

Aspects of Commercial Art 1918-1970

The Central School and Modern Publicity

Commercial Art is a term used to denote the visual material associated the developing industrial and commercial economies of the 19th and 20th centuries. Usually, it is used to refer to images reproduced in very large numbers and associated with the advertising, packaging and point-of-sale material of various products and services. The term is not usually associated with the original design, or artwork, from which these are derived. The term is therefore linked with the commercial, mass-produced and ephemeral by-products of modern society. All of which has tended, whatever the cultural significance of the material, to contribute to its being overlooked by historians.

The characteristics, itemised above, are precisely those which make this material significant in relation to the history of the Central School of Arts and Crafts in Holborn, London. Indeed, the posters, packaging, magazine design and illustration by tutors, students and artists associated with the school provide an opportunity to examine the developing and inter-related worlds of commerce, print culture and education.

These notes attempt to describe the developing engagement of the school with the commercial environments surrounding it. This engagement is traced through the personalities of the staff and students at the school, the developing print technologies of reproduction and by reference to objects within the category of commercial art. I have chosen to divide this essay into two parts. The first tells of the craft traditions of lithography that dominated commercial art before 1939. The second is of the post-war development of mechanical reproduction and the concomitant development of a technocratic design community in Britain.

One of the great problems facing any historian of this material is the absence of any systematic archive of the material. Commercial organisations have been poor at retaining examples of their advertising and packaging and even individual designers have not always been able to retain examples of their work. The material also falls beyond the scope of our national collections that, in any event, have limited space and resources. Furthermore, the ephemeral and commercial nature of this work has placed it outside the normal interests of the art market.

Notwithstanding these difficulties there are significant collections of posters within the Victoria and Albert Museum, London and at the London Transport Museum, London and at the National Railway Museum, York. The Imperial war Museum, London, has a world-class collection of political propaganda that indicates the progressive potential of this material beyond the normal limits of the life-style consumerism with which it mostly associated. The Robert Opie Collection of Packaging also need to be acknowledged along with the Ephemera Society's Archive Collection held at the University of Reading. The Museum Collections at Central St Martin's, and within the London Institute, provide compelling evidence of the archaeological potential of this material.

The annual publication of "Modern Publicity" from the 1930s onwards provides an important resource of examples of commercial art. "Modern Publicity" was published by "The Studio" who also published the main artistic magazine in Britain during the major part of the 20th century. The development of Commercial art was more widely discussed in Germany, France and Switzerland where "Das Plakat", "Gebrauchsgraphik" and "Graphis" were published. These publications, although obscure to the general public, would have been widely known within the teaching and student environments at Central.

Before 1939

Lithography

The technical determinants of commercial art are described entirely by reference to lithographic printing. Aloys Senefelder discovered the processes of lithography in 1796. The process is based on the fact that oil and water do not mix. Accordingly, a design may be drawn out on a specially prepared surface using an oil-based tusche. Ink will adhere to the grease and can be washed off the rest of the plate surface. A print may then be taken by bringing a paper into contact with the surface of the plate. Senefelder discovered, through a process of repeated experimentation, that the textured surface of a local limestone gave the best results. Later on zinc metal plates were found to provide a substitute plate material.

The discovery of lithography marked a considerable technical advance on the existing intaglio and relief processes in printmaking since a print could be made without recourse to the costs of engraving a metal plate or cutting a wood block. The first use of Senefelder's discovery was in the printing of sheet music that for the first time became widely and inexpensively available. Musical parts could be written out directly on the stone and printed up before cleaning the stone and writing up the next part. Implicit within the visual characteristics of musical notation was the potential for combining image and text that came to define the development of poster art by the end of the 19th century. Lithography also made the printing of technical data, such as railway timetables and statistical information, much less expensive to print. Furthermore, the absence within the process of any need for excessive pressure enabled very much larger areas to be printed.

