The Gerard Herbst Poster Collection
Education Kit

The Ian Potter Museum of Art, the University of Melbourne
Introduction to the kit

This resource can be used to assist or enhance a self-directed visit to the Museum's online Gerard Herbst Poster Collection.

The kit will assist students and teachers in understanding and interpreting the concepts and visual languages present in the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection; in considering the approaches the artists have taken in making the works; and in discussing ideas around the themes present in this collection.

The Gerard Herbst Poster Collection holds close to two thousand seven hundred posters, representing a selection of international design from six decades.

The collection provides an overview of twentieth-century poster design in Europe, with a collecting focus on Polish poster design and includes material from all over the globe, notably the United States, Asia, and Australia.

The collection was formed by Gerard Herbst, a former lecturer and head of Industrial Design at RMIT, over a fifty year period from the 1940s to the 1990s. It was donated to the University of Melbourne Art Collection by Herbst in 1996. The collection of posters arrived rolled in numerous cylinders and a large quantity have been steamed, pressed, catalogued and researched with the generous contribution of volunteers as part of the University of Melbourne’s volunteer program. The intention of the gift was to provide young designers, scholars and the general public with the opportunity to learn from the example of excellence in design, and to encourage a continuation of the skills involved in artistic poster creation and visual communication through this particular medium.


Right: Wojcieh Fangor (1922), Picasso, 1957, France. colour offset, 86.0 x 61.5 cm, reg. no. 1996.4666. The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of Gerard Herbst 1996. © Unknown* 

An introduction to posters

The word poster probably originates with the practice of putting public announcements on posts.

Posters are public and accessible, so they provide an excellent vehicle for communication in an urban environment. Techniques of mass production allow for cost effective repetition and hence the reinforcement of a message. The visual nature of posters makes them powerful disseminators of images which often become part of popular culture. The point of posters is to persuade. Since their development in the nineteenth century posters have been utilised as a means to raise awareness of societal issues, to promote political and national agendas, to advertise cultural and sporting activities, to promote travel and to sell products. Posters can be confronting, such as the 1990s Benetton posters featuring AIDS sufferers, they can be humorous or they can allow the viewer to fantasise about a life of leisure and luxury.

From the late nineteenth century people began to collect posters. As with all collections, poster collectors have varied interests and motivations. Posters designed by artists such as Toulouse-Lautrec fall into the last category. Some posters are collected because of their historical or socio-cultural significance in documenting events or ideas. There are also corporate collections which form a company archive, tracing developments and changes through time and in response to market demand.

Poster design is about communication. The designer’s brief is to respond to the client’s need. To be successful the poster must increase sales, improve attendances, influence the way someone votes or help them to think about a current social issue. The designer’s task is to discover the essence of the message and then to convey it in a clear, striking and unambiguous way.

In the late nineteenth century urban populations were growing and increased consumerism fed the development of mass advertising. It was in this social context that Jules Cherét perfected the technically challenging process of colour lithography. His development was to revolutionise commercial poster production. Companies could now commission print runs of several thousand posters to advertise their products. Cherét used an acid process to fix the reverse image on stone. The stone was inked and washed and paper pressed into it to form the print. Several stones were used, each for a different colour. The stones were then reused to create new images, so the print run was limited and could not be repeated.

It is in the nature of a poster that its message must be conveyed visually and with a minimum of text. It must immediately capture the attention of a moving audience. “The poster is denied the luxury of long, elegant headlines and extensive copy, so it must make its point fast and powerfully, and, by reduction, create a message that is both memorable and compelling. The more an idea is distilled, the more forceful it becomes; it is part of the fascination and strange allure of the poster that it can say so much by using so little.”

The Gerard Herbst Poster Collection
Gerard Herbst was born in Dresden, Germany in 1911. He achieved a Diploma of Industrial Design/Textile Design in Cottbus, Germany before arriving in Melbourne in 1939 just before the outbreak of World War II. He obtained a position with Prestige Ltd, a textile design company based in Brunswick, Melbourne. Herbst served in the Australian Military Forces for the duration of the war and when the war ended he became Head Designer at Prestige.

From 1951–1960 Herbst taught at the Melbourne Technical College School of Art. When Melbourne Technical College became the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology in 1960 he became Principal Lecturer in the Department of Industrial Design, a position he held until his retirement in 1976. In 1999 he was inducted into the Hall of Fame of the Design Institute of Australia.

