

Book Reviews

Comptes rendus de livres

Krzysztof Dydo, *Masters of Polish Poster Art*

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Dydo, Krzysztof. *Masters of Polish Poster Art*. Bielsko-Biala: Buffi, 1995. 239 pp., 300 illus., paper, US\$40, ISBN 83-901078-8-0.

The Poster Gallery in Cracow is undoubtedly one of the most interesting art galleries in Poland. Situated on Stolarska Street, in a stylish building dated back to the twelfth century, the Poster Gallery is currently the only art gallery in Poland devoted exclusively to poster art. In addition to exhibiting and selling posters, the gallery, owned and managed by Krzysztof Dydo and Ewa Pabis, promotes the genre through international exhibits, and also publishes posters and markets the art form in Poland. Mr. Dydo is an internationally recognized collector of posters and an expert on the topic of modern graphic arts; his analysis of Polish contemporary graphics has appeared in such important art magazines as *Design* and *Novum Gebrauchsgraphik*. Dydo's profound expertise on the subject of modern posters has given rise to an exceptional publication, *Masters of Polish Poster Art*.

This volume is a valuable source of information on the evolution of graphic arts in Poland and, furthermore, provides substantial insight for the sociological and historical interpretation of recent events. The primary objective of *Masters of Polish Poster Art* is to present the most important modern posters and their creators to anyone interested in graphic arts. The collection of works is based entirely on the aesthetic value of the art, and, although a great number of the reproduced posters have a political subtext, the selection is not organized with any references to political intentions. Rather, it is justified by the level of excellence maintained by contemporary Polish poster artists.

Masters of Polish Poster Art is divided into four sections. The first section comprises three

introductory articles. The second section contains the "Pictorial Lexicon of Polish Poster Artists, 1894–1994," which presents in chronological order 108 thumbnail, colour reproductions of the most important Polish posters. The third and primary section of the book, "Masters of Polish Poster Art, 1980–1995," is devoted to full-page, high-quality images of distinguished posters that document outstanding achievements in modern poster design. The final section contains concise biographies of the artists, including date of birth, education, preferred media, major awards, and a selected bibliography of poster art in Poland listing twenty-nine books, exhibit catalogues and articles published between 1957 and 1993.

The introductory text of the book is trilingual: provided in Polish, English and German, it consists of three articles, each dealing with a different aspect of the subject. In a short commentary, Dydo explains the dilemmas encountered in selecting the artists to represent different generations as well as varieties of styles and artistic temperaments. Unfortunately, the size of the publication does not allow for a comprehensive presentation of poster art in Poland, although the exclusive title — *Masters of Polish Poster Art* — conveys the high aesthetic expectations. Dydo chose the works of twenty-one internationally acclaimed artists, members of the Alliance Graphique Internationale and winners of numerous world-wide competitions. His selection effectively blends diverse styles and moods of contemporary Polish graphic design. The rich repertoire of visual images used by the practitioners of Polish poster design, such as Roman Cieslewicz, Jan Mlodozieniec, Franciszek Starowieyski, Waldemar Swierzy or Henryk Tomaszewski, reveals the most important purpose of this genre of art: engaging a passer-by in a dialogue and providing awareness through an effective system of visual expression.

The middle generation of graphic artists (debuting in the early 1970s) represented, among others, by Jerzy Czerniawski, Eugeniusz Get Stankiewicz or Mieczysław Gorowski, declares the importance of individual expression and combines new aesthetic trends with the unique personality of the Polish school of design. The youngest artists, Stasys Eidrigevicius, Roman Kalarus, Wiktor Sadowski or Wiesław Walkuski, share the common attitude of artists worried about the human condition beset by a gray and unattractive reality.

The foreword to *Masters of Polish Poster Art* was written by Steven Heller, a senior art director of *The New York Times Book Review*, the editor of *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* and the author of numerous books and articles on graphic arts, including several essays on contemporary Polish artists published in the *Graphis Magazine*. In the foreword to the book under review, Steven Heller recalls his first encounter with Polish postwar poster art and the powerful impact its visual language and functional typography had on American designers. Particularly important was the influence of the antiwar *Nie! (NO!)*, created in 1952 by Tadeusz Trepkowski, a poster that shocked the American graphic world with its simple, laconic style and an enormous emotional expression.

In a short paragraph, Steven Heller brilliantly explains the essence of Polish poster design: the creation of a new method of discourse, deeply rooted in Polish symbolism and metaphors that transcended the limitations of a national style. Heller also discusses differences between American and Polish poster design and the mutual influences of these distinctive forms of expression. He stresses the fact that American designers admired the integrity of the Polish poster design and perceived it as the expression of stylistic freedom. In the United States market, posters were allowed little room for artistic experiments and compelled most artists to create posters for the purely practical purpose of advertising the product. Paradoxically, government patronage in Poland allowed artists to design high-quality cultural posters, while forcing them to search for a sophisticated code to define their attitudes toward the new social system.

