

## **Cassandre Poster**

### **L'INTRANSIGEANT**

**1925**

Cassandre's 1925 poster for the Parisian evening paper *L'Intransigeant* was the result of a commission from its editor, Leon Bielby. The paper had been founded in July 1880 and had developed a tradition for polemical journalism aimed at a popular readership with conservative sympathies. Bielby was conscious, in the aftermath of WW1 (1914-1918), of the need to reposition the newspaper in relation to a newly politically engaged audience. This he did by promoting French national interests and by demanding the maximum of German war damages.

Furthermore, the newspaper industry had been transformed as a consequence of WW1. The war had raised questions about the cosy relations between the political establishment and media owners and raised doubts about the quality of objective reporting and the expression of political opinions to a wider public. These doubts had opened a space, within the French newspaper industry, for foreign media interests (mostly Anglo-Saxon) with different views and helped to create a more competitive environment in the market place. Bielby's response was to invest heavily in new machinery and newsgathering networks.

The new technologies made the integration of photography into newspaper art-direction possible and the international scope of the new newsgathering networks helped establish an international projection to the newspaper. The developing competitiveness of the popular press would be resolved, in France during the 1920s and 30s, by the successful use of photography and illustration to create a new and dynamic visual language of current affairs and metropolitan life.

The poster by Cassandre, on the theme of *news*, therefore offers an ideal opportunity to examine popular visual culture in relation to wider social, political and technological contexts. The poster is reproduced as figure 2.

### Part One **Cassandre**

Cassandre was the name adopted by Adolphe Mouron in his career as a poster designer. The name Cassandre is, nowadays, associated with a series of dramatic poster designs created in France during the 1920s and 30s and subsequently in the USA. Cassandre also designed typefaces for the Deberny and Peignot foundry and was a theatrical stage designer of great originality. Portraits of Cassandre are reproduced as figures 1 and 10.

Adolphe Mouron was born in the Ukraine in 1901. His family were Franco-Ukrainian and had links with both the French and Ukrainian wine trades. Mouron's ambition was to be a fine artist and it was natural that he should move to Paris, in the course of WW1, to advance his art education at l'École



Fig One.

Photographic portrait of Cassandre painting the *Normandie* mural for the Exposition Internationale, Paris, 1937.

des Beaux Arts and, subsequently, at l'Académie Julien. It was whilst still a student that Mouron gained third prize in a poster competition for the Michelin tyre company. This success established the possibility of commercial work as a means of making a living for Mouron whilst, at the same time, pursuing his artistic ambitions. Mouron adopted the name Cassandre for his commercial work so as to leave open, at some point in the future, his return to fine art.

Cassandre's first efforts at poster art were greatly helped by his meeting with the Hachard family of lithographic printers with whom he signed an exclusive contract. In 1923 Cassandre designed a poster for the furniture retailer *Au Bucheron*. The design was submitted for inclusion in the 1925 Paris *Exposition des Arts Decoratifs* where it was awarded the Grand Prix. The Paris exhibition launched a new international style known as Art Deco.

Cassandre's success, within the context of the international projection of Art Deco, immediately established him at the forefront of poster design at an international level. Leon Bielby's commission was amongst the first that Cassandre received.



Fig 2.

Poster by Cassandre for *L'Intransigeant* 1925.

### Part Two **Context (art and society)**

Cassandre's poster designs were immediately recognised as commercially astute and intellectually satisfying. They were able to reconcile these, often contradictory, ambitions through the synthesis of image, text and art into a design that was a dramatic and exciting addition to the theatre of the street (*le spectacle de la rue*). This allowed Cassandre's posters to be attached to the wider cultural project, beyond the immediate commercial ambitions of his advertisers, associated with recasting French national identity after WW1 and the promotion of sophisticated aesthetic and metropolitan values as quintessentially Parisian.

