

# POSTER DESIGN

*in the 20<sup>th</sup> century*

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In this paper, I will examine the evolution of typography in poster design during the 20th century. The origin of the poster was at the center of several influential innovations. Paris was the poster capital. However, that soon changed when artists began designing posters in other industry-focused nations, including Belgium, Austria, Germany, Holland, Italy, Spain, and the United States. The production of typographic posters evolved along with the industrial revolution. The invention of movable type by Johannes Gutenberg in 1450 was the catalyst for sharing ideas and personal opinions. The innovation of movable type shook Europe to its core and later revolutionized Western writing. The invention of Lithography, a simple chemical principle using oil and water, also played a significant role in the production of poster design. Initially invented by Bavarian author Aloys Senefelder in 1796 and later perfected by American inventor Richard M. Hoe in 1846 (Meggs, 153). With these new inventions and the ability to produce a large number quickly, the poster soon became a new mode of advertising products, entertainment, and services. Posters were pasted in public places, buses, theatres, government buildings, ferries, and fences. The poster held a unique position in the art world during this time. It was somewhere between fine art, reproduction, and pop culture. For

my purposes, I will show how the origin, production, distribution, and relevance of the poster and its message played a significant role in the evolution of typography in the field of graphic design and advertising.

Posters originated in Europe and North America during one of the most visually saturated times in history. During much of the first half of the twentieth century, poster design was a continuation of late nineteenth-century poster design. However, the poster movement gained more traction as a means of communication during World War I (1914-1918). Posters began reshaping the typographic landscape through their presence. As large, typographic messages started appearing in public places, artists quickly realized that if they wanted their message to persuade their audience, they needed to include a visual reference (Meggs, Ch. 14). This, in turn, became a balancing act for the artist, thinking about the poster design in terms of graphic images as well as the visual communication of the poster as a whole. Many compositions during this time were influenced by modern art. As the popularity of posters grew, many people would buy and sell poster designs as collector items, profiting off the excitement of the new movement.

Printing technologies were advancing rapidly, allowing breakthrough propaganda compositions. Magazine illustrators soon found themselves abandoning their easels and embracing the world of mass communication, transitioning to poster design, and integrating images with type. This form of advertising soon replaced narrative design. The streets of London and Paris soon became known as the poor man's picture gallery (Guffey, 13). Many residents began to see their properties as an opportunity for investment. Artists and advertisers would pay to utilize their large, flat, open spaces for their posters and advertisements. This brought attention to all areas of the city, including those sections that had not been recognized in a long time. Not only was the poster now relevant to the art world, but it also had the power to persuade and change minds.

The commercial poster was quite successful for advertising because it attracted attention with bold images and clear messages (Iskin p.10). However, this was not always the case. Poster design for advertising started by combining several typefaces into one composition. Often the poster would display over a dozen typefaces at once. We see this in the Full Moon letterpress poster from 1875 (Lupton, 24). Typography was embellished and engorged as various parts of the text were manipulated to take up every inch of the poster space. Letterforms were expanded, contracted, shadowed, fattened, and floriated. These compositions were often set in a centered format, leaving the piece static and dull.

As time passed, designers began to view the manipulation of the alphabet as "gross and immoral." Influential reformers of the era started to speak up and change the narrative regarding typography in poster design. Jan Tschichold coined "new typography" (Armstrong, 35). What once was aimed at beauty and ornamental embellishment had now shifted to simplicity and clarity. One significant difference in the new typography from the old is the attention to form over function. It was no longer enough to look pretty. The

# FULL MOON.

## ST. MICHAEL'S TEMPERANCE BAND !

Prof. V. Yeager, Leader, will give a

## GRAND MOONLIGHT

## EXCURSION

On the Steamer

## BELLE !

To Osbrook and Watch Hill,  
On Saturday Evening, July 17th,  
Leaving Wharf at 7½ o'clock. Returning to Westerly  
at 10½ o'clock. Kenneth will be at Osbrook.

## TICKETS, - FORTY CENTS.

G. B. & J. H. Utter, Steam Printers, Westerly, R. I.

text needed to communicate with the viewer functionally and logically. It soon became imperative for the artist to set the type in a way that displayed the relationship of one piece of text to the others within the composition. This was achieved by type sizes, weight, lines, use of color, imagery, etc. Following these basic principles allowed artists to have greater flexibility with their designs. In early twentieth-century Germany, a flat-color design school emerged called Plakatstil, meaning poster style. After running away from home at 15, the self-taught young artist Lucian Bernhard joined this movement haphazardly. While in Berlin, trying to support himself as an artist, he came across an advertisement for a poster contest sponsored by Priester matches. After immediate rejection, followed by immediate rescue from Ernst Growled of the Hollerbaum and Schmidt lithography firm, Bernhard won first prize. His first poster is now famous, and Bernhard is known in the graphic design world for reducing communication to one word and two matches. Bernhard didn't realize it then, but he significantly impacted pictorial communication. He spearheaded the simplification of naturalism and messaging into its own visual language of shape and sign. Bernhard repeated this approach for the next two decades, totaling over three hundred package designs for sixty-six products, including the Stiller shoe poster (1912). Bernhard and other young artists blazed the trail and reorganized the direction of German poster design.