Heller also argues that, although prominent American artists such as Milton Glaser, Seymour Chwast, James McMullan and Paul Davis had already valued the metaphorical, multiform style of Polish posters in the early 1960s, its idiosyncratic vocabulary did not penetrate American art until the 1970s. At that time, both the *New York Times* op-ed page and the *Times* re-interpreted and applied the intellectual,

symbolic semantics of Polish posters to create these magazines' new styles. Steven Heller thus focusses his analysis on the influence of Polish poster design on the American form and, although he doesn't discuss it explicitly, he implicitly refers to the adaptation of the Polish poster style by French artists. He does not comment, however, on the noteworthy interaction between Polish and Japanese designers.

The two introductory articles by Krzysztof Dydo and Steven Heller are complemented by a brief history of Polish poster design written by Zdzisław Schubert, an important art critic. Schubert, the author of several publications on graphic arts, describes the beginnings and development of poster art in Poland, the importance of the "Polish school of poster" and the influence of the new trends and styles pervading the graphic arts in the 1970s. Yet Schubert's text deals solely with the history of Polish posters and does not provide the reader with any explanation of the typesetting or the printing technologies, the most important publishers, or the number of impressions of posters and their prices.

Also disappointing is the fact that none of the introductory articles in *Masters of Polish Poster Art* explains the transformations in the modern poster caused by changes in the social system in Poland. Given the fact that the reproductions in the book present mostly posters designed between 1980 and 1995, the publication could greatly benefit from an analysis of the newest metaphors and styles as well as profits or problems created by the altering social circumstances.

Since posters are often important artifacts and collectibles, students of material history would certainly appreciate a critique of these aspects of the genre. Polish posters are popular collectors' items. They combine aesthetic values of the high arts with the appealing utility of applied graphics. They are also affordable: a contemporary print at the Poster Gallery in Cracow costs between \$7 and \$10 Canadian.

Vintage and modern posters are acquired by private collectors as well as art galleries and museums. The Musée d'art moderne, Bibliothèque Forney, Smithsonian, Library of Congress and The Visual Art Museum in New York are just a few of the many institutions that have organized exhibitions of Polish posters, contributing greatly to the popularity of this form of art among an international audience. It is indeed unfortunate that the authors of the introductory essays to *Masters of Polish Poster Art* decided not to comment on these important aspects of the subject.

The second section of the book, "Pictorial Lexicon of Polish Poster Artists, 1894–1994" illustrates the beginnings and the evolution of poster art in Poland, and provides an effective background for the study of the source of iconography and metaphors used by the artists to design an exclusive language of visual discourse.

It is probably not a coincidence that the author of *Masters of Polish Poster Art* is a native of Cracow, as this city was in fact the birthplace of Polish posters. In the late 1800s Cracow was a lively centre of artistic activities in Poland. The Academy of Fine Arts, the Museum of Technology and Industry, and various cultural magazines and periodicals promoted local artists, shaping an atmosphere of creative freedom unique in what was then partitioned Poland. The first exhibit of international poster art was organized in Cracow under the auspices of the Museum of Technology and Industry in 1898. The main purpose of this exhibit was to promote the poster as an advertising medium and to encourage commercial manufacturers to support Polish artists.

The cultural poster was created, however, in the ateliers of Cracow's most renowned artists. A number of prominent painters such as Stanislaw Wyspianski or Teodeor Axentowicz moved to graphic art as a means of gaining better access to a larger audience. As presented in "Pictorial Lexicon of Polish Poster Artists, 1894–1994," images of the posters created between 1894 and 1918 reflect the influence of the decorative colours, floral ornaments and the solid, clear flow of line associated with Art Nouveau. These elements of European Modernism are combined with Polish historical iconography and the aesthetic patterns of native folk art.

Sztuka (Art), a poster created by T. Axentowicz in 1898, presents a dreaming, visionary face of a woman in a wreath of leaves designed with strong outlines and delicate colours that suggest the direct influence of the Secession; the sentimental ornamentation of the wreath, however, is typical of Polish folklore. The most famous example of early poster art presented in the Lexicon is perhaps the lithograph produced by Stanislaw Wyspianski in 1899 for the opening of the Maurice Maeterlinck play, *The Interior*. Wyspianski, an artist and a writer, re-created the atmosphere of the play by balancing the typographical imitation of the handwritten text with the powerful but plain image of a girl looking at the audience through a window. *Wnetrze (Interior)* was also the first Polish poster displayed on the streets of Cracow and enthusiastically discussed by the intellectuals of the city.