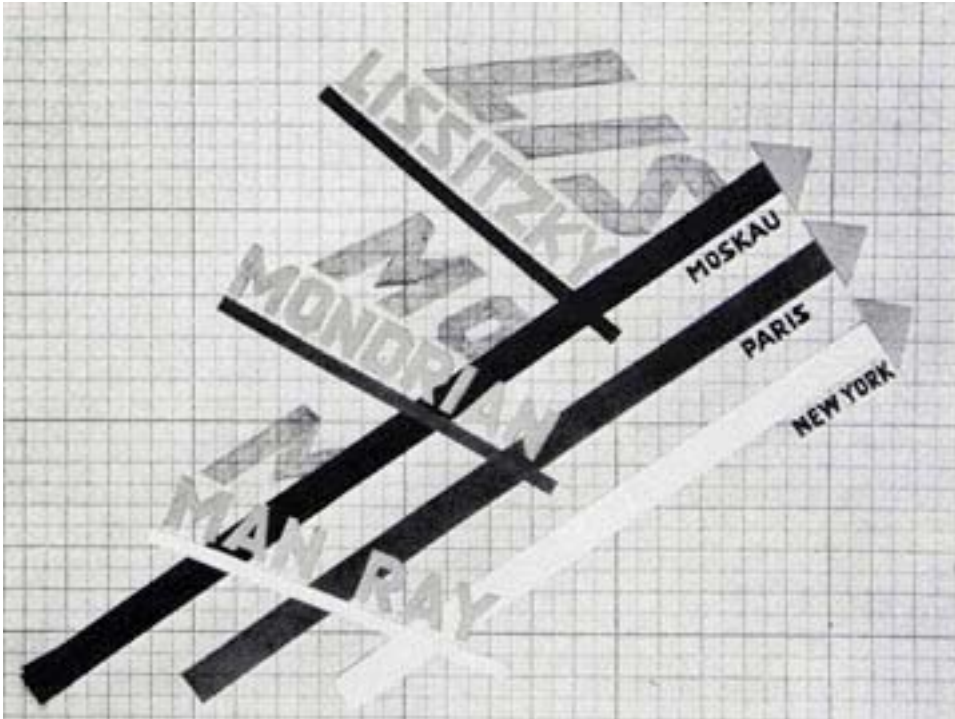


Fig 3.

Graphic projection of Modernism by El Lissitzky, 1925.

The aftermath of WW1 offered an opportunity to recast society around a cluster of ideas identified as Modernist. This enabled the political establishment to argue that the sacrifices of the war had resulted in a different, more egalitarian, form of society. In Britain, this recasting took the form of *homes fit for heroes* and in the granting of *votes for women*. In Russia, the old order was overturned and a new, Communist, society developed. In Germany, the recriminations and economic consequences of defeat created special conditions that accelerated industrial reform and destabilised internal politics. Lissitzky's graphic projection, reproduced above, gives expression to the momentum and direction of these forces for change.

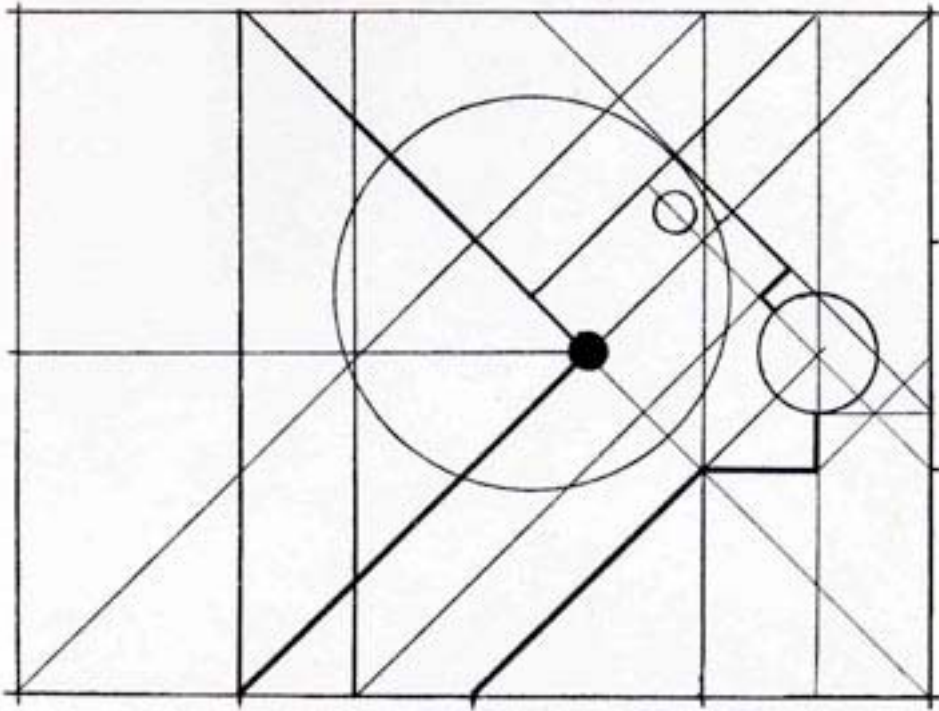


Fig 4.  
Composition of poster design by Cassandre.

