

The Value of Posters

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All teachers desiring an inter-disciplinary instructional activity that is fun, practical, and applicable within the purviews of both the classroom and the “real world” for the life-long learners in their charge need look no further than creating posters. Who hasn’t curiously crept through a corridor, peered into a classroom, or attended a science fair and not seen several posters? In fact, what student has made it through the sixth grade and not been required to produce a handsome, hand-made poster?

Poster development endeavors have a plethora of benefits. Inventing posters is great for individual, group, and brainstorming activities. Lessons on creating posters can be valuable in Social Studies, Language Arts, Science, Math, and Fine Arts curricula. They may be selected for studying topics like water cycles, or chosen categorically for announcement, decorative, or social awareness posters. Some of the compulsory skills included in poster creation are measurement, understanding ratios, organizational, and good eye-hand coordination. Other important aptitudes for effective posters involve the cognitive areas of analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. Computer competencies can also be exploited.

To help teachers apply posters exercises effectively, check out the Star Poster Program. Here you can find lessons on the elements of art and how to design award winning posters. There are also instructions on utilizing text, graphic considerations, use of color, and planning layouts with thumbnail sketches.

Posters have great worth other than as instructional tools.

For the last eighty-eight years in the United States the image of “Uncle Sam” in a striped top hat, white hair, moustache and beard has been pointing his finger at us declaring “I Want You...” in a cornucopia of issues. We’ve all seen it numerous times and in more than just two dimensional print. He’s even appeared in video spoofs. This image has been emulated and festooned to the point it has become a cultural icon. It’s probably the most famous poster of the 20th century, Montgomery Flagg’s legendary 1917 “I Want You for the U.S. Army”. It went through over four million copies during WWI and WWII and was not his original concept in helping to enlist thousands of recruits for military service. He borrowed it from a “Your Country Needs You” design by British artist Alfred Leete done in 1915 (Rickards, 1971).

Posters are designed for people on the move (Horn, 1965). They have been around for about 2,000 years. Their initial placard intent was for influencing the voting practices of the Romans and promoting their dramatic performances (Weill, 1985). The modern type of poster combining lettering with imagery can be traced to about the 1600’s (Cooper, 1949). Throughout the centuries posters have transgressed through techniques, styles, printing process, cultures, and issues. Yet, over the years the basic cardinal rules of poster design, simplicity, balance, workmanship, and surprise have remained (Biegdensen, 1946). They have been conceived in terms of words first and secondly through illustration to be bold and impacting (Allner, 1952).

Why have posters endured for so long? They have persisted for a variety of reasons. Posters have numerous merits relative to historians, governments, the public, entrepreneurs, artists, and philosophers. These virtues may be intrinsic to their nature as to why they were created, economic in character, aesthetically valuable, historically significant, and educationally important. For the person who creates a poster and the organiza-

tion which uses it, the work can be assessed as valuable if, at the very least, the poster has achieved to some measurable degree influence on its intended audience.

For museums and the historically minded, posters have an interesting chronicle. They were first made individually by hand, then through woodcuts, movable type, and etchings. In 1798, lithography's invention by Austrian Alois Senefelde allowed a modicum of mass production of art. This gave artists more freedom in creating printed materials than etchings and cutouts. Posters now had a new form, which was exploited by Jules Cheret, considered to be the father of the modern color poster (Barnicoat, 1972). Cheret is credited with having designed over one thousand of them.

In the 1890's, poster use was considered to be at its height. At this era posters became popular with public audiences when they were widely produced to herald plays. It was not uncommon for these bills to be ripped from their display by zealous fans. Consequently, some publishers in the 1890's offered special editions for collectors (Barnicoat, 1972). The time when posters were considered "ephemera", to be attached to walls for a short time and just discarded, had reached an end (Heyman, 1998). The historical epoch of poster accumulation was inaugurated.

Posters have become known as collector's items for a diversity of reasons. Due to the fact that amassing original paintings is cost prohibitive for most people, an alternative solution for the average person to have works by famous artists was to turn to collecting posters. Given that some posters are produced from hand-pulled processes (i.e., lithography, woodcuts, and serigraphy), this offers a sense of having an original piece by an artist even though most posters were runs created with mechanized reproduction processes.