The impact of scale had several important consequences in the development of lithography during the 19th century. The large printing surface of lithographic stones enabled several images to be printed in a single pass through the machine and made the process ideally suited to the

emerging demands of manufacturers for labels and packaging from the mid 19th century onwards. Indeed, the big lithographic printers were nearly always associated with a successful local enterprise. Indeed, the origins of the modern poster in Paris during the 1860s illustrate this point perfectly. Jules Cheret had established a lithographic workshop under the patronage of the cosmetics entrepreneur Rimmel. Cheret printed all of Rimmel's packaging and point-of sale advertising and this established a powerful economic base for the expansion of his printing factory until it had the spare capacity to develop the more costly, time consuming and prestigious side-line of poster printing. Coincidentally, Paris was at this time being redeveloped into a cityscape of wide boulevards and long vistas and this created the modern billboard as a characteristic of commercial property development.

The alignment of commercial values with lithographic printing powered the technical development and evolution of processes and technology. In the course of the 19th century lithography moved from a small-scale artisan craft to a factory based activity with specialised plant and a skilled workforce organised around a strict division of labour. The craft developed so as to make the most complex colour printing possible whilst the press engineering evolved to allow for greater press speed. The extra speed of the press came from powering the press with electric motors and in transforming the press into one with a rotary, rather than a flat, action.

The development of offset lithography had its origins in attempts to print on sheet metal for commercial packaging. It was found that bringing metal sheets into contact with the litho stone tended to damage the stone and interrupt the printing. It was recalled that litho ink had a tendency to offset, or transfer, itself onto another surface whilst wet. This was to provide the starting point for the development of offset litho as a process where litho stone and paper, or metal, were kept separate. The addition of a rubber roller between the two offset the design from stone to roller and then transferred the design from roller to paper. The offset process also allowed for a design to be printed from a positive, rather than negative, image on the stone.

The last key development in the 19th century evolution of lithography was the perfection of the half tone as a means of printing photographic images using lithography. The process block held, implicit within it, the promise of a completely mechanical form of reproduction along with the modernist transformations of montage, repetition and overlap.

By the end of the century the artisan skills and plant engineering of lithography had been established so as to support a rapidly expanding market in commercial art. From the 1890s poster design became the most obviously visible form of advertising as metropolitan London was transformed by the expansion of the railway network and the rapid increase in population.

The School

It was against this background of rapid growth that the Central School of Arts and Crafts was established. Indeed, the origins of the school are almost exactly contemporary with the beginnings of the technical developments described above. It is therefore true to say that the development of the technologies of mechanical reproduction and the origins of the Central School occur simultaneously and in response to the developing industrial organisation of the print industry.

The origins of the school, in 1854, date back to the Victorian design reform movement. The objectives of this movement aimed to foster an awareness of good design amongst the educated classes. In addition it was hoped that the utility of well designed objects would benefit consumers and add a redeeming aesthetic dimension to modern life. In its extreme form the design reform movement aimed to define a utilitarian functionalism in design as “good” and to connect these characteristics with the emerging emancipatory politics of socialism.

Given these interests it is not surprising that a primary activity of the school was organised around the School of Book Production. It was within this school that the developing interest in commercial art was first identified and fostered. In the first instance the school focussed on the practical skills of letterpress printing and identified the nascent private press movement as an exemplar of practical, ethical and improving craft production. The school's reputation was greatly enhanced by the series of lectures given by Edward Johnston from 1899 and which had begun on the subject of illuminated lettering. The classes had been suggested by W R Lethaby as a means of investigating first principles in lettering, calligraphy and typography in the hope that these sound principles could be extrapolated to the relatively abstract concept of design. Amongst the students attending the classes were Eric Gill and Noel Rooke. Johnston's ideas were to receive a much wider audience through his association with Frank Pick and London transport and in the subsequent collaboration between Eric Gill and the Monotype Corporation. It was Gill who, notwithstanding his status as a sculptor and letter cutter, moved the craft bias implicit in Johnston's approach into a more open-minded acceptance of the machine. By the 1920s the School of Book Production had embraced wood engraving and lithography as suitable for decorating books and had begun to acknowledge machine setting as the future of letterpress printing. The history of the role of wood engraving in the revival of British printing between the wars is relatively well known and requires no repetition here. The influence of lithography is much less well known. By the beginning of the 1920s the School had established classes in lithography under Gerald Spenser Pryse.

