

## **A Short introduction to the History of the Poster**

([http://www.posterconnection.com/r\\_history.htm](http://www.posterconnection.com/r_history.htm))

### **Defining Poster**

What makes a poster a poster? How does it differ from a painting or a work of graphic art? A poster is typically a printed paper announcement that is displayed publicly and functions as a tool for the promotion of a product, an event, or a sentiment or cause through image and/or text. A poster's principal task is to be noticed: it must attract attention and influence the passerby.

### **Beginnings**

The poster is a product of the big city. Theater companies and (book) printers in London and Paris were the first to make use of the poster. Food or household items were not really advertised until the second half of the 19th century when more goods were offered and similar products began competing for their customers. The political poster, the third large group after the cultural and the product poster, developed, with a few exceptions, only around World War I.

### **Jules Cheret and Lithography**

The poster as we know it today started to develop after 1860. Before Alois Senefelder's discovery of the process of lithography in 1798, most posters were produced as monochrome wood or metal engravings. Even in the early lithographic prints, colors were seldom used and the illustration was never integrated with the text. This changed with Jules Cheret, the undisputed father of the modern poster. Cheret introduced vivid, direct designs, combining illustration and text and using few bright colors in large coherent shapes. His central motif was a happily, laughing young Parisian woman showing her eternally dazzling smile at the onlooker.

### **Poster Craze**

The 1880s and 1890s marked the beginning of L'Affichomanie, the poster craze: the colorful, large billboards were euphorically greeted as "Art of the Street" and as such suited to raise the art appreciation of the masses. Cheret's posters (and those of others soon thereafter) were viewed as public works or art. Newspaper critics thoroughly discussed poster art: the use of color, the composition and the drawing itself. The product seemed secondary.

Even the young artists of the Parisian avant-garde were attracted to the poster. Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Pierre Bonnard viewed the new art form and its large paper format as a challenge and wanted their works to gain broader public recognition. It was Toulouse-Lautrec who elevated the status of the poster to a higher art form. Lautrec had a profound knowledge of Japanese engraving. In contrast to Cheret, he drew individual faces rather than generic figures and his use of words did not overpower the image. His most famous poster is Moulin Rouge from 1891.

## **Art Nouveau**

Paris was the center of poster art. From here, the poster boom spread to Europe and the United States. Following Cheret, many artists began to specialize in making posters (Theophile-Alexandre Steinlen in Paris, Will Bradley in Chicago, Adolfo Hohenstein in Milan, to name a few). The poster designers were honored in public exhibitions and greeted as artists of a new era.

In the early 1890s, the poster discovered Art Nouveau. The ornamental style that flourished between 1890 and 1910 throughout Europe and the United States became most prominently manifest in the poster designs of a young Czech living in Paris. Alphonse Maria Mucha's combination of a Byzantine style and a subtle use of color made him an immediate success. His poster for Sarah Bernhardt, a purely decorative portrayal of the deal of feminine beauty, could be called a masterpiece of Art Nouveau.

## **Outside of Paris**

While enthusiastic collectors in Paris were discovering the posters of Cheret and Toulouse-Lautrec, conventional graphic ideas still dominated the walls in most other European cities. The example of the French masters, however, soon had a liberating effect. In Germany, new avant-garde journals like "Pan" (1895, Berlin), "Simplizissimus" (1896, Munich) and "Jugend" (1896, Munich, the name "Jugendstil" was derived from this), began to spread the new ideas and style. In Vienna, the new Secession movement (founded in 1897) threw out all old standards and introduced a rebirth of artistic creation. Munich and Vienna became important centers of poster activity.

But skilled crafts also experienced a revival in other European countries. In Belgium, Privat-Livemont was a leading artist. While comparable to Mucha, his designs were bolder and stronger in colors. In Holland, Henry van de Velde created one of the most exceptional Art Nouveau image in his poster for the food "Tropon." In Italy, Adolfo Hohenstein and Leopoldo Metlicovitz became well-known illustrators who made posters for publishers, stores and the theatre. The Art Nouveau phenomenon flourished across Europe and dominated the poster style into the next century.