The fondness for poster procurement has steadily grown since the early 1980's, as have their prices. Though some vintage posters may be obtained for under \$50, a serious purchaser can expect to spend a hefty bankroll. A cinematic poster for *The Wolf Man*, starring Claude Rains, can go for over \$100,000. Whereas, a 1932 film poster for *The Mummy* featuring Boris Karloff has sold for \$450,000 (Westbrook, 1996). Poster garnering for monetary satisfaction has merited a special article in the Investor section of *Business Week* (Khermouch, 2001). Here the curious and serious poster patron is provided general tips on poster acquisition. Because posters were sometimes done by well known artists of their time, such as Parrish, Beardsley, Mucha, and Cheret, collectors are willing to put out more than a few dollars to have them. It is readily apparent that *La Goulue*, Henri Toulouse-Lautrec's first lithographic poster in 1891, "which established his fame" (Janson, 1995, p 735), is worth more than a graphic avowal by an unknown artist.

There are poster collecting clubs, companies, and web sites established for the casual and determined poster aficionado. Some people collect posters from a scholarly perspective in comprehensive and systematic manners, specializing in specific categories: movie posters, war posters, period posters, and political. Others acquire examples of particular art styles and influences; i.e., Art Nouveau, Deco, Fauvism, DeStijl, Bauhaus, and Cubism. To view a cross section of poster history visit The Metropolitan Museum of Art. It has one of the largest poster collections in the world (Ades, 1984).

Posters have economic values other than selling among collectors. Not just because it is a source of income for the artist and for the person that obtains them for resale or trade to others that collect posters, but for influencing the buying habits of consumers, from product purchases to services, recreation, and entertainment.

By 1893, posters were also used as effective tantalizing announcements for future magazine publications, increasing circulation sales of popular magazines, like *Harpers* (Ades, 1984).

Humanity needs to communicate! Art is communication. Here's where the advent of the poster's value reaches its greatest zenith. Posters replaced the public town criers and heralds (Rossi, 1966). As Therese Heyman puts it, posters "give an effective voice to culture" (Heyman, 1998. p 14). Posters not only reflect any given society's major and subculture's idealisms, quintessence, and interests, they can also influence the cultural tastes and spirit of their times.

Posters played an active role in shaping political and civic events. The general populace has immeasurably used posters for their declarations, as have governments in propaganda dispersions (Cooper, 1945). Noticeably so during the French Revolution where the words "Liberty, Equity, Fraternity" appeared prominently on posters (Gallo, 1974). During the 1960's, posters were also proficient in communicating social beliefs and changes.

Within the arena of aesthetics one can ascertain other values for posters. Posters fill a need for expression (Gallo, 1974), for the voice of the artist not just the patron. If you review the visual history of posters you'll witness the narration of artistic techniques and aesthetic pursuits. Posters have even influenced art styles. The decorative, "artistic" posters are more concerned with style than content (Herdeg, 1986). As European artists became aware of Japanese woodcuts and paintings in the 1890's, color litho posters underwent transformations, noticeably persuaded by this new art exposure (Cooper, 1945). When one looks at the significant artistic events in USSR history, one finds companion examples in its posters that "raised illustrated announcement to the level of genuine graphic art" (Boburina, 1990. p 3).

Posters have instructional value. Educators use posters as a teaching tool in Language Arts and the visual arts. Not only as a reference in glimpses of past vogues, but also from the standpoint of structuring effective, succinct communication. They're especially useful as collaborative devices between and among schools, students, parents, non-profit groups, and business to come together in good causes to benefit larger society. With this association in mind and because posters can be utilized efficiently to affect social transformation, as a medium for pedagogy, and artistic expression, I created the Star Poster Program to give children a platform to vivify artistic attestations of social consciousness.

What is the value of a poster? It depends on your perspective: collector, historian, entrepreneur, consumer, teacher, artist, or student. Posters unite people; they divide people. Posters influence our ethics, morals, and behaviors. They have monetary significance for collectors. They possess emotional value, nostalgia appraisals, instructional merit, historical warrants in study, and aesthetic worth to be enjoyed. Without a doubt, a poster's value is greater than its naissant intent. No matter what your department, posters will continue to endure, evolve, and be a voice for millennia, for they are "barometers of social, economic, political and cultural events and inter-relations, as well as mirrors of intellectual and practical activities" (Brockmann, 1971. p 12).

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