

BRITISH MODERN

STEVEN HELLER

LOUISE FILI



GRAPHIC DESIGN BETWEEN THE WARS

BRITISH MODERN

The authors are very grateful to Rebecca Holzman, our researcher, for her tireless detective work. Thanks also goes to Mary Jane Callister of Louise Fili Ltd., for her design and production expertise. As usual much gratitude goes to our colleagues at Chronicle Books: editor, Bill LeBlond; associate editor, Lesley Bruynesteyn; art director, Michael Carabetta; and design coordinator, Julia Flagg. And last but not least our agent, Sarah Jane Freymann.

We are also indebted to those whose collections we raided for this book, notably Robert Opie, who supplied the lion's share of the materials. Also thanks to Kurt Thaler, Catherine Bürer, Barbara Meili, and B. Hausmann at the Plakatsammlung Museum für Gestaltung Zürich; The London Transport Museum; Irving Oaklander Books; and Steven Guarnaccia.

CREDITS

Unless otherwise noted below the material in this book comes from private collections. Robert Opie Collection: 11, 19–21, 24–25, 27–30, 32 (bottom left and right), 33–34, 38, 40–47, 50–51, 52 (left), 53–55, 56 (bottom left, top right), 57, 73, 74 (bottom left), 75 (left), 76, 77, 78 (bottom), 79 (bottom and top right), 80 (left), 82–84, 86, 87 (bottom left and right), 89 (bottom left and right), 91–94, 95 (top right), 96 (middle), 99, 101, 102 (top left, right and middle), 103, 104, 105 (top right), 106–107, 109, 110 (bottom left and right), 111–113, 116 (bottom), 117 (bottom left and right, top right), 118 (bottom left and right), 119–120, 121 (bottom), 123, 125, 130. The Wolfsonian Collection, Miami, Florida: 35, 56 (bottom right), 118 (top), 121 (top left), 122. The London Transport Museum: 59–71. Plakatsammlung Museum für Gestaltung Zürich: 81, 115, 121 (top right). Steven Guarnaccia: 96–97 (razor blade packages).

Book design by Louise Fili and Mary Jane Callister.

Copyright © 1998 by Steven Heller and Louise Fili. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher. Printed in Hong Kong. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data: Heller, Steven. *British Modern: graphic design between the wars* / Steven Heller and Louise Fili. p. cm. Includes bibliographic references. ISBN 0-8118-1311-8 (pbk.) 1. Commercial art—Great Britain—Themes, motives—Catalogs. 2. Modernism (Art)—Great Britain—Catalogs. I. Fili, Louise. II. Title. NC998.6 G7H45 1998 97-26250 741.6 0941—dc21 CIP. Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books, 8680 Cambie Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6P 6M9 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Chronicle Books, 85 Second Street, San Francisco, California 94105. Web Site: www.chronbooks.com

INTRODUCTION

6

CULTURE

18

COMMUNICATION

26

FASHION

36

HOME FRONT

48

UNDERGROUND

58

INDUSTRY

72

SUNDRIES

90

CONSUMABLES

98

FURNISHINGS

108

HOLIDAY

114

TYPOGRAPHY

124

BIBLIOGRAPHY

132

BRITISH MODERN

S T E V E N H E L L E R

G R A P H I C D E S I G N

B R I T I S H

C H R O N I C L E B O O K S

A N D L O U I S E F I L I

m O D E R n

B E T W E E N T H E W A R S

S A N F R A N C I S C O

The authors are very grateful to Rebecca Holzman, our researcher, for her tireless detective work. Thanks also goes to Mary Jane Callister of Louise Fili Ltd., for her design and production expertise. As usual much gratitude goes to our colleagues at Chronicle Books: editor, Bill LeBlond; associate editor, Lesley Bruynesteyn; art director, Michael Carabetta; and design coordinator, Julia Flagg. And last but not least our agent, Sarah Jane Freymann.

We are also indebted to those whose collections we raided for this book, notably Robert Opie, who supplied the lion's share of the materials. Also thanks to Kurt Thaler, Catherine Bürer, Barbara Meili, and B. Hausmann at the Plakatsammlung Museum für Gestaltung Zürich; The London Transport Museum; Irving Oaklander Books; and Steven Guarnaccia.

