

“Curating German Graphic Design: Collections, Interpretations and Responses”

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My contribution today is to consider some of the issues around curating exhibitions of German graphic design. The observations are drawn from the experience of working as a curator on two exhibitions, “Signs of Art and Commerce, German Graphic Design 1900–1950” which was shown at the Victoria and Albert Museum, London in 1997, and the exhibit “Print, Power and Persuasion, graphic design in Germany, 1890–1945”

Slide—Leaflet and installation

This is currently on show at the Wolfsonian, Miami Beach until 29 April and then at the Bard Center for Graduate Studies in the Decorative Arts in New York from May through to August. It will also go to the gallery at Rhode Island School of Design in 2002.

I will begin by outlining the broad subject area of the exhibitions and then move on to concentrate on issues of interpretation.

Exhibitions devoted to graphic design are still not frequent. While there are rich holdings of posters, prints, books and other forms of graphic design in most international museums of design and the decorative arts, graphic design does not often feature as an object of focus. This may have something to do with an implicit hierarchy of the significance of different genres of design.

However, German graphic and typographic design in the first half of the 20th century represents an extraordinarily rich and diverse aspect of the history of visual culture. It marked the moment of recognition that the world was becoming increasingly dependent on a modern and commercialized system of communication in which the designer was to play a major role. An unprecedented scale of attention was given to printed matter and therefore is of substantial interest to a variety of historians as well as to artists and designers and the wider public.

The range could include designs for graphic ornament and typefaces:

Slide—Bauersche Giesserei, Julius Gipkens 1908

Slide—Behrens Schrift, 1909

From Jugendstil, on the left” by Julius Gipkens in 1908 to the restrained neo-classicism of Peter Behrens on the right;

Slide—Futura f r Fotomontage, 1928

Slide—5 Tannenberg new typefaces, 1934

And from the modernist sans-serif typefaces such as Paul Renner’s Futura of 1928 to the National Socialist revival of Fraktur or Blackletter, as in Tannenberg of 1934 on the right.

Slide—Vogeler Ex Libris, 1900

Slide—Exhibition stickers

But design could just as well involve small pieces of graphic ephemera, such as a bookplate, here by Heinrich Vogeler, from Worpswede, of 1900, or stickers, miniature versions of posters that became children’s and collectors’ items after 1990.

Slide—J. M. Olbrich, Cologne exhibition, 1907

Slide—Julius Klinger Chandelier factory, 1909

Then there is the more obvious area of poster design. The artistic poster became of central interest in Germany later than in France, Belgium or Britain. German posters gained international acclaim, first with the Jugendstil and design reform work, as in the hands of Joseph Maria Olbrich, on the left, who depicted the figure of Athena for a Cologne exhibition poster in 1907 and subsequently, Julius Klinger, an Austrian designer resident in Berlin, who contributed to the emergence of the tradition of the "object poster" or (Sachplakat). This emphasized product and brand name in an iconic manner—here for a chandelier factory in 1909.

Slide—Ashley Havinden, Hut ab vor dem neuen Chrysler! 1928

Slide—Herbert Bayer, Europ isches Kunstgewerbe, 1927

By the 1920s, the new design was applied to mainstream consumer products, as in the case of Ashley Havinden, the English designer here advertising Chrysler cars, for the Berlin branch of Crawfords, while Herbert Bayer's museum poster for the European Arts and Crafts exhibition in Leipzig in 1927 remained distinctly in the cultural arena.

Slide—Crawfords press advertisements, 1928

Slide—Mohlzahn, a leaflet for Technische Vereinigung, c.1929

In the physical framework of an exhibition, posters inevitably form a major part because of their size and immediate attraction, they command attention that is sometimes out of proportion to their significance in a designer's career. I have been concerned wherever possible to show that designers spent their time on black and white press work, for advertisements, labels, trademarks and business stationery, just as much as with prestigious posters.

Slide—Exhibition installation

To show this, in many cases this means leading the eye from the display cases to the wall, as here. However, as much one wants to evoke the original context of the consumption of graphic design; museum objects; the posters, books and other items—require special treatment. As printed objects they are light fugitive and have to be displayed under particular conditions—50 lux light levels; posters are framed and mounted behind glass, books are placed on cradles, and all objects carefully arranged by a designer. The impact is to turn what were once ephemeral items of everyday use into hallowed objects connoting aesthetic or monetary value. This is an irony that Walter Benjamin would have enjoyed. In his essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction" of 1935, the German cultural philosopher and literary critic had predicted the demise of what he called the "aura" of works of art in the museum context prompted by mass reproduction. Subsequent developments have proved Benjamin wrong. This "museum effect, may not be desired, but it is an inevitable and unavoidable consequence of making collections available for public view.