In France, the aftermath of war was equivocal. France was victorious but effectively ruined. Conservative interests of establishment, economy and church sought to extract punitive damages from Germany whilst at the same time attempting to limit the appeal of social and political upheaval at home. The projection of a French style of luxury, craftsmanship and taste associated with a modernist synthesis of cubism, drama and quality would assure Paris its continued status as home to the world cultural and artistic elite. Art Deco became the visible cultural manifestation of these ideas as well as offering an opportunity, within the contexts of various exhibitions, to recast French imperial relations between the mother country and its colonies.

During the 1930s this project was continued through the projection of a *style moderne* aimed at a more prosaic mass market and projected through the emerging technologies of the mass media. The radical potential implicit in the technologies of the mass media was recognised by Walter Benjamin and the Frankfurt School.

It is not surprising, therefore, that Cassandre's posters should have a special cultural status within these contexts. The combination of cubist painterly effects and monumental scale gave his designs the characteristics of *high art* whilst, at the same time, their commercial messages and status as advertising gave them a place amongst the best of *low* commercial culture and communication. The similarities between the diagonal structure of Cassandre's design (see figure 4) and El Lissitzky's graphic projection of Modernism are obvious (see figure 3).

Cassandre's training as a fine artist had introduced him to the theoretical and aesthetic characteristics of Cubism. He was able to incorporate this into his commercial designs through the use of interlocking, yet simplified, planes within the picture space, Cassandre's use of outline drawing superimposed on shaded mass allowed for a simplified cubist rendering of form. Also, the scale effects implicit in poster production gave his designs a monumentality that allowed them to compete effectively for attention within the context of a busy city street. Paradoxically, the intellectual simplifications of these artistic theories, implicit in Cassandre's designs, gave his projects a greater potential for advertising as effective communication.



### Part Three **The Paper**

*L'Intransigeant* was founded in July 1880 by Henri Rochefort. The evening paper immediately established itself as a platform for radical ideas in support of national interests and against political moderates at home. The paper was, from the start, hostile to German interests.

It is not surprising that, given the paper's origins, its editorial position during the 1920s should pursue a populist anti-German line. The paper regularly sold a million copies every evening in Paris. A newspaper delivery van with Cassandre's poster on the side is reproduced as figure 5.

The newspaper had invested heavily in new printing presses and in the emerging technologies of photo mechanical lithography. This allowed for the inclusion, within newspaper or magazine, of photographic illustrations. The

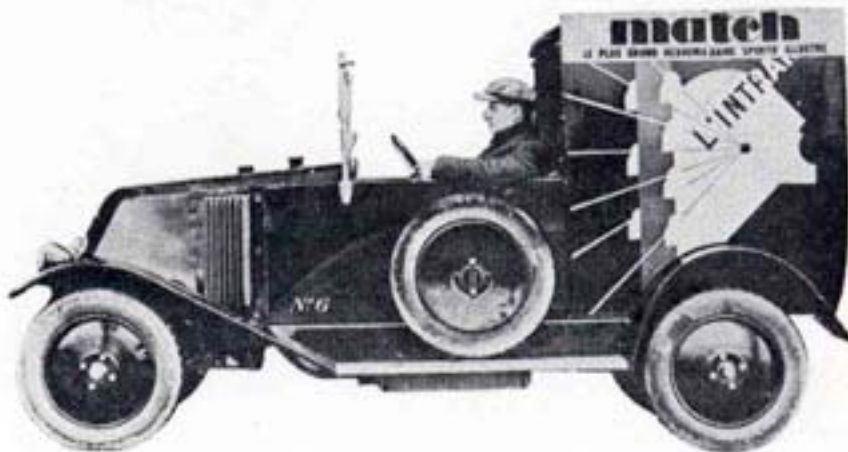


Fig 5.

Newspaper delivery van, 1925.

development of a new visual language associated with the popular press also advanced the related development of pictorial advertising aimed at a mass market. Bielby, editor of the paper, understood that the popular success of his paper and the news agenda would be set by the quality of its photo journalism.

The investment in new printing presses after WW1 resulted in a more highly competitive market where increased circulations were required to make use of the extra capacity of the new technology. The pursuit of extra circulation could be achieved through mergers and the creation of large diversified press groups and by the pursuit of a populist *tabloid* agenda of news stories and features. The resulting mixture of celebrity, incident and scandal has become a staple of the popular press worldwide.

