

JOHN BETJEMAN:

In a decade of theories and schools of thought, of about a dozen differing standards from which to judge the same thing whether it be political, literary or æsthetic it is comforting to find one branch of activity which shows improvement by any of the standards critics like set up.

There is no doubt that the publicity of many of the leading English firms and organisations is neater, more legible and usually more beautiful than it was twenty years ago. Certainly other countries have not yet reached such a high level. There is no harm in showing how this has come about. In the nineteenth century advertising was generally left in the hands of printers and signwriters. These men still worked in the fine traditions of craftsmanship inherited from the Georgian era. Early advertisements had a certain uniformity and urbanity which prevented them from being offensive. Type faces were varied and beautiful: engraving was ingenious and pretty. Not until pre-war days when processes and printing offered a limitless choice of design and colours did the advertiser become embarrassed by their riches. Artists were, in those days, far too professional and temperamental to have anything to do with vulgar commerce. Consequently large spaces in papers, books, and on hoardings were covered with designs, if such they could be called, by people styled commercial artists who caused the vulgarity of filthy colour schemes and cursive script to be mistaken for art by business men, and to be associated with business men by genuine artists.

Soon after the War the Underground Railways (now the London Passenger Transport Board) took this situation in hand and employed genuine artists to design their posters and their type faces. Eno's Fruit Salt did the same thing. From these experiments Mr. E. McKnight Kauffer emerged as the chief discoverer and perfecter of a technique of poster design calculated to strike the eye at a distance, intrigue, slightly shock, and yet never to offend. He, in fact, invented public art, which is a different thing from Connoisseur's Art (confined to galleries) Commercial Art (already described) und Royal Academy Art (tried without success as a publicity medium by the Railway companies). He has his imitators, but being always ahead himself, they find it impossible to catch up. Better than inspiring imitation he has, thanks to the publicity given to his work by the London Passenger Transport Board and the Great Western, caused art students to realise the importance of public art.

The chief requirements of the public artist are a sense of type and its proportion to a given area, a journalist's head for seeing the important message to be conveyed by his design and for putting it to paper a distinguished line and sense of colour. There is no reason why all good public art should be an imitation of Kauffer. The Guinness advertisements exploited humour neatly and effectively. They produced work as handsome in its way as any of the "higher-brow" London Passenger Transport Board posters. They have never sunk to commercial vulgarity.

In 1931 the General Post Office employed publicity and by means of its film unit (which, under John Grierson produced the best English documentary films) and by posters and telegraph forms gave an official recognition of public art as opposed to commercial art.

Every month now, some firm gives up its more repulsive "commercial" style of advertisement and either reverts, if it is old enough, to its early Victorian typography, or employs one of the many talented young artists who are now giving their services to public taste. Young artists no longer despise commerce, and business men are becoming aware that a well laid out display can be left to a public artist—a being every bit as practical as the business man himself.

Good public art has effected public taste. People are aware now that advertisements are worth looking at, and not indiscriminate shouting to which tired people turn a deaf eye.

JOHN BETJEMAN

Werbetexter Copywriter

SHELL MEX & B. P. LTD.



Zeichnung OSCAR BERGER Drawing