

The Museum of Modern Art

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No. 23A
FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE
Wednesday, February 19, 1969

"Poster collecting in the 1890's reached the proportions of a mania; today, there are countless collectors of posters, and shops that cater to their desires. The printing of extra copies of posters intended for specific advertising campaigns was common then, and is common now; it is not unusual for a poster to be designed for sale--and not advertise a thing. Chéret did this 70 years ago; designers are doing it today."

Thus Alan M. Fern begins his text for Word and Image: Posters from the Collection of The Museum of Modern Art, published by the Museum February 19, 1969. The 160-page book is illustrated by 211 examples, including 30 in color, selected by Mildred Constantine who also wrote the introduction. Miss Constantine is Consultant to the Department of Architecture and Design, and Special Assistant to the Director of the Museum.

In this selective history of the modern poster as an art form, Mr. Fern, Assistant Chief, the Prints and Photographs Division of the Library of Congress, starts his analysis at the point in the latter half of the 19th century, when two ancient forms of communication - writing and pictures - were joined. He concludes with the recent appearance of the psychedelic poster where "the message is loud, usually irreverent, and often confusing; posters for musical events and political groups carry equally illegible captions, almost as if the artist defies his viewer to find the words in the midst of his design."

The two basic approaches to posters - that of the artist and of the designer - were established in 1890, Mr. Fern says, and have existed side by side ever since. "Even more important, the posters of the nineties were crucial in bringing avant-garde painting into contact with the decorative arts, resulting in the combustible style of Art Nouveau. Graphic design has served a similar catalytic function since, and does so today."

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Mr. Fern traces the art of the poster from the pioneering contributions of Chéret, Toulouse-Lautrec, Aubrey Beardsley, and Will Bradley, through the World War I posters of James Montgomery Flagg ("I Want You for U.S. Army"), Käthe Kollwitz, and Kokoschka ("Down With Bolshevism"). He discusses the work from the Bauhaus as seen in posters by Walter Dexel, Herbert Bayer, Oskar Schlemmer, and Jan Tschichold, and he greets the development of photography in graphic design between the wars by such masters as Lissitzky, Piet Zwart, and Herbert Matter. The work in England by E. McKnight Kauffer and in France by Cassandre and Carlu are analyzed. New forms which were developed in the American poster from 1930-45 by artists such as Lester Beall, Herbert Bayer, and Leo Lionni are also described in detail with numerous examples; At the same time Ben Shahn was producing such famous images as "For Full Employment after the War Register Vote," which are illustrated and discussed.

He writes with enthusiasm of recent work from Japan, Poland, and Switzerland; the poster produced by painters he regards as primarily a postwar phenomenon practiced with impressive results by such diverse artists as Dubuffet and Frank Stella.

Mr. Fern concludes by suggesting that the poster, as we have known it, may be already a thing of the past. "It is a paradox that today, when there is so much exploration and activity in the field of poster design, there should be so few places for the public display of posters. Apart from the subway station, airport, or theater billboard, places to mount posters have become practically nonexistent; ... and perhaps this is why the graphic designer has been exploring new functions for the poster."

Miss Constantine, formerly Associate Curator of Design, directed an exhibition called "Word and Image," which was shown at the Museum in 1968, then at HemisFair in San Antonio and in Mexico City at the Olympics. A traveling version is now touring the United States. It was the first comprehensive historical survey selected from the Museum's collection of more than 2,000 posters and the 35th poster exhibition held at the Museum since 1933. Since 1964, a small selection from the Museum's collection has been continuously on view. Miss Constantine was responsible for many of the preceding shows and for much of the content of the poster collection.

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Alan M. Fern was born in Detroit in 1930 and received his A.B., M.A., and Ph.D. degrees from the University of Chicago. He has written and lectured on the history of printing, printmaking, and modern art, and was a contributor to Art Nouveau published in 1960 by The Museum of Modern Art. Currently a Director of the American Institute of Graphic Arts and of the Print Council of America, Mr. Fern has directed a number of print exhibitions at the Library of Congress.

The bibliography for Word and Image was prepared by Bernard Karpel, the Museum Librarian.

WORD AND IMAGE: POSTERS FROM THE COLLECTION OF THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART.
 Selected and edited by Mildred Constantine; text by Alan M. Fern; designed by Massimo Vignelli. 160 pages, 211 illustrations (30 in color). Hardbound, \$12.50. Published by The Museum of Modern Art, New York. Distributed in the United States and Canada by New York Graphic Society Ltd.; in the United Kingdom by Trans Atlantic Book Service, Ltd.; and internationally by Feffer and Simons, Inc.

Additional information available from Elizabeth Shaw, Director, and Joan Wiggins, Assistant, Department of Public Information, The Museum of Modern Art, 11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019. 245-3200.