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book review of

The Poster, Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s–1900s
by Ruth E. Iskin

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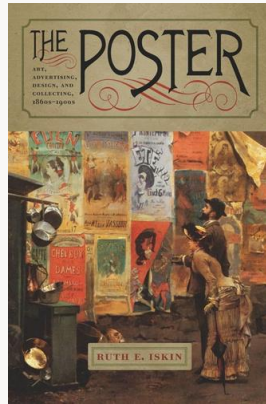
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Ruth E. Iskin,
The Poster, Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s–1900s.
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With *The Poster, Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s–1900s*, Ruth Iskin provides the first comprehensive examination of the emergence of the poster as a significant art form. In her text, within an introduction and eight chapters, Professor Iskin argues that the poster has been ignored by advocates of intense modernism, because it was seen as an example of popular art that referenced the common man as well as issues drawn from the life of the street. She sets out to demonstrate why these earlier perceptions were incorrect, using significant examples of poster art drawn from France and England (and occasionally other countries) to substantiate her claims. Each of her chapters also examines the poster from a broad perspective, one reinforcing the other in an interlocking mosaic that connects all the issues raised by the conclusion of the book.

The introductory chapter illuminates the central argument that the poster was at the crossroads between fine art, popular culture, advertising and the emerging field of graphic design. Noting the way in which the French artist Jules Chéret pioneered the illustrated color lithographic poster helps Iskin establish the broad diffusion of poster images beyond France, creating an international phenomenon. As the poster was internationalized, it became “a crucial new mode of advertising products, entertainments, and services in industrialized nations” (4). Iskin identifies two types of posters: the crude commercialized examples and a more aesthetically refined example known as the “artistic poster.” It is the latter type that draws most of her attention, even when the message in this type of poster might not have been as clear as it could be because of the innovations of a given creator. Both poster types proliferated. The “commercial poster” produced in a realistic style was found throughout city

streets, on walls of buildings and on independent billboards. The artistic poster also increased, especially in Paris after 1881, when a new law supporting freedom of the press made it permissible for those mounting posters to have free access to buildings.

Identifying the 1890s as the period when poster production mushroomed, Iskin suggests that the widespread commentary in the press and in specialized journals helped make people aware of this new art form in their midst. Finding that there were certain advocates of the poster, such as the art critic, collector, and government official Roger Marx and the great collector Henri Béraudi, Iskin uses these supporters as models for further argumentation. Through them she sets out other reasons for this book: the necessity of reiterating that there was no difference between those who created posters and those individuals who were painters. During the 1890s there was an avowed belief that all the arts were equal, that the old hierarchies placing painting as the most significant art form were challenged and by-passed by the achievements of the poster. This excellent introduction sets forth the arguments that the book will pursue in further detail. Marx was a very strong collector of prints and a fervent supporter of all the applied arts. Learning from Japanese art, which he championed, Marx applied the idea that all the arts were equal as they were in Japan. Béraudi, on the other hand, was a collector of prints and a scholar whose publications provided evidence for the ways in which he sought out prints as the most important medium of the era. Both men ultimately knew each other's work, as Marx would have relied on Béraudi's cataloguing of printmakers to help him with historical documentation. Béraudi's publications, examining even the most little known printmaker, provided evidence that prints were a significant area for study and continued appreciation.

The first chapter, "The Poster as Art," argues that the poster was a site for creative experimentation just as much as painting was at the time. Through examples by Pierre Bonnard, Jules Chéret, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, Aubrey Beardsley and the Beggarstaffs Brothers, Iskin examines these artists' contributions toward making the poster a viable art form. She also posits that there were two types of modernism: the first which was found in the posters of the period and the second, a twentieth-century modernism that reiterated the belief that there was a modernism only for high art and that the poster had to be relegated to the margins since it never achieved this high degree of creativity. While this is a very challenging statement, Iskin does not explain, in depth, what she means by high art modernism. Nor does she explore whether this definition of high modernism was a product of the time or something that was developed later on by art historians trying to explain the period itself, while showing an avowed bias toward painting. Examples by artists other than the group she has identified as models would have strengthened her position even further, but Iskin does not do this.

In identifying these tendencies the author posits that posters were written out of the history of art since their mass appeal and attention to the people of the streets did not satisfy the higher taste for creativity embedded in what the avant-garde was trying to accomplish. This chapter marks out the territory where the poster has remained, becoming a crucial way for seeing what Iskin has set her sites on reclaiming the importance of the poster as an independent art form. The fact that she does not provide evidence for either what the poster was rebelling against or how the activities of so-called higher art influenced poster design hampers the credibility of her argument.

In the chapter on “Toulouse-Lautrec, Jane Avril, and the Iconography of the Female Print Connoisseur in Paris,” Iskin identifies the new female poster collector, including the role that women were playing in examining posters. Focusing at first on Toulouse-Lautrec’s selection of the dance-hall performer Jane Avril in a print for *L’Estampe Originale*, the author uses this image, among many others, to comment on the development of women as icons of sensitivity in assessing posters and prints, rather than being relegated to the image of a seductress luring men into purchasing the advertised object shown in a particular poster. She sees Toulouse-Lautrec as “the first to represent a contemporary woman as a connoisseur of prints in a color lithograph” (82–83). This is a significant section of the book since Iskin has focused on the creation of a new iconography that privileged women as being much more than a femme fatale, becoming instead women of ideas—as was the case with Jane Avril. The cover of *L’Estampe Originale* also gave considerable visibility to Jane Avril as she was now seen as a promoter of the visual world of color lithography as well as posters.

