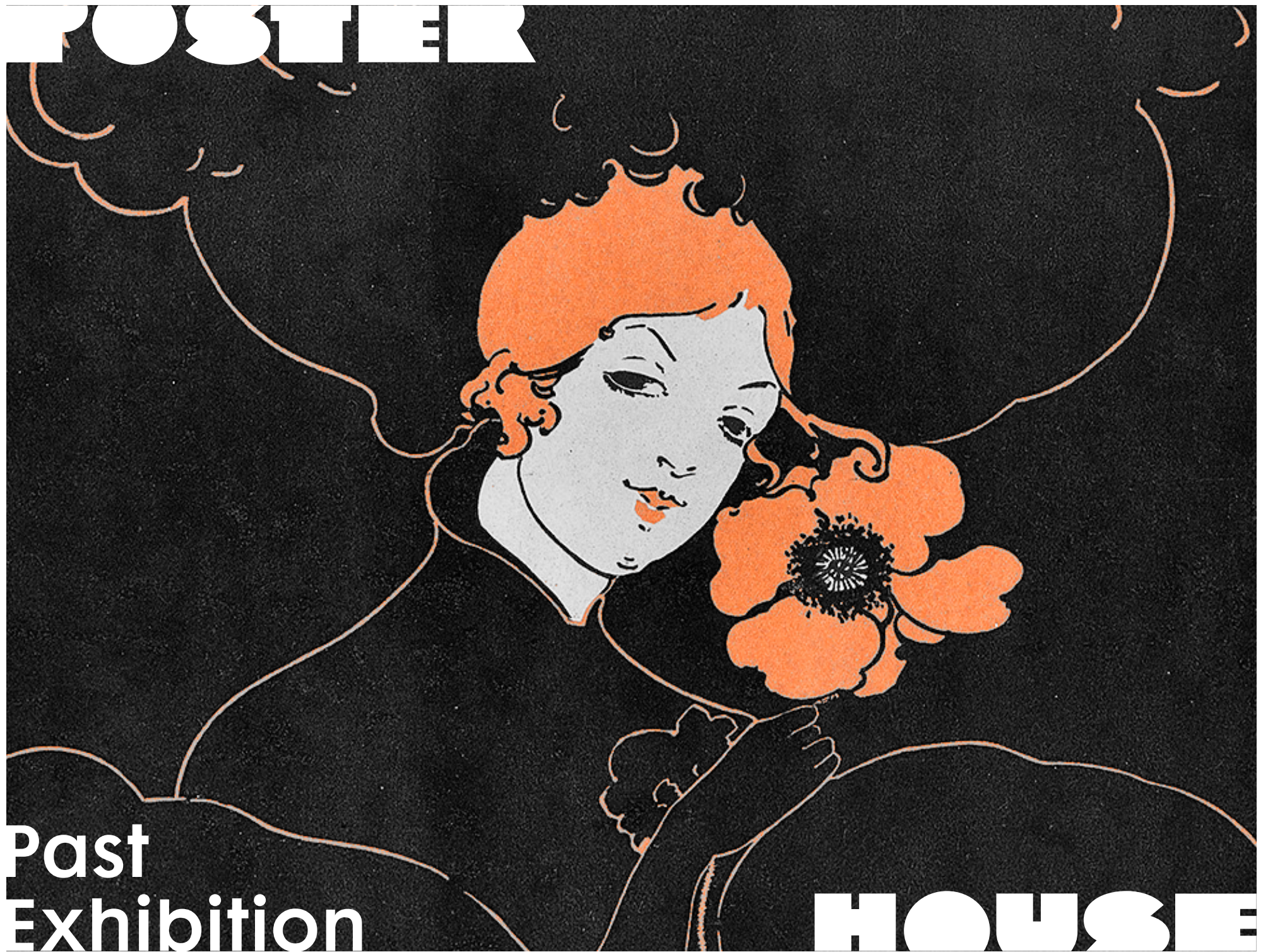


POSTER



**Past
Exhibition**

HOUSE

Ethel Reed: I Am My Own Property

Feb 25–Aug 21, 2022

Ethel Reed shot to fame in 1895 as a fresh talent in the world of poster design, becoming the darling of the international press in a matter of months. By 1898, however, she had disappeared from public life. Until recently, scholars only knew her as the best of a very small number of women poster designers at the turn of the century, creating light-hearted, decorative advertisements for literary publications, primarily based in Boston. While contemporary critics have often dismissed Reed's work as cheerful fluff and her talent as less notable than that of her male counterparts, both news articles of the time and her personal correspondence reveal the sources of a heavily autobiographical, dark, and defiant thread that runs through her illustrations. Reed's life and work represent some of the struggles of female artists in the male-dominated art world of the late 19th century, while also touching on issues of class, addiction, mental health, conventional societal expectations, and sexuality.

The exhibition comes to Poster House through a generous loan from Thomas G. Boss. Unless otherwise noted, all works are from his personal collection.



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Isometric Studio

Production & Installation

Ola Baldych

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Woodwork & Structures

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Ethel Reed

Isometric Studio, 2022

Fits and Starts

Born into poverty in a suburb of Boston in 1874, Ethel Reed was the only child of a failed photographer with mounting debts who died young, and a hapless Irish immigrant mother. While little is mentioned of her formal education, records show that her instruction in art was erratic, lasting a few weeks or months before she lost interest, moving on to other fascinations. Her longest period of study was with the miniaturist Laura Coombs Hills, but Reed maintained throughout her brief career that she was largely self-taught and relied on her own intuition when approaching a composition. Her methodology, however, was anything but serious—she notoriously only spent a few moments on any piece, creating it with a burst of energy whenever the mood struck. Even her first poster commission in 1895 seems to have come about by accident: a friend who worked for the *Boston Herald* was visiting her studio, noticed a drawing on a table, and suggested Reed submit it as a potential poster for an upcoming Sunday issue. She did, it was accepted, and suddenly everyone in New England wanted to work with her. Reed was just 20 years old.

This serendipitous foray into poster design was due simply to the fact that Reed was in the right place at the right time. American posters of the 1890s focused mostly on the publishing world, one that favored her style with its fluid lines and delicate motifs. Reed also lived in Boston, the center of the publishing industry in the United States during this period. Not only was she in close proximity to many of the major progressive publishing houses that were beginning to exploit the growing popularity of posters, but she was also in a prime position to immerse herself in the social lives of key figures within that milieu, using her beauty and sexual availability to form the bonds that would make her a preferred artist. Her poster designs for the *Boston Herald* soon led to commissions for both posters and illustrations from major artistic publishers including Copeland & Day and Lamson, Wolffe & Co., and her ability to produce work quickly—and probably more cheaply—than her male counterparts resulted in numerous additional jobs.

Within the first few months of her stratospheric rise to fame, Reed became a master manipulator of her public image. Periodicals consistently mentioned her beauty before discussing the quality of her work—a tendency that had begun years earlier when she acted briefly in the theater. Even when cast in the most minor of roles as a teenager, reviewers singled out Reed as the most captivating and irresistible of the actors on stage, based primarily on her appearance. The designer's striking looks were noted throughout her life, and she relied on such virtues to increase and maintain her celebrity status. She posed for lavish studio photography sessions, sending the images to magazines and papers that then established her as the most beautiful female artist of the day. At the same time, despite deploying her charms to beguile male gatekeepers to the art world, Reed understood that a loose reputation would condemn her with the American public, especially as a female illustrator. Her image in the press was therefore very important, and she carefully orchestrated the photographs that were printed and her public persona in interviews. Journalists consistently emphasized how “shy” and “naive” Reed appeared during their tours of her studio, often dismissing the French literature (seen at that time as illicit) on her bookshelves or evidence of a debauched evening with a man as mere inspiration for her designs. She also refashioned her history to avoid mention of her impoverished beginnings and her immigrant mother. The result was a media image of a sweet young lady from a respectable home.



