Polish poster art 1952–84

Polish posters are renowned for their individualism and powerful expressive content. More than simply a visual device for advertising films, festivals, and opera, circus and theatre productions, the poster was a unique art form in post-war communist Poland, largely free from the socialist agenda that dominated other forms of creative expression.

Increasingly subjective content and experimental design began to appear in late 1940s posters from radical designers Tadeusz Trepkowski, Henryk Tomaszewski and Eryk Lipinski (whose work is displayed on the wall opposite). By the mid-1950s, Polish designers had gained international kudos for their experimentation and innovation—products of 'making do' in a country ravaged by war and governed by the new state order. Recognising the poster's capacity to represent 'national genius', the government established a poster department within the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts in 1952. Support was given to a new generation of poster designers who took the medium into more imaginative realms.

Central to what became known in the 1950s as the Polish Poster School was the philosophy that designs should be 'felt' rather than 'read'. Henryk Tomaszewski, head of the poster department at the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, explains: 'I was trying to find the essence of the film. I was trying to feel the impression that the film had on me, whether it was a lyrical film, comedy, drama, sport or war film. I wanted to illustrate this essence with my own language, in my own way.' While state publishing houses such as the Polish Film Enterprise and Wydawnictwo Artystyczno-Graficzne (Graphic Arts Publishers) maintained control over poster designs, they encouraged individuality and subjectivity. Designers used film poster commissions, in particular, for oblique social commentary. The trauma of the recent past was manifested in haunting images of distorted or abstracted heads and disembodied figures.

The 1950s and '60s were the 'golden years' of poster production. In 1966 the International Poster Biennale was established in Warsaw and continues today. The Polish Poster School is not characterised by an identifiable style, but is marked by a strong sense of individual personalities. Still, we can discern certain visual characteristics across the exhibition that are typical: the painterly gesture and use of hand-drawn lettering, the linear quality, the use of vibrant colour and a sense of humour and fantasy.