

The Power of the Poster

Propaganda Poster Design

For centuries, posters have played a major role in delivering information to the public. Whether it is the date for an upcoming performance or an alert about a missing person, posters offer quick access to information throughout our daily lives. However, during the years of WWI and WWII, posters played a much darker role. During the beginning of WWI in 1914, the era of the propaganda poster had begun. Both the Allied Forces and the Central Powers started creating public posters that would engage the people in the war. Besides an attempt to validate their war engagement, these posters were used to promote enlistment, encourage conservation of food and resources among the people, raise funds for the military, and boost the overall public morale. Little did designers know that their posters would be the difference between victory and defeat.



The Beginning of Central Propaganda

Unsurprisingly, the Central Powers had quite a different approach to design than the Allied Forces. The poster design of the Central Powers was primarily inspired by Lucian Bernhard (figure 1) and the simplicity of the *Plakatstil* style (seen in figures 2). Bernhard, largely known for his influence and engagement in *Plakatstil*, was born in Stuttgart, Germany in 1883, originally named Emil Kahn. Primarily self-taught, Bernhard was a Graphic Designer, Typographer, Professor, Interior Designer, and Fine-Artist. At the beginning of his career, the artist, after being kicked out of his home for repainting

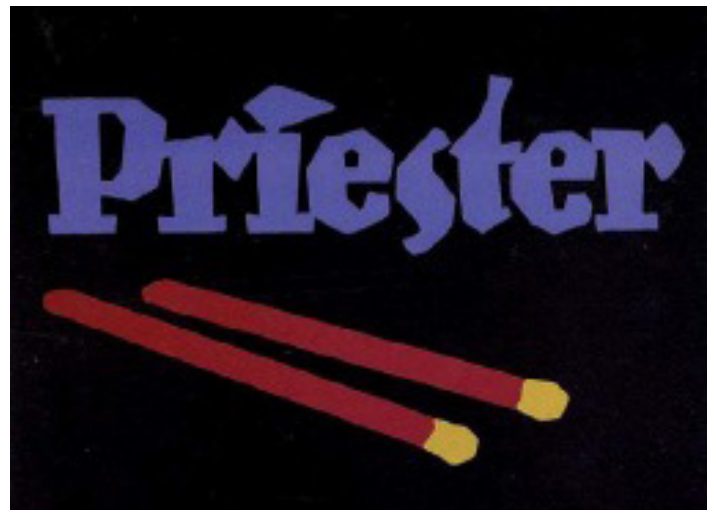
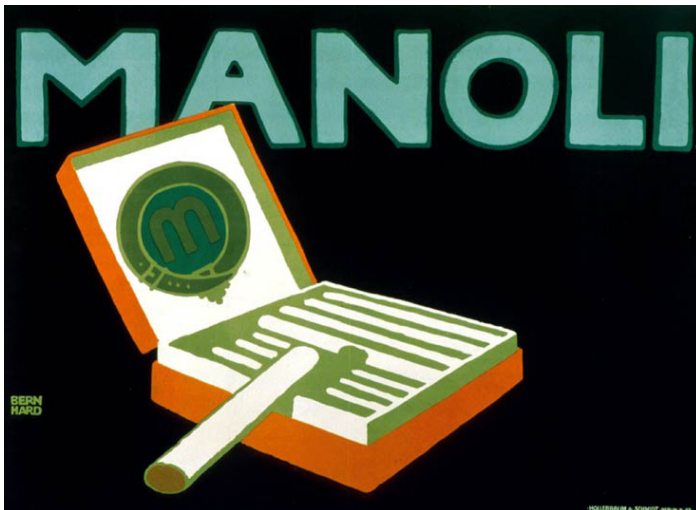


Fig.1. Lucian Bernhard Portrait
Lucian Bernhard, 1955.

Fig.2. Poster for Manoli
Lucian Bernhard, *Manoli Poster*, 1910.

Fig.3. Poster for Priester Matches
Lucian Bernhard, *Priester Poster*, 1905.

¹Phillip Meggs and Alston Purvis,
Meggs' History of Graphic Design
(Hoboken, New Jersey: John Wiley and
Sons, Inc., 2012), 283.

his family's antique décor, had decided to enter a poster advertisement competition for the Priester matches company. After finishing his piece, Bernhard felt as though the poster was too complex and he began painting the figures out until it clearly represented the brand and nothing else. While his design was quickly rejected, the chief judge, arriving late, noticed his piece in the trash, pulled it out, and immediately claimed it as the winning poster (seen in figure 3). During the height of *Plakatstil*'s popularity, Bernhard's designs were based on a single image or illustration accompanied by a title on a plain background, usually in an advertisement for a product. As described by Phillip Meggs and Alston Purvis in *Meggs' History of Graphic Design*, "words and images were integrated, and the essence of communication was conveyed by simplifying images into powerful shapes and patterns".¹ Germany and Austria-Hungary brought this concept into their propaganda, focusing on reductive forms, flat planes of color, and clarity. While Bernhard continued to follow these rules in his propaganda poster design, he also embraced a unique medieval characteristic. The artist produced many propaganda posters for

WWI in this style, often incorporating the same gothic typeface and neutral colored background. One of these pieces, seen in figure 4, exemplifies Bernhard's medieval, illustrative approach. The poster reads "This is the way to peace – the enemy wills it so! Thus subscribe to the war loan!" and depicts a knight's fist as the focal point of the image. Many mark Bernhard's role in *Plakatstil* as the main influence for the beginning of propaganda poster design in WWI.

