The Gerard Herbst Poster Collection

The posters in this display have been selected from the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection, which includes more than 2000 individual posters donated to the university in 1996 by Gerard Herbst and managed by the Ian Potter Museum of Art. The collection is significant as a record of poster design, representing many international schools, designers and periods. The posters in the collection span forty years of practice in Europe, with a smaller number from the USA, Japan, Asia and Australia.

Gerard Herbst was born in 1911 in Dresden and studied weaving and textile design in Cottbus, Prussia (now Germany). Herbst embraced the holistic teaching style espoused by the Bauhaus, and was particularly influenced by Laszlo Maholy-Nagy. In 1939 Herbst escaped Germany, emigrating to Australia. The same year he became head designer for Prestige Fabrics in Melbourne, working there prior to joining the Australian Military Forces. He continued to work for Prestige after the war and in 1951 began teaching at RMIT, joining the permanent staff in 1960 as principal lecturer in the Department of Industrial Design.

Gerard Herbst has been a passionate advocate for poster design throughout his career, and it was also an integral feature of his interdisciplinary approach to teaching industrial design. Herbst drew upon his connections with artists and publishers in Europe to source posters for his collection, which he then used in teaching. He donated the collection to the University of Melbourne to promote the importance of the art of the poster, and to foster design practice in Australia.
Poster design arguably represents the most rigorous of graphic design disciplines. A successful poster attracts the viewer’s attention from a distance and holds it for long enough to communicate its message. A poster's stripped-down design must create an immediate impact, exploiting both its display context and ephemeral nature. Many of the poster designs in this exhibition effectively balance familiar imagery with something unexpected to produce a joke or visual surprise. This is a simple technology, often informed by complex concepts.

The thirty-seven posters in this exhibition represent less than two per cent of the total collection, the core of which is a large number of posters by well-known artists from the Polish Poster School. This room includes a selection of safety posters from the British Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) dating from World War II. Workplace-safety posters from the National Safety Council of Australia in the 1960s provide a counterpoint. Direct and instructive, they pull no punches in communicating the likely consequences of carelessness.

The Grimwade Gallery includes images that are less diagrammatic or linear and more illustrative. Produced by leading Polish, Czech and German designers between the 1950s and 1990s, most of these posters promote cultural programs and events (film, theatre, opera). Their primary motifs are heads and hands.

Designers may seek to educate or call the population to action but as well a poster is an excellent mirror to the contemporary social and artistic environment. While the technical means of poster production have changed dramatically over the years, their popularity as a form of mass communication has changed little.

Daisy Searls, guest curator