The next important stage in the Polish poster design came in the 1920s with the impact of Cubist and Formist theories that restructured the shape of a picture and replaced historical iconography with versatile typography, pure colours and a rich repertoire of folklore schemes and visual images of regional or military costumes, wild flowers and wheat, or the elements of the Polish landscape. The influence of Constructivism was strongly visible in the geometric forms, an ascetic use of colour, and a notable simplicity of imagery. This period is represented in the Lexicon by a poster advertising laundry detergent designed by Tadeusz Gronowski in 1925. Laconic in its visual elements, this poster was based on an amusing metaphor: black and white cats jumping into and out of the laundry detergent. The poster was reproduced in the Great Brockhouse Encyclopaedia in 1933 as the exemplar of the modern arts.

The Second World War interrupted the development of graphic arts in Poland and caused the almost total destruction of the country's artistic community. Arts subsequently became part of a therapeutic effort to restore health to a traumatized society. Poster art occupied a special position in postwar life, and modern posters presented in *Masters of Polish Poster Art* are greatly influenced by the role that the fine arts played in the recovery of Polish cultural life. At a time when the new government ignored the aesthetic needs of society, construction sites and destroyed buildings provided excellent "exhibit" areas for posters. Graphic artists had to comply with the demands of the Social-realist didactic approach to ideology and give primacy to themes such as political propaganda, health and safety promotion and environmental protection. The artists' desire to communicate with the passerby forced them to develop a cryptographic language of visual communication. Posters intended as urban decoration were also a source of information and commentaries on events. Soon the posters became as important a part of the arts as painting, yet could reach a greater number of people.

As cultural life in Poland resumed, the number of institutions ordering posters increased: operas, theatres, movie distributors, philharmonic halls, universities, and the trade and tourism industry provided a great demand for this form. The topics also shifted from political didacticism to a broad range of themes that reflected artists' interests in drama and movies, exhibits, a variety of historic and national celebrations, and holidays or sporting events.

A group of professors from the Warsaw Academy of Fine Arts, including Tadeusz Trepkowski and Henryk Tomaszewski, promoted an interdisciplinary and complex approach to graphic arts and rejected narrow professionalism. These masters of Polish graphic arts focussed on the common aspiration to inform and educate the audience through a constant dialogue with the viewer (a quality promoted by the life-motive of a human face in the Polish tradition of poster design). In this way they contributed to the integration of the graphic community.

The presence of this consistent system of support, both public and private, provided mature and emerging artists with the assistance needed to pursue their individual style of expression. The desire to communicate with the audience — a common element dominating Polish poster design — came from the intention shared by artists to animate and influence public understanding of art. As the level of education and the perception of the average spectator increased, artists reached for a new means of expression and mastered the metaphors and allegories used in their visual dialogue with the viewer. Spontaneous individual utterance was replaced by reflection on the fate of man and human dignity, as irony and sarcasm along with surrealist imagery permitted the avoidance of pathos and unnecessary emotionalism.

By presenting the masterpieces of early posters designed by Henryk Tomaszewski, Waldemar Swierzy, Jan Mlodozieniec and others, Krzysztof Dydo provides an excellent background for the comparison of imagery and techniques used in their more recent works. The austere topography that imitates the abstract sculptures of Henry Moore adopted by Tomaszewski in his poster *Moore*, the elements of folklore used in Mlodozieniec's *Turkey* and the surrealist metamorphosis of a human face into a bird skull applied by Franciszek Starowieyski in *Red Magic* are essentially the signature styles of these artists.

Numerous theatre and film posters reproduced in the Lexicon express the main principle of Polish graphic design, introduced by Henryk Tomaszewski, yet present in virtually all cultural posters: in addition to advertising an event, a poster also reflects the atmosphere of a play or a movie through the artist's own interpretation of the work. A theatre poster for Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, designed in 1983 by Wiesław Rosocha and reproduced in the Lexicon, is not simply a promotion of the event but an art form in itself. This poster shows a black geometrical contour of a human head and shoulders against a grey background. The shape is split by a cement

ladder leading to a red, bunker-like entrance situated in place of a human face. Thus, the visual metaphor that reveals the emotional essence of the play is the main element of the design. The audience is left with the task of discovering the meaning of the artistic message of the poster.

The elements of poster design introduced in the "Pictorial Lexicon of Polish Poster Artists, 1894–1994" can be easily identified in the third and main section of the book, entitled "Masters of Polish Poster Art, 1980–1995." This section contains 192 full-page reproductions of the most remarkable posters created in the last fifteen years. The works arranged alphabetically by author are combined to present modern Polish poster design in its entirety. The posters of each artist are arranged chronologically. Diverse individual styles selected by Dydo make it easy for the viewer to recognize works created by different artists just by looking at the photographs, while the chronological approach reveals the aesthetic evolution of the artists.

