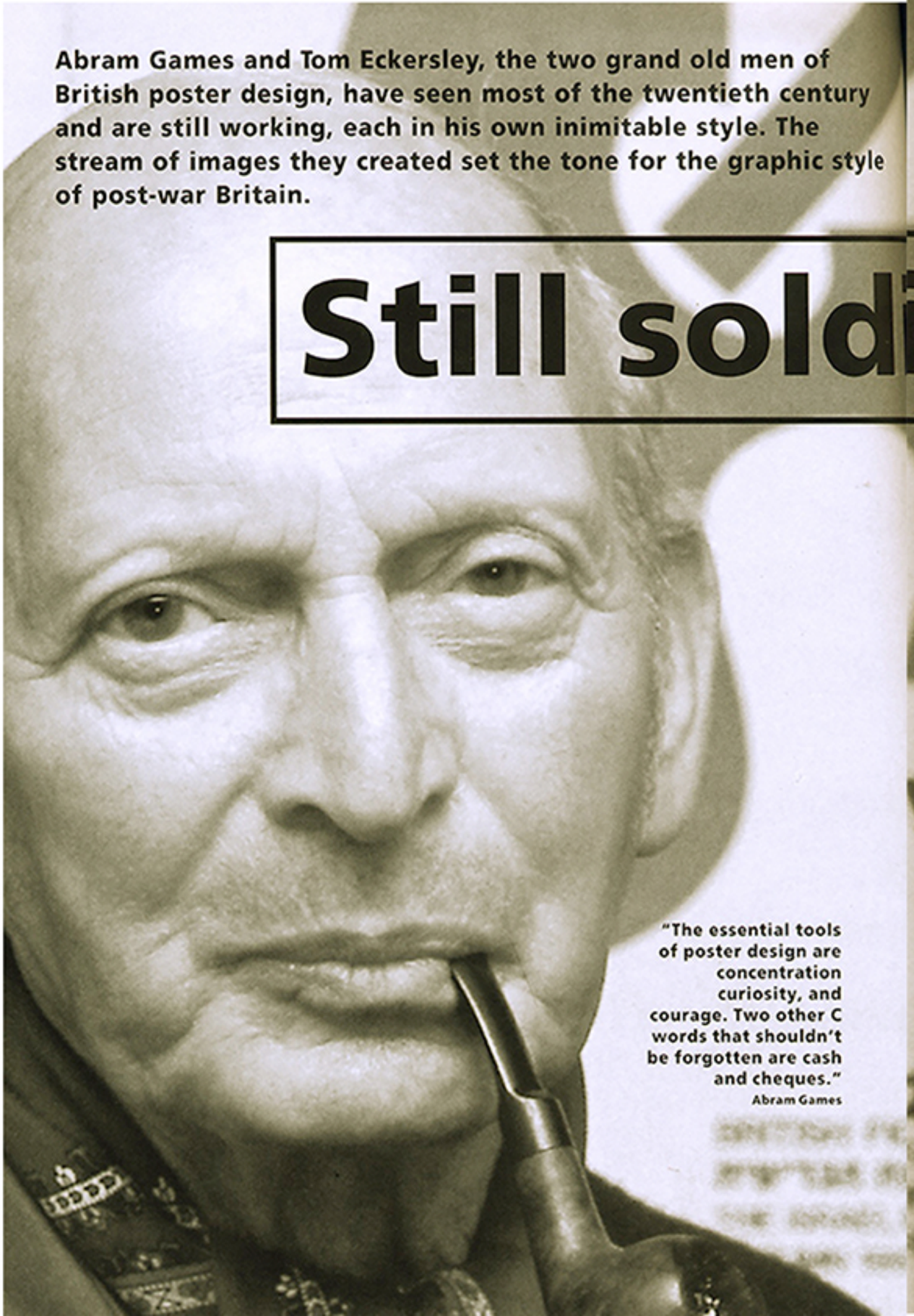
Abram Games and Tom Eckersley, the two grand old men of British poster design, have seen most of the twentieth century and are still working, each in his own inimitable style. The stream of images they created set the tone for the graphic style of post-war Britain.

