TOM ECKERSLEY
DESIGNER AND EDUCATOR

PAUL RENNIE

Tom Eckersley was a distinguished member of an 'outsider' generation that transformed graphic design in Britain and contributed to an explosion of visual culture in Britain after World War II. His contemporaries including Abram Games, F H K Henrion and Hans Schleger [Zéró] were from Jewish and émigré origins whilst Eckerlsey was from a north-country Noncomformist background.

Tom Eckersley was born on August 30th, 1914 into a Lancashire family of Methodist faith. The house was, as befits the popular mythologies of utopian Non-conformism, full of books. These formed the basis for Eckersley's practical intelligence as a communicator and problem-solver. He attended Salford School of Art from the age of 16 beginning in 1930 through to 1934. His application, discipline and skill were recognised at the school and he was awarded the Heywood Medal as the best student in 1934. At the school Eckersley had become friends with a fellow student Eric Lombers. The two students began to produce posters and to compete with the designs they saw on the hoardings. Their benchmarks were already beyond the confines of the school. Eckersley and Lombers began to submit work to the advertising agencies in London who usually replied with vague and non-committal praise. The two quickly resolved to move to London in 1934 and to establish themselves as freelance poster designers.

THE 1930s

The duo immediately began to submit designs to prospective clients. The advisory committee for publicity at the Post Office records that on November 6th 1934, a design for a poster had been submitted by Tom Eckersley and Eric Lombers *Plan Your Evenings on the Telephone*. The design, however, was rejected. Newspaper illustrations for the *News Chronicle* that were published at the end of the year are contained in the Archive.

Success quickly followed. The London Transport Museum records that during 1935, the duo had ten posters printed, published and displayed by London Transport. The successful association with London Transport immediately established the duo amongst the top echelon of poster designers in Britain during the 1930s. The association between Eckersley Lombers with the Post Office and London Transport brought the young designers into contact with some of the most important and influential personalities in the British design establishment.

During the 1930s the term 'graphic design' did not really exist. Eckersley recalled that there were 'commercial artists' who did a variety of work in whatever style was required for small advertising purposes. These jobbing artists were, whatever the technical merits of their work, looked down upon by the poster artists who

considered themselves to be working at a more elevated level. This was an outlook that Eckersley promoted to his students in the poster class at Westminster School of Art.

By the end of the 1930s, the partnership of Eckersley Lombers had successfully integrated themselves into the small world of British poster design. The advent of World War II would transform their lives, break the partnership and revolutionise the practice and processes of design.

WORLD WAR II AND THE 1940s

The propaganda demands of war disrupted the cosy relationships between politics, establishment and the media. The political economy of 1930s visual culture had been characterised, as described above, by an artistic sensibility and limited opportunity. For the most part, the key advertisers and their poster advertisements addressed a metropolitan audience much like themselves. The circumstances of approaching war made the development of a mass media an urgent priority so as to underwrite the propaganda efforts required to mobilise the support of all.

This shift towards a mass visual culture had been, in some senses inevitable. The artistic posters favoured during the 1930s took months to prepare and were expensive in terms of labour and materials. The whole process was dependent on a craft tradition that dated, more or less, to the beginnings of industrial lithography in the 1860s. The relatively few, and very big, lithographic printers that controlled the poster printing business had an effective regional monopoly on plant and craft skills which made them reluctant to invest in new machinery and processes.

The last posters of the Eckersley Lombers partnership are dated from the early part of the war. The Archive contains a poster for Austin Reed, tailors to the officer class, which is signed and dated 1940. Thereafter Tom Eckersley became part of the Royal Air Force and was assigned to cartographic work. Eric Lombers went into the Army. There was a brief effort to re-establish the partnership towards the end of the war. GPO and The Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA) posters are signed by both designers and dated 1944.

Tom Eckersley made a remarkable contribution to poster design during World War II at the same time as being in the RAF. He seems, uniquely, to have been able to combine his technical drawing and cartographic duties with working on briefs given him by RoSPA. Once visualised, he would work up the solution on his twenty-four hour leave at home. Eckersley was the designer most often used by RoSPA during the war period. A catalogue of the industrial safety posters produced by RoSPA during World War II lists some 22 published designs by Tom Eckersley. The average of other designers