#### Part Four **Symbolism**

The ambitions of the paper and its editor are reflected in Cassandre's poster design. The composition is based around a pictorial design that includes a newspaper boy, in profile, shouting the day's top story. The newspaper vendor is abstracted so as symbolise the editorial personnel of the paper. The idea of the paper as an intelligent force at the centre of an international newsgathering network is given expression through two powerful symbols.

The first is the title of the paper, included as a collage of its masthead along with the words *Le Plus Fort* (the biggest and best, or the strongest). The collage effect is derived from cubist effects pioneered by Picasso before

WW1. The second is the use of a simplified form based on the ceramic insulators of telegraph wires. These shapes indicate a network of communication beyond the scope of all but the largest companies. It is interesting to note that the emergence of international companies with global reach came about as a consequence, in part at least, of the command

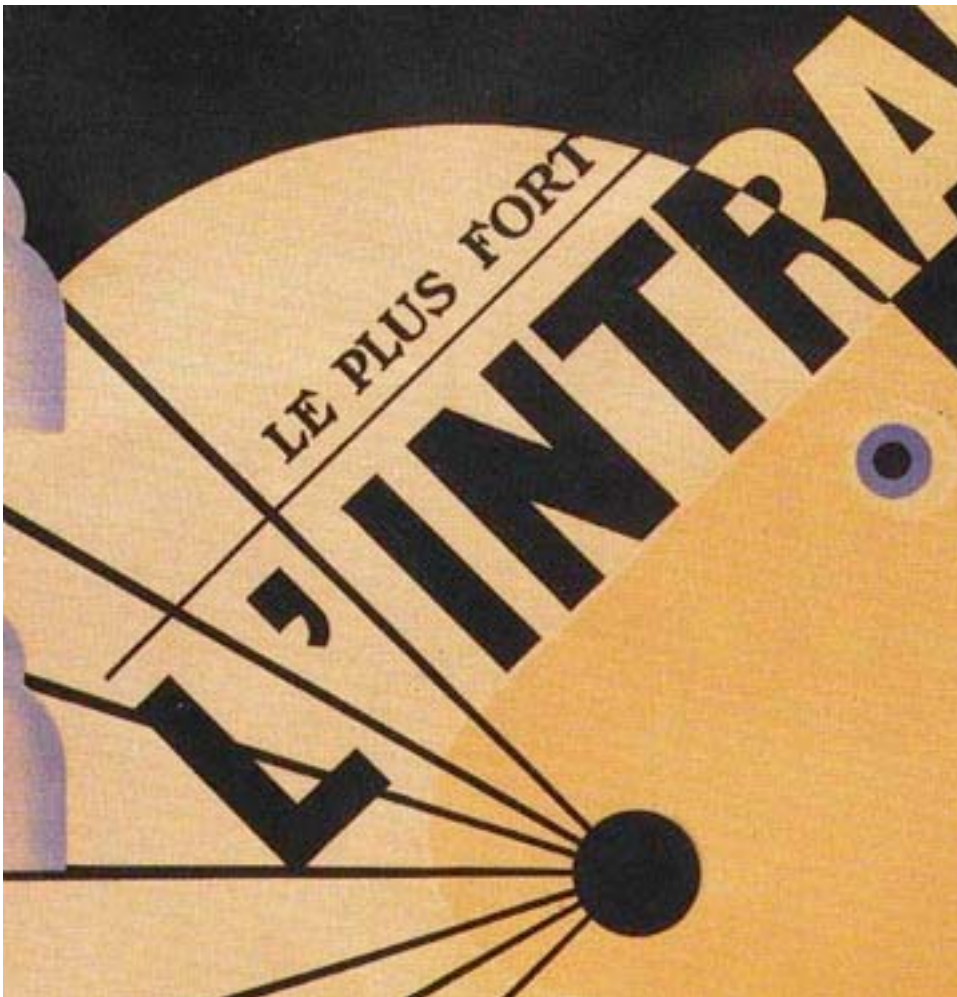


Fig 6.  
Detail of poster showing collage title effect.