The Boston Sunday Herald, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

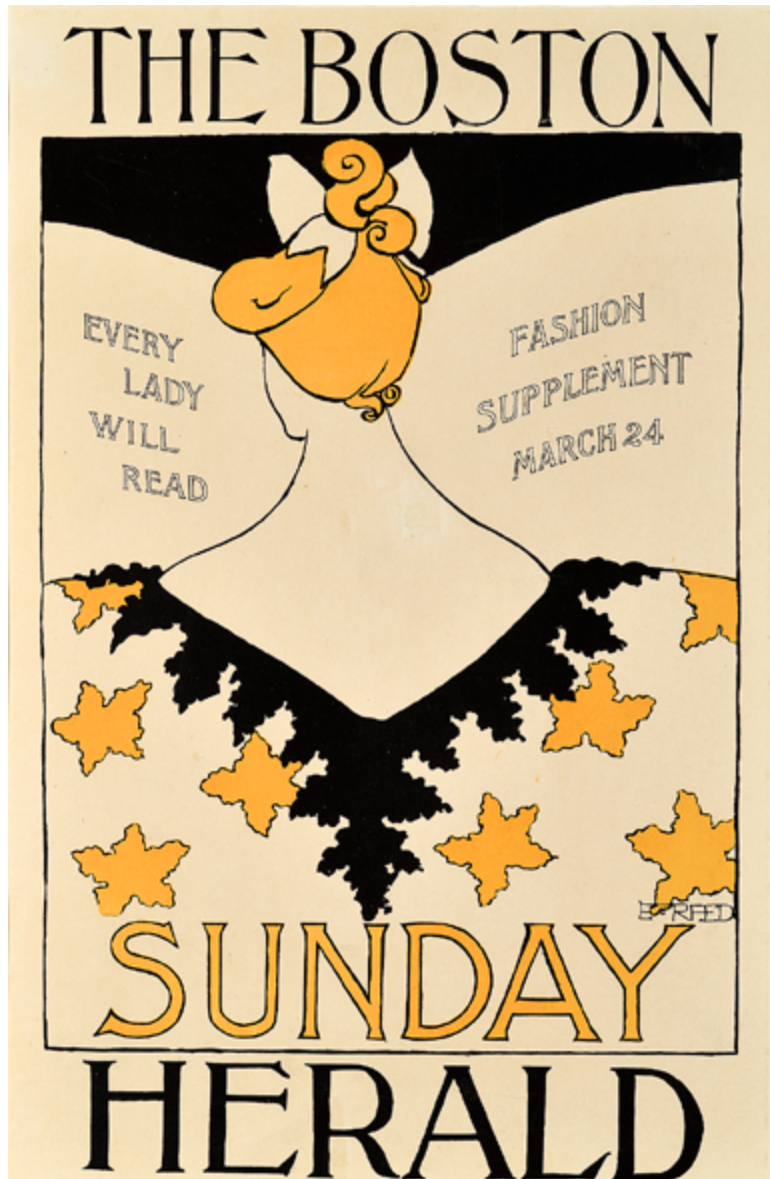
- Traditionally, the Sunday supplement to any daily newspaper was larger, more expensive, and frequently printed in color. It often featured collectible prints, fashion plates, or even cut-out paper dolls and other novelties. As such, it was advertised primarily to women for whom the regular daily editions were viewed as inappropriate.
- This first poster by Reed reveals her wicked sense of humor: she depicts herself in an off-the-shoulder gown, showing off her idealized alabaster skin and elegant long neck to the viewer as she appears to read a blank page—perhaps a sardonic reference to the idea that women were too vapid for serious content.
- Reed is surrounded here by a row of stylized, oversized poppies—a visual signifier for the opium that she had been using medically and recreationally since at least her late teens. At this time, opium and other sedatives were prescribed without caution for all manner of ailments, particularly to middle- and upper-class women, and they represented sixty percent of all opium addicts by the turn of the century.
- The tagline “ladies want it” was created by Reed herself rather than the publication. Given her growing reputation among those in the literary trade as a sexually active woman, the double entendre seems too obvious to deny—in essence, the poster is as much an advertisement for the designer’s own desirability as it is for the newspaper.
- While most accounts indicate that Reed submitted the drawing for this poster on her friend’s suggestion, she would later claim that the piece was a study for a stained-glass window. She frequently manipulated facts or embellished stories in order to create a more compelling narrative about her life.



The Boston Sunday Herald, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- In her second poster for the Sunday edition of the *Boston Herald*, Reed created a remarkably similar composition to her earlier design—both feature the artist in profile facing right, both show her reading. This time, however, she has switched from the whimsical wardrobe of a Pre-Raphaelite maiden to a more sophisticated ensemble complete with wide collar and heavily plumed hat. She also uses the formerly blank paper as a space to list the latest edition's contents.
- Both this and the previous image were printed by the Boston Engraving Company. Printing information like this was not often noted on literary posters in the United States because publishers already had access to fine presses and could therefore produce much of their content in-house. Most of the other posters in this exhibition do not include this kind of credit line.



The Boston Sunday Herald, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- From 1895 to 1896, the *Boston Herald's* Sunday supplement included an outfit for one of two paper dolls also supplied by the paper (a blonde and a brunette) that female readers could cut out and collect. Richly printed in color, the dolls and their clothing served two purposes: to inform ladies and their dressmakers of the latest Parisian fashions and to entertain children as keepsake toys when their mothers were finished with them.
- Reed chose a dress for this poster that was intentionally provocative. Fashion in New England was fairly conservative at the end of the 19th century: a low-cut back like this one would never have been incorporated in a day dress and would have been seen as bordering on inappropriate even in an evening gown.
- Like most literary posters at this time, this design was created through lithography. A printer would first print the orange portion of the design in multiple impressions. Then, each sheet would get a second pass through the press in order to print the black elements. With only two colors, this composition would have been fairly inexpensive for a publisher to produce.



The Boston Sunday Herald/Easter, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Sunday supplements like this Easter edition of the *Boston Herald* typically featured poems, illustrations, and short stories, with perhaps the addition of ecclesiastical musings or brief sermons related to the holiday.
- The following year, Reed had a series of portraits taken by the noted female photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston. Reed's favorite image from that sitting is one in which she mimics the pose of the figure in this poster, her eyes downcast and hands intertwined. After that image was circulated in magazines and newspapers, many viewers concluded that the women in Reed's posters were all self-portraits.
- These early posters for the *Boston Herald* establish other visual conventions that persisted throughout Reed's career: her figures, all presumed to be versions of her own image, are typically encompassed by enormous, shapeless, or otherwise unrestricted gowns, free of any obvious corsetry. With few exceptions, these figures also rarely make eye contact with the viewer, inviting the male gaze to fall on them unimpeded, much in the manner in which she presented herself in the photographs she eagerly pushed the press to publish. This choice suggests Reed's desire to control how her body was used in advertising to her advantage, relying primarily on her own sex appeal.

Posters in America

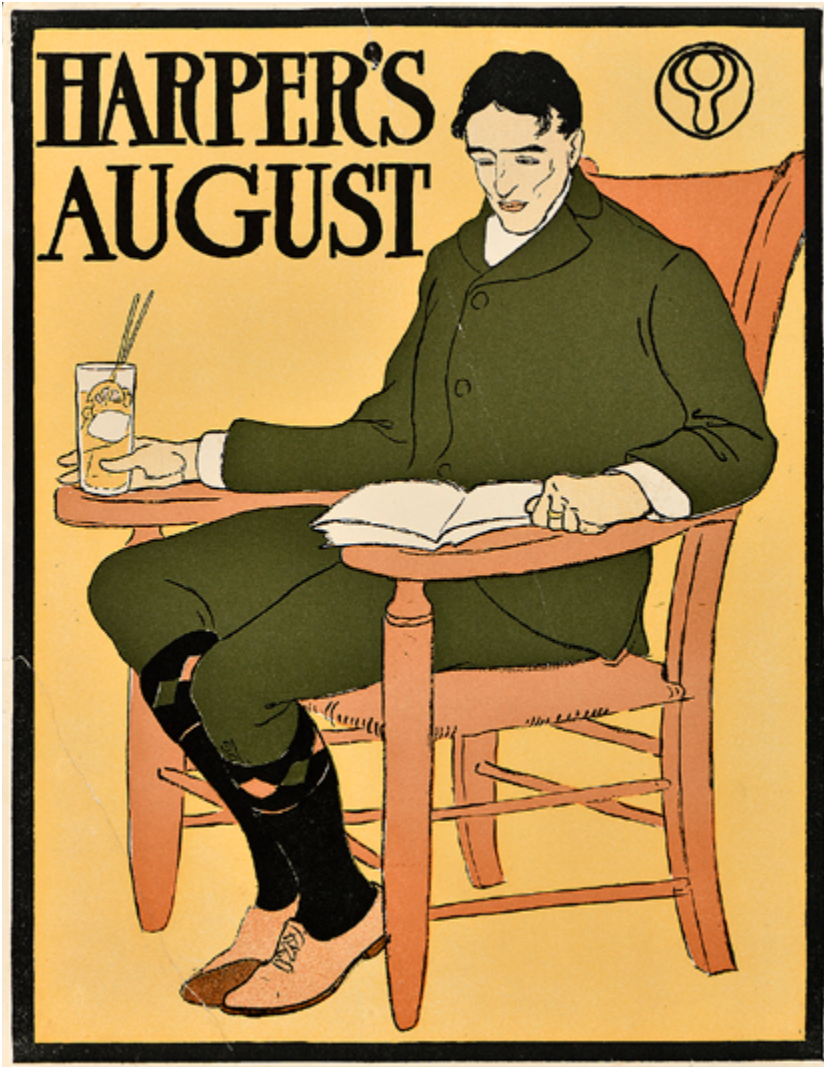
In 1890, the Grolier Club in New York hosted the first exhibition of European posters in the United States, exposing the American public to the relatively new concept of lithographic advertising that merged art with commerce. In April 1893, Harper & Brothers became the first American publisher to use this kind of poster to sell its publications, albeit in a more restrained guise. Staff illustrator Edward Penfield created a strikingly simple image of a middle-class New Englander reading the latest issue of *Harper's*, flanked by the phrase “Harper’s for April.” The reception was overwhelmingly positive, inspiring other young publishers to produce similar designs, the style of which came to define American literary advertising.