In 1996 Gerard Herbst gave his collection of more than 2000 posters to the University of Melbourne and they form part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection at the Ian Potter Museum of Art.

In 2003 Gerard Herbst was interviewed by Gaby Eisen at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. She asked him how and when his interest in posters had begun. Following are his verbatim responses.

well it started in Italy … I was there on holidays with my parents and I stood on the railway platform and went close to this and I saw ‘Tutti Frutti’ … and at first … one orange being peeled, the outer skin from the peel falling down from the young lady, the pith was the white face in which were left the eyebrows and a beautiful mouth and I mean for the bottle which was (inaudible) to her … so, that was an inspiration … theatrical, stimulating presentation of the longing for something prior the receiving. Herbst was about twelve years old when he had this experience.

Eisen then asked Herbst how he viewed the place of the poster in the visual arts. His response:

Unfortunately neglected through the electronic media … and yet I must say that the French who have taken the poster art actually over from the English, across the Channel, have something to offer and you can find in France often, a poster which stuns you. In Switzerland, it delights you but at times it can rip you emotionally because the visual drama of the poster, designers have a language of expression that is quite unique …

When asked how he went about collecting posters from around the world Herbst said:

Well, you beg for them ifyou like them, and people know that it is not just for your personal satisfaction or joy but that I have wanted to have in the end a place like you, gratefully you have for this collection to be shown and see what can be expressed through art.2

The exploration, admiration and collecting of posters was a major personal and professional focus for Gerard Herbst throughout his life.

Gerard Herbst, Cheese – flavour’s crowning achievement, 1962
Poster design for the Australian Dairy Produce Board

A major role of posters throughout the twentieth century was in the advertising of products for sale.

The poster Cheese – flavour’s crowning achievement in the Herbst collection, was designed by Gerard Herbst and printed in 1962 by McLaren and Co Pty Ltd, Melbourne for the Australian Dairy Produce Board. The Board existed from 1935 to 1975 and was the precursor of the Australian Dairy Corporation. Its primary function related to the production and marketing of Australian dairy products.

In Cheese – flavour’s crowning achievement, Herbst depicts a demure cow wearing a crown of cheese. She is adorned with yellow flowers and wears a traditional cow bell around her neck. The image evokes a sense of the pastoral idyll. Slightly jarring in this context is the large knife which cleaves the cheese balanced on the cow’s head.

The gradation of tone in the background provides a contrast to the clearly defined lines that create the dominant figure of the cow. Herbst has achieved an effective image with minimal detail and has made strong use of symmetry and curved lines in achieving the design. Above the cow’s head, in a simple font, the text tells us that cheese is the crowning achievement of flavour.

This 1962 poster attempts to sell cheese to the Australian population by promoting a connection with a peaceful natural source and by appealing to one of the five senses greatly valued by human beings, taste. If you buy this cheese you will have the opportunity to enjoy a wonderful flavour experience.

Jan Lenica (1928 - 2001) was a major Polish graphic artist who worked in film animation, poster design, book illustration and the design of theatre costumes.

Lenica’s 1964 poster, *Alban Berg Wozzeck* provides a strong contrast in every way to *Cheese – flavour’s crowning achievement*, the poster produced for the Dairy Board. It is not a poster which invites us to contemplate a peaceful, natural environment, promising the enjoyment of eating a flavoursome product. Rather, it confronts us with its emotional intensity. The poster was produced for a Polish National Opera production of the Alban Berg opera *Wozzeck* by the Austrian composer Alban Berg. The opera, based on an unfinished play, *Woyzeck*, by German playwright Georg Büchner, was first produced in 1925. It tells the story of a poor soldier who subjects himself to medical experimentation and becomes increasingly disturbed. He murders the mother of his illegitimate child when he discovers that she has been unfaithful to him.

Lenica produced his poster in the cultural and political context of 1960s Poland. The image of a screaming head was frequently seen in Polish posters of the time and it has been argued that this enabled the designers of cultural event posters to convey an underlying message of political tension. It has been suggested that “the fears, duplicities and contradictions of contemporary urban and political life” are exposed in Polish posters of this era.