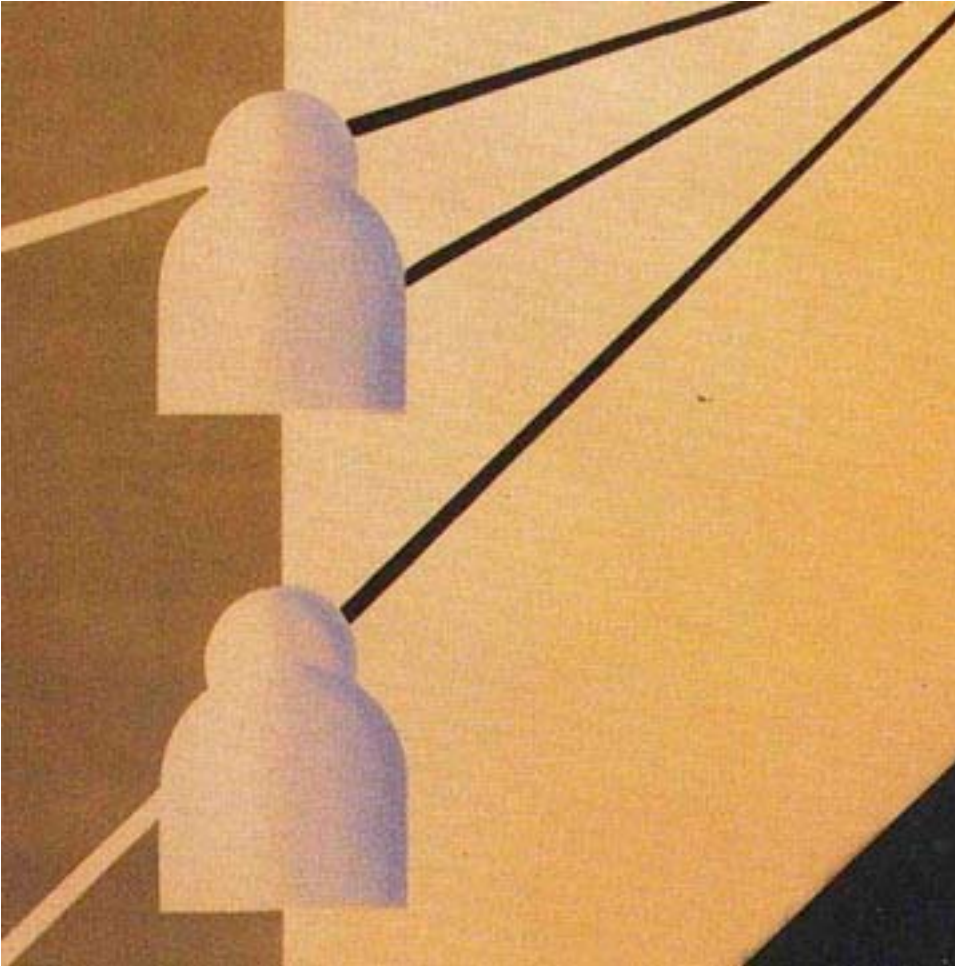


Fig 7. Detail of poster showing information symbol.

structures of WW1. Details from the Cassandre poster are reproduced as figures 6 and 7.

The insulator symbol denotes communication, information and knowledge. Also, because of the association between telegraph lines and railways, the symbol also denotes speed. The convergence of lines into the ear and brain of the figure at the centre of the poster projects the paper as a synthesising

intelligence that makes sense of a rapidly changing and uncertain world. The paper may be relied on to defend its readers' interests.

## Part Five **Conclusion**

Cassandre's body of work as a poster designer during the 1920s and 30s places him as amongst the most significant figures in the history of graphic design. His subsequent work as a typographic designer and theatrical designer indicate that Cassandre was able to deploy a range of technical skills and applied intelligence to his problem solving in the graphic arts and in design. A small extract from a typographic work about the theatre (or drama) of the street is reproduced as figure 9.

Working in France during the inter war period also gave Cassandre a place in the most sophisticated and highly developed advertising market in the world. In 1927 he founded L'Alliance Graphique with Charles Loupot and Maurice Moyrand. L'Alliance was a prototype artist's agency that pooled resources to maximise effectiveness in client relations and media sales. An advertisement for Alliance Graphique is reproduced as figure 8.

In 1936 an exhibition of Cassandre's posters was held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. Cassandre briefly worked in New York before returning to France and working as a theatre designer. He was unable to repeat his success as a poster artist and viewed the later stages of his life as a relative disappointment. Notwithstanding this sense of failure he created the typographic identity for Yves St Laurent in 1963 – a design that epitomises the cool sophistication of French fashion. Cassandre died in 1968.

