

# POSTERS



*Merrill C. Berman's extraordinary collection of 20th-century posters provides the core of this book and the exhibition it accompanies. As is true of all significant collections, his is the result of profound knowledge and a deep regard for the artists and designers who have created these works of graphic art. Alma Law and Merrill Berman share an interest in the Russian film poster; that common background was the basis for their conversation about collecting.*

**Alma Law:**

*How did you first become interested in collecting graphic art?*

**Merrill Berman:**

My parents were collectors of American antiques and collecting was something I became involved with in childhood. From the age of ten or twelve I began collecting political ephemera, campaign memorabilia, political flags, tokens and buttons. I cut my teeth on campaign art, and in a sense, my later appreciation of graphic design came from an early and constant exposure to this material. It had color, typography; candidates trying to communicate to a mass audience through their posters and buttons. I pursued this interest until I went to college, and then more or less forgot about it.

When I came back to collecting, it was to collecting art, mainly contemporary art, but also post-impressionist and American abstract expressionist art. I was, for example, an early collector of works by Richard Estes, who became one of America's most renowned photorealist painters, and of paintings by Wayne Thiebaud. This was in late 1966 or 67. There were some quite nice paintings in that collection, but I didn't really get a sense of personal fulfillment from that field.

Through a combination of study and developing one's eye, and also collecting, one's taste is gradually refined, and that's what's happened to me. But it became impossible to go on, as the cost of many of these paintings had become quite prohibitive. I had important Gorkys, Pollocks

and de Koonings and several Soutines. I had a Renoir, and other quite substantial pieces. Yet I didn't feel that I was doing anything more than participating in a trend that had already been well-documented and well-exhibited. There was no personal contribution beyond that of selecting a fine painting or being in a position to buy it. So in 1973 I decided to sell the collection.

In the meantime, I had started to renew my interest in graphic art. I rediscovered my own collection of political material and decided to build on that. I felt that being a pioneer in a field was more exciting and meaningful than coming into an area that was very well mined. You can contribute more to a little known field and have more personal gratification as a collector by bringing together material from the far corners of the earth, putting it into a collection, exhibiting it and making other people aware of it. This was stimulating, and it also involved some scholarship.

My own collection of political ephemera actually carried me right into graphic design. Some of the earliest examples of graphic art were the broadsides and woodcuts done in the 18th and 19th centuries for commercial and political purposes, even before the use of color lithography. There are some fantastic 19th-century pieces done in textile form and on paper for candidates like Andrew Jackson, William Henry Harrison and John Quincy Adams. There was also the European broadside, like the one I have for the Revolution of 1848, right after the overthrow of Louis Napoleon. The designers were often unknown artisans or printers, but the pieces they created really stand out because of their use of color, type and layout. Some of these artisans developed the technique of lithography, the use of stone lithography and chromolithography.

*Was there any specific incident or particular poster that caused you to move into 20th-century graphic design?*

It was really the 19th-century product advertising and political poster that led me into the more sophisticated 20th-century "art" poster. When I was traveling around Europe in the early 1970s, especially in France, I came across posters in flea markets and antique shops, and I met a few people who were selling posters. That was when Art Nouveau was being rediscovered, so the first posters that I was exposed to were works by Mucha, Privat-Livemont, Steinlen, Grasset, and of course, Chéret.

A lot of political advertising done between 1896 and 1908 for the campaigns of William Jennings Bryan, McKinley and Taft had used Art Nouveau graphics; some of the campaign buttons had incredible Art Nouveau designs, very much akin to the work being done at the time by Grasset, Mucha and Berthon. That's why I was able to swing over and appreciate Art Nouveau posters when I saw them in Europe.