## **The 20th Century: Beyond Art Nouveau**

Art Nouveau began to lose its vitality in France with the departure of the three major posterists. Toulouse-Lautrec died in 1901; both Mucha and Cheret turned largely away from the poster and dedicated themselves to painting. Artists everywhere found new ways of expressing themselves. The Beggarstaff Brothers in England were the first designers to emphasize more than just the enlarged illustrations with text. They reduced the text to a minimum and designed large, strict compositions. In France, the young Italian caricaturist Leonetto Cappiello sought to combine the popularity of Cheret's happy posters with the large flat areas and simple motifs of the Beggarstaff.

An important development took place in Berlin after 1905, where a new kind of poster started to conquer the city's advertising kiosks: a young artist named Lucian Bernhard gave birth to the object poster which placed the central focus on the product, eliminating the feminine eye-catcher and other metaphors. Bernhard took a radical new approach to

poster design, dramatically simplifying the use of form, flat colors, shapes and bold type (see his prize-winning poster for Priester matches in 1905). The idea of Art Nouveau became outgrown. The ornamental elements noticeably disappeared and color and design were incorporated realistically to the task at hand.

"Designing posters" soon developed into an accepted artistic profession. Labor unions were formed (f.ex. the "Union of German Graphic Designers) and professional journals were published (Das Plakat). Posters started to be printed in uniform, standardized format sizes. In France, printers used the outdoor format 160 x 120 cm (63 x 47 in.); in Switzerland, the Weltformat 128 x 90 cm (50 x 35 in.), in Germany, the DIN-format 119 x 84 cm (47 x 33 in.) and 84 x 59 cm (33 x 23 in.). Numerous poster exhibitions with international participation and awards helped enhance the quality and high standards.

### **World War I**

A new trend developed with the deteriorating political developments and the outbreak of the First World War: the political poster was born. Before 1914, political posters were censored in most countries. During the World War I, however, they became the most powerful propaganda tool. (Today, it is impossible to imagine a country without it.) World War I turned the poster into the most important medium of political imagery. With its blunt and powerful message, the poster influenced history: it helped rally support, increase morale, raise money, recruit soldiers, defame the enemy and boost patriotism and support for the war. The poster's impact was immediate. After World War I, an increasingly industrial society arrived at new definitions of the proper relationship between art and society. Influenced by the modern art movements like Cubism, Futurism, and Surrealism, the poster played a central role in the avant-garde movements of the 1920s, from de Stijl to Bauhaus and Russian Constructivism. Photography and Typography combined with the mechanical revolution became an integral part in poster design and development.

In stark contrast to the florid creations of the Art Nouveau, this machine age led to the development of a the Art Deco movement (named after the 1925 Exposition Internationale des Arts Decoratifs et Industriels Modernes in Paris). Art Deco placed a strong emphasis on striking geometric shapes and patterns and bold, streamlined typeface. The movement quickly spread throughout Europe. Adolphe Mouron Cassandre's achievements in the Art Deco realm remain unrivalled. His posters for newspapers, railways, and shipping-lines, are proof of his ability to simplify things to a sign-like design to make them more easily understandable. Cassandre combined strength and elegance and carefully integrated text lettering as an important graphic element.

Charles Loupot, Jean Carlu, Pierre Fix-Masseau and Paul Colin are other well-known posterists who determined the style of French Art Deco posters in the 1920s and 30s. In Italy, Marcello Dudovich, Sepo (Severo Pozatti) and Giuseppe Riccobaldi were considered to be among the leaders in illustrative poster-designing. In England, McKnight Kauffer was one if the most gifted and influential designers between the wars.