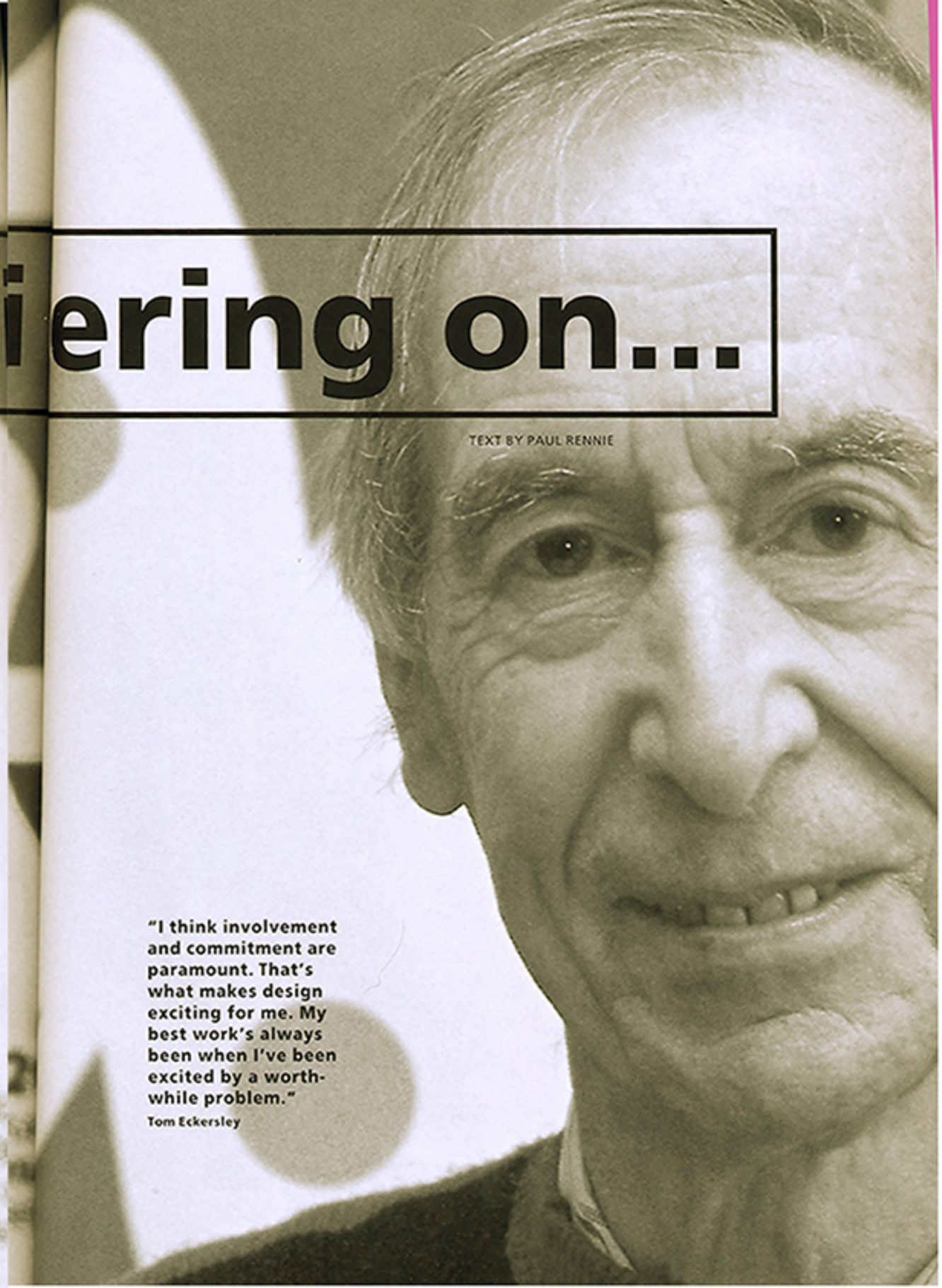
Still soldiering on...