Looking at the poster *Alban Berg Wozzeck*, the viewer’s eye is drawn to the open mouth with its stark white teeth. The mouth is screaming and the sound seems to be echoed in the reverberating red lines that move outward in concentric shapes across the poster surface. The screaming mouth and the powerful reds reflect the psychological torment and violent actions of the protagonist. While the Polish social context of the time forced a shift away from consumerism and hence a refocussing of the role of posters away from being sales tools, Lenica has nevertheless produced a poster which conveys the essence of that which it is advertising.
…… the poster was the most powerful visual advertising medium before the age of colour television and glossy consumer magazines. Thousands of airline poster designs have been created over the years, and those that survive leave us a rich visual history of airline travel in aviation’s century.”

Even the world’s first airline, the St. Petersburg-Tampa Airboat Line used simple posters to advertise its flights. During the 1950s air travel became a common means of transportation and it was a prolific period for the production of airline posters.

As early as the 1880s travel posters were being produced in Switzerland. These posters promoted the country as a holiday destination. During the twentieth century the Swiss tradition of poster design continued to develop and was utilised by Swiss airlines to promote their commercial passenger routes. By the early 1930s several Swiss carriers merged to form Swiss Air Lines or Swissair.

The poster, *Ferner Osten Swissair*, produced in 1957 is dominated by a stylised image of exotic Asian destinations. Prominent in the foreground is the figure of a Japanese woman in traditional kimono and behind her we see an elephant draped in rich patterned fabric and carrying three men wearing turbans. All four human figures are looking directly at the viewer, thus drawing us in to their evocative faraway context. The graphic technique employs a flat picture plane, rich and vibrant colour and strong use of line, patterning and repetition. The only actual depiction of an aircraft on this travel poster is tiny; a small red plane in the bottom left hand corner heads to the elephant’s trunk. This is the 1950s Swissair Arrow logo.

By the time this poster was produced in 1957 there had been a fundamental shift in the focus of travel posters. In the early twentieth century the journey was paramount. Early airline posters aimed to convince the prospective traveller that they could have a fast, safe, entertaining and luxurious journey just as they could on a luxury liner or railway train. However, the reality of travel on early passenger planes was often rather more uncomfortable than the posters promised. Nevertheless, the advent of commercial air travel opened up the world to many people and enabled travel times to be drastically reduced. Gradually the emphasis on travel posters shifted away from the journey to the destination. Air travel was promoted as the best way to reach a longed for holiday destination. Hence, images of the destination became the dominant visual subjects of travel posters.

4 Szurovy, 2002, p. 7
Questions

1 “... the graphic arts are practically non-existent now through ... technology but ... you should have a civilization where the painters and the poets also have a part to say and not just the computer”
To what extent do you agree with Herbst’s contention that technology has caused the demise of the graphic arts?

2 With reference to the three posters discussed, to what extent do you think posters reflect, inform or shape the society in which they are produced?

3 In the context of today’s society, with the immediacy of communication facilitated by information technology, is there a place for printed posters displayed in public places? Give reasons for your answer with reference to both types of media.

4 With reference to the three posters examined in this resource, discuss the design elements that make a poster successful as an art work and as an advertising tool.

Further resources

Accessing the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection online.
A significant number of examples from the University of Melbourne Art Collection are available to view at the Ian Potter Museum of Art website. To search the University of Melbourne Art Collection, please follow these steps:

Click on: ‘The Collection’ and ‘Search the collection’
Click on: ‘Detailed’
Under ‘Collection Name’ drop down menu and scroll to ‘Gerard Herbst Poster Collection’

Reference list


RMIT: Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT) website. URL: http://rmit.edu.au/


The travel poster is one of the key genres within the history of the poster. Initially dominated by text detailing routes and fares, posters for shipping lines focused on the market demand for freight and migration transport. With the growth of tourism in the later nineteenth century, railway companies used new printing technologies to present alluring and colourful images of newly accessible holiday destinations. In the twentieth century, airlines modified this design tradition, combining the existing imagery of exotic destinations with the promise of global reach.

Travel posters present fascinating examples of graphic design, combining both reason and romance. The viewer must be convinced of the reliability and superiority of the transport provider but equally must be tempted to make an emotional decision based on the promise of relaxation and adventure. In meeting these demands, travel posters often emphasise the distance of destinations, and their difference from the traveller’s home culture. In the latter case, exotic costume, folk imagery, nostalgic style and rich colour are brought into play. Bold, simple typography, often stripped of any decorative embellishments, confers a reassuring sense of modernity and efficiency to airlines and railways.

