early type of what is now termed native advertising, when ads are produced to resemble editorial content.

Before television supplanted magazines as the most important mass medium, “the magazines were so important to the advertisers,” said Terrence C. Brown, a former director of the Society of Illustrators who curated the exhibition with a consulting curator, D. B. Dowd of Washington University in St. Louis. Mr. Brown, who said his father, R. C. Brown, worked in the copy department of BBDO in New York from 1944 to 1962, recalled how publishers sought to keep the cover prices of their magazines low to aggregate the large audiences desired by Madison Avenue.

The exhibition will display more than 70 of Mr. Conner's original works. "It's unusual that a body of work like this would be intact to such a degree," Ms. Henry said, for reasons that included how rarely the art was reused and how frequently agencies disposed of material after moving or losing clients. Mr. Conner has kept files of his work in his apartment on Fifth Avenue, where he has lived for decades.

In an interview on Wednesday, Mr. Conner was a lively presence, offering observations mixed with jokes and encouraging remarks about his favorite team, the Yankees. "Never, never. I never expected this," he said of the exhibition.

Mr. Conner looked over copies of works being included in the exhibit, reminiscing about their origins. He recalled how he read a two- or three-page synopsis of each fiction article he was hired to illustrate and then what he drew was "freewheeling" and "completely up to the artist."

By contrast, "the ads were very controlled," Mr. Conner said, to the point that when he worked on a car ad, "the car was done by a 'car man,' " an artist who specialized in that automotive brand, "not by the illustrator."

"Don't touch the car," Mr. Conner remembers being told. Perhaps as compensation for when the agencies "told you pretty much what to do," he said, "the ads paid a little more" than the magazines did.

"Those days were happy days," Mr. Conner said, but by the end of the '60s, they had waned as photography supplanted illustration. "TV pushed us aside," he said. "That changed the style."

Referring to a contemporary who also alternated between magazine and advertising work, Mr. Conner added: "Take Norman Rockwell as an example. He was realistic but he had feeling for the person, which the camera does not do; the camera is cold."

Mr. Conner said he had recently watched the first episode of the first season of "Mad Men" and he pronounced it "very good," particularly the plotline about the agency's work on the Lucky Strike cigarette account.

(The exhibition is being sponsored by the Modern Graphic History Library at Washington University and the Rockwell Center for American Visual Studies at the Norman Rockwell Museum.)

The exhibition will feature a video clip in which Mr. Conner discusses his influences, including Rockwell, and his career ("I started out as a sign painter").

"I intend to be there," Mr. Conner said of the opening reception, particularly if martinis are to be served.



McCauley Conner, who is 100, plans to attend a reception for his retrospective, which opens on Sept. 10.
Credit Nicole Bengiveno/The New York Times



A Plymouth automobiles illustration from 1953.



An illustration for Blue Bell denim.