TEXT BY PAUL RENNIE



"The essential tools of poster design are concentration curiosity, and courage. Two other C words that shouldn't be forgotten are cash and cheques."

Abram Games



"I think involvement and commitment are paramount. That's what makes design exciting for me. My best work's always been when I've been excited by a worth-while problem."

Tom Eckersley

1. *This Child Found a Blind*, 1943, War Office

2. *London Zoo*, 1976, London Transport

3. *Guiness*, 1956, Guiness PLC

1

Abram Games

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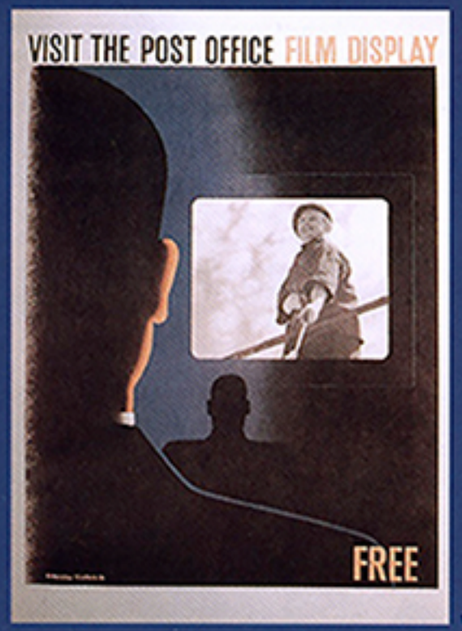
1. *Visit The Post Office Film Display*, 1938, GPO Film Unit

2. *Piccadilly Line Extension to Heathrow*, 1970, London Transport

3. *By Bus to the Pictures Tonight*, 1935, London Transport



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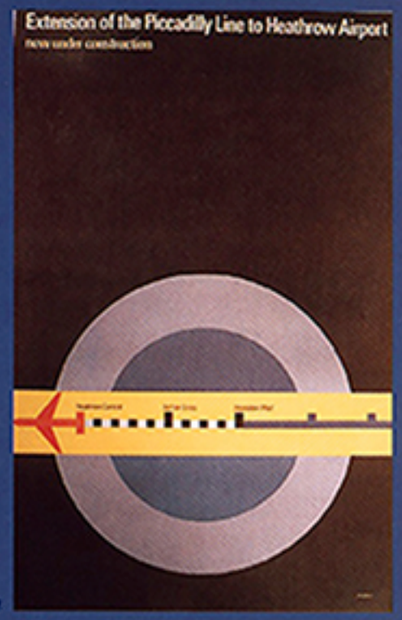

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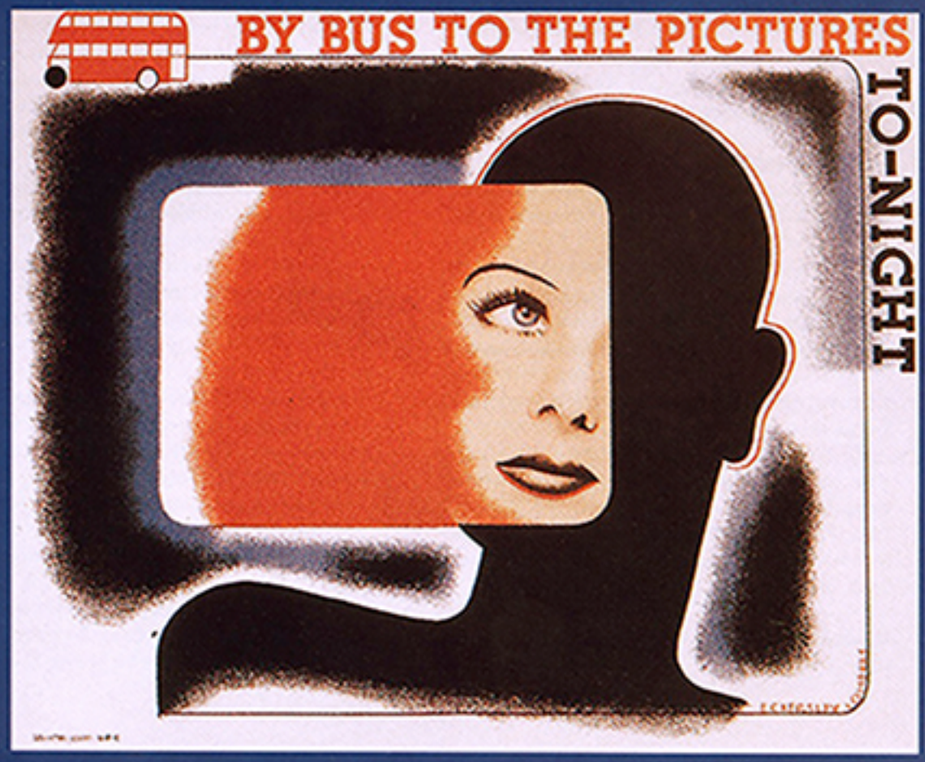
Tom Eckersley