The poster was an important medium during World War I. Public morale was crucial for army recruitment and global support of the war effort. As resources were diverted to the war effort, the public was encouraged to conserve everyday essentials, such as growing food and making clothes, to counter global shortages. Amid international conflict, governments looked to the art of poster design as a means of visual persuasion. James Montgomery Flagg played a significant role in this movement producing forty-six war posters during the year and a half America was involved in the war, including his infamous military



recruitment poster of Uncle Sam stating, “I Want You for U.S. Army.” Five million copies of Flagg’s poster were produced and distributed, making this poster the most widely produced poster in history (Meggs, 277). After World War I, the world tried to return to some sense of normalcy. People put much faith in war machinery and technology. This faith was illustrated through post-war poster design and production.

The industrial age transformed posters into abstract visual forms which projected powerful concrete shapes of strong contrast and large sizes. It became a revolutionary social and economic change rather than a mere historical period. This movement generated a shift in the purpose of typographic

then it is considered bad typography. Other influential field members have described typography as service art rather than fine art. This is sometimes hard for an artist to hear as we put our blood, sweat, and tears into numerous projects. However, with this service art, and specifically poster design, artists have the fantastic opportunity to give form to their environments and the spaces they live in (Armstrong, 45).

During the mid-nineteenth century, lithography allowed a more illustrative approach to public communication. Lithography, also known as “the lightning press,” was perfected by the American inventor Richard M. Hoe in 1846 (Meggs, 153). It was known as “the lightning press” because the machine could print six

this process would be perfected one day to allow painting reproduction (Meggs, 153). Lithography soon became the preferred printing method for economical color printing, ranging from art reproductions for middle-class parlors to advertising graphics of every description, pouring from the presses in millions of impressions each year. The use of color lithography allowed society to enjoy the aesthetic experience of colorful images out in the world (Meggs, 134).

By the mid-nineteenth century, presses could produce twenty-five thousand copies per hour of one composition. However, each letter in every word had to be set by hand (Meggs, 141). In 1886, Ottmar Mergenthaler, a thirty-two-year-old German immigrant living in Baltimore, perfected the Linotype machine. Around three hundred machines were patented in Europe and America alone. Before the invention of mechanized typography, the largest daily newspapers at the time were limited to eight pages because of the work that had to be done by hand. Books were also very precious. While the invention was life-changing for many, it also did wonders for the economy. Hundreds of new jobs were created, and the average cost of a newspaper plunged to one or two pennies. The world of publishing exploded overnight, and the public was exposed to a new age of visual communication that it had never seen.

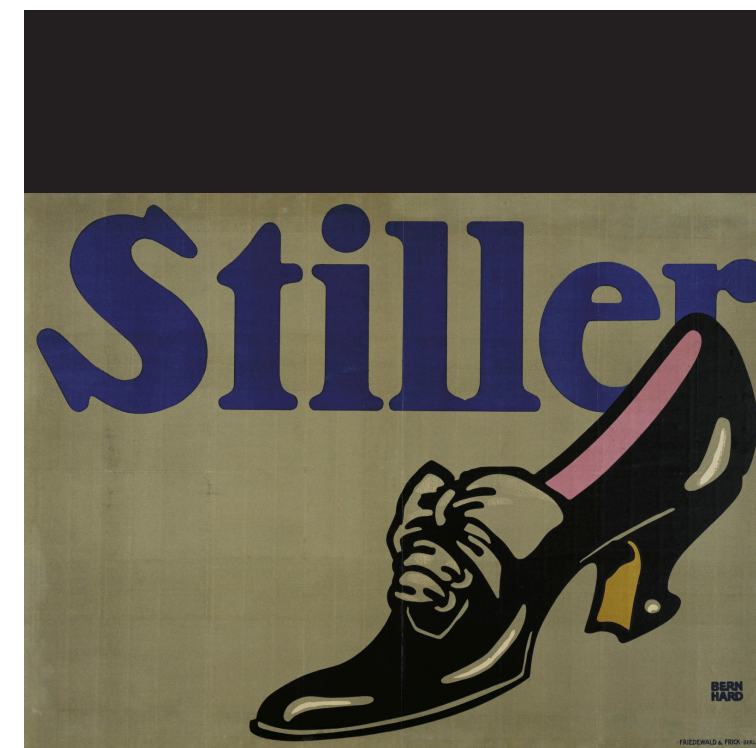
Once the poster was produced, it was ready to be distributed. Posters are one of the most permanent and solid forms of communication. They hold a physical presence, shaping spaces and altering behaviors as they are viewed. A rapid expansion of poster advertising grew from the faster pace and mass communication needs of an increasingly urban and industrialized society (Meggs, 135). At first, French and British commentators objected to commercial posters saying they desecrated the city, overshadowed architectural monuments, and misrepresented civic spaces (Iskin p.10). However, they did not win that battle. Advertising companies saw an opportunity for profit, and they took it. Various