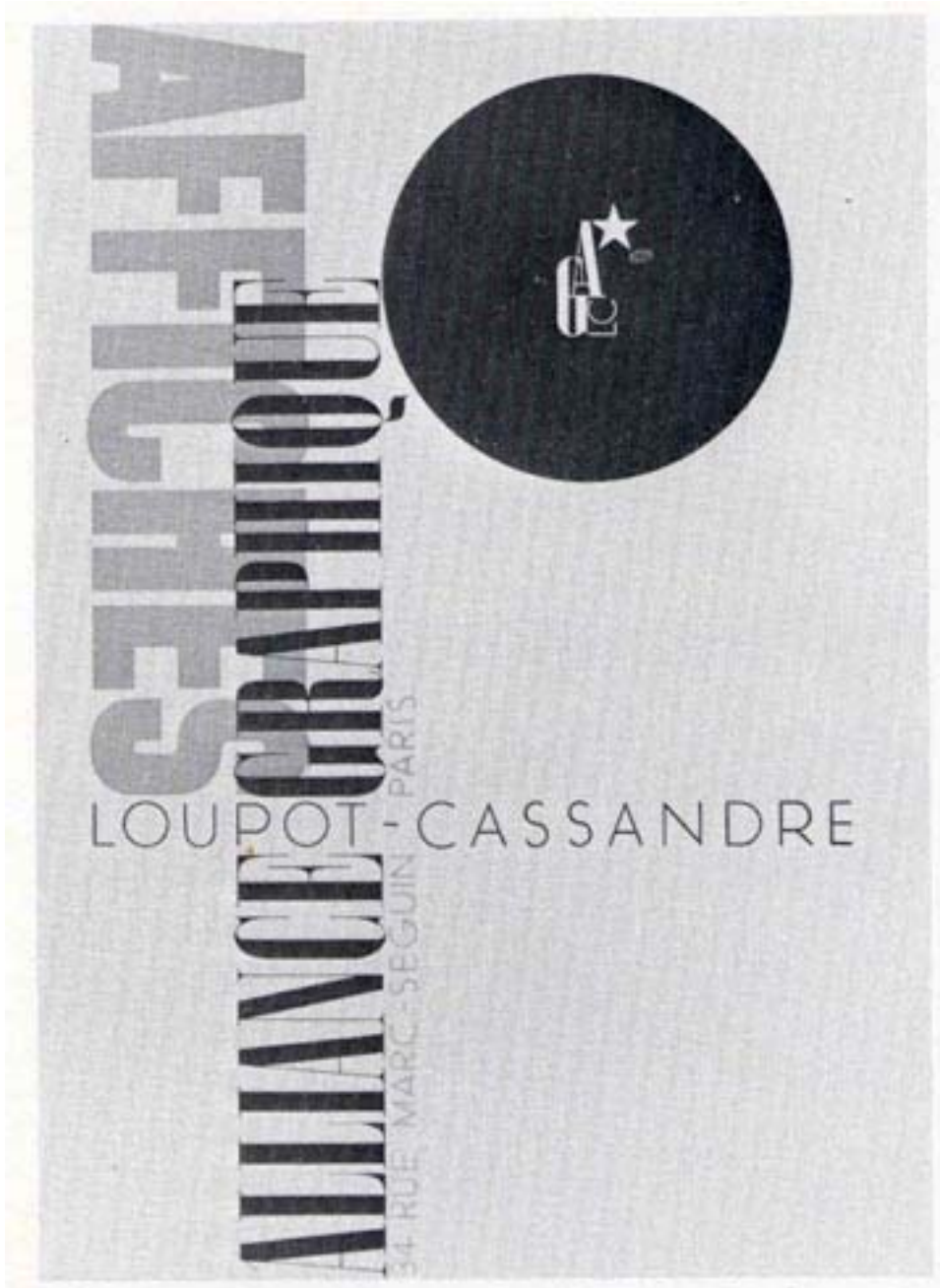


Fig 8.

Advertisement for Alliance Graphique, 1930.



Fig 9.

Typographic experiment *La Rue*, 1936.



Fig 10.

Photographic portrait of Cassandre, 1930s.



## **Bibliography**

Brown R and Reinhold S (1979) **The Poster Art of A M Cassandre**

New York, Dutton

Golan R (1995) **Modernity and Nostalgia** London, Yale University Press

Mouron H (1985) **Cassandre** London, Thames and Hudson

Silver K (1989) **Esprit de Corps** London, Thames and Hudson

Vox M (1948) **A M Cassandre Posters** St gall, Zollikofer and Co

Paul Rennie

January 2005

2000 words

p@rennart.co.uk