In contrast to those in Europe, American posters of this period did not typically appear on the streets. Instead, they populated the walls of bookshops and newsstands as an indication to customers of available stock. Because book and magazine publishers were already familiar with the latest printing methods, they could internally lay out and produce posters themselves, removing the traditional middleman from the process. This specialization gave American literary posters a higher artistic status than other types of posters printed in the country. As more firms printed their own posters, stores became overwhelmed, often piling them in

The American art poster of the 1890s achieved a level of significance that influenced the growth of modern advertising in the 20th century.
—Helena E. Wright, art historian

stacks in a back room or, more frequently, selling them to collectors who were taking part in America’s new obsession with posters. Within a few years, the market was saturated with thousands of poster designs for publications of all kinds, of which Ethel Reed’s were some of the most notable. Compared to the work of Penfield and other sought-after male illustrators of the time, however, Reed’s figures display a different type of American woman—one distinctly more sensual and openly flirtatious.

By 1900, publishers realized that their posters had developed a role outside that of mere advertising, often finding their way into collectors’ hands before they ever went on display in a shop. Some printers chose to embrace this trend by offering special editions of their most in-demand designs: Lamson, Wolfe & Co., for example, promoted complete sets of Reed’s posters, signed and numbered in an edition of 50, for a premium price. The majority of publishers, however, were creating these costly art objects for no financial return. At the same time, advances in printing technology were making illustrated book covers less expensive to produce. Many American posterists, including Ethel Reed, contributed illustrations to the books for which they made posters, and so easily adapted their designs to a smaller scale. Collectors of their work would now have to actually buy the book if they wanted the imagery. While making financial sense for publishers, this evolution led to the downfall of the American literary poster.

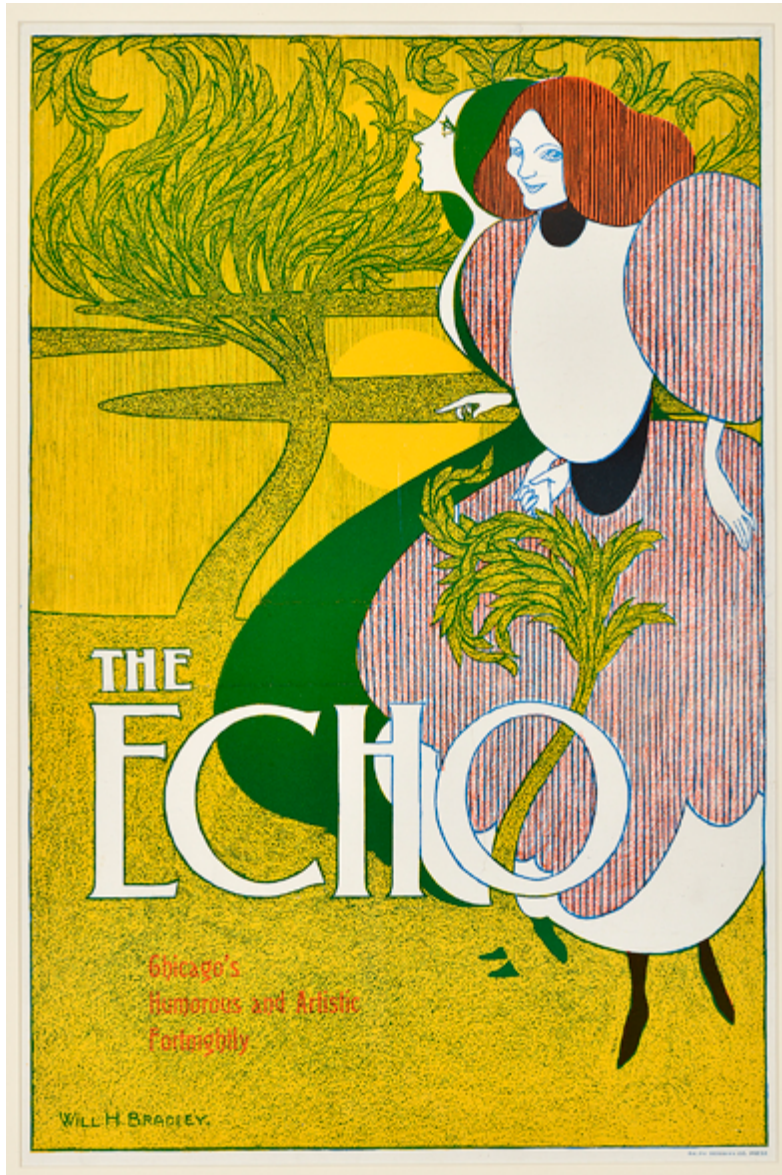


Harper's/August, 1898

Edward Penfield (1866–1925)

Collection of Nicholas D. Lowry

- Between 1893 and 1901, Edward Penfield set the standard for the American literary poster, producing a monthly advertising design for *Harper's* magazine. These simple, reserved images of New Englanders enjoying the latest edition of the publication in various settings, often accompanied by a dash of humor, inspired an entire generation of designers and collectors.
- The emblem in the upper-right corner is Penfield's bulls-head monogram that appears on many of his posters. It was common at this time for designers to incorporate a recognizable, playful stamp or monogram in their work, possibly referencing the signature hanko or chop on Japanese prints that were highly valued by American collectors.
- As demonstrated in this image, a reader's ability to take full advantage of the surge in literary publications of the 1890s required leisure time. While reduced printing costs allowed the average magazine to decrease in price from 35 cents to 10 cents per issue and literacy rates were rising due to expanded access to education, these periodicals were still aimed at an elite audience that had spare time to read.
- In addition to being educated and financially comfortable, the target buyer for these publications tended to be younger and more liberal than the average person in Victorian America. Many of the artists and writers who contributed to these journals held progressive views about a variety of social causes and felt that mere exposure to new trends in art could elevate the human condition. While Reed was a member of these circles, her letters indicate that she was more interested in their hedonistic proclivities than in their philosophical musings.



The Echo, 1895

Will H. Bradley (1868–1962)

Poster House Collection

- Along with Penfield, Will Bradley helped define the early American poster, drawing from elements of Japanese woodblock printing, the Arts and Crafts movement, and French Art Nouveau. He was also responsible for bringing the work of Aubrey Beardsley (whose work also greatly influenced Reed) from England to the United States. Notably prolific, Bradley created posters, illustrations, and typefaces for numerous outlets, and was at one point the highest-paid artist in the United States.
- This poster advertises a bi-monthly, Chicago-based humor and art newspaper—one of many like it that appeared during the literary craze of the 1890s. Underscoring how important the illustrations were to selling these publications, the poster notes that each issue would feature a “series of colored frontispieces” by Bradley. He ultimately created seven covers for *The Echo*.
- Unlike the majority of literary posters that were printed by lithography, this design was created in three colors through letterpress in which the image was carved into a wooden block, inked, and pressed onto the paper. Each color was printed separately.
- Inside the magazine, readers were invited to purchase a copy of the poster for 25 cents, while 50 cents would cover the poster and a three-month subscription. Offers like this began appearing more frequently for the work of important designers, especially as publishers started noticing that the posters were increasingly serving more as art and less as advertising.



Poster Show, 1896

Maxfield Parrish (1870–1966)

Mark J. Weinbaum Fine Posters & Prints, NYC

- The 1890 poster exhibition at the Grolier Club in New York spawned a seemingly endless proliferation of similar shows. Held primarily in New England, poster exhibitions were as popular and exciting as today's contemporary art fairs, with literally thousands of visitors lining up daily to see the latest designs.
- The composition of this poster is devoid of Parrish's typically dreamy sense of color and elaborate detail. Instead, he seems to have filtered the French designer Pierre Bonnard's poster for *La Revue Blanche* (1894) through the restrained lens of Edward Penfield, producing what many scholars believe is the most important American poster of the period.
- The margins of this poster are notably wide, with Parrish's signature decorating the lower-right corner. This indicates that it not only served as advertising, but was also sold as a commemorative print for the event. Such deluxe versions of posters were not uncommon, aimed at the fanatical collectors' market that was in full swing by the mid-1890s.
- Over a two-year period, Reed's work appeared in dozens of poster exhibitions, both in the United States and Europe. She was even the focus of a show in 1896 put on by the Business Woman's Club in Washington, D.C., after which she received a presidential reception at the White House. It was during this trip that she sat for photographer Frances Benjamin Johnston (who helped organize the exhibition) and was described by the *Washington Post* as the "foremost woman poster maker in America."