RoSPA poster | *Asking for Trouble* | Colour litho | 1940s | 51 x 76 cms

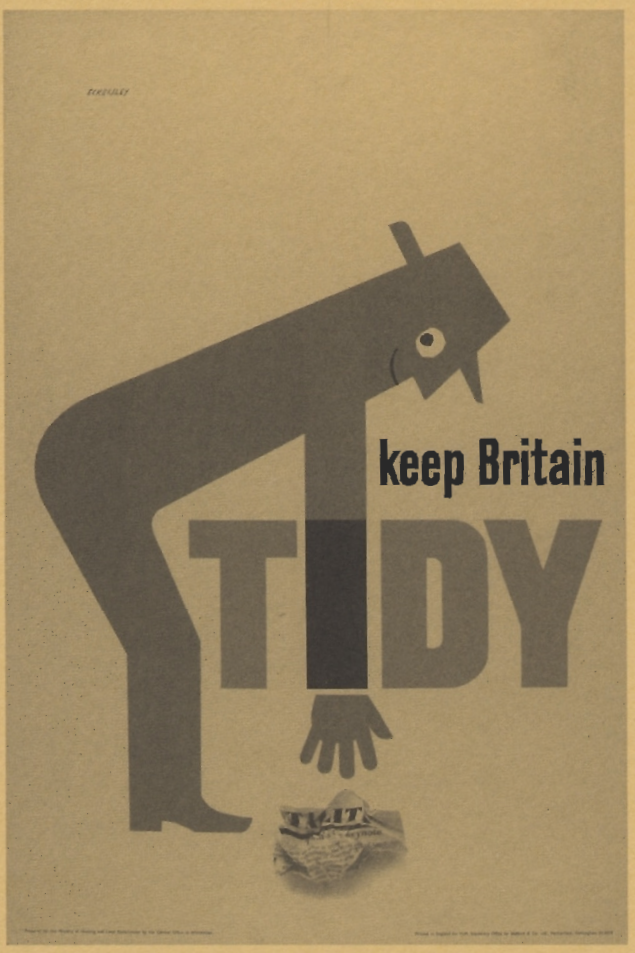
is about six for the same period. Obviously, personal circumstances count for something, and it is worth noting that Eckersley's role within the RAF allowed him a stable working environment in addition to his family home with wife, Daisy, and two young children. The RoSPA campaign made use, exceptionally, of émigré designers and their circumstances of internment and marginalisation must have made working very difficult.

It is worth commenting, briefly, on the RoSPA campaign [see above]. The industrial safety posters were aimed at workers in factories and workshops associated with the productive effort to support the military. The authorities were dismayed to find that hospital resources available to the potential victims of enemy action, were being used by persons who had injured themselves in work-place accidents. These were mostly identified as preventable. Ernest Bevin, Minister of Labour for the duration, authorised a programme of safety education as part of an effective initiation, for neophyte workers, into the industrial workplace. Bevin understood that any progress on the safety issue made during the war would be translated into a permanent welfare gain on the part of 'his people'.

The RoSPA campaign contributed to the realignment between labour and capital identified by George Orwell and others, as a necessary condition for victory. Bevin's political contribution to underwriting the campaign insured that social gains of this realignment were lasting and permanent. Eckersley's contribution to the development of a coherent visual language associated with this political project cannot be overstated. This contribution was acknowledged in a feature by Mary Gowing in *Art and Industry* and by the award of an OBE in 1948. International recognition came through the pages of *Graphis* and *Gebraucshgraphik*.

Notwithstanding this recognition, the immediate post-war period was a difficult one for many graphic designers. The volumes of work associated with the propaganda efforts of World War II began to fall away and were only partly replaced by other types of government communications. The advertising industry remained in reduced circumstances for many years whilst rationing remained in place and the export market was ruthlessly pursued.

Eckersley found his fair share of clients as a freelance graphic designer. He produced posters for clients such as the GPO, London Transport and made a series of posters for Gillette. An additional source of income at this time was as a book illustrator. Eckersley drew the pictures for Daisy Eckersley's story *Cat O' Nine Lives* for Peter Lunn and published in 1946. In 1947, Eckerlsey made the pictures for the book *Animals on Parade* with words by E A Cabrelly and was published by the Conrad Press. The



Public information poster | *Keep Britain Tidy* | Screenprint | 1960 | 50 x 70cms

second of these has large colour illustrations in the tradition of the French educational texts of Père Castor or Kathleen Hale's *Orlando* books.

THE 1950s

The Festival of Britain in 1951 established a template for the integration of architecture, art and design into a coherent and material expression of post-war optimism and reconstruction. Eckersley entered the competition to design the symbol for the Festival but was unsuccessful against the jaunty Britannia and bunting design by Abram Games. The list of possible candidates had also included Robin Day, Milner Gray and F H K Henrion. This cohort, along with Hans Schleger, effectively transformed the role of the designer in mid-century Britain.