The posters in the exhibition were selected from the many travel posters held in the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection. They are evidence of the immense growth of tourism and air travel after World War II, but also of the persistence of nineteenth-century colonialism and romanticism within the mentality of the tourist.
Attention please!
Posters from the Gerard Herbst Collection
25 Jan 2007 to 06 May 2007
Guest Curator: Daisy Searls

Attention please! exhibited striking posters by leading European, English and Australian designers and revealed stylistic and conceptual shifts in graphic design over four decades.

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.

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

The graphic wit of Roland Topor:
posters from the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection
23 Feb 2011 to 15 May 2011
Curator: Bala Starr

This exhibition presented twenty-two posters by influential Parisian artist, filmmaker and novelist Roland Topor, who died in 1997. From 1990 to 1996 Topor was commissioned by Münchner Kammerspiele (Munich Studio Theatre) manager Dieter Dorn to create posters to promote theatre productions. Each poster usually lists season dates, the title of the play and its author, the director, set and costume designer and sometimes the starring actors. Roland Topor depicts absurdities and impossibilities in his art. Influenced by Surrealism as a young teenager, Topor believed drawing should be communicated directly from the unconscious. In the Munich Studio Theatre posters, he varies his expressive, swiftly drawn but detailed style to suit the mood and key plot elements of the play each poster promotes. Colour, tone, line, composition and figurative motifs (notably including many different plant and animal orifices) come together in each image with imagination and often macabre wit.

LEFT: Klaus Stäck (1938), Die Gedanken sind frei [Thoughts are free] c. 1979, Germany. colour offset, 84.0 x 59.0 cm, reg. no. 1996.4259. The University of Melbourne Art Collection. Gift of Gerard Herbst 1996. © Unknown*

Politics of Polish posters
Anna Frey Taylor

The rise of the Polish poster during the late fifties and early sixties remains for many a puzzling paradox: How did such a vital, inventive and politically astute school of design emerge during a period of strict Soviet Union censorship? Interestingly, Polish poster design was able to flourish under communist rule for two unique reasons.

Authorities saw the poster medium as a simple propaganda tool from which to espouse the benefits of socialism. The form’s mass production meant that it was regarded as less individualistic than the traditionally expressive art forms of painting and sculpture and was seen, therefore, to pose little threat to social order. As a result, poster designers enjoyed relative artistic freedom during the fifties which permitted them to use the medium to offer oblique commentaries on their political surroundings and to test new ideas.

A centrally planned economy also meant that the focus and purpose of poster design changed. Given the limited nature of consumerism in a state run economy, poster design became an essentially aesthetic pursuit evaluated not by its ability to generate sales but in terms of its artistic merit.

This evolution is reflected in the prominence and quality of Polish cultural event posters. Film poster art of the late fifties focused on the artist’s interpretation of the mood and climate of the film, rather than on a literal transcription of the plot through the use of film stills. This practice enabled artists to create posters for cultural events in which they could allude to the grim realities of everyday life. Cultural event posters often reflected the artist’s interpretation of the entire cultural mood and political climate, not simply that of the film or event being advertised.

A wide visual language of metaphors and symbols developed in these Polish cultural event posters. One of the most effective and persistent motifs to emerge during the early sixties was the image of an abstracted head with an open screaming mouth. This motif is evident in many of the Polish event posters held in the Potter Museum’s Gerard Herbst Poster Collection.

Polish poster designer Jan Lenica made particular use of this motif in his 1964 design, *Alban Berg Wozzek*. The poster was designed for the Polish National Opera’s performance of an Alban Berg production and depicts a human head reduced to a rhythmic construction of reverberating red tones. The tortured scream of the figure conveys the psychological torment of the central character in Berg’s opera.

While the use of the screaming head motif was largely confined to cultural event posters, critics, including James Aulich, have insisted that the motif carried political weight. Aulich has argued that Polish
poster designers of the sixties used the image to express the fears, duplicities and contradictions of contemporary urban and political life.

This use of the screaming head motif to express political sentiment is more explicit in Lenica’s design of 1977, *The Gorgon Case*. The poster depicts and appropriates the figure of Lady Justice; blindfolded, she stands ready to deliver impartial judgement. Yet, Lenica’s morality figure is covered in grotesque fat-lipped open mouths which, rather than conjuring ideas of truth and fairness, allude only to the blinding danger of power. This striking poster compels the viewer to question what denotes a truly fair system of governance.

By expressing moral indignation and individual consciousness through astute and subtle design, the Polish cultural event poster became a vehicle for political commentary as well as a graphically distinctive source of information.


**Bibliography**


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