



## Hitler as Poster Boy: German Graphic Art

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**T**he trouble with the exhibition of German posters at the Bard Graduate Center is that it's so difficult to look at an image of Adolf Hitler and admire the graphic design. Or to appreciate the use of typography in a Nazi-era poster designed to foster hatred of "The Eternal Jew." Or to focus on how many elements of modernist imagery survived the Third Reich without recalling the designers who had to flee for their lives. But that is what makes "Print, Power and Persuasion: Graphic Design in Germany, 1890-1945" such a powerful show.

The exhibition, which runs through Aug. 26, draws from the collection of the Wolfsonian-Florida International University in Miami Beach.

"This is the first exhibition of its kind on graphic design," says co-curator Jeremy Aynsley, a design historian at London's Royal College of Art and author of the scholarly catalogue "Graphic Design in Germany 1890-1945" (University of California Press). In an interview, Aynsley acknowledged that few people outside Germany have been prepared to study the Third Reich's contribution to design

until recently. Now, he says, "we feel brave enough that people are prepared to consider the Weimar Republic and the Third Reich" in that context.

Working with Wolfsonian curator Marianne Lamona, Aynsley drew 48 posters from a collection of about 2,000 works of decorative arts, propaganda and fine art amassed by Mitchell Wolfson Jr. Wolfson donated his collection to the university to create the museum in 1997. The Bard Graduate Center for Studies in the Decorative Arts, Design, and Culture was founded eight years ago by Susan Weber Soros. It has tackled serious subjects before, including a multicultural study of women in design. For the Bard Center, the poster show was expanded to include nearly 100 objects, from a dining chair by architect and designer Peter Behrens to a 1938 Bakelite "People's Radio." The posters include a photo montage exhorting Germans to turn on that radio.

The show journeys through history as well as artistic periods. The Jugendstil movement—Germany's answer to Art Nouveau—occupied designers from unification in 1871 through defeat in World War I. The Weimar Republic followed. Its hopes and failures were reflected in the work of Bauhaus modernists. They were inspired by constructivism and the avant-garde. But

their typographical reforms, including the introduction of Futura, would soon run afoul of Nazi tastes. Gothic made a comeback along with nationalism. By 1946, a powerful anti-Nazi poster announced the Nuremberg war crime trials with a ghastly image of Hitler and a headline: Guilty.

"My concern is to show that graphic design is a persuasive force," Aynsley says.

Graphic design is a 20th-century discipline. It flourished in artistic centers across Europe and in New York, as surveys such as Steven Heller and Seymour Schwest's "Graphic Style" (Abrams, \$24.95) reveal. The Bard show focuses on Germany's design evolution through its most tumultuous period in

history. At the turn of the last century, typefaces dated back to the 15th and 16th centuries and were modeled after the marks of a quill pen. But rapid industrialization led to mechanization of Germany's printing industry. Post-unification prosperity inspired commerce, advertising and bold graphic design.

Designers lent their talents to signage, books, magazines, advertisements, company logos and packaging. Posters offered a new means to reach people in urban environments. And although Paris remained the capital of poster art, German artists made their mark with brilliant colors, wildly creative typography, then-novel use of photo montages and expressionist illustrations. But the graceful curves and innocent romance of the Jugendstil ultimately gave way to the swastikas of the Third Reich.

The exhibition reminds that the swastika was an ancient sign of good fortune and prosperity long before Hitler's National Socialist Party appropriated the symbol, blazoned on red and black posters. Aynsley considers their success as a graphic device, the emblem of a horrendous brand.

Visitors to the show at the Wolfsonian had to struggle to keep up with the scholarly intent.

"You can see the first part of the show and understand it as art," Lamona says. "When they see the Third Reich material, immediately it becomes politics. People can't help themselves

from reacting that way."

Wartime required effective propaganda, whether the message was "Germany Needs You" or "Turn Out the Lights." But the Third Reich propagandists did not succeed in stamping out modern design, as a number of interesting images show. But brilliant practitioners such as Lucian Bernhard, Herbert Bayer and Laszlo Moholy-Nagy emigrated to the United States. Bernhard, known for iconic imagery and saturated colors, left in 1925, taking up a position at Harvard. He kept an office in Berlin until 1933, when the Nazis came to power. Bayer, a Bauhaus radical who favored clean-lined type and the abolition of capital letters, departed for New York in 1938. Hungarian-born Moholy-Nagy, who taught metal-working at the Bauhaus but had his greatest influence on photography, left in 1937. He went on to lead a Bauhaus school in Chicago.

Their artwork combines with what Lamona calls "this really difficult political material" to drive a single point.

"This is a show about graphic design, about the power of design, how the simple elements of text, color and imagery are manipulated to create a powerful message," she says. "Whether we believe the message is good or bad, the power of design in our everyday lives is extraordinary."

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