The second large section of the book examines “The Poster and the Print: Reproduction and Consecration” beginning with a chapter on “The Color Print: Art in the Age of Lithography.” Focusing on the support and writings of Roger Marx, also a distinguished critic and member of the intellectual Jewish elite of the period, and André Mellerio, a passionate collector and defender of color lithographic prints, she establishes the way in which these men spoke up fervently for color lithography as a legitimate field of creativity at a time when such art work was not yet admitted to public exhibitions, such as the Salon. Both men also demonstrated that an art of multiples, such as lithography, was an art form that remained creative and vital, despite opposition from those who strongly opposed the unity of all the arts, and refused to accept prints as equal to paintings in the hierarchy of the established genres of creativity.

The following chapter, “Les Maîtres de l’Affiche: Aura and Reproduction”, tackles another difficult theme: the availability of lithographic prints in portfolios and books. In this case study Iskin probes the validity of art works that are often issued in reduced formats, making them more widely available to a broad public. This democratization of the artwork is critical for seeing the ways in which color lithographs (including posters) challenged the concept that an original art work could exist in only one example. Today collectors often obtain numerous examples of a print that has been reproduced widely for mass dissemination.

Part III, “The Poster as Design and Advertising” begins with a chapter on “Art and Advertising in the Street.” In seeing the poster as critical for the advancement of design issues, this section also advances other arguments. Iskin sees the street as extremely significant because it was here that there was a “dialogical encounter between art, advertising and the street” that permitted the creation of a type of imagery that could reach the passerby, the stroller, and the individual on his way to work or rushing to make an appointment (33). Iskin also notes how the poster was received in both Paris and in London; in the case of the latter she gives the British high marks for creating images that reflected design aesthetics combined with “functionality.” This chapter provides a foundation for continued discussion of the poster within the field of twentieth-century graphic design, although she might have carried her discussion further to demonstrate exactly how a poster achieved its goals through either form, suitability of image, or minimalization of text.

In chapter six, “Poster Design: The Dialogics of Image and Word,” the author probes the ways in which the poster tried to integrate words and images to create a satisfactory composition. As Iskin examines the ways that poster designers tried to solve the issues surrounding the use of words, she carefully demonstrates that the new posters, created artistically, used words sparsely, letting the image speak for itself. In this way the poster created an image-centered artwork that was most effective when a creator understood the intricacies of downplaying texts so that an image could directly affect the viewer of the poster. The radical simplifications used by poster designers also advanced the case for seeing posters as a very creative medium, stressing early abstraction through the type of visual shorthand the posters often used.

Part IV, “Collecting and Iconophilia,” begins with a lengthy chapter on “The Poster at the Origins of the Age of Spectacle: The Rise of the Image and Modern Iconophobia.” In this chapter Iskin reiterates issues suggested earlier such as the ways in which the poster replaced the priority placed on the word in a variety of print media from trade cards and sheet music to fully developed posters. She also raises another significant point. Posters were seen as a threat to masculinity since they emphasized the role of women in society, created images that children could understand because of the simplifications of form, and erased the boundaries between men who were educated and the common worker in society. With not everyone taking these arguments as serious, the critics who supported the dissemination of the poster, such as Roger Marx, saw it as a symbol for the democratization of art, an art for the masses that made it possible to reach a large audience through the placement of posters everywhere. Iskin does not carry her idea of posters threatening men far enough, leaving the reader to try to understand why this was happening if indeed it happened at all.

The last chapter “The Iconophiles Collecting: Posters as an Ephemeral Archaeology of Modernity” reveals a new type of collector: someone who placed considerable value on objects that dealt with everyday life. One individual Ernest Maindron, collected fifteen thousand posters, thereby demonstrating that ephemeral objects, those materials that could rapidly disappear since they were placed on walls where they were exposed to the weather, were valuable enough to preserve for posterity. Iskin notes that “posters depicted many topics that were absent not only from academic painting but from the avant-garde art of the time” thereby further commenting on their utility and on their modernism (274). Seeing posters as objects of contemporary history, as ways in which the passing moment was preserved, elevated this art form to a significant position. The emergence of a few individuals who saw their role as collectors of this material helped secure the fact that posters would be preserved for the future.

“The Poster” is a challenging book, one that securely establishes this type of artwork as significant for continued examination in the future, while also demonstrating that there is a history of poster creation that is only beginning to be understood. The adoption of carefully selected visual examples, the probing of the ways in which the poster was seen in the 1890s, and the establishment of a firm history of ideas surrounding poster creation make this book a text that audiences can use without fear of finding ideas being advanced without suitable explanation in history. At the same time, the larger implications of her discussion: the combative relationship between the poster and avant-garde art or the ways in which gender issues were couched in certain posters are not fully or satisfactorily explored. We are left with a type of one-sided discussion of posters in the 1890s that cries out for a deeper, more

penetrating examination of the social issues of the day and of the effectiveness of the poster in doing what it was supposed to do.

With this text Iskin has created a book that beginners can use, that educators in the classroom can feel secure about noting, and scholars working in the field of graphic art and design can reference as a tool for further consideration. This is no small achievement. But we have to await a stronger, more penetrating examination of the poster. Other poster makers in other countries need to be considered. Despite some editing lapses, some redundant language, which could have been pruned from the text, this is a book worthy of noting, using, and applauding. But it is only the first step toward a broader understanding of the poster phenomenon.

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