Gerald Spencer Pryse

Fitzgerald Spencer Pryse (1881-1956) was one of the great lithographers of the 20th century. He first came to attention in 1910 when he began to design Labour Party propaganda. His work, drawn direct onto the stone, began to explore the expressive potential of lithography. His contemporary Frank Brangwyn was a similarly skilful lithographer. Both artists produced

propaganda posters during WW2 and Pryse was amongst the first artists to be commissioned by Frank Pick as Publicity Manager of the Underground Electric Railway (later London Transport).

Pryse and Brangwyn developed a dramatic and expressive style that made use of the possibility, implicit within lithography, for the artist to work direct on the printing plate. The result was a design made up of marks, drawn by the artist, and highlighted with a second and third coloured printing to add both colour and a powerful perspective effect. The new style was easily distinguished from the prevailing taste of most commercial lithography which aimed, through a sense of artisan pride, to produce an accurate facsimile of the original design.

Brangwyn and Pryse were amongst the first artists in Britain to learn from Toulouse-Lautrec's experiments in poster design during the 1890s. Lautrec's designs had been recognised, in France and abroad, as marking a new direction in commercial art where the artist's direct involvement in the production of these images elevated them from the lowly status usually accorded to commercial images. It will be obvious from the description of lithography outlined above that the ability to work direct onto the litho stone was a rare skill and relatively few artists had either the training, nor opportunity to develop the necessary skills. Brangwyn became so famous, and so popular, a poster designer that he was retained by the Avenue Press. They would deliver prepared litho stones to Brangwyn's studio so that he could work on them in the comfort of his own surroundings.

Pryse had no such arrangement but had a succession of commercial jobs that kept him in the public eye. His most significant commission was to produce posters for the Empire Exhibition Wembley during 1924. The Empire Exhibition was conceived, after WW1, to counter the popular view expressed through certain newspaper interests that the Empire was a drain on the homeland.

The exhibition sought to recast Imperial relations and to create a sense of community and shared interest between the peoples of Britain and Empire. Accordingly, the posters were conceived as a frieze that showed the people of Empire gathering crops and materials. The posters were printed quad royal size, 50 inches wide by 40 inches high, so as to be displayed on railway platforms and other suitable sites. The exhibition itself was not entirely successful and was extended into a second season in an effort to recoup some of the costs. The propaganda efforts of which the exhibition was part continued through the creation of the Empire Marketing Board and the Empire Film Unit. The Marketing Board was established under the direction of Stephen Tallents who commissioned sets of posters for display on specially constructed sites along railway lines. The sets were of three landscape images interspaced with two portrait information posters. Tallents was an enthusiastic supporter of the nascent film industry and established the Film Unit to produce documentary films that would show the efforts and hardships of the Empire's disparate communities. The Film Unit was one of the most significant cultural developments in Britain between the wars and helped establish the British documentary tradition.

Pryse was helped in the classes by A S Hartrick who designed posters for London Transport. By the end of the 1930's James Fitton had joined the teaching staff. Fitton brought a political engagement to the practice of lithography and promoted its use to allow the economical and widespread distribution of social-realist images. Fitton was a founder member of the Artists' International Association as were James Holland, James Boswell, Jesse Collins and Pearl Binder. Collins had exhibited at the famous Whitechapel exhibitions organised by the AIA at the end of the 1930s and became head of the painting school at Central. Collins later recruited Morris Kestelman, a former student of Fitton's, to the teaching group at Central. Fitton, Holland and Boswell produced many fine images for the "Left Review" and, during WW2, a series of lithographic images of the Home-Front celebrating the stoicism, heroism and contribution of ordinary people. Fitton also designed posters for London Transport.

Another student at Central was Clarke Hutton who was associated with the illustrated series of "Picture Puffin" books published by Penguin. The series had been conceived by Noel Carrington and made use of the potential of lithography to create colourful and inexpensive children's books where image and text combined seamlessly. The interest in colour lithography as a means of producing inexpensive and original children's books had grown as a consequence of changes in the technology of lithography. These changes had made the make-ready processes of lithography less dependent on artisan craftsmen and had made for a speedier turnaround at the press. Eventually, printing technologies would enable inexpensive and short-run printing to be possible.