The excellent quality of the reproductions truly reflects the visual elements of the posters, such as a versatile palette of colours, bold strokes and distinct contours, as well as typography and suggested texture. The captions under the replicas include the date, title and type of poster, printing technology — mostly offset — and the size of the original. Here, however, the images could benefit from a short description of the events or, especially in the case of Polish productions, an explanation of the essence of the plays or movies they represent, for the modern Polish poster has little to do with the purpose of its American counterparts. Only five of 192 presented reproductions are advertising posters in the Western sense. Among them, interestingly enough, there is a poster designed in 1990 by Mieczysław Gorowski for the Université du Québec à Montréal *Rentrée 90*.

The wide use of the broadly understood cultural themes created an intellectual genre of posters specific to Polish art. Most of the impressions are devoted to the theatre and exhibits but there are also music, commemorative or event-related posters. So distinguished in earlier years, Polish film posters have currently become almost completely displaced by commercial American products. It is also notable that all of the posters presented in *Masters of Polish Poster Art* were designed by men. In the Polish art world, female graphic artists are still associated with more domestic forms of applied arts such as book illustrations. In addition, a greater supply (by established male artists) than available demand makes it very difficult for the female artists to find clients.

The diversity of individual artistic expressions presented in *Masters of Polish Poster Art* demonstrates the distinctive nature of poster art in Poland. As the artists presented are often also painters, illustrators, exhibit designers or cinematographers, their posters are greatly influenced by a variety of artistic styles and techniques. The evocative, emotional, painterly approach to poster design is employed by artists such as Jerzy Czerniawski, Franciszek Starowieyski, Wiktor Sadowski or Wieslaw Walkuski, whereas an intellectual, coherent language of visual metaphors is typical of Henryk Tomaszewski, Tadeusz Piechura or Mieczyslaw Wasilewski. The range of styles and idioms used in contemporary Polish posters is clearly visible in the works of such diverse artists as Jan Mlodozieniec and Stasys Eidrigevicius. The art of both is deeply rooted in folklore, but Mlodozieniec's painterly compositions are filled with joyful, bright colours and simple objects, while Eidrigevicius applies dark, grotesque or surrealistic images to comment on the loneliness of the artist in society.

Nevertheless, there are common trends in Polish graphic arts that, taken together,

contribute to a unique current in poster design. The functional typography intensifies the original illustration; intellectual metaphors and imagery hide the essence of the message and invite a dialogue with a viewer; dark humour, irony or cynical criticism provide a comment on everyday life and popular culture.

Masters of Polish Poster Art is the first work in a series of publications intended to present modern Polish posters; a second volume, published by Krzysztof Dydo, is entirely devoted to film posters and contains high-quality reproductions of more than 900 impressions. Among the many publications dedicated to Polish graphic arts, *Masters of Polish Poster Art* is notable from several points of view: in addition to presenting aesthetic comment and artistic interpretation of cultural events, this album provides an excellent introduction to the history of Polish poster design, exposes modern metaphors and iconography, and fully documents the innovation and extravagance of the contemporary language of visual communication. Although it may be difficult to find in bookstores, this book is a valuable reference for anyone interested in the graphic arts.

Annette Carruthers, ed., *The Scottish Home*

ANNMARIE ADAMS

Carruthers, Annette, ed., *The Scottish Home*. Edinburgh: National Museums of Scotland, 1996. 232 pp., 211 illus., paper, ISBN 0-948636-85-8; cloth \$59.95, ISBN 0-948636-72-6.

From here in the "distinct society," I applauded Scotland's hearty endorsement of a separate parliament a few months ago. Having visited Scotland as a child (and later as a student of architecture), it seemed evident to me that Scots are quite different than their neighbors to the south. Even by the age of thirteen, when I was fortunate enough to travel to Edinburgh with my parents, I had worn kilts and taken Scottish dancing lessons. A few years later I read Sir Walter Scott novels in high school and learned about (ugh!) haggis. More than two decades later, as an architectural historian, I have little doubt that the work of the great Scottish architects, such as Robert Lorimer and Charles Rennie Mackintosh, is particularly interesting *because* of its Scottishness.

It was from this position of the predisposed convert that I approached *The Scottish Home*. Why write a book on the Scottish home? How did its evolution differ from houses in England? And perhaps most selfishly, I wondered what such a book might teach us about interpreting Canadian houses, whose history, after all, is similarly overshadowed by *our* neighbors to the south.

The Scottish Home is an extremely ambitious undertaking. Seven authors (academics and museum professionals) have uncovered the history of the Scottish home from 1600 to 1950 in nine chapters. It may, however, have been more accurately entitled "Stuff in the Scottish Home," since its emphasis is on objects and artifacts (particularly furniture), rather than buildings. An introduction to the book is followed by two chapters on small rural and urban houses. The subsequent six sections are organized like the house itself, in rooms: kitchen, hall/lobby, dining room, drawing room, bedroom, and bathroom.