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Abram Games and Tom Eckersley, both born in 1914, are the surviving members of a generation of designers that has experienced the aesthetic revolution of modernism and has had to grapple with a technological transformation in the processes of graphic design.

Eckersley was born in the industrial North-West of Britain. His earliest memory of posters and graphic advertising is bleak he recalls endlessly slaving away at ordinary letterpress work until he visited an exhibition of art and industrial design, which prompted him to attend Salford School of Art. He discovered an informality and friendliness among students and staff that he had not experienced at school.

Games grew up in the East End of London, where he saw a lot of posters on hoardings and railway platforms. Against the advice of his school tutors, he felt powerfully drawn to poster design. He was impatient with the traditional courses taught in colleges at the time and after only two terms at St Martin's School of Art he left to make his own way in the world, keeping up only the evening life-drawing classes.

The first years of this century saw the most profound advances in modernist aesthetics, but these were largely ignored by both British public and artists. It was not until the arrival in London of Edward McKnight Kauffer, an American artist who had been studying in Paris, that British poster design began to incorporate some of the ideas of modern art. Kauffer's first designs date from 1918 and his work throughout the 1920s and 30s perfectly captures the increasing mechanization of urban life. Kauffer's art, like that of Cassandre in France, marks a progression towards a synthesis of word and image. Eckersley was introduced to Kauffer when the American was at the height of his fame and in a position to pass on projects to young designers who needed the work. In contrast to Games, Eckersley has always preferred collaboration and so, when he moved to London, he established a studio with his friend and fellow student, Eric Lombers.

You chose early on to work in collaboration. Why?
Tom. *I was in partnership with my friend Eric Lombers throughout the 1930s. It suited us both, sharing ideas and working together.*

Teaching is a kind of collaboration.
Tom. *Yes, that's true. I've always found the process of teaching very rewarding and stimulating. Look at the principles behind the Bauhaus.*

So, is design a social skill?
Tom. *Yes. I think involvement and commitment are paramount. That's what makes design exciting for me. My best work's always been when I've been excited by a worthwhile problem. I think you can then express ideas, start a dialogue and make a difference.*

Between 1934 and 1940 Eckersley and Lombers work for major institutions such as the Post Office and Shell-Mex BP. They had already produced designs which included photo-montage, a process that had been pioneered in central Europe and that Kauffer had experimented with in Britain. The advertising style of the 1930s, at least the style used by the biggest organisations, was shaped by an ethos of public service that reflected the values of quality, service and tradition. This style was appropriated by the state in the period before the outbreak of hostilities. The war caused the break-up of Eckersley's partnership with Lombers. Eckersley was attached to the Air Force and Lombers to the Army. Eckersley's first job in the war was map-making. Eventually he was called upon to use his skills as a graphic designer for the Ministry of Information and he made many designs promoting safety and vigilance in factories, offices and in the street.