America Enters the War

On April 6th, 1917, America broke diplomatic relations with Germany after a German U-Boat had sunk an American vessel. Many propaganda posters were already in circulation throughout both the Allied Forces and the Central Powers. Artists from all around were being commissioned to create designs that would encourage and persuade the people. At the time of the United States entering the war, a well-known illustrator named Joseph C. Leyendecker (seen in figure 5) had switched roles in order to focus on aiding the war efforts. Leyendecker was born in March of 1874 in Rhine, Germany. When he was 8 years old, Leyendecker immigrated to the United States where he soon found a new home in Chicago, IL. The artist studied drawing and anatomy at the Chicago Art Institute and later continued



Fig. 4. War-Loan Campaign
Lucian Bernhard, *This is the Way to Peace – The Enemy Wills it So!*, 1915.

Fig. 5. Joseph Leyendecker Portrait
Joseph Leyendecker, date unknown.

Fig. 6. Saturday Evening Post Cover
Joseph Leyendecker, *The Saturday Evening Post Thanksgiving Cover*, 1918.

Fig. 7. Third Liberty Bond Poster
Joseph Leyendecker, *Third Liberty Bond Poster for the Boy Scouts of America*, 1917.



his education at the Académie Julian in Paris under the influence of popular artists such as Alphonse Mucha, one of the leaders of the Art Nouveau movement in France. During the early years of his career, Leyendecker's was most known for his work with Arrow, a shirt collar company, and his piece entitled *The Arrow Collar Man*. However, in 1899, Leyendecker began illustrating the covers of the *Saturday Evening Post*, a popular news media at the time. While his work was usually focused on the current buzz of entertainment, the designer's topic of choice migrated to war propaganda in 1917. Leyendecker started creating many military based covers that often honored a man in uniform. In example, figure 6 depicts a cover for the famous magazine in which a soldier is marching with a Turkey by its side and a basket of food hanging from his gun's barrel. This cover not only honored the military's contribution, but it also indirectly encourages the people to enlist in the military.

The artist also gained a boost in popularity when he began creating propaganda posters for the US Navy, Marines, Army, and even the Boy Scouts. In fact, Leyendecker's most famous poster was an image of a boy scout passing over a sword, of which is inscribed with "Be Prepared", to the statue of liberty seen draped in the American flag. The poster, seen in figure 7, was meant to praise and celebrate the success of the Third Liberty Loan and honor the Boy Scouts' generous contribution. Leyendecker's

work with the *Saturday Evening Post* lasted until 1943, when he created his last cover for the company of the New Year's Baby. Yet, even though his commissioned work slowed down, he still created posters for the United States Department of War, one of which depicts a string of commanding officers encouraging the audience to purchase war bonds in support of the military's endeavors during WWII. All in all, Joseph Leyendecker's propaganda design in both his posters and his magazine covers truly captured the illustrative, emotional approach that the Allied Forces so strictly followed throughout the wars.

he Nazi Graphic Designer

As propaganda poster design fought its way into society before WWII had begun, even un-commissioned artists were joining in the fight, creating propaganda in order to show support for their country. One German Graphic Designer named Ludwig Hohlwein (seen in figure 8) joined the persuasive fight toward the beginning of the second war. Hohlwein, born in 1874 in Rhine, Germany (much like Leyendecker), was originally an experienced architect that trained at the Technical University in Munich before he began pursuing poster design. In similarity with Lucian Bernhard, Hohlwein rebelled against Art Nouveau and was a leader of the *Plakatstil* style. His primary influence derived from the works of the Beggarstaff Brothers in Britain.



Fig. 8. Ludwig Hohlwein Portrait
Ludwig Hohlwein, date unknown.



Fig. 9. Fund Poster for the Wounded
Ludwig Hohlwein, *Fundraising Poster for the Wounded Soldiers*, 1914.



Fig. 10. The German Student Poster
Ludwig Hohlwein, *The German Student*, 1933-1934.

Between the years of 1912 and 1925, the graphic artist hit the peak of his career creating posters and advertisements for countless commercial companies across the region. By 1925, he had designed more than 3-thousand different advertisements, becoming one of the most known graphic designers of his era. Hohlwein had even created pieces for American companies such as Camel and Fatima Cigarettes. This fame and fortune was most likely due to his unique style of applying ink over time, allowing each layer to dry before he added the next. And, of course, much like Lucian Bernhard, Hohlwein focused on solely incorporating very few elements such as a title and the product the company sells. However, in contrast to the traditional style of Bernhard, Hohlwein's approach was more painter-like and was thought to be based on photography. This is best demonstrated in his earlier poster for the Red Cross (seen in figure 9) in support of rehabilitation efforts for the wounded soldiers of WWI. The soldier is much more illustrative than any of Bernhard's works, yet it still incorporates the sense of symbolism promoted by the Central Powers in WWI.