Continuing the range of graphic types that designers were engaged with, we turn to book design,

Slide—Henry van de Velde, Also Sprach Zarathustra, 1908

Slide—Jan Tschichold, Typographische Gestaltung, 1935

This went from the opulent special edition, designed following the ideals of William Morris such as Van de Velde's design for Thus Spoke Zarathustra of 1908. This is an example of the total work of art, or Gesamtkunstwerk, a limited edition that takes care of all elements of manufacture: inks, papers, type, illumination and binding. By contrast was Jan Tschichold's "new typography" first announced in 1925. Here on the right is the book, *Typographische Gestaltung*, (Typographic Design) which

employs a single typeface, asymmetry, primary colors and photographic illustration, all advocated as an approach or set of design principles to make the book a modern, democratic, industrial object.

Slide—die neue linie, 1931

Slide—BIZ Film star for I.50 Marks

Then there were the magazines, ranging from *Die Neue Linie* the general interest magazine for the new woman with lowercase masthead and covers by Herbert Bayer and Moholy-Nagy, to the photo journals on the right.

Slide—Berliner Illustrierte Zeitung Erich Salomon

Slide—Arbeiter Illustrierte Zeitung

Picture editors and photographers collaborated in the late Weimar years on city magazines, the photo journals that explored areas of social, political and cultural life and were subscribed to in the thousands. Here we have a candid photograph of behind the scenes with politicians, exposed to the public for the first time by Erich Salomon. In dialogue with this entertainment press, John Heartfield, who anglicized his name from Herzfelde in reaction to Germany's belligerence in the 1914-18 war, used the new techniques of photojournalism, and specifically photomontage, as a weapon of class war on covers for the Communist weekly illustrated, *AIZ The Workers Illustrated Magazine*, to alert readers to the rise of Nazism. Here, in a cover entitled "The Meaning of the Hitler Salute", Hitler is depicted as receiving a pay-off from big business, the lower caption reads "a small man asks for big favours."

Slide—Underground advertisements

Slide—Poster column

In both exhibitions it has been my intention to avoid solely concentrating on Modernism in graphic design. In the literature, particularly in the German language, the Bauhaus and German Modernism have claimed greatest attention. For a graphic design historian more concerned with representativeness, it can be pertinent to refer to the trade press to uncover what was seen in the streets, what people would have encountered through advertising, press and publicity as consumers. This is in line with a general tendency in Design History to move away from a concern with authorship and the canon, of great designers, to the social significance of design in consumption.

Slide—*Gebrauchsgraphik* two covers

For example, one strategy I adopted was to study the graphics journal *Gebrauchsgraphik*, (Commercial Graphics or Graphics for Use) to find out how the profession was defining itself.

In an exhibition, it is possible to leave pages of periodicals open in display cases many of the articles were published bi-lingually in English and German and so the visitor can discover connections between the works on the wall for themselves.

Slide—Installation Red wall at V&A

Slide—Nazi room at Wolfsonian

Clearly, whatever you draw on whether magazine or museum. some form of editorial control has been exerted. And the collections I was working with had their strengths and weaknesses, The V&A is the oldest decorative arts museum in the world, established in 1853, and has substantial historical collections of prints and books within its departments. In terms of German graphic design, its strengths are the Jugendstil posters of the turn of the century and the prestigious posters of the 1920s. The library is also rich in examples of book typography and holds most of the significant publications concerning the movements in modern German design. A remarkable collection of photo-journals in the Osman-Gidal archive made it possible to deal with social and political themes,

such as gender politics and the body. By contrast, the Bauhaus was not a strength of the V&A collection and it was hard to find examples of the new typography in posters.

The Wolfsonian, is a collection that has been amassed relatively recently and is the result of the originality of one man's activities. Although now there is a team of museum professionals who catalogue, conserve and interpret the collection, originally Mitchell Wolfson was fascinated by the propagandistic value of design and the decorative arts and this interest determined his selection of objects. Therefore, it is not surprising that the collection is extraordinarily rich in political posters from the First World War and the Third Reich. As well as this, the works on paper are complemented by strong Library holdings, through which it is possible to show, as at the V&A, the contextualization of graphic design, its promotion through education, professional societies and exhibitions.

It might be interesting now to reflect briefly on specific possibilities that objects allow in terms of display and arrangement.

Slide—Bauhaus 1919–1923

In this case, the decision was whether to show the title page (left) or the cover of a book (right), for example. This was the first major publication by the Bauhaus to summarize its activities to coincide with the 1923 Weimar exhibition. It marked director Gropius's famous change to art and technology as a new unity or put another way, the switch from craft to industrial design. The cover design was by Herbert Bayer and the title page and interior layout by Laszlo Moholy-Nagy.

In neither exhibition did the budget allow for a book to be filmed in the process of being viewed—therefore, what is essentially a kinetic experience of reading was frozen for the visitor.

Slide—El Lissitzky Catalogue for *Pressa*, 1928

Slide—Ehmcke poster for *Pressa*, 1928

A star attraction in both exhibits has been the catalogue for the *Pressa* exhibition in Cologne of 1928, designed by the Soviet artist El Lissitzky. In the late twenties a rash of exhibitions promoted the new graphic design. *Pressa*, for instance, was a review of international press, newspapers and design.