CREDITS

Unless otherwise noted below the material in this book comes from private collections. Robert Opie Collection: 11, 19–21, 24–25, 27–30, 32 (bottom left and right), 33–34, 38, 40–47, 50–51, 52 (left), 53–55, 56 (bottom left, top right), 57, 73, 74 (bottom left), 75 (left), 76, 77, 78 (bottom), 79 (bottom and top right), 80 (left), 82–84, 86, 87 (bottom left and right), 89 (bottom left and right), 91–94, 95 (top right), 96 (middle), 99, 101, 102 (top left, right and middle), 103, 104, 105 (top right), 106–107, 109, 110 (bottom left and right), 111–113, 116 (bottom), 117 (bottom left and right, top right), 118 (bottom left and right), 119–120, 121 (bottom), 123, 125, 130. The Wolfsonian Collection, Miami, Florida: 35, 56 (bottom right), 118 (top), 121 (top left), 122. The London Transport Museum: 59–71. Plakatsammlung Museum für Gestaltung Zürich: 81, 115, 121 (top right). Steven Guarnaccia: 96–97 (razor blade packages).

Book design by Louise Fili and Mary Jane Callister.

Copyright © 1998 by Steven Heller and Louise Fili. All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form without written permission from the publisher. Printed in Hong Kong. Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data: Heller, Steven. *British Modern: graphic design between the wars* / Steven Heller and Louise Fili. p. cm. Includes bibliographic references. ISBN 0-8118-1311-8 (pbk.) 1. Commercial art—Great Britain—Themes, motives—Catalogs. 2. Modernism (Art)—Great Britain—Catalogs. I. Fili, Louise. II. Title. NC998.6 G7H45 1998 97-26250 741.6 0941—dc21 CIP. Distributed in Canada by Raincoast Books, 8680 Cambie Street, Vancouver, B.C. V6P 6M9 10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 Chronicle Books, 85 Second Street, San Francisco, California 94105. Web Site: www.chronbooks.com

INTRODUCTION

6

CULTURE

18

COMMUNICATION

26

FASHION

36

HOME FRONT

48

UNDERGROUND

58

INDUSTRY

72

SUNDRIES

90

CONSUMABLES

98

FURNISHINGS

108

HOLIDAY

114

TYPOGRAPHY

124

BIBLIOGRAPHY

132

I N T R O D U C T I O N

"There is a healthy stimulus in change, whether of air, scene, or in the crafts of advertising and printing."

—R. P. GOSSOP, 1935

England, the birthplace of the industrial revolution in the nineteenth century and the most commercialized Western nation in the early twentieth, was reluctant to accept modernism as a means to package and advertise its industrial and consumable products. During the early 1920s Britain's commercial trade organizations stubbornly rejected stylish trends and foreign fashions. Modern graphic design—the visual code of progress, which represented a shift from decorative ornamentation to economical functionality—was born on the Continent and therefore viewed as anathema to British taste. Although Germany and France had abandoned old-fashioned advertising techniques after World War I in their struggle to regain economic equilibrium, England clung to its late nineteenth century graphic arts tradition as though holding on to a precious piece of its empire.

There was a right way, a wrong way, and more important, an English way to promote British wares. This was based on the assumption that consumers were conservative and unwilling to tolerate change. Advertising and packaging had to be tasteful and elegant. Classic typefaces, decorative ornaments, and realistic renderings were encouraged. And advertising executives repeatedly told their graphic artists: "We must give the public what it wants," a dictum that absolved designers from the sin of mediocrity.

The keepers of the traditional flame further criticized the few intrepid modern designers then practicing in England for forcing their principles into advertising at the expense of the advertiser. "The public were so interested in the posters as pictures that they largely forgot their message as posters," wrote



THE ENEMY
MAGAZINE
COVER, 1927
ARTIST: WYNNDHAM
LEWIS



CURTIS
MOFFAT LTD.
ADVERTISEMENT, 1928
DESIGNER: E.
MCKNIGHT KAUFFER

one critic about the modern preference for dynamic abstraction. And in an article in *The Penrose Annual* (1935) on the initial impact of modern art on English publicity, poster artist R. P. Gossop, himself a modernist, described the prejudice of critics during the early 1920s: "Simple design was defined as 'modern' only because of its simplicity" and "Angularity of treatment was dismissed in a word for some years; the word was 'futuristic'...."

