

CENTRAL SAINT MARTINS: PRESS RELEASE MODERN BRITISH POSTERS

Modern Art, Graphic Design and Utopia in 20C Britain

April 7th – May 17th 2008

Lethaby Gallery, Central Saint Martins, Southampton Row, WC1

This exhibition of posters explores the interaction between modern art and graphic design in Britain during the middle part of the 20C. The years after WW1 were, as a consequence of the war, a period of social and political realignment. It was natural, in these circumstances, for artists to want to address an audience beyond the complacent limits of the gallery. They were able to do this by engaging with the developing technologies of graphic reproduction so as to produce commercial poster images. These images spoke broadly of people, landscape, technology and identity.

Every great artist in Britain contributed to this effort. The exhibition will include work by Edward Wadsworth, Paul Nash, Edward Bawden, Edward Mcknight Kauffer, Abram Games and Tom Eckerlsey amongst others.

The posters displayed come from the collection of Paul and Karen Rennie. Paul is Head of Context on BAGD at CSM.

The evolution of modernism, in the period after WW1, was a consequence of both social and technological change. In Britain, with its great-power status intact, modernism developed in a less obviously ideological but no less utopian form than that conceptualised elsewhere.

The practical effort by artists, of reaching beyond the gallery, required them to embrace the possibilities of new technologies in print media. This effort was instrumental in transforming commercial art into graphic design. This visual re-invention was fundamentally utopian in its expression of social emancipation.

Surprisingly perhaps, this propaganda was not always produced by government agencies. The administrative mechanisms of war and the economic potential of empire allowed for the emergence, after 1920, of new and large-scale corporate organisations. These bodies used the media to promote their own efforts and to communicate the emerging class-interest of their managers. Accordingly, their communications speak of more than economy and convenience.

The evolution of British graphic design, from 1920, onwards has usually been presented as a footnote to developments in Europe. These posters show a graphic language of range and sophistication emerging in Britain and able to communicate beyond the established rhetoric of advertising and sales.

Many of the artists associated with these images have a connection with CSM. The origins of the College are in the 19C design-reform movement. The College was a pioneer force in the conceptualisation of graphic design and in the formation of the first professional cohort. Indeed, the College has played a crucial role in the development of the modern creative economy.

PV April 15th RSVP to
Dr Paul Rennie
Context BAGD CSM SR WC1