Slide—Interior shots of the catalogue

The most radical pavilion at *Pressa*, which claimed greatest attention in reviews, was also designed by El Lissitzky. It depicted the role of the press in the first ten years of Soviet society in a stunning "photofresco", following the filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein's theory of the montage of attractions." The catalogue was a published version of this fresco.

Slide—Installation of the catalogue

Here are two views of the concertina catalogue as a complete object.

Slide—Installation

Slide—Carbaty Flaggen, Julius Gipkens, 1913 and Enamel Sign

The Wolfsonian Collection allows opportunities to juxtapose flat graphic objects with other forms of design. For example, an enamel sign designed by Julius Gipkens around 1913, which would have been displayed in the street or on a shop front, is placed alongside a poster that used the same trademark to advertise cigars. This helped to convey the strategies adopted at the time of the German Werkbund to encourage a consistent branding of goods through all media and to improve the usual cacophony of commercial advertisements to which they so objected. And later, on the right, we showed the campaign to encourage people to buy radios, the people's receiver, to prepare them for Hitler and Goebbels' propaganda, by juxtaposing the poster and the radio itself.

Slide—Poster: Ganz Deutschland hört den Führer mit dem Volksempfänger and the Radio itself
The modernity of Hitler's propaganda campaign was signaled by the extensive use of the radio as a medium. Between 1933 and 1942 the private ownership of radios grew from 4.5 million to 20 million households. At the same time radio transmission was carried out in factories and offices for Hitler to guarantee that the Nazi message was heard exhaustively. As well as being used to communicate central party propaganda, programming concentrated on light entertainment and avoided intellectual reflection and criticism. It is interesting to note that the design evokes a film poster.

Through all these political difficulties, and possibly inspired by them, the limits of graphic language were tested. Graphic design as a term was new—William Dwiggins the American typographer, reputedly coined the term for the first time in 1922. It was not applied in Germany at the time but instead the term "graphics for use" was used.

In Germany, possibly more than any other country, the choice of typeface and graphic style took on an ideological dimension.

Slide—Laszlo Moholy-Nagy, Portrait by Sibyl Moholy,

Slide—Cover for Gefesselter Blick, (The Captured Glimpse) 1931

For the political Left during the Weimar years, avant-garde art had prompted an excitement about combinations of word and image and a wish to find new forms of expression. It became known generically as the new vision as defined by Moholy-Nagy - here we see him photographed by Sibyl Moholy in his functionalist boiler suit. Johannes Molzahn, a fellow "new designer", optimistically pronounced in the mid-twenties that the illiterate of the future would be the person who could not use a camera, "The photograph will be one of the most effective weapons against intellectualization, against mechanization of the spirit. Forget Reading" See! That will be the motto of education. Forget reading! See! That will be the policy of newspapers."

However, the democratic utopia of the new vision was not to be realized.

Slide—Adolf Hitler Spricht in München, 1934

Slide—Ludwig Hohlwein, Reichsporttag Bund des deutschen München, 1934

Instead, in 1933, the National Socialist party came to power and attempted to undo many of the advances in visual communication made during the Weimar years.

In the first years of the Third Reich several new Blackletter typefaces were commissioned to satisfy increased demand. Design came under the control of Joseph Goebbels, (the Reich Minister for Peoples Enlightenment and Propaganda) and a series of cultural chambers was formed—graphic design, for example, fell within Department V of the visual arts chamber.

Goebbels introduced a policy to ridicule styles associated with the liberal Weimar years and in turn advocated designs loyal to a native "Germanic" tradition. Designers were banned from practice, forced to emigrate or persecuted and killed, dismissed as Bolshevik, Jewish or undesirable.

Official Aryan ideals were presented to the population, as here, a gymnast, who literally embodies her political system in the poster on the right, by Ludwig Hohlwein. The Nazis had taken the message of branding to their hearts.

Slide—Studenten an's Werk, 1937

Slide—Kunst im Deutschen Reich, Richard Klein 1941

However, in spite of their reactive policy to ridicule all that had been advocated in the Weimar years and their official proclamations to the contrary, Nazi propaganda nevertheless used some of the most

advanced techniques of film and photomontage to promote their extremist views. One emphasis in the exhibition is to show how even in an autocratic regime that intended to centralize and legislate all areas of life, in many respects graphic design was pluralistic and far from coherent under Nazism.

Despite a strong propagandistic dogma, design could highlight the inherent contradictions between an expressed ideology and graphic style - as here photomontage and neo-classicism, on the right, Hitler's preferred personal style. To propel the major propaganda initiative of the Third Reich, Nazi strategies sometimes resorted to the modern techniques they so despised.

To conclude, from 1890 to 1950 a great deal of debate was devoted to where graphic design stood in relation to other arts and business practices. Was it indeed an art or commerce? Was it moral or immoral? Could it be national, or were its implications inevitably international? Many examples of design suggest that it was all these things. Reflecting on examples of design from this time allows us to realize the centrality of graphic design for an understanding of cultural politics.

Graphic design in Germany depended on its ability to satisfy the expectations of different contexts, to be diverse, and at times contradictory. To impose a more consistent interpretation would be to lose the complexity of its ambiguous character to act as signs of both art and commerce