The Carrington project covered a series of subjects that promoted English values and provided an alternative political projection from that favoured by the radicals Fitton and Holland. The card-carrying activism of Fitton was characteristic of an important strand in British cultural activity at the end of the 1930s but it was by no means the only avenue available. Many artists, whilst supportive of the progressive politics of the Left, worked within the more consensual framework epitomised by Carrington. John Farleigh and John Skeaping provided support for this approach within the school. During WW2 this tendency supported the "Recording Britain" project that sent artists out into the English countryside to record the distinctive architectures and landscapes of Britain. Noel Carrington was later appointed a Governor of the Central School.

Pat Gilmour has written of Paul Nash's classes in design at the Royal College during the early 1920s and described the way that he encouraged his students to engage with the world of commercial art as a means to underwriting their artistic careers. Nash had studied at Chelsea and been a member of a stellar class at the Slade School with Ben Nicholson. Nash could see no necessary objection to an artist pursuing these, traditionally contradictory, objectives. Nash steered the most able of his students towards the print works of Harold Curwen where they were initiated into the workshop practices of commercial lithography. The connection with Curwen and

with his project to enhance the quality of ordinary “jobbing printing” placed many of Nash’s students in the front line of developments in commercial art during the 1930s. Barnett Freedman and Enid Marx were also connected to the Central School. Freedman had attended evening classes at the Central School before being offered a place at the RCA and Marx had studied textile design before progressing to the RCA.

Enid Marx was a remarkable artist who worked as a textile, illustrator, lino-cut and poster designer. Her success in commercial art provided an important example for female students at Central and beyond. It is important to acknowledge that the nascent creative industries, whilst not entirely free of discrimination, were admirably supportive of female efforts to enter the workplace and to gain economic independence. Margaret Calkin James, Dora Batty, Mary Kessel, Freda Lingstrom, Pearl Binder and Betty Swanwick were all able to follow the example set by Marx.

The close ties between Nash, the RCA and the Curwen Press were exemplars of the mutually supportive and commercially useful links that could be established between education and business. A similar arrangement was brokered through Noel Rooke and through Spencer Pryse. Rooke had, through his connection with Edward Johnston, come into contact with Gerald Maynell who a typographic pioneer and Chairman of the Westminster Press. The Press had installed their first Monotype (hot metal) machines in 1911 and were at the forefront of efforts to engage with and promote mechanical reproduction in printing. The Press was a general printing works and had a poster printing section whose Creative Director was the distinguished designer Edward McKnight Kauffer. Through these connections the School was wired into the centre of progressive design in commercial art and printing throughout the 1920s.

Pryse’s efforts in promoting a more direct and expressive form of lithography should not go unrecognised. Curwen’s promotion of “autolithography” as a progressive and original form of printmaking has been acknowledged through its legacy in artistic printmaking and in the post-war

development in the limited edition print market. Barnett Freedman was, as the most talented lithographic artist of his generation, the most vocal supporter of the “aotolitho” project. His work in lithography ranged from books and illustrated ephemera through to posters for London Transport and for Ealing Films. Freedman had, through his interest in the technique of lithography, become friends with Curwen and also Thomas Griffiths of the Baynard Press. Griffiths had been apprenticed into the lithographic trade in the 19th century and had become, by the 1930s, the most technically expert craftsman in the industry. Freedman and he exchanged tips and tricks in a spirit of friendly rivalry. Griffiths also published two books on the techniques of lithographic printing that stand as testimonials to the artisan skills of the industry.

The most significant patron of the arts in London between the wars was Frank Pick of London Transport. Pick’s relations with the Central School had begun through the membership of the Design and Industries Association that had been established in 1915 to promote a model of design awareness and education based on the German model of the “Werkbund” which proposed closer links between manufacturers and craftsmen. The founder members of the Association included Lethaby and Rooke from the Central school along with Pick and Ambrose Heal of the eponymous furniture store. The network of relations established through the DIA was to support the development of commercial art and design in London and to cement the Central School’s place at the heart of this development until 1939.

