

The Poster

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WHAT IT IS, AND WHY

"Others fashion man: I relate him" wrote Montaigne more than three centuries ago. This perceptive and responsible understanding should not belong to philosophers only. Wherever and in whatever medium the molding of men's thinking is involved those engaged in such work have a responsibility for the direction of such influences.

In advertising this applies to those who use the word and to those who employ the image. Advertising in its many forms has become—particularly in the United States—a most powerful factor in the daily life of citizens. It has become standardized to a degree where the individual contribution is swamped by charts, response check-ups, and surveys, and any direct responsibility is shifted from one department to another. But facts and figures prove that thus far it works. For this reason it is highly unlikely that there will be any substantial change. Since it pays off, what else? In the middle of the last century Emerson said, "We eat and drink and wear perjury and fraud in a hundred commodities." Could he be thinking prophetically of what was to come? Strong words but very significant ones.

I leave these few remarks within the mind of the reader. For a comprehensive study and analysis of the state of advertising today I refer the reader to one who is not a designer but who is a serious and responsible critic.

According to Webster, the word "poster" first came into general usage in 1838 and was defined as "a placard posted or displayed in a public place as an announcement or advertisement." But long before this official recognition of the word, the poster in embryo was used by Roman booksellers (slabs of stone with writing) and again much later during the great plague of London, this time printed on paper with the words "Lord have mercy upon us." The poster as a medium therefore is older than any other form of advertising art. And because of its long tradition and definite character for propaganda it should be designed with understanding and used with discretion.

Until the discovery of lithography the poster was a one-toned woodcut. Because of this, simplicity was inevitable. Thus the minimum of means produced a maximum of effect. And to this day the best posters are designed with this as a guiding principle.

With the increase of printing facilities and relatively lowering production costs, the poster as we see it, particularly in the United States, has lost its original simplicity as well as its power. Like a drink made up of various liqueurs, it looks pretty but has not distinct flavor. Obviously printers must make money and a design made in three or six colors will be cheaper than one done in 14 colors. I am certainly not laying the blame for bad poster art at the printer's door! Unwittingly, however, in his zeal to do a "beautiful job" his persuasion may influence a client. Whatever the causes may be for our lack of good poster art we have on the whole lost sight of its original character.

A poster is designed primarily for the pedestrian in the street and for the traveler on the highways. Within the tick of a few seconds the poster should do its job. Therefore I repeat that it must be simple. Whatever the problem may be it must be broken down into plain terms that relate quickly to the content—the meaning and the purpose. No equivocation, no stammering, but a direct "this is it." Like an arrow, a traffic signal, a road sign, or an affirmative command. The daily life of a citizen is punctuated with slogans, pictures, stops and go's. It is logical to assume that the mind welcomes and responds to any symbol or interpretation that expresses a sense of order, and good design is exactly concerned with this elementary and always compelling fact.

Posters used for travel can convey in no less swift and uncomplicated terms the character of places, the manners and differences of people, architectural interests, and amusements. Many European countries are familiar and inviting to us through their posters and many a potential traveler has been persuaded to go to one country rather than another because of the poster. Our own country is still unexploited in spite of the fact that it offers a vast variety of scene, peoples, architecture, and climates, perhaps unequaled anywhere.

To summarize: First, the poster is not a modern invention. Second, it has a very definite character and use. Third, it is an influence of widespread public interest and because it uses the talents of artists and writers it is educational as well as commercial. Fourth, its true identity must be not dissipated and its purpose not confused. Fifth, the most effective and memorable posters have been designed by first-rate artists. Finally, remember Plato's warning that a standardized object is a dead object.