Then there was Art Deco. In Paris I became increasingly aware of posters by Cassandre. I also came across other material in poster form that didn't fit into obvious categories. One of the most extraordinary discoveries was a large poster by Herbert Bayer, "Section Allemande," 1930 (p. 94). It was for a decorative arts and crafts exhibition in Paris. Bayer had by that time left the Bauhaus and had his own design studio in Berlin called Dorland. "Section Allemande" was an extraordinary work because it involved things I had never seen before in posters such as a new method of typographical layout, photomontage, and the use of geometric or abstract forms.

The next thing I found was a group of Soviet political posters. There were probably thirty of them from a museum in Belgium, or perhaps they had come out of the Soviet Union. I was never really able to establish exactly where they had come from.

*This, in a sense, also provided a link to your earlier interest in political ephemera?*

I had always been interested in political material. I was a political science major in college and had studied the Russian political system. And so I found these posters quite fascinating. One of them, for example, which was done in 1931, incorporated photographs, a photomontage of Trotsky, Stalin and other Russian revolutionaries, including many leaders whom Stalin later purged. Other pieces dealt with the Five Year Plans; they were exciting in terms of color, type and design.

I hadn't really delved into the meaning of typography, the avant-garde or photomontage, but just the way type was used in these Russian works made them quite distinctive from the decorative poster. Most collectors at that time were interested in decorative posters, not with those with greater content. The Russian posters were distinctly non-decorative and they were trying to communicate something. You just knew that there was something special about these pieces, in their extraordinary use of color, form and typography. They obviously emanated from some major art movement.

*It must have required a great deal of research and detective work to track down these obscure posters.*

There's very little source material with which to educate yourself about these posters, so you feel like you're flying by the seat of your pants, and that was the exciting part of it. The more you dug around and expanded your contacts with dealers in books and with collectors, the more posters you could find that were meaningful. One would come across pockets of some of the most exciting material.

Also, it was fortunate that I met like-minded people in the field who were tilling the same soil. Robert Brown and Susan Reinhold, for example, had opened a gallery in the early 1970s devoted to antique posters. They had the German objective poster, as it has come to be called, people like Lucian Bernhard who were designing commercial graphic material in the 1900–1920 period. There were other styles that I became aware of such as the Vienna Secession, the Mackintosh group in Scotland, and the Beggarstoffs in England. There were various categories that became evident as I pursued the subject more and more. One could run across this material, but not in great quantity. There were also some great American artists, Bradley and Penfield, for example, who were making illustrations between 1896 and 1910.

Some of the posters from World War I were also very interesting, and of course there was Futurism, Dadaism and the Bauhaus. Those artists developed spectacular posters and in the process they revolutionized typography. Later I began to pick up constructivist pieces from the 1920s and De Stijl material. With the Russian material people like Arthur Cohen and his colleagues at Ex Libris, also specialists like Gail Harrison Roman, were a great help. And there are others. John Vloemans, an antiquarian bookseller in The Hague, has a tremendous appreciation of architecture and book design and of the Russian avant-garde.

*How would you assess the relative influence of the various artists and movements you have discovered in the course of building your collection?*

As great as some of the pioneering work coming out of the Bauhaus and De Stijl was, probably the greatest influence has come from the Russians. Russian typography was so juicy and exciting. You know, some of the theater posters for Meyerhold's theater, for example, and of course, Rodchenko and El Lissitzky, who was traveling to western Europe. He was certainly a pivotal figure. But there were many, many anonymous people doing equally incredible work. Some of them were true unsung heroes whose names we'll never know.

I think the work of the 1920s set the standard for everything that people take for granted in contemporary design, even our own commercials and television graphics. It all came out of the frenetic brilliance of the 20s. And yet, we still have not by any means plumbed the depths of the eastern European avant-garde, the Polish avant-garde, for example, and the other Slavic countries. There are so many more names, more artists, and more material that we have to see . . . from Russia and other east European countries as well.