Frank Pick had conceived of a regulated and coherent advertising environment throughout London Transport that was part of an integrated architecture of mass transit. The poster sites were part of an ordered and systematic approach to visual communication that extended to the functional engineering of the transport network through to the modernist architecture of the stations. Pick realised that there was not sufficient commercial advertising to fill all the spaces on his platforms and so undertook to commission poster designs on behalf of his organisation. The purpose of these advertisements was primarily to encourage passengers to use the network

during off-peak hours and at weekends. Accordingly there were posters for destinations outside town and for events within. The list of Central School alumni commissioned by Pick is impressive testimony to Pick's open-mindedness and eclectic taste in advertising images. The close relations between London Transport and the Central School throughout the middle period of the 20th century also reflect the technical quality of the teaching offered by the school.

Post-War

Mechanical Reproduction and technocratic design culture

The war changed everything in Britain including the printing industry. The demands of war propaganda had greatly increased the requirement for speed in printing and especially in relation to the make-ready processes prior to presswork. In fact, the war had simply accelerated a process that had begun after WW1 and had been resisted, more or less effectively, by a combination of craft self interest and industrial complacency.

The urgency of print requirements during war had required an engagement, on behalf of printers and designers, with new systems of graphic reproduction. The processes of mechanical reproduction, photolithography and offset-litho were adopted and used to serve the propaganda requirements of the various war departments. After the war the creation of the Welfare State required its own forms of print communications and propaganda. This post-war period of State purchasing offered a lifeline to printers and advertising executives whose commercial clients were still weakened by the ravages of the war economy and the need to export goods and services.

These changes had been anticipated by the printing industry and by the educational environments supporting them. Indeed, the direction of change had been evident since the 1920s when the German Bauhaus School had begun to promote a form of technocratic design activity

as most useful to industrial manufacturers. The achievements of the Bauhaus are recognised as central to the development of Modernism in Europe and America.

The graphics teaching at the Bauhaus, during the 1920s, promoted the use of mechanical reproduction, the half-tone and of the process block. The skills of assembly, montage and repetition were identified as crucial in the technical specification of lay-out and design for printers. The final manifestation of the Bauhaus ideal in graphic design was the synthesis of typography and photographic elements into a single coherent and symbolic motif identified as “typo-photo.” Such elements would become the staple of an emerging visual language of modernism that sought to co-ordinate artistic, typographic, photographic and film elements. The project was cut short in Germany when the Bauhaus school was closed in 1933.

The mythology of Modernism and the Bauhaus has been presented as a narrative that connects Moscow, Berlin and Paris with New York and that passes London by. In fact, when the school closed many of the staff and students associated came to Britain. The stellar names of the school were eventually offered bigger opportunities in the USA but many others remained and prospered. It would be wrong to characterise the 1930s in Britain as a period of hostility to Modernism.

The technical precision implicit in the Bauhaus aesthetic made it especially appealing to printers and designers who were beginning to experiment with the integration of photographic elements in graphic design. The Bradford based printers Lund Humphries had placed themselves at the forefront of technical innovation from the 1920s onwards and had established a studio and gallery as part of their London office in Bedford Square. Edward Mcknight Kauffer was their creative director throughout the 1930s and, following his work at the Westminster Press, established the Lund Humphries studio as a centre of graphic innovation in London.

The status of the studio was greatly enhanced by their association with European émigré designers such as Moholy-Nagy, Walter Gropius and the photographer Man Ray. These associations were brokered by Ashley Havinden of Crawford's advertising agency. Havinden had worked in Germany during the 1920s where he had established a Berlin office for the Crawford agency. He was aware of German experimentation in graphic design and had already established contact with the personalities of design reform. It was natural therefore that he should become their first port-of-call on arrival in London and be instrumental in steering them towards other like minded Modernists at Lund Humphries.

In the immediate post-war period Ashley Havinden became a key figure in the design community in London. As well as continuing in his role at Crawford's he was one of the key personalities in the promotion of design education and was a member of both the Central School and of the London College of Printing's board of governors. The relationship with Lund Humphries continued too through the appointment of Herbert Spencer to the teaching staff at Central in 1949.