Further recognition came in Eckersley's successful election to the Alliance Graphique Internationale [AGI]. The origins of AGI were Franco-Swiss and marked a European attempt to develop an international community of design in the graphic arts. The name Alliance Graphique, had first been used at the beginnings of the 1930s by Cassandre and Charles Loupot. The new, post-war, Alliance Graphique began informally as a consequence of the important poster exhibition organised by Paul Colin in 1948 under the title 'Exposition de l'Affiche Française'. AGI was founded by Donald Brun, Fritz Bühler, Jean Colin, Jean Picart le Doux and Jaacques Nathan Garamond as an exhibition society. Its first international exhibitions were held in Paris during 1955, London in 1956 and Lausanne in 1958. Eckersley was elected an exhibiting member in 1950 when British representation was exceptional. By 1956, the British representatives numbered Eckersley and Pat Keely along with the émigrés Henrion, Schleger and Lewitt. Ashley Havinden provided British representation on the exhibition organising committee.

The AGI gave Eckersley an opportunity to share ideas from across Europe and to become aware of international developments in graphic design and poster art. The internationalism of Eckersley's outlook was reflected in the choice of posters he made to illustrate Poster Design published in 1954. This was a handbook for students which reflected important changes in art education in Britain after World War II. By the time of the 1956 AGI exhibition in London, it was clear that graphic design, communication and advertising would have substantial contributions to make to that project. Associated with the London College of Printing since 1954, he was invited, in 1957, to lead the newly-formed Design School. The College needed to place itself at the forefront of the developments noted above.

LCP information poster | *Keep an Eye on Valuables* | Screenprint | 1970s | 46.4 x 74.2cms

THE 1960s

Tom Eckersley joined the College at an exciting time in its history. The College had outgrown its existing site and was searching for a new location in which it could establish state-of-the-art facilities for the technical and craft specialisations of the printing trades. A site at the Elephant and Castle had become available and a redevelopment proposal was put forward with a view to opening the new College facilities in 1960.

The redevelopment proposals showed the familiar mixture of workshops and studio facilities and also spaces marked 'design'. It was in these spaces that Tom Eckersley would work. It is surprising to reflect that, at the end of the 1950s, design did not really exist as a recognisable activity that could be taught. Obviously, things were designed but the processes by which this happened remained a mystery except to those immediately involved. Furthermore, the consumer economy of the time was much more static than that of today. New products were still defined by an idea of material or technical progress.

The College's commitment to design recognised the very substantial social changes of the 1960s as somehow inevitable. The College understood that consumer society would continue to develop at an accelerating rate and that graphic design, communication and advertising would all have a part to play in that process. The Design course was amongst the first to promote design as a technocratic and creative practice of problem solving and communication.

Tom Eckersley had firm convictions about design and the impact that intelligent design could have on the communication of new ideas. He expected his staff and students to share his outlook. Eckersley rarely got angry except when he felt that graphic design was being slighted.

The idealism and integrity implicit in Eckersley's approach to his work was a defining characteristic of the period. The utopian ambitions of post-war reconstruction and social justice had, not yet, been worn away by the relentlessness of market forces. In any event, Eckersley was certain of the value of his work as designer and teacher. His partner, Mary Kessel, an artist and teacher also shared this powerful sense of conviction in her work.

The impact of Eckersley's teaching and the College's Design School was evident in the explosion of graphics that occurred at the end of the 1960s. Much of what is recalled as 'swinging London' was actually the visual projection of a new, young and exciting reality. The embrace of new printing technologies immediately made this visible beyond the metropolis.

Tom always combined teaching and his work as a freelance designer. He continued to produce posters throughout the 1960s and was elected Royal Designer for

ILEA exhibition poster | *53 83 Three Decades* | Screenprint 1983 | 51 x 76cms

Industry (RDI) in 1963 in recognition of his skill. Eckersley also produced many posters for use within the College and these helped give the environment a unified and coherent identity. Although he retired from the School in 1977, Eckersley continued to work for clients such as the WWF and for the NBCA scheme that the College co-sponsored. In fact, Eckersley produced posters for the annual calendar exhibition until his death in 1997.

Tom Eckersley's contribution to the development of graphic design in Britain was unique and remarkable. His work as a poster designer would be sufficient to place him at the top of that profession for his sustained output over a career that spanned some 60 years. Eckersley's association with London Transport is recorded as the longest of any designer with that organisation. Not all of his work for London Transport was in the form of posters. For example, he designed a mural for the Heathrow extension of the Piccadilly Line and also designed tiled station panels for the Victoria Line.