La Revue Blanche (1894),
Pierre Bonnard



Miss Träumerei, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Mark J. Weinbaum Fine Posters & Prints, NYC

- In the spring of 1895, Ethel Reed received her first commission for a poster advertising a book: *Uncle Sam's Church*. This transition from newspapers to the literary trade enhanced her reputation as a significant poster designer and led to many requests to both illustrate and design promotional posters for the latest novels.
- Published by Lamson, Wolfe & Co., *Miss Träumerei: A Weimar Idyl* was written by the musician Albert Morris Bagby, and references “Träumerei” (Dreaming) a romantic piano piece by the composer Robert Schumann from his *Kinderszenen* (Scenes from Childhood) suite. Reed would revisit themes of childhood and innocence in her compositions throughout her career, often with a subtly sexual or ominous twist.
- Reed has placed herself as the main figure in the composition, the length of her bare back provocatively exposed while her lips form a pout as she plays the piano. The gown almost overwhelms her, filling and extending beyond the lower third of the page. Her form is frequently enveloped in impossibly puffy garments, always on the verge of slipping off her delicate frame—something her male admirers evidently found incredibly enticing; many of them wrote to her publishers in order to arrange contact with her.
- The yellow chrysanthemums extending diagonally up from the lower left demonstrate Reed’s knowledge of Japanese woodblock prints in which floral motifs are used to harmonize a composition. In the Victorian language of flowers, however, yellow chrysanthemums typically imply a jilted or unrequited love—another theme that would recur in Reed’s *oeuvre* and as well as in her personal life.
- This design proved so popular that it won a silver medal in a competition sponsored by the Massachusetts Charitable Mechanic Association and was later reproduced for circulation in England. It also appeared in miniature in the seminal collection of the best poster designs of the Belle Époque, *Les Maîtres de l’Affiche* (1898), assembled by Jules Chéret, and sold to international collectors.



Behind the Arras, 1895

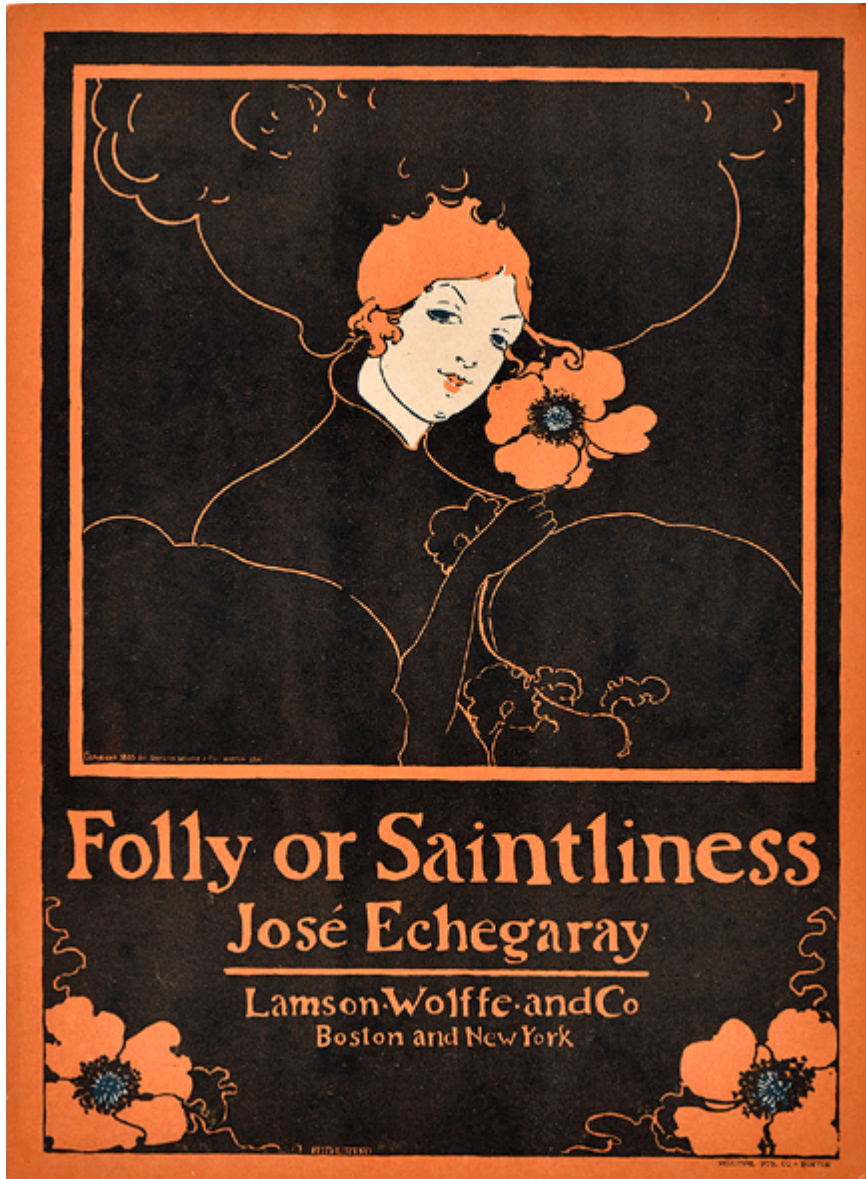
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- A celebrated lyric poet, Bliss Carman had developed a cult following among young, progressive audiences for his themes of pacifism, deep friendship, and individuality. *Behind the Arras* was his third book of poetry, exploring philosophical ideas about the various paths one can take in life.
- The book takes its name from a line in Shakespeare's *Hamlet* in which Polonius hides behind an arras (tapestry) in order to eavesdrop on Hamlet's conversation with his mother, Gertrude.
- The poster shows Reed herself reading Carman's latest publication while surrounded by the poisonous flower known as angel's trumpet. Carman was a member of the "Visionists," a group of intellectual Bostonian aesthetes also including Ralph Adams Cram, Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue, Fred Holland Day, and Herbert Copeland, many of whom had romantic ties to Reed. Around the time this poster was printed, Carman and Reed engaged in a short-lived affair, the termination of which may be the reason for the presence of the deadly plant in the background.
- Two versions of this poster were printed in addition to the original advertising run: one on regular paper available to collectors for 50 cents, another on "imported paper" for one dollar. The hand-drawn lettering is Reed's interpretation of Will Bradley's eponymous typeface that had appeared a few months earlier on the cover of the *Inland Printer* magazine.



The White Wampum, 1895
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Born on the Six Nations reservation in Ontario, E. Pauline Johnson (also known as “Tekahionwake,” meaning “double life”) was of half Mohawk and half English descent. She made a career as a poet, writer, and performer, drawing from both sides of her heritage to promote unity.
- Rather than base her illustration on a promotional photograph of the writer, Reed chose to create a generic, romanticized image of an indigenous figure standing in the moonlight, bare chested and sexually ambiguous, holding a spear or paddle and surrounded by foliage. Ethnographic exhibitions and traveling performance troupes like Buffalo Bill’s Wild West had caused a surge of interest among white audiences in native stories, but only on the most basic and fetishized level.
- The hand-lettering is an interpretation of Chop Suey, a typeface created in 1883 that would come to serve as visual shorthand for anything Asian in the 20th century. European and American interpretations of other cultures often resulted in an amalgamated, imaginary aesthetic that lumped peoples of diverse backgrounds under one “exotic” umbrella.
- To provide a range of options for collectors, the image was printed through a commercial relief process in both yellow and dark-blue ink on either red or brown paper.



Folly or Saintliness, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Poster House Collection

- Written by the celebrated Spanish dramatist José Echegaray in 1877, *O locura o santidad* (better translated as “Madman or Saint”) is a melodramatic play in which a central character grapples with the need for truth in a world that does not want to know it. Ultimately, his desire for what is right leads to his downfall.
- Rather than focusing on the male protagonist, Reed highlights the daughter within this family drama, who is described as too “excitable” due to her imagination and need for passion—a mental “disease” that only marriage to a wealthy man might cure. At this time, Reed was involved with the well-to-do painter Philip Leslie Hale whose own parents would come to reject their engagement due to her reputation and class.
- This is the first time one of Reed’s figures makes direct eye contact with the viewer. Her gaze is knowing and self-assured, even provocative, as she caresses her cheek with an oversized poppy—a seductive contrast to the buttoned-up but still attractive outfit that conceals the rest of her body.
- When this poster was printed, the November issue of *The Poster*—one of many new publications dedicated to reporting the latest news on the subject—noted that the black background made this one of Reed’s least effective works. This is possibly a reflection of the growing popularity of Art Nouveau and its light and bright aesthetic qualities. Today, however, artistic tastes have evolved and it is considered one of her stronger compositions, the simple and sinuous outline of the figure forcing the viewer to linger upon her face, while the continuation of the floral motif in the lower corners serves to incorporate the hand-lettering into the larger design.



Is Polite Society Polite, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Poster House Collection

- This poster advertises the publication of a collection of lectures by the abolitionist and suffragist Julia Ward Howe, best known for her political activism as well as for writing “The Battle Hymn of the Republic.”
- The term “polite society” meant the upper class, and the essays in the book posit that the values of that echelon of society do not necessarily translate into all aspects of their lives, particularly in the way they treat people outside of their economic sphere. As Reed actively hid her impoverished upbringing in order to be accepted by her middle- and upper-class friends, the topic of this publication may have been particularly poignant to her.
- This is one of only two compositions in which Reed does not include a central female figure, but fills up the page instead with her signature poppies and a loose interpretation of the Caslon typeface. The November 1898 issue of *The Poster* claimed this as her best composition, while other sources noted that “no production by Miss Ethel Reed has been praised more highly.”
- Printed on imported, handmade red paper in black and olive ink, this poster was created with collectors in mind. Certain local bookshops would also carry the sketches of some of Reed’s posters for a few weeks when a book was released to entice customers to see the art (and buy the book) in person.



