

# The History of Posters

By Olof Halldin



John Parry, 1835

## INTRODUCTION

These pages are meant to provide information about the poster in Sweden starting with the significant era in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. The public has little knowledge about the holdings of the National Library's poster collection, which is sad because it contains a trove of artistic treasures. So, this is a brief attempt to spark interest in the poster, as a phenomenon and for its artistic qualities.

## BACKGROUND

The poster is a composition of pictures and words – or words alone – often with a distinct graphic expression. Interest in what the poster has to say must be triggered in the perhaps stressed and distracted passerby. For that reason, a poster designed with text alone needs stunning typography to compensate for the lack of an appealing pictorial element.



Lithographic stone. Photograph: Halldin/Malone

That has often been the case, so designers have used a variety of type styles in a single text-only poster to catch the viewer's eye. Variation in the typeface was important to make the often long blocks of text easier to read. One characteristic of older posters is that they can be likened to "wall newspapers." Illustrated posters often have an artistic quality; it is unclear whether or not that was deliberate, but one thing is for sure, the time speaks for the poster.

In many cases, our views on the esthetic properties of the poster seem to change with time and we often elevate them to new heights. Nostalgia and recognition are appealing phenomena and the temporal perspective lends new qualities to the poster in the eyes of the modern viewer, who may perceive an almost naive charm in how messages were expressed and marketed in days gone by. Poster design was often poorly paid work done as a sideline. Many creators were prescient enough to sign their work, but far from all were, which is unfortunately still true.

## THE EVOLUTION

The earliest posters are most reminiscent of enlarged newspaper ads with text and, very occasionally, illustrations set in columns. According to some sources, the first printed bill was posted in England in 1477 by a gentleman named William Caxton. The claim may be open to debate, since the poster's job of communicating a message is surely as old as the art of printing, or even older – for why wouldn't poster-like bills have existed earlier? There is no law that a poster has to be printed.

The modern poster is considered to have been born in the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, 1866 to be exact. Jules Cheret hung posters in Paris that had been produced using color lithography. Cheret and Toulouse-Lautrec created *La Belle Epoque* posters in France. The Art Nouveau style, typified by Hans Hollwein's woodcut-inspired surfaces, advanced the evolution of the poster on the artistic front.

Swedish artists were influenced by this and in 1890 formed the short-lived company “Artistic Posters,” which created a valuable series of posters by some of our greatest artists. Some of the notable artists who worked at the company were Olle Hjortzberg, Ragnar Östberg, Nils Kreuger, Artur Sjögren, and Albert Engström. In 1893, Caleb Althin, as an employee of the company, made an artistic advertising poster for a brewery, Stora bryggeriet, which proclaimed that “Stora bryggeriet’s beer is best.” Increasingly, posters were made in the form of large, colorful pictures. The idea was to display an artistically elevated quality in the advertising in order to more effectively communicate a message and thus sell the product. In these cases, the text element was usually fairly brief.

For more than 150 years, posters have been a significant part of the array of information we encounter every day. They may be aimed at spreading information that brings people to an entertainment venue or informs them about changes in public policy. And of course they may simply be about selling merchandise – letting people know that the taste of a particular tea is something not to be missed.



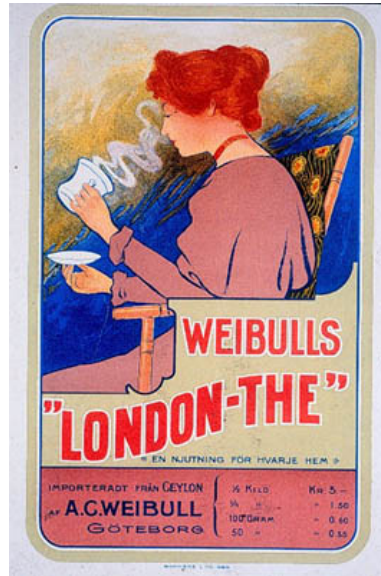
Caleb Althin © [1896]

## THE MESSAGE AND THE ART

Posters are extraordinarily clear reflections of the values, trends, and important events of their time. The poster acts as an indicator, shaping attitudes and trends and thus is a superb mirror of the times. Posters should be an expected element in recreations of historical settings, and advertising posters play a significant role here with their manipulative presentations of the messages. A common line of demarcation is often placed between artistic and commercial posters, even though they usually coincide. Today we understand that the two are not mutually exclusive and are more inclined to consider many illustrated posters works of art.

The more or less anonymous creators of these works are legion. Posters often have more than one creator – perhaps a group including the artist, art director, copywriter, and layout artist – but not always. Theatrical posters are often signed by the set designer and artists often design posters for their own shows. Twentieth-century printing techniques have made mass production of illustrated posters possible.

Text and pictures are carriers of the message. The picture illustrates the text. The interaction in the graphic expression between picture and text is what many believe in the modern sense is the unique characteristic of the poster. The poster provides an opportunity to appeal to the viewer’s imagination and emotions. The poster must compete with the fact that the viewer is often in motion, at a distance, or perhaps distracted by the context in which the poster has been hung. It must grab attention fast and make an instant impression, and the picture is by far the fastest method.



Anonymous Advertising Poster 1890

The poster's job is to inform. Viewers should feel that they have learned something, that they have been informed. This requires various stratagems or forms of artistry such as seduction, agitation, or manipulation. Well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century, poster messages were communicated with simple symbols used to express courage, strength, hatred or something else the viewer would identify with or be annoyed by. Attract, surprise, shock, and remind are central precepts in the rhetoric of posters. An effective poster uses combinations of stylistic resources that accentuate each other. A good communicator must have the guts to play on familiar conditions and use tried-and-true rhetorical strategies, preferably while introducing new motifs.