Nonetheless, the artist's career took on a different tone when he began accepting commissions from the Nazi regime. As Adolf Hitler mentioned in his book *Mein Kampf*, the illustrative approach of the Allied Forces was far more successful than the symbolic approach of the Central Powers due to its emotional aspect of pathos. And, Ludwig Hohlwein was the perfect artist to translate this since of illustrative emotion into the message of the Nazi regime. Many of his works depicted the swastika, the adopted symbol

of the Nazis, and some sort of figure with a confident, victory-like pose. This is best illustrated in his poster *The German Student*, as seen in figure 10. This poster was commissioned by the National Socialist Student Union, a Nazi organization that strove to represent the student population of the regime. The image depicts a German student with his sleeves rolled up and a confident, positive demeanor. He is holding the flag of the Nazi party in one hand while he ponders the future of society. This poster and the campaign of which it was a part of was quite successful, as it seemed to contribute to the number of individuals, especially university groups and fraternities, that supported the Nazi regime. Hohlwein also designed countless posters for the NSDAP, the Nazi People's Welfare, the Winter Relief Fund, the Air Raid, and even the 1936 Olympic Games. While Hitler was spreading his message about a dominant/superior race throughout the world, Hohlwein's posters depicted these images and symbols that strengthened Hitler's message and backed up his beliefs. After the war's beginning, the Nazi graphic designer continued his propaganda poster design by creating works that had a higher tonal contrast, persuading German men to enlist in the military and to help save their people. In summation, after the war had ended, so did Hohlwein's career as an artist. Ludwig Hohlwein's downfall eventually led to his death in 1949.



Fig. 11. Jean Carlu Portrait
Jean Carlu, date unknown.

Fig. 12. Production Poster
Jean Carlu, *America's Answer! Production*, 1941.

Fig. 13. *Between the Hammer*
Jean Carlu, *Entre LeMarteau...Et L'Enclume!*, 1944.



The U.S. Office of War Information

While the vast majority of the world stopped producing art due to the devastation and trauma of WWII, a group of artists including painters, illustrators, and designers began working for the U.S. Office of War Information. This government agency was responsible for producing and distributing informative pieces about the war in order to keep the public in touch with the war and its corresponding events. Numerous posters, cartoons, and other materials were widely distributed throughout the United States. These efforts were focused on enlistment, conservation, preparedness, and funding. One of the artists that was commissioned by the organization was Jean Carlu, as seen in figure 11. Carlu was born in May of 1900 in France. At the age of 18, Carlu was a promising architectural student when he was run over by a trolley and his right arm was severed from his body. During his amazing recovery, the young artist had much time to think about the current issues of WWI and his future. In doing so, Carlu decided to change paths and become a Graphic Designer. The new-found designer decided to teach himself to draw with his left hand, and wished to support his country as a designer the best that he could. In 1940, while Carlu was in America working on an exhibition for the French Information Ser-

vice, he found out that German soldiers had marched into Paris and Hitler had taken over his country. Therefore, the designer chose to remain in America and continue his work for local companies. Carlu's style was much different than the current designs circulating the United States, considering his French background in design and pictorial modernism. While Carlu understood the need for a straightforward message and the utmost precision based, he had trouble conveying his message to an American audience, at least until he was commissioned by the Container Corporation of America. During his work with CCA, Carlu began creating designs for the U.S. OWI. It was at this point that Carlu created one of his most famous pieces, *America's Answer! Production*, seen in figure 12. Over One-hundred thousand copies of this poster were distributed throughout the country, making him a recognized artist all over the globe. Originally, when the poster was first created and submitted in 1941, it was designed as a mobilization poster (pre-Pearl Harbor). However, it became a war poster when it was issued in 1942. The poster strongly encouraged the public to aid in production in order to out-produce German and Japanese manufacturers. It was one of the first posters that successfully mobilized the American people and made them aware of a way that they could help fight in the war.

Another successful propaganda poster by Carlu, named *Between the Hammer*, was designed in representation of the Free French Forces (a.k.a. the Forces Françaises Libres), a group of fleeing French soldiers who were given American equipment and were part of the first D-Day landings (seen in figure 13). The image depicts a hammer, that is decorated with the flags of the Allies, and the Patriarchal cross with the Nazi symbol being crushed in between. After Carlu's involvement in the war, he went back to developing posters and advertisements for the CCA and a few other companies until his death in 1997.

Concluding Thoughts

Throughout the years of WWI and WWII, the poster became a tool for persuading the public and encouraging them into aiding war efforts. Many artists broke away from their work and utilized their strengths as designers to help fight for victory. Even though the Allies ultimately defeated the Nazi regime due to the help of propaganda poster design, many artists still regret their contributions to this day and blame themselves for the countless soldiers that lost their lives.

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