Trilby, the Fairy of Argyle, 1895
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Originally written in French by Charles Nodier in 1822, *Trilby, the Fairy of Argyle* is an adult fairytale first translated into English by Minna Caroline Smith for the publisher Lamson, Wolfe & Co. in 1895. As the book and magazine trade expanded rapidly in the 1890s, many publishers looked to untranslated European material as a means of satiating American readers.
- Set in Scotland due to the author’s admiration for the writing of Sir Walter Scott, the story follows a young married woman who is seduced in her dreams by a fairy named Trilby. After she confesses her otherworldly infidelity, her husband enlists a religious figure to exorcise the sprite from their home, ultimately leading to their financial detriment. When she encounters Trilby again, he implores her to resume their relationship; however, her husband finds a way to lock the fairy inside a tree for a thousand years. The woman’s subsequent anguish drives her to suicide.
- This type of melodramatic fantasy was exceedingly popular in the 1890s, drawing on the European Symbolist and Art Nouveau aesthetic movements. While mass American audiences were not accepting of anything overtly sexual, Reed’s work managed to toe the line between the proper, stalwart women in posters by Penfield and the more voluptuously erotic figures in the scandalous illustrations of Aubrey Beardsley in England.
- The seated figure is remarkably similar to Reed’s image for the Easter edition of the *Boston Herald*, and both faces bear a striking resemblance to her self-portraits. The thistles on either side of the central motif further tie the story to its Scottish setting, while the note below the publishing information about “Scotch plaid boards” indicates that the book was bound in tartan fabric as an added selling point.



When I have an idea I simply sit down to the paper, and the drawing and colour come to me as I proceed.

—Ethel Reed

Arabella and Araminta Stories, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- By the time Reed was commissioned to create the artwork for *Arabella and Araminta Stories*, she was famous enough that her name appeared prominently on both the poster and the title page of the book; her popularity was thus used to entice fans to purchase the volume.
- Geared toward young children, Gertrude Smith's text is repetitive and "sing-songy," chronicling the adventures of twin four-year-old girls who mimic one another. In its December 1895 issue, *The Bookman* called the stories "one of the most irresistible nonsense books for children."
- The girls are drawn with a voluptuous sense of line, their hair and dresses ballooning around their small bodies in much the same way as on Reed's adult female figures, but with less overt sexuality.
- Some scholars have claimed that these girls are twin versions of Reed's younger self, disguising their maturity (represented by the poppy flower) with wide-eyed feminine innocence. If true, this would echo Reed's own smoke-and-mirrors campaign with the American press, presenting a far more naive and acceptable version of youthful girliness than her private reality.



Arabella and Araminta Stories, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- This is a black-and-white proof of Reed's cover design for the regular edition of *Arabella and Araminta Stories*.
- The twins are shown running away from each other on either side of the binding as they rip the heads off of angel's trumpets, a highly poisonous flower in the deadly nightshade family that can cause hallucinations and death. Reed had previously incorporated this flower into her poster for Bliss Carman's *Behind the Arras* toward the end of their affair. This juxtaposition of innocence with danger was a recurring theme in Reed's *oeuvre*.



Arabella and Araminta Stories, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Advances in printing technology and textile manufacture resulted in a proliferation of decorative bindings in the 19th century, allowing publishers to make the physical book as much of an advertisement as a poster. In the 1890s, cover designs moved away from floral and abstract motifs toward figurative illustrations that better expressed the plot or theme of the publication.
- This new type of cover design was one of the few artistic fields dominated by women. While limited to a few examples, the fact that Reed produced covers, endpapers, posters, and illustrations for books throughout her brief career speaks to her importance in the field.



AND ARABELLA SAID, "I WILL BE GOOD,
DEAR PAPA!" AND ARAMINTA SAID, "I
WILL BE GOOD, DEAR PAPA!"

Arabella and Araminta Stories, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- *Arabella and Araminta Stories* was put out by Copeland & Day, an artistic publishing house known for releasing some of the more risqué European titles, including Oscar Wilde's *Salomé* and the hard-bound literary magazine *The Yellow Book*, frequently featuring illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley.
- Here, Reed has made the "papa" figure resemble her newest employer, Fred Holland Day. While Day was presumed to be homosexual, the inclusion of two little girls—thought to represent Reed herself—with legs entwined on his lap, kissing his cheeks, was probably intended as a bit of an off-color joke between colleagues.



Children's Books, 1894

Aubrey Beardsley (1872–98)

Poster House Collection

- Aubrey Beardsley's works had a tremendous impact on Ethel Reed, although the two never met. Early in her career, reporters noted that Beardsley's posters decorated her studio, and comparisons were often made between their designs. Both excelled at compositions that bordered on sexually inappropriate, but where Beardsley's women are confident dominatrices, Reed's are coy and flirtatious, or passive objects of desire.
- Beardsley created this portrait of a glassy-eyed woman about to spill out of the top of her gown as a stock image. This is the first time it was used, promoting the children's books produced by the London publisher T. Fisher Unwin—an unusual choice given Beardsley's sordid reputation and the incongruous subject.
- Before dying of tuberculosis at 25, Beardsley was infamous as a master of the visually grotesque, illustrating deformed and debauched characters, often with their genitals exposed. His association with Oscar Wilde led to his termination from *The Yellow Book* after Wilde's arrest for participating in homosexual acts, while rumors about Beardsley impregnating his older sister shocked London society.
- *St. Nicholas*, one of the last publications on the list, was the first to print an illustration by Reed (a reproduction of which can be seen in the label for *Fairy Tales*).
- In 1895, Copeland & Day would reissue the poster in different colors and with alternative text to promote *The Yellow Book*, where Beardsley served as art editor and for which Reed would design a cover in 1897.



Harper's/October, 1897
Edward Penfield (1866–1925)

Poster House Collection

- Toward the end of the 19th century, literary posters, particularly those by Edward Penfield, presented an American interpretation of the New Woman, a liberated concept of femininity that had emerged in Europe in which women were championed as educated, accomplished, and self-reliant.
- Penfield's version of the New Woman was slightly more tight-laced than her European counterparts. Her sexuality is not flaunted, nor is she particularly flirtatious—the opposite of the women in Reed's posters. She is, however, well-read, confident, and of an upper-middle class background.
- This distinction between Reed's figures and those designed by her male colleagues to promote similar products points to a different understanding of what a woman can be. Almost always using her own body as the subject, Reed pushes the idea that a woman need not be sexless to be on the same intellectual level as a man.



In her day she was a marvel to everyone, as a woman who had made it in a male preserve.
—Bevis Hillier, poster historian

Boston Illustrated, 1895
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- With increased rail travel, illustrated guides to cities proliferated toward the end of the 19th century. Many of these were advertised to specific groups, including women, to provide them with safe and reliable information about where to stay and what to see.
- Reed presents a self-assured, modestly dressed woman, reminiscent of the figures in several of Penfield's best posters. Behind her, the dome of the Massachusetts State House peeks above the trees of Beacon Hill, in a sober composition that differed from the more flamboyant and exuberant illustrations in European posters at the time.
- This is the original of three versions of the design, economically printed in green ink on yellow paper. Another edition was printed on white paper. However, the most interesting variant was printed one month later in August of 1895 by a different publisher; the backdrop and text remain the same, but the female figure is replaced by a medieval knight on horseback addressing the triennial conclave of the Knights Templar. This version appears to be a sponsored reprint for a specific event.



The House of the Trees, 1895
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Published by Lamson, Wolfe & Co. in August of 1895, *The House of the Trees* was Canadian poet Ethelwyn Wetherald’s inaugural collection of verse, launching a notable literary career.
- As in Reed’s other compositions, the central female figure is draped in a loose gown and unstructured hat, echoing the fluid shapes of the leaves of the surrounding magnolia trees. She seems more Romantic and sensual than the women depicted by fellow illustrator Penfield, lost in thought as she rests the book of poems in her lap.
- Private presses producing fine aesthetic volumes gained popularity in the 1890s, the most famous of which was William Morris’s Kelmscott Press. The text in the lower register here uses a variant of Caslon, an 18th-century typeface that was revived at such presses, complete with fleurons (ornamental glyphs inspired by nature) in green between the words.
- Produced through a commercial relief process rather than lithography, this is a two-color poster printed on white paper. An alternate version exists on light-blue paper.



The House of the Trees, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Reed's poster design was redrawn as a stamp for the book cover as well as for the frontispiece of this volume. While much of the original composition remains the same, the woodblock reproduction within the publication incorporates delineated blades of grass around the central figure, adding more texture to the finished image.