This is evident in the most recent Polish exhibition in Paris. The work by the Blok group, for example, is fantastic, very exciting graphically. And in terms of the use of photography, they had a totally different slant from that of the Russians. The fact that these people were crossing paths with

each other, and all the work they were producing was permeating mass culture through the film poster, for example, has also yet to be explored. Take, for instance, the Stenberg brothers and their film posters. These works are breathtakingly beautiful and important. I think you have to look at them again and again and you see different things each time. I think their impact on the art world is yet to be felt.

The very fact that there were so many major figures, not only artists, but literary figures and architects working in this format, suggests that this was an area of fascination for the artists themselves. Once again it shows the synthesis and the integration of all aspects of culture that was at the basis of movements like Constructivism and the Bauhaus in the 1920s. It was just not easel painting anymore. It covered all aspects of culture: book design, textiles, architecture, theater. In that sense you could say that the graphic arts really brought together many areas of artistic endeavor.

*As your collection has developed—and of course, it has grown enormously in these few years—where are you today? What is the process you're going through now, a continuation of discovery, refinement?*

I think the discovery process is something you can't predict, it's just something that happens. But for me, being able to bring all this material together has been a continuing mission. First of all you have to be lucky enough to come across these works and to be in a position to buy them. You have to consider their condition. Often they have to be restored. A lot of this material would have been spread to the far corners, or never been rediscovered and a lot of it might even have been destroyed. So there's the continuing process of search and discovery. A great deal still remains to be uncovered, especially in eastern Europe.

Even in Germany we're coming across unknown works as members of the avant-garde and their families die and their archives and collections and libraries become available. We're not that far away from the great figures of the 1920s, some of whom are still alive, and if not, often their heirs have material. So there's probably another twenty years of rediscovery and of putting material together from all these distant fields, the Russian avant-garde, and the western European movements. There's also ephemera—little broadsides, programs—brilliant examples of graphic design, a quarter the size of a poster.

The goal is to continue a systematic rediscovery of these materials, and to build an archive that will be valuable to people who are interested in graphic design and in the synthesis of design and all other forms of art, and that will also be helpful in giving a certain identity and profile to the artists themselves, something better than just being buried in the cobwebs where they might not have been discovered for quite a while, if ever. I think a lot remains to be done.

*What advice would you have for someone who is interested in collecting graphic design?*

From a collector's point of view graphic design is in a very early phase. The material is important artistically, it is visually exciting, and it is still to some degree available. One of the virtues of this field is that it is an area where someone like myself can build a systematic and comprehensive collection.

On a unit basis the price of these works is low compared to other art, either graphic works of known artists, or original works, and they're probably of equal importance, and sometimes of greater importance than original artworks. Some of these posters are very rare although they were probably made in multiples. Originally many of them were totally ignored and all known copies of many works were destroyed. The basic point about posters is that almost no one has had any regard for them. Art historians and critics have had little regard for anything existing in multiple copies made for mass consumption. Also, art dealers prefer one-of-a-kind works. They can't relate to multiples unless they're numbered and signed by a famous artist. It's a prejudice that has affected the attitude of many people toward this material. They have never understood typography, anything with a message. A poster has typically been something seen in the window of a drugstore or a butcher shop. It was advertising, not art.

I think that if one started collecting painting today, one would have to have absolutely staggering resources, whereas here, for a relatively modest sum I have been able to put together a very systematic, comprehensive collection of design material (i.e. posters and ephemera) by some major figures in 20th-century art and graphic design. The fact that this was a relatively unknown and neglected area, for one reason or another, has meant that it presented a great opportunity, a great challenge.

One of the negatives about collecting is that you get frustrated. What are you really doing? Can you really accomplish anything? You can collect a few things, get a few nice examples, but can you ever really make a major contribution to the field? The exciting thing in dealing with graphic works is that one is able to pursue things as a scholar and as a collector at the same time in a comprehensive and systematic fashion. Any enduring value in collections of graphic materials will stem directly from their cultural, historical and aesthetic qualities. This will be more widely recognized as curators and other collectors participate and carry on the discovery. And in the meantime there is enormous satisfaction in rescuing and preserving many of these vital works.