On the Continent, by the early 1920s France, Italy, Holland, and Germany had introduced their own variants of this "futuristic" graphic style alternately known as modern, moderne, modernistic, or Art Deco (as it is referred to today), which relied on dynamism, asymmetry, and surprise to convey mes-

sages. Rather than a pox on popular taste, as the English had feared, modernism symbolized the post-war shift to a revitalized peacetime economy.

France and Germany made impressive showings at the 1925 Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs & Industriels Modernes, the international festival of commercial style that officially launched—and gave its name to—the Art Deco epoch. The trade boards and economic ministries of these nations reasoned that modernity could jump-start the moribund post-war engine of commerce by giving consumers the impression of progress—of “new and improvedness.” Meanwhile, England rigidly stuck to austerity in the face of Continental flamboyance. As Carol Hogben wrote in *British Art and Design 1900–1960* (Victoria and Albert Museum, 1983), “Our showing in 1925 was half-hearted in the extreme. The French government's own official report commented that in point of physical scale our participation was worthy of our economic importance. But from the artistic point of view, it did not offer the revelations expected from a country which had been the birthplace of the revolution against ugliness and pastiche, and in which the marvelous example, from the 19th century, of our Ruskins, our William Morrises and Walter Cranes had revitalized the art of their age.” At the time even the British government's own white paper admitted the overall impression of their exhibits was “dull, aloof, lacking in the spirit of adventure.”

Yet British design was not always this lackluster. During the 1890s Aubrey Beardsley broke the academic stranglehold over poster design with his eccentric, chiaroscuro renderings of fanciful, post-pre-Raphaelite characters. At the same time, the Beggarstaff Brothers—James Pryde and William Nicholson—created a new approach to poster art that was resolutely modern. Although the Beggarstuffs did not have much commercial success, the poster maquettes they used to show as samples, using silhouettes

composed of pure, flat tints and complemented with minimal, bold lettering, were reproduced in various trade journals. They were a source of inspiration for the "pictorial placard" that came into its own in England during the mid-1920s. The Beggarstiffs also influenced leading German poster artists—especially the members of the Berliner Plakat movement—who in the early 1900s fostered an advertising style that was described in *Design in Modern Printing: The Year Book of the Design and Industries Association* (Ernest Benn Ltd, 1928) as having "movement and colour, a decorative exuberance which makes them very lively and pleasant things."