Spencer was appointed successor to Kauffer as creative director at Lund Humphries where he continued to promote a form of graphic design determined by the technologies of photography and mechanical reproduction rather than mark making. One of Spencer's great achievements at Lund Humphries was the founding and editorship of the magazine "Typographica." Through the range and eclecticism of Spencer's interests the magazine quickly became much more than a house journal and became, like "Ark" published by the Royal college of Art, an important instrument in graphic education and in the development of a design sensibility that was as open to the merits of popular culture in defining the parameters of contemporary communications. Both "Typographica" and "Ark" explored the history of graphic design, lettering and typography in its various forms. At the Central School this project was extended by the creation, through Nicolette Gray, of the Central Lettering Record. The Record was conceived as an archive of lettering on building, signs and as a manifestation of human communication.

The richly varied and historically informed visual language promoted by Spencer was a distinctive and intelligent alternative to the pared-down functionalism favoured by the Continental Modernists. The publishing explosion of the 1960s which allowed for the cheap colour printing of books and magazines and that allowed for the launch of Sunday newspaper supplements was all the more effective for being able to draw on the visual resources established by Spencer and the Central School.

The emergence of “Pop Art” as a popular phenomenon has usually been associated with the Royal College of Art and with the critical interventions of the “Independent Group” at the Institute of Contemporary Arts. In fact, the 1960s success of this phenomenon would not have been possible without Spencer’s contribution at Lund Humphries and at the Central School. Both the RCA and ICA comprised elite post-graduate groups whose influence, in terms of numbers, was always limited. It was through the advent of specialised undergraduate programmes that the creative sector was able to reach critical mass and provide the required skills to support the 1960s emergence of a new kind of consumer culture based on youth markets and supported by a photographic and illustrated mass media. It is also obvious that the visual language required to support this project would have to constitute a much more extensive resource than had been the case before WW2. Firstly, there would be more design and more advertising and secondly, things would change much more rapidly. Accordingly, the lexicon of design and advertising was extended to include elements drawn from popular culture, America and Continental Europe. The role of designer was therefore integrated into a team activity comprising advertising executives, creative directors and printing technicians. The specifications of modern publicity became a technocratic process rather than a process of reproducing marks in a workshop.

Of course Spencer was helped at the Central School by colleagues such as the typographers Anthony Froshaug and Edward Wright and the designer FHK Henrion who had been art director of the ICA during its key period of critical support for the Independents. John Lewis had played a

similar role to Herbert Spencer at the RCA and in 1954 had published his “Graphic Design” which included detailed accounts of typography and lettering, illustration and design. Lewis was scrupulous in emphasising that aesthetic effects of design were always determined as much by technology as by the craft of the designer.

The supportive environments created by Spencer and Lewis to graphic experimentation beyond the immediate School context created the condition in which an idiosyncratic and witty tradition in British design was allowed to flourish. Colin Forbes and Alan Fletcher were teachers at the School in the late 1950s before Fletcher, Forbes, Gill morphed into Pentagram. Alan Kitching, Derek Birdsall and, later, Richard Hollis were able to combine professional careers with periods attached to the department of Graphic Design (a nomenclature that had superseded commercial art in the mainstream during the 1960s).

Design professionals were also supported by the creation, from the mid 1950s onwards, of an agency framework of representation. This allowed for freelance designers to market themselves effectively to the advertising agencies. Amongst the first of these in Britain was Artist Partners. The emergence of an agency network was indicative of an increasing specialisation on the part of the freelance designers, illustrators and photographers involved in creative work. At the same time the agency allowed individuals to effectively communicate with the increasingly corporate structure of the advertising and publishing industries.

The creation of these effective support networks linking the Central School to the technological, administrative and creative environments in London has been a characteristic of the School’s engagement with the realities of commercial art, graphic design and creative direction. These networks have allowed the school to keep pace with the technological changes informing the development of commercial art and advertising in Britain throughout the 20th century and to make a substantial contribution to the emergence of a sophisticated and intelligent creative industry.

These brief notes provide an indication of the continuities in personnel and approach that have underpinned the success of the Central School's contribution to this development.

Bibliography and list of illustrations to follow.

5226 words

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