As mentioned, the temporal perspective lends impact to older posters with regard to both content and artistic achievement. The messages often take on a comical undertone, while the artistic qualities, which perhaps were not originally meant to be anything special, may be perceived as incredibly gifted. Modern viewers may smile at the bombastic rhetoric used to launch a product. One often sees the hyperbole of advertisements more clearly with the passage of time. But still, the creators probably deliberately used humor to clarify the intended message. The wordplay and the humor are palpable and, as is still the case today, they are meant to help the viewer associate with the message intended by the poster creator. For contemporary viewers the humor may sometimes seem very drastic and almost crude in a way. Certain phenomena cannot even be transferred in translated form to modern advertising idiom. For instance, the view of ethnic features is a sensitive matter today that should be handled with care. Another distinct change is that in Sweden today, advertising alcohol and tobacco is a violation of laws and ethics.

The 20<sup>th</sup> century brought many new impulses from the painterly arts. The collage of objects and letters of Cubism inspired poster artists, as did Surrealism. The Bauhaus Movement's experiments with surfaces, photomontage, and typography were directly applicable. Daring to tell a story visually has been a clear challenge in the epoch of modernism. When we look back at artistic developments of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, we can justifiably claim that it is within design and

graphic design that the best of the traditions of modernism have been passed on and translated into a viable visual and design idiom.

The breakthrough in Sweden came with Functionalism in 1930. It was not until the 1950s that artists were liberated from the style created at the end of the 1920s. However, originals were still done by hand and transferred to the printing medium by lithographers. In recent decades, new means of expression have come into uses that primarily benefit offset printing and photographic methods.



Rich. Bergman © Exhibition poster 1919

## MOVIE POSTERS

When the subject is posters, a lot of people probably think movies. In the early days, movie posters were anonymous creations in the form of “insert posters” that were not particularly suited to capturing the attention of busy people. The creators limited themselves to presenting scenes from the movie under a wooden headline.

But some time into the 1920s, layout became important at roughly the same time for various poster genres. Again, the focus was not on the artistic aspects, but rather on bringing people into the theaters by any means necessary. The silent movie posters are still so appealing from an artistic point of view due to their capacity to combine the commercial and the artistic. The two extremes, squeezing in as many eye-catching and audience-attracting ingredients as possible and creating artistic quality are beautifully represented here.

Movie posters were produced in an unceasing stream, which according to many has had a detrimental effect on their quality over the years. Factors that an artist must keep in mind are to accentuate the hero, depict a romantic or dramatic scene from the movie, draw the actors in a portrait-like manner, etc. The audience must recognize their matinee idols. The breakthrough for the artistic Swedish movie poster came in the 1920s, the glory days of silent movies in

Sweden. The 1930s shaped the style of the classic movie poster for several decades to come. Photo collages were mixed with drawings. The photograph provided information from the movie and the drawings drew attention to the poster.



Jerk Werkmäster © Movie Poster 1920

## POLITICAL POSTERS

Different messages inspire different design idioms in poster art. There is a difference between how you present a product or a service – that is, between an abstract and a concrete message. Likewise, social information, political propaganda, or cultural events impose various demands for how the message should be presented. The design is also affected by the sender and the receiver, not only by the content.

In the years before the Second World War, the hallmark of political posters was strong wording, where most things can be arranged in black or white. Cartoons were commonly used. The poster was used rather sparingly in the service of political propaganda in Sweden before the First World War.

A study of political campaign posters to the present day reveals certain developmental tendencies. Early in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, posters were primitive and almost never illustrated. The texts were long and rather arduous reading. But eventually professional artists were engaged, primarily advertising people, to create the illustrations. One can say that every decade had its distinctive poster style, which reflected social changes in its own way.

Before 1920, the main job was to get people to the polls. Cartoons and symbolism soon became the fashion. The threat from the left could be illustrated with workers chopping down a tree in whose branches perched anxious burghers. One characteristic element in the development of Swedish political posters was that the Right developed its campaign posters earlier than the Left. Rightist Party posters of the 1930s are colorful, for instance, while those of the Social Democrats are subdued, although that would later change. The same rhetoric was often used by the Right and the Left, and it can sometimes be difficult to identify the party behind the poster. The message became more straightforward in the 1940s: The slogan “A straight left will knock out the Right” was illustrated by a picture of a man swinging a punch. The funny thing is that there was a poster from the Rightist Party the same year that talked about a “straight right,” where the illustration shows a fist crushing the words “Communism” and “Nazism.”

Foreign models were used frequently in the interwar period, when the inspirations from both Soviet and German models were obvious and where the design idiom is fairly similar between the two political systems. In Sweden, the politics and the color schemes became progressively more nationalist in tone for some years into the 1930s. The political posters of the postwar era have a hard time reaching the heights of inventiveness that characterized earlier message design.



TL © Political Poster 1947

## FINALLY

Other categories of posters that characterized the settings in which they were hung are circus and entertainment posters. These have been preserved since the 1700s and in the earliest years often featured simple illustrations, often in woodcut, of stylized animals and people. Other

examples of poster categories include theater, concerts, preparedness, art, and exhibitions. The oldest poster in the National Library's poster collection dates from around 1680 and is a text-only theater poster from the Bällhuset Theater in Stockholm. The oldest illustrated poster, also from Bällhuset, is from 1705.



Anonym Cirkusaffisch 1851