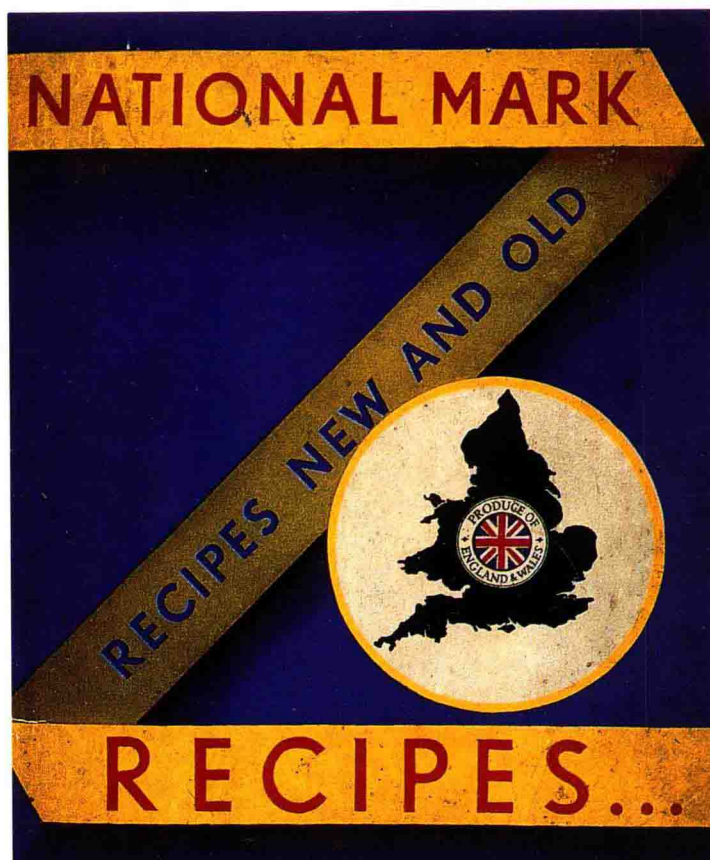
The widespread acceptance of this method on the Continent, and its subsequent promotion in European graphic arts trade journals, inspired young English designers to further the quest for modernity. But lacking viable clients at home, modern British designers were forced to sell their designs abroad, mostly to German advertising agencies and printers, who paradoxically sold usage rights back to English companies who were willing to experiment with the new forms. It was a circuitous route, but ultimately, modern design won out and found champions within the influential design organizations and trade groups. The Design and Industries Association mediated between those members who preferred to maintain the handicrafts tradition and others who sought to raise the standard of design in mass-produced and "machine-begotten" objects of common use. The Empire Marketing Board, which represented and dictated trade preferences to many of England's manufacturers, also stood behind what one of their leaflets called "the admirable simplifications of our accomplished poster artists [who create] not modernist eccentricities but essentially intelligent adaptations [to achieve a] means to an end."

The "end" referred to was the goal of attaining widespread increases in British trade throughout the empire and the world. By the mid-1920s British industry was facing a slump at home and fierce com-



LONDON'S
LEISURE
POSTER, c. 1932
ARTIST: AUSTIN
COOPER

NATIONAL MARK
BROCHURE COVER,
C. 1938
DESIGNER UNKNOWN



petition abroad. Much was written in the design trade journals about marshaling progressive graphic design to combat this threat, particularly the resurgence of German trade in the post-war era. Despite the fact that the devastation of World War I had temporarily paralyzed German industry, an editorial in a 1924 issue of England's *Commercial Art* magazine anticipated its inevitable recovery and ensuing competition. Germany was in the midst of a tremendous spiritual awakening, warned the editorial: "... German laboratories and art centers are enthusiastic and active and preparing for the day of recovery." Against this fervent German impulse the commercial art movement in England was unimpressive.

So the editorial further cautioned: "It behooves us to emulate the Germans in the attention they pay to laboratory and studio work, for only by these means will we be able to keep pace with our rivals ..."

The critics of stodgy British advertising also saw America as a worthy opponent: "Why is it that our standard of commercial art does not approach that of the Americans," asked Brian Rowe in "Commercial Art in England and America: A Difference in Attitude" (*Commercial Art*, 1924). He blamed it in part on the nonexistence in England of "a breed of men called art directors," which he described as Renaissance men of advertising who controlled both image and text to accomplish a creative end. But despite his awe of American practice, Rowe concluded that "We can show them infinitely more progress since the war than they have made We can show them ... modernity [that] they have not the wit or courage to use."

Rowe sounded a clarion call for members of a new generation of "modern artists for industry," including Austin Cooper, Tom Purvis, and the American expatriot Edward McKnight Kauffer, who in the face of prevailing conservatism produced sophisticated—and progressive—graphic design that was wedded to the avant-garde languages of Cubism, Futurism, and Vorticism. Through their efforts modernism gradually found a niche. Outlets for this work became more common. Each of these artists, in fact, was the beneficiary of a far-sighted patron, Frank Pick, who from 1908 to 1940 directed publicity respectively for the Underground and London Passenger Transport Board. In the early teens he was instrumental in developing an identity and publicity campaign for The Underground, which evolved into the British poster renaissance of the late 1920s. Pick reasoned that to entice its passengers the Underground and its bus service not only had to provide clean, comfortable, and efficient transport, it had to promote its services in an artistic manner—even the maps required a creative touch. Pick's