Soon after he had established himself as a graphic designer, Games was awarded 2nd and 1st prizes in consecutive London County Council competitions for poster design. His winning design, that was pasted all over London in 1936, was strongly criticised, giving him the image of a young rebel. However, these early successes enabled him to leave the commercial studio where he had been working and turn free-lance. The August 1936 issue of the magazine Industry featured six of his early proposed designs for such companies as Truman's and Friary breweries, Danish Eggs and the Air Mail service of the General Post Office. By the outbreak of war and his call-up to the Infantry in 1940 he had already produced work for Shell-Mex BP, the Post Office and other major clients.

You've almost always worked alone. Why?
Abram. *Poster design is a very individual thing.*

Even today?
Abram. *Yes. I can't work any other way. I've always signed my own work and wanted it to be my own. I couldn't honourably sign anything that someone else had a hand in. Nowadays most posters are a group effort.*

Is there a particular poster that has inspired you?
Abram. *Practically anything by Cassandre. He was brilliant.*
Tom. *I always liked the work of Hans Schleger, who used the pseudonym Zéró. He was very clever. Kauffer's Devon's Moors is also an evocative poster and a powerful design.*

After a year with the Infantry, Games was drafted to the War Office to produce a recruiting poster for the Royal Armoured Corps. Other military subjects followed and, in 1942, he was appointed to the newly created post of Official War-Office Poster Designer. This afforded him an unique opportunity to produce a series of strikingly economical and stylish designs, all within the tightest of deadlines and with a minimum of resources.

Looking back Games agrees that he had a good deal of luck. The War Office had simply scanned an alphabetical Army list, looking for a professional poster designer. If they had gone further they would have found Lomber or if they had trawled the Air Force list they might well have chosen Eckersley. This, Games recalls, was the moment when the 'fickle finger of fate' intervened in his favour.

At the end of the war Games resumed his career as a free-lance designer. He was visiting tutor at the Royal College of Art between 1946 and 1953, yet, being largely self-taught, he retained a degree of scepticism about the value of college training. He recalls that his first instinct at the beginning of the new college year was to sift through the folios rejected by his colleagues on the teaching staff. Several students, thus saved, have gone on to do great things.

Eckersley re-established himself in a private design practice with the return to peace. During the next ten years he produced many fine designs for clients as diverse as Gillette, The Post Office and London Transport. The designs show an ability to distil a message into a precise visual image and to lighten it with humour. He was awarded the OBE in 1949 for his services to poster design. In 1957 he was appointed Head of Graphic Design at The London College of Printing where he remained until 1976. The return to teaching marked a change in the direction of Eckersley's work and a recent exhibition of his work shows simplified shapes and flat colours that evoke the pioneering work of the Beggarstaffs and Tom Purvis. Eckersley was elected RDI in 1963 and awarded the medal of the Chartered Society of Designers in 1990.

What qualities do you consider essential in a poster designer?
Tom. *Patience. There are many solutions to a particular problem and you have to choose the most effective design, but without a thorough understanding of communication you're lost.*
Abram. *Curiosity, concentration and courage. There are two other words beginning with C that shouldn't be forgotten cash and cheques.*

No computers?
Abram. *Not for me.*
Tom. *I don't think they contribute to the creative side of things. I'm an artist and a designer and I've always known how much I rely on the skills of drawing and simplification. Those are artist's skills.*

The 1950s and 60s were decades when the 'broad grin' asserted itself as the marketing symbol for a peaceful, prosperous and forward-looking society. During this period Games' posters were seen everywhere on hoardings with work for British Rail, The Financial Times, British European Airways, Guinness, London Transport and many other clients. Like Eckersley he was awarded the OBE (in 1957) and in 1959 appointed a Royal Designer for Industry. In 1991 he received The Designers and Art Directors prestigious President's Award.

So what is the future of poster design?
Abram. *That's the big question. Posters will always be with us in the sense of combining image and text, but new technologies will move the output from printing to laser projection.*
Tom. *Yes, I agree. But paper posters have the great virtue of simplicity.*

And so, your byword 'maximum meaning, minimum means' still holds?
Abram. *Yes.* <

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