Jacques Damour, 1895
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Written in 1880 by Emile Zola, *Jacques Damour* follows a man who escapes prison in the South Pacific, unsuccessfully attempts to make a fortune in the United States, and returns to Paris more than a decade later to find that his wife has remarried.
- Decidedly different from the rest of Reed's posters up to this point, this composition demonstrates her experimentation with Impressionism—a stylistic choice possibly made because of the author's French nationality. The hand-lettering is also influenced by Ronde, a style of French script.
- French literature was viewed by the American public of this period as immoral or indecent, often openly presenting sexual or sordid situations that were considered inappropriate, especially for female readers.
- While some scholars have claimed that the male figure in shadow implies an erotic encounter, the book does not depict this imagined scene, and it is doubtful that Reed read the novel before making the poster. It is, however, one of the few instances in which a male figure appears in her work.
- In her letters, Reed notes: "the more I look at my poor Jacques Damour the more I writhe in real anguish at its badness." She is referring to the quality of printing, however, not the composition—one of her first collaborations with the publisher Copeland & Day.

Narcissism, Addiction, & Depression

By 1896, Reed was at the height of her fame while living a double life. Her public persona remained that of an innocent, middle-class young lady. Journalists constantly reminded readers of her beauty and sweet nature—so much so that men had begun writing to the publishers of her work expressing a desire to meet her. Privately, she engaged in sexual dalliances with a large swath of her male circle, from editors and publishers to the writers for whom she created posters. One key admirer of her illustrations who had asked for an introduction was the well-off painter Philip Leslie Hale. Immediately smitten, the couple quickly announced their engagement in January 1896; however, the day after the celebratory party, the relationship was called off, presumably because of Hale's family's objections to Reed's reputation and social class.

Reed's letters from this time express a nonchalance and almost flippant attitude toward the scandal; however, on May 9, 1896—three months after the termination of her engagement to Hale—Reed sailed with her mother to Europe aboard the *Pavonia*. While the press reported enthusiastically that she would be furthering her artistic studies abroad, not to mention taking part in the tradition of the Grand Tour, the reality was far less exciting. Unmoored and financially

insecure, Reed bounced aimlessly around Europe, often writing to former lovers about her boredom and depression. And yet, when any of them asked to see her, presumably offering to provide some much-needed form of financial assistance in addition to romance, her replies emphasized a fierce independence and desire to chart her own course: "I owe no man anything—neither fidelity nor explanations—I am my own property."

Reed's time in Europe also exacerbated her issues with addiction. She writes that doctors were now coming regularly to administer sulphonal, a sedative then used to treat anxiety and sleeping issues. However, continued use of this drug gradually induced dramatic mood swings, paranoia, hallucinations, and depression leading to suicidal thoughts. Combined with Reed's established proclivity for alcohol and opium, this narcotic was to prove disastrous for her. While she produced some illustrations and posters in London, that work dried up quickly, and she soon noted that she had made this trip "utterly unprepared."



Fairy Tales, 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- At the height of her popularity, Reed was commissioned to create this poster for Mabel Fuller Blodgett's collection of fairy tales as well as 12 accompanying illustrations.
- The poster diverges from her established style, reproducing the shading and texture of a watercolor sketch rather than the flat planes of color more typical of her work. In it Reed also clearly revisits many of the compositional elements of her first published illustration, "Butterfly Thoughts," printed in the June, 1894 edition of the children's magazine *St. Nicholas*. The result is a saccharine image that contrasts with the boldness of her existing design vocabulary.



Butterfly Thoughts
(June 1894)



Fairy Tales, 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- The 12 illustrations inside *Fairy Tales* are graphically far more complex and interesting than the poster. Each displays a knowledge of Japanese color woodblock prints (*ukiyo-e*) as well as the influence of Aubrey Beardsley, with a strong use of black ink to produce texture and line and a fantastical approach to composition.
- This particular illustration accompanies the story “The Blue Emerald,” and is directly inspired by Tsukioka Yoshitoshi’s woodblock print *Moon of Pure Snow at Asano River: The Filial Daughter Chikako* (1885), in which a young woman attempts to prove her devotion to her father by jumping to her death in freezing water.



Moon of Pure Snow at Asano River: The Filial Daughter Chikako (1885), Tsukioka Yoshitoshi



She has achieved that which dozens of most admirable decorators have failed to discover, namely, a unique way of expressing distinctly personal impressions of beauty.

—International Studio, June, 1897

The Penny Magazine, 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- *The Penny Magazine* was a literary journal published in Philadelphia that survived for only a year, producing nine issues in total, each containing approximately six short stories. Fiction and poetry periodicals were in high demand in the mid-1890s, with more than two hundred different specialty publications in circulation, and it was not uncommon for some titles to vanish after a handful of issues.
- Reed recycles motifs from two earlier posters in this composition: the seated reading figure from *The House of the Trees* and the diagonal row of chrysanthemums from *Miss Träumerei*. With dot and fan textures added to the two-color printing process, however, the final design is superior to either of its predecessors.
- While it does not recreate a specific typeface, the hand-lettering on this poster is clearly influenced by the popularity of Rugged Roman type at the turn of the 19th century. This trend was inspired by William Morris and other designers who wanted darker Roman typefaces to create a more powerful visual impact. These often had rough rather than smooth edges, reminiscent of earlier type styles that “bled” into the paper—thus the term “Rugged Romans.”

The Boston Sunday Herald, 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Collection of Patricia Elaine, Female Poster

Artists Project



- Although it is unsigned, many scholars believe that this and the subsequent poster are by Reed. While the *Boston Herald* was her earliest client, the fact that she did not seem to be producing any posters for them only a year later brings this attribution into question; however, certain stylistic choices, like the slight double chins of the female figures and the position of the foliage in the foreground of this composition, evoke many of Reed's other designs.
- While he does not appear in any of Reed's other posters, the commedia dell'arte character of Pierrot was a favorite subject in her illustrations. She even had plans to make a children's book about him, the sketches for which depict him as a childlike nymph rather than a lovesick adult clown. Here, he sits as a toddler on Reed's lap.
- A zoetrope is a cylindrical device that acted as an early form of animation technology. Strips in which an image repeats and varies slightly were placed inside the contraption. The viewer then peered through vertical slits along the side as the internal element spun, creating an effect similar to a flip book. The *Boston Herald* hired some of the same illustrators who contributed to its posters, releasing a variety of zoetrope "animations" under the title "Wheel of Life."



Temptation (1897)



The Boston Sunday Herald, 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Poster House Collection

- As with the previous poster, there is no consensus about whether or not Reed made this design. Certain similarities to aspects of her other works, like the formation of the hands, the slight double chin, and the billowing gown, invite speculation.
- Many posters of this time for the *Boston Herald* and other periodicals included the phrase “situations wanted” at the bottom. Due to the overwhelming demand for reading material, publications were eager to pay writers for submissions. Here, the newspaper is offering five cents a line (equivalent to approximately \$4.64 today).
- This poster has been heavily restored. There is evidence of replaced paper loss at the edges, and the red ink around the hat seems to have bled during the linenbacking process during which the poster gets wet. Such details highlight the fragile nature of paper and some of the methods a conservator can take to preserve it.



Newspapers were starting to call her the most successful woman graphic artist in America.

—William S. Peterson, biographer

The Chicago Milwaukee & St Paul Railway Co., 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- In the summer of 1896, the Chicago, Milwaukee, and St. Paul Railway Company placed an advertisement in the national press announcing that anyone who sent in one dollar would receive three color posters by William Wallace Denslow, Ray Brown, and Ethel Reed. The notice also claimed that “all who are afflicted with [the] ‘poster craze’ will immediately embrace this rare opportunity, as but a limited number of the posters will be issued. The scarcity of a good thing enhances its value.”
- While no posters by Denslow (the original illustrator of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*) or Brown incorporate text specifically relating to railways, Reed’s poster directly promotes the conglomerate with a well-dressed woman apparently waving goodbye with a fluttering handkerchief to someone leaving on a train.
- This might also be interpreted as an image showing Reed saying farewell to her American life, as it was produced just before her permanent departure to Europe and is more in line with the European style of poster design.



Field Flowers, 1896
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- In autumn of 1895, celebrated children’s poet Eugene Field died suddenly of a heart attack. A memorial fund was established to build a monument to him in Lincoln Park, Chicago, and famous designers including Will Bradley, Edward Penfield, and Ethel Reed contributed posters and illustrations to promote a finely bound volume of his “happiest poems” that would be sold to benefit the cause.
- While the lettering in this poster represents an amalgamation of contemporary American typefaces, it is hand done, introducing a three-dimensional effect through the “shadow” of blue beneath the red text. Curiously, the “w” in “flowers” is reproduced backwards.



Time and the Hour, 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Collection of Nicholas D. Lowry

- First published in March 1896, *Time and the Hour* was a Boston-based periodical that, like *The Penny Magazine*, ran for a handful of issues before folding. It took its name from a line in Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, and covered everything from literature to local gossip, theatrical reviews to social causes. An ad for the journal noted that it “aims to present each week the best sentiment of a City whose opinions and activities have never failed to carry weight throughout the Nation. In a briefer and more American fashion, it is planned somewhat along the lines of the English reviews.”
- Reed's poster design was reproduced to accompany a poem by Louise Chandler Moulton in the art section. Compositionally, it anticipates Reed's illustration for Moulton's *In Childhood's Country* that was released later that year, with the addition of a menacing Father Time grasping the young maiden's shoulder.
- Printed after Reed left the United States, the poster was created as a commercial relief print in red and black ink on gray oatmeal paper.