Eckersley also made a huge contribution to the development of design education in Britain. This fostered a new generation of young designers. Peculiarly, the role of design education within the political economy of popular visual culture is an area that has not yet received proper attention. He was also able to help develop a visual language that could communicate sophisticated ideas effectively. His work for the RoSPA campaign during World War II marked the beginnings of this project. After World War II, the visual communications of welfare reform and reconstruction provide ample proof of the effective communication of messages beyond the siren calls of commercial advertising.

Eckersley's association, through AGI, with the best of European creative talent placed him at the centre of a wide and influential network of personalities. The combination of these four elements in an individual career is without equal in British design.

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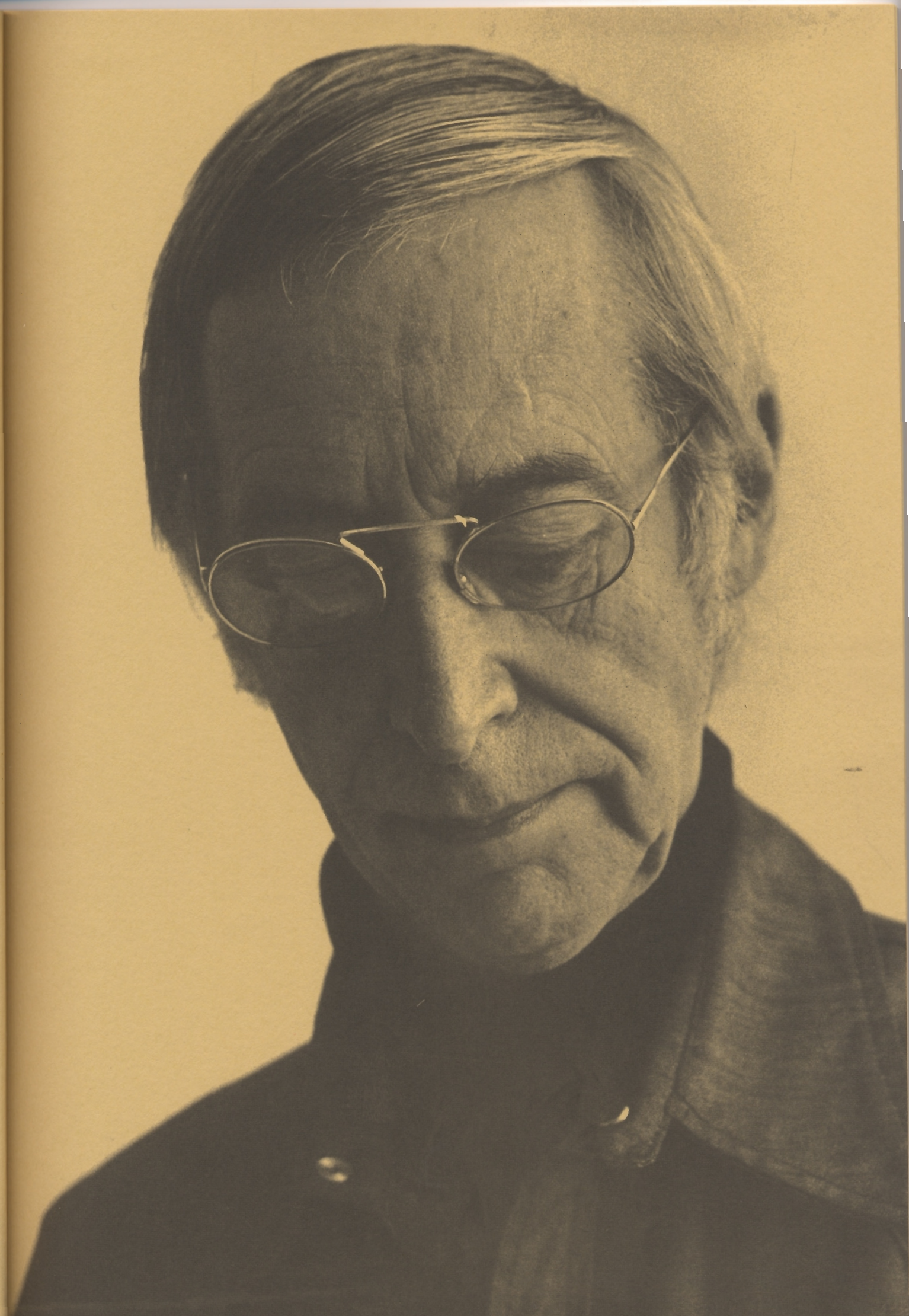

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