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## - Beatrice Ward

communication (Meggs, 135). Man’s demands were adjusted. Thus, the era of mass communication and new cultural foundations were born. Innovative technologies lowered unit costs and increased the production of printed materials, allowing graphic communication to become more available than ever before. Beatrice Ward is quoted saying this about printing in a lecture to the British Typographer’s Guild in 1930, “The most important thing about printing is that it conveys thought, ideas, images, from one mind to other minds” (Armstrong, 42). Ward believed that our mind’s eye focuses through type rather than on it. If the typography distracts the viewer from the mental picture that is to be conveyed from the work itself,

times faster than the lithographic flatbed press. The printing process is based on the simple chemical principle that oil and water do not mix. It begins with an image drawn on a flat stone surface with an oil-based crayon, pen, or pencil. Then water is spread over the stone to moisten all areas except the oil-based image, which repels the water. Oil-based ink is rolled over the stone, adhering to the image but not to the wet areas of the stone. A sheet of paper is placed over the image, and a printing press is used to transfer the inked image onto the paper. Initially invented by Bavarian author Aloys Senefelder in 1796, Senefelder began experimenting with multicolor lithography in the early 1800s. In his book, he predicted in 1819 that



advertising companies began buying and selling premier advertising locations around town. One company, Bonnard-Bideault, had over 500 framed areas at its disposal, including fences, all over France, Algeria, and other major cities abroad. Companies like this would utilize a bill sticker, someone who sticks up advertisements on billboards, walls, and similar surfaces. Companies like Bonnard-Bideault also painted posters for permanent outdoor locations on large canvases, walls, and fences. Today we call these murals or installations. Many advertisers preferred realistic posters. However, many artists complained about the advertiser's conservative taste, believing in the innovative aesthetic of the artistic poster (Iskin p.7). Lucian Bernhard invented the "object poster," a poster that sells a product. Art Nouveau was popular during the time that Bernhard came on the scene. The style encouraged embellishments and ornamentation; however, Bernhard rejected this style. He took a more simplified approach to his poster designs. He reduced all unnecessary detail and only featured the brand name as the only copy on the poster: no fancy tagline, no embellishments, only the product and the product name. Bernhard was influenced by two brothers in England who also approached their designs from a minimalist perspective - the Beggarstaff Brothers. They were actually brother's-in-law. Like the Beggarstaff Brothers, Bernhard utilized flat planes of solid color to create his compositions. Bernhard's unconventional approaches launched a wholly new and straightforward style of advertising. Makers began to think the decoration of the Art Nouveau style could distract and take away from their products. Everyone agreed that posters needed to make a quick impression.

After World War I, the world tried to return to some sense of normalcy. People put much faith in war machinery and technology. This faith was illustrated through post-war poster design. Cubist ideas began to form regarding spatial organization and imagery, inspiring a new direction in design. This movement is also known as art deco. Bevis Hillier, a British art historian, coined this term in the 1960s. Art deco is



“The more we read the less we see.”

- Herbert Bayer

used to identify famous works in the 1920s and 1930s. Geometric attributes were used to illustrate the modern age of the machine while also satisfying a passion for design. One artist who allowed cubism to influence his work is A.M. Cassandre. At age 14, Cassandre immigrated to Paris from Ukraine. He had a Russian mother and a French father. Cassandre studied at the École des Beaux-Arts and Académie Julian. At age 22, his graphic design career began by executing poster commissions from the Hachard & Cie printing firm. Cassandre's design style is bold, simple, and two-dimensional, with broad planes of color. Cassandre expresses his love of letter forms by immigrating words and images. He is known for creating concise statements, incorporating powerful geometric shapes, and simplifying silhouettes to create dynamic compositions. In his poster for the ocean liner L'Atlantique, Cassandre exaggerates the scale difference between the ship and the tug boat. He uses geometry to separate the boat from the softened smoke and fading reflection in the water. A.M. Cassandre, also known as Adolphe Mouron, applied modern painting concepts to his French poster design compositions. He was known for using solid perspectives to create three-dimensional space. Cassandre used geometry and shadows to create the illusion of space. He also pioneered airbrushing techniques, which added smoothness and depth to his poster designs. He always incorporated typography into his compositions, not leaving them as an afterthought. Like many other artists at the time, Cassandre was very interested in machines. He believed that art wasn't just for the elite but everyone. This came through in his Art Deco stylings of typography, causing a disarray in the Russian Constructivist's outlook on the topic. Sadly, Cassandre struggled at home, all while becoming a successful artist. Regrettably, he committed suicide in his Paris home in 1968.

The poster is a quick form of production, distribution, and perception. The poster movement became known for its all-encompassing development of industry, capitalism, and globalization, playing a crucial role in visual culture. Herbert Bayer is quoted saying,

“The more we read, the less we see. Constant exposure to visual materials has dulled our sense of seeing” (Armstrong, 46). Posters have grown in importance over the years throughout the design profession. It is often described as over-large and under-used (Guffey, 32). But no matter what, artists have continued to utilize this medium to define themselves as artists, whether they are designing for cultural, political, or charitable organizations.

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