He designed over 120 posters for the London Underground alone. His posters belong to the masterpieces of modern poster art.

Some of the best known graphic designers came from Switzerland, including Otto Baumberger, Hugo Laubi, Otto Morach, Niklaus Stoecklin and Herbert Matter. Their posters are distinguished by the minimal use of graphic means and their effectively calculated orchestration of space and the use of color.

### **World War II and Beyond**

During the Second World War, the poster was once again a fundamental propaganda medium to rally support for the war. Similar to World War I, the United States was again at the forefront of poster production, encouraging American citizens to enlist, buy bonds or work in the war industry. Jean Carlu, who happened to be in New York when France surrendered to Germany in 1940, was commissioned to create a poster to increase industrial output. His award-winning poster *America's Answer! Production is among the finest of the U.S.* defense posters from the period. One hundred thousand copies of *Production* were printed and distributed to the factories. But in contrast to the First World War, the poster was now forced to take its place among other media, mainly radio and television. An important transformation was under way in which the poster had to redefine its own significance and purpose.

The enormous destruction and dislocations caused by the Second World War led to a disruption of the modernist enterprise. The modern art movement emerged as the preferred art of the free democratic world. Two contradictory art styles characterized the decades after the war. As the strict, formal compositional concerns of the 1930s further eroded, art moved toward a lyrical abstraction, accentuating painterly qualities, anecdotal and humorous drawing. The emphasis was on light entertainment, now presented in the context of modernism. Example of this new spirit can be seen in the work of Raymond Savignac whose simplified illustration style spread from France as far as Poland and the United States. In Switzerland, Hans Erni, Donald Brun and Herbert Leupin are noteworthy of mentioning. In different ways - some as sublime illustrators with graphic means, others with a clever wittiness and irresistible humor - their works emphasized the illustrative reality of the Zürich and Basel Schools of Design.

### **Swiss Design**

On the other hand, an international typographic style developed in Switzerland. Switzerland emerged as the most influential center of graphic design during the first decades after the war. The country's technically advanced and highly skilled printing industry had continued to develop while the rest of Europe was destroyed by the war. The Swiss' already strong tradition of graphic design had further been nurtured under the influences of the Bauhaus and Constructivist movement. Swiss poster development and design was actively supported by the government through annual competitions. Journals such as *Graphis* (1944) and *New Graphic Design* (1958) were at the forefront of design innovation. In the 1950s, the popular Helvetica typeface was developed; its widespread use made it an icon of the Swiss graphic style.

Armin Hofmann and Josef Müller-Brockmann were among the leading innovators of Swiss graphic design. Their powerful visual designs employed both the traditions of the 1920s as well as innovative combinations of typography and photography. Some of their leading counterparts came from the United States. Designers such as Paul Rand, Erik Nitsche and Lester Beall made influential contributions to the modern post-war poster and the development of graphic design.

### **The Psychedelic Poster**

The ever-growing dominance of radio and especially television and a virtually complete dependence on photography in the field of print advertising resulted in new- and re-definitions of poster art. The pop art and the counterculture movements of the mid-1960 led to the development and rise of the a new (if brief) visual style, the psychedelic poster. Influenced by a combination of rock music and hallucinogenic drugs, the movement was strongest in San Francisco. In many ways, the flower power posters announcing hall concerts in the Fillmore and Haight-Ashbury districts reminded of the golden age of Art Nouveau Age of the 1890s.

### **The End of the Poster?**

The last decades of the 20th century have been largely coined by an experimental use with electronic technology and data processing. Since the 1980s, graphic design has flourished through the use of computer design and the construction of digitized images and texts.

In our age of continuous technological change and innovation, the poster has proven itself to be an adaptable and resilient medium. While its artistic dynamism and commercial function have declined, the poster remains an important cultural medium that allows broad visual expression of ideas and beliefs, both political and individual. Posters engage the world and function as social and artistic barometers in every-day cultural, economic and political issues.