I owe no man anything—
neither fidelity nor explanations—
I am my own property.
—Ethel Reed

In Childhood's Country, 1896
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

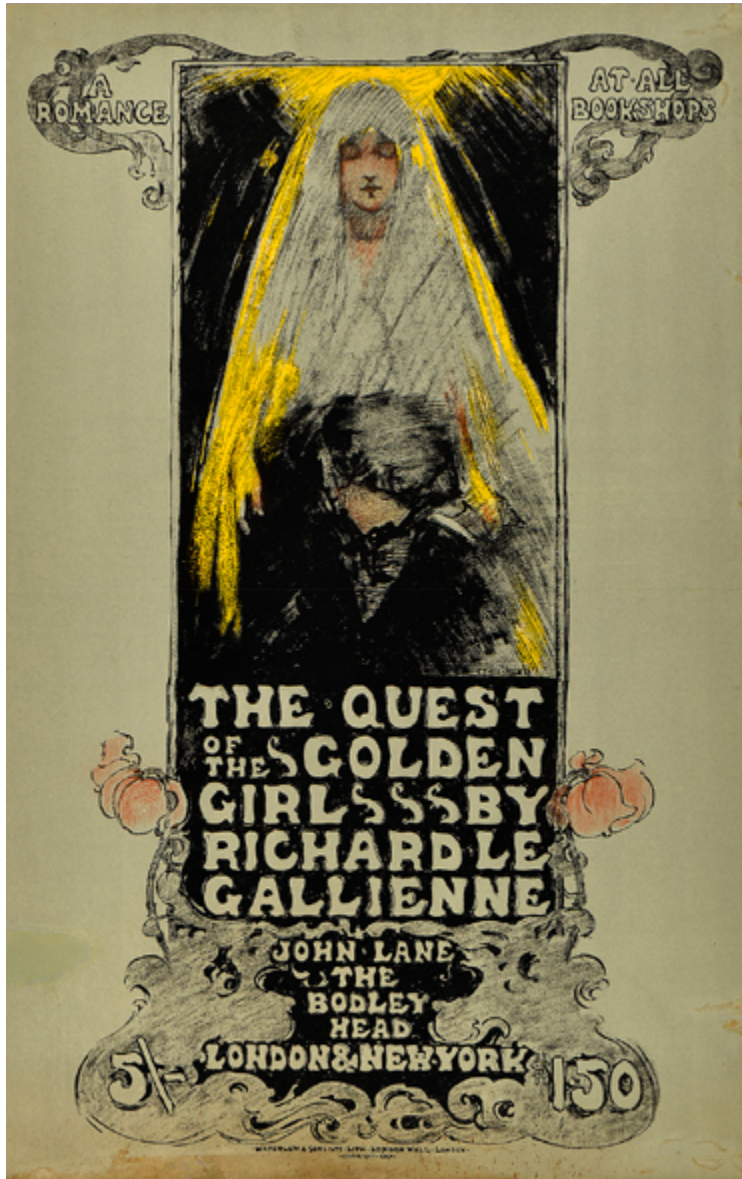
- After the success of *Arabella and Araminta Stories*, Copeland & Day dubbed that arm of its publishing house the “Yellow Hair Library” in honor of the blonde twins designed by Reed.
- For the second (and final) volume in the new sub-series, Reed was commissioned while in London to create the poster and illustrations for Louise Chandler Moulton’s *In Childhood’s Country*. Personality clashes with the author incited Reed’s rebellious nature, and she intentionally oversexualized the little girls in the artwork to ruffle Moulton’s puritanical feathers.
- The poster is a four-color commercial lithograph of a young Reed seducing the viewer with bedroom eyes and a coy pout, her dress on the verge of slipping off her narrow shoulders.



In Childhood's Country, 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- In addition to the endpapers and poster, Reed designed nine illustrations to accompany Moulton's poems. The images range from the innocent to the erotic, some showing children dressed as adults while others display nude or half-nude pre-pubescent bodies in nature.
- While the designs were technically accomplished and beautifully composed, they shocked many viewers; the author herself found them distasteful. Reed, on the other hand, noted: "I'm disgusted to find that it contains some of my best work."
- Twenty-five copies of a deluxe version of the book were also printed in blue ink on Japan paper and sold for five dollars (the equivalent of approximately \$160 today).



The Quest of the Golden Girl, 1896

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Poster House Collection

- Reed’s last poster is also her most interesting. Designed while she was living in London, it represents a stylistic departure from her other work, dabbling with elements of French Symbolism and seemingly anticipating Expressionism.
- The story essentially describes a young man’s journey to find the perfect woman, depicted here as a shrouded Reed somberly comforting the curled up figure of the author, Richard Le Gallienne.
- At the time of its publication, Reed was involved in a torrid affair with Le Gallienne, whose letters indicate that he was attempting to convince his wife to allow Reed into their relationship as an additional romantic partner.
- Le Gallienne also wrote a supernatural version of his and Reed’s love story, *The Worshipper of the Image*, in which its hero, Antony, betrays his wife with the image of a deceased woman, Silenceux, who drives him to madness. Ultimately, the wife dies—a not-so-subtle hint at La Gallienne’s fantasies for his relationship with Reed.
- Although the paternity of Reed’s children is unconfirmed, her first child, named Antony like the hero in the story, was most likely a product of this affair.
- While critics called this poster “the least successful of Miss Reed’s works, being too complicated, and in this respect resembling the plot of the novel itself,” it was chosen by Jules Chéret for inclusion, along with her poster *Miss Träumerei*, in his *Les Maîtres de l’Affiche* (Masters of the Poster). Will Bradley created the fine binding for the book.



Hills of Song, 1895
Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Published by Copeland & Day, *Hills of Song* is a short book of poetry by Clinton Scollard.
- This was one of Reed's earliest cover designs, representing a turning point in her work from abstract motifs inspired by nature to the figurative illustrations that she produced later.



WAS URSULA whose gentle tread

Bore round the broad-rimmed wheel of oak

That whirled, and hung, and whirled again,

As though she timed it with her heart.

And when it stopped, her fingers ran

Over the spokes until it whirled,

A moment hung, and whirled again.

The Love Story of Ursula Wolcott, 1895

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

- Written in verse by Charles Knowles Bolton, this romantic story takes place during the First Great Awakening in New England, a time of religious revival in the 1730s and '40s that provided the basis for present-day evangelicalism.
- Reed used her own silhouette to create the stamped cover of the novel, while the endpapers feature a repeating floral motif. She also included five decorative initials as section headers, as well as five illustrations.
- Bolton was especially impressed with Reed's ability to evoke woodcut designs from the period in which his story takes place. The central figure on the opening page, however, is clearly a version of the woman in her poster for *Miss Träumerei* from the same year.

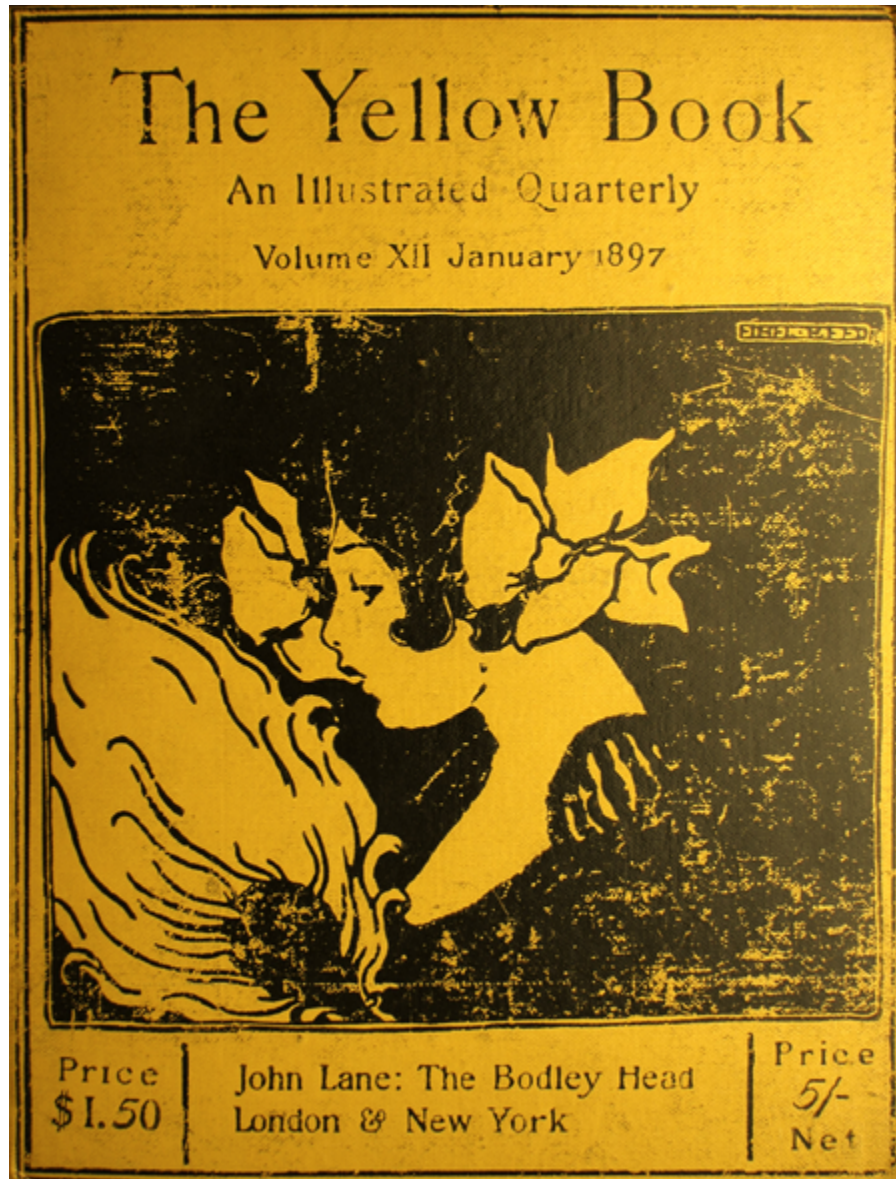


The Yellow Book Prospectus, 1897

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Mark Samuels Lasner Collection, University of Delaware Library, Museums and Press

- A clothbound quarterly, *The Yellow Book* remains the most famous British “little magazine” of the 1890s. The volumes featured the work of establishment figures like John Singer Sargent and Henry James alongside members of the younger avant-garde, including William Butler Yeats, Max Beerbohm, and H.G. Wells. It also touted the writings of a handful of New Women authors such as George Egerton (née Mary Chavelita Dunne Bright), Ella d’Arcy, and Ella Hepworth Dixon. However, it was the covers and illustrations by Aubrey Beardsley, the journal’s original art editor, as well as its perceived connections with French decadence and the work of Oscar Wilde that made it controversial and—to some—scandalous.
- This is a prospectus for the January 1897 issue of the journal meant to entice buyers, featuring the cover design by Ethel Reed. It depicts the designer in profile, her characteristic motif, with an elaborately plumed fan.
- Reed was most likely connected to *The Yellow Book* through Copeland & Day, which served as the periodical’s American publisher and might have made the introduction once Reed arrived in Europe. This relationship would have been further reinforced by Reed’s lover Richard Le Gallienne, who served as the literary advisor to the publication and was also a frequent contributor.



The Yellow Book, 1897

Ethel Reed (1874–1912)

Private Collection, New York City

- Reed's cover for this second-to-last volume in *The Yellow Book* series is the only one to feature an artist's name spelled out within the image, indicating both her importance in the field and her ability to advocate for her own recognition.
- In addition to the cover design, Reed also contributed five illustrations to this issue, four of which feature children or childlike figures. The fifth is a play on the cover design, depicting the artist in a domestic setting preparing for a party.
- The publication also contains two works of prose by Reed's lover, Richard Le Gallienne. The first is a story and poem titled "The Silver Girl," an obvious adaptation of his longer novel *The Quest of the Golden Girl*, for which Reed designed the poster. Themes of desperate love and admiration of unparalleled beauty run throughout the narrative, reflecting the sentiment of Le Gallienne's letters to or about Reed.

A Tragic End

**She was not at all elated with
the success she had won**

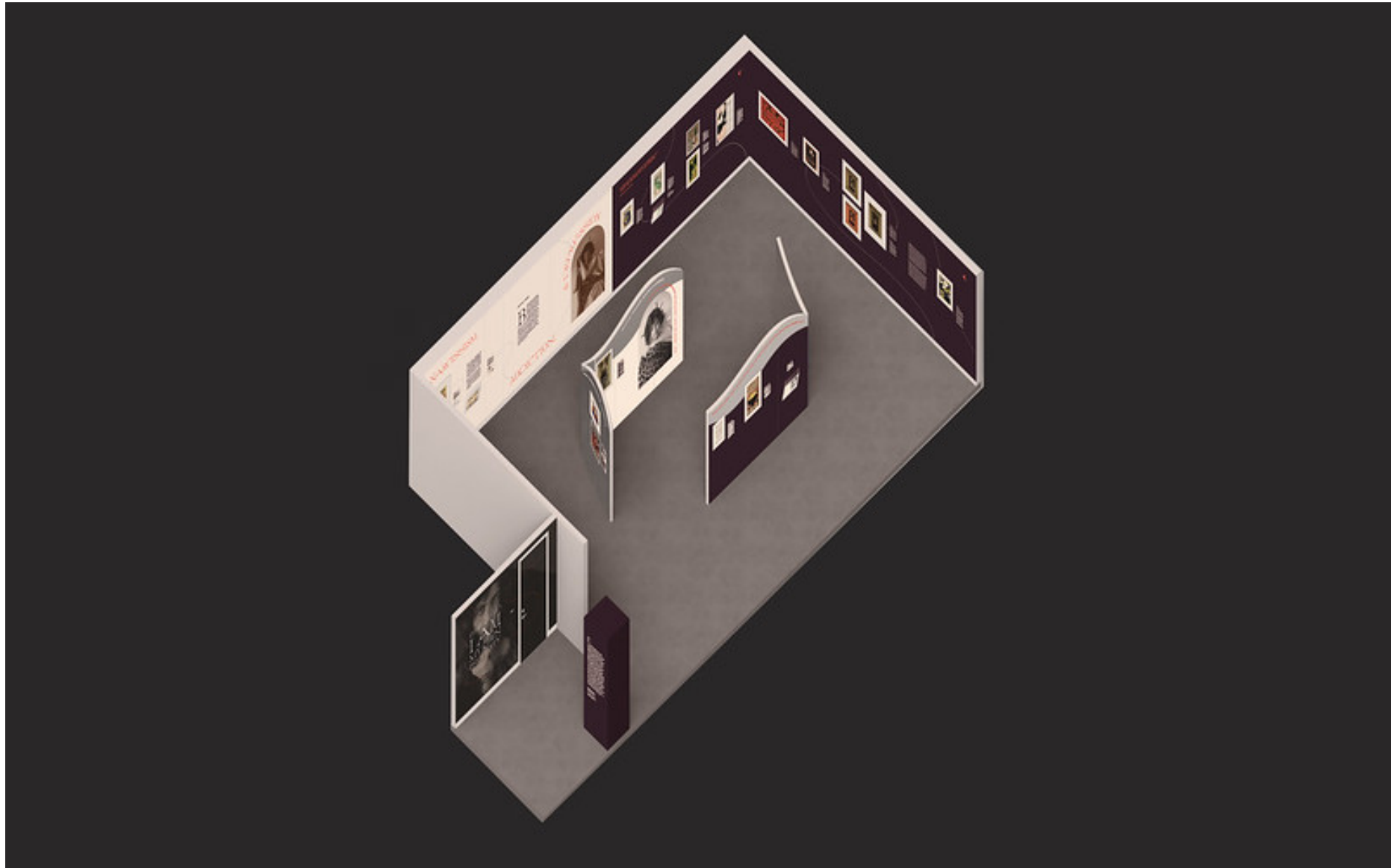
—The Bookman, December, 1895

Reed's European sojourn was not the educational experience that the American press publicized. While completing a few final projects, she began a tumultuous affair with the married author Richard Le Gallienne, for whose book she created the poster *The Quest for the Golden Girl*. The relationship was tempestuous, with Le Gallienne's wife rejecting the idea that he should be allowed to have both women as romantic partners. Reed then fled to Ireland for two years, entering into a period of deep depression and worsening addiction that she described in many letters to her former lovers back in Boston.

On November 28, 1900, less than a year after Reed returned to London, records indicate that she had a son, Antony—presumably with Le Gallienne, who ultimately reconciled with his wife. Within a few months of their separation, she began a relationship with Alexander Arnold Hannay, a married stockbroker with whom she had her second child, Alexandra. However, that love affair was also short-lived, and her daughter's name was quickly changed to Elizabeth to satisfy Hannay's wish that she conceal his paternity. Meanwhile, in the United States, the publishers Copeland & Day and Lamson, Wolfe & Co. folded. With no known commissions and therefore

no obvious source of income, Reed began to rely primarily on her looks and the benevolence of others to survive. Her letters to friends at this time are more manic than usual, oscillating between extreme joy and hope for the future and absolute despair and a desire for death.

Quite suddenly, in 1903, Reed married Arthur Sale Whiteley (who later changed their surname to Warwick); however, they became estranged and separated during their honeymoon in Italy, unmooring Reed even further. By 1909, rumors had begun to circulate that Ethel Reed was blind (possibly from untreated syphilis), living off charity in a boarding house with her children. Her mother would later testify that she provided her reclusive daughter with a bottle of whiskey or brandy a day, and that doctors came regularly to give Reed the sleeping pills she desperately demanded in order to rest. Prolonged use of the sedative sulphonal and other narcotics, combined with alcohol, had addled Reed's senses, destroying the independent spirit and self-assuredness that once made her the most famous female poster designer in the world. On March 1, 1912, just shy of her 38th birthday, Reed overdosed and died. The official inquest listed the cause of death as chronic alcoholism and "misadventure."





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