

Abram Games Graphic Designer

Maximum Meaning, Minimum Means, by Naomi Games, Catherine Moriarty and June Rose, Lund Humphries, 2003, 208pp., 230 illus. in colour, £30 cloth. ISBN 0-85331-881-6.

Abram Games deserves to be counted as one of the most important poster designers of the 20th century. This book is the first major publication on Abram Games, except for a few exhibition catalogues, since 1960 and is the first comprehensive account of his career as a poster designer and of the images he created. Games is best known for his work during WW2 and the posters he produced, working within the uninspiring context of the War Office, constitute the most prolific and sustained graphic output of quality by any poster artist, anywhere, during the 20th century.

A quick look at the checklist of published posters (pages 187-196) reveals that Games designed some 80 odd posters during the period 1941-46. This corresponds to an output of one design every three weeks for the duration. In addition, Games designed wall charts and educational material for the Army of Bureau of Current Affairs at the rate of a double-sided poster every fortnight. It should be remembered that, notwithstanding the advent of mechanical reproduction, Games was still working within the limits of craft production. He defined the brief, worked out the solution and then prepared the artwork before sending it to the printer. This lavishly illustrated, comprehensive and substantial monograph will serve as a welcome introduction to this significant body of work.

Furthermore, the publication of this book during the machinations of the Hutton Inquiry and the continuing war in Iraq could not be more timely. Abram Games was a master of propaganda and

the book is evidence, as if any were needed, that propaganda need not be necessarily duplicitous.

The narrative of the Games story is expressed through three separate but interconnected texts.

The first is a memoir by Naomi Games of her father, the second is a detailed account of his professional life by design historian Catherine Moriarty and the third is an account of the work that he did for Jewish causes and for the nascent state of Israel. This last text is by the biographer June Rose. These texts correspond, at least in the beginning, to accounts of Abram Games as father, designer and idealist. By the end of the book these strands are interwoven and inseparable so that the idealist and designer are evident in the ethical projection of work and family described movingly by Naomi Games.

Abram Games was born in 1914. His parents lived in the Lower Clapton Road, East London, where his father was a photographer with his own studio located above a cinema. Both sides of the family had escaped anti-Semitic persecution, in Poland and Russia respectively, and had arrived in London in 1899 and 1904.

Games was surrounded during his childhood by the paraphernalia of the darkroom and studio. It is therefore unsurprising that he should develop a taste for drawing and for making things. These tastes, however, distracted him from the usual school curriculum and a bout of prolonged illness insured that he failed his eleven plus. This academic failure was a blow for the upwardly mobile ambitions of his mother who nevertheless arranged for Games to be admitted to the Hackney Downs School for Boys. The school looked to prepare its pupils for employment in the lower reaches of the professional classes and was unimpressed by the choice of art as a possible career. The early narrative is therefore one of emerging vocation set against educational indifference. Later, Games set himself against what he considered the exploitative behaviour of his employers and, on a point of principle, resigned from his first job. Against these trials are set

the constant and enduring background of family support and community. In the end, Games made his mark through tenacity, talent and perseverance.

At the outbreak of WW2 Games joined the army. It was there that he realised that service communications would require, and be made more effective, by the use of a contemporary graphic style with which to address the soldier. Games immediately signalled these observations to his superiors. Looking back, Abram Games was always slightly self-deprecating in his account of how he was appointed Official War Office Poster Designer (p45) and promoted to Captain. He claimed that, having established the case for this role, it was his good fortune to be the first poster and graphic artist to be listed in the alpha' sorted army lists. His exact contemporary Tom Eckersley was, for example, included in the RAF lists. In consequence, Games always claimed that his appointment owed as much to army administration as to anything else.

The beginnings of the propaganda efforts of WW2 were not auspicious. There was a general cultural unease with the idea of propaganda in Britain. This view had taken hold in the aftermath of WW1 when it was recognised that Britain's propaganda victory against Germany had been engineered through the fabrication of atrocity stories. The early literature of war propaganda recognised that German posters were probably better designed than their British counterparts although less effective (see Hardie and Sabin (1920) for example). George Orwell, writing about the propaganda images of WW1, contrasted the duplicity of much war propaganda with the prevailing ethos of "fair play" amid officers and gentlemen that characterised the perception of the war amongst those left at home. The subsequent revelations, throughout the 1920s, that things had not been as they seemed, was another moral failing to be added to the catalogue of war and measured against the guts, determination and spirit of the ordinary men. Orwell was writing, of course, as much about what he considered a moral decline amongst the British elite as of anything else.

The same decline was described, looking from another cultural perspective, by Evelyn Waugh who had noted that the administration of global conflict had created an enormous new state apparatus concerned with marketing, presentation and, what we would now call, “spin”. Of course, the Ministry of Information was a new kind of Government department and did become, during the course of the war, an enormous, difficult and not always effective bureaucracy. The Ministry was concerned, to a large extent, with managing the interface of relations between Whitehall and the public through the media. The administrative anxieties of the project were recalled in the diaries of Harold Nicolson for the period (see Nicolson (1967)). In the main, the chief problems faced by the Ministry were derived from an inability amongst the political class to empathise with ordinary people and to understand that explanations and information might be a necessary corollary of total war.

The war posters produced by Abram Games refute both these accounts of communication and propaganda. More significantly, his work refutes the trajectory of national decline implicit within both these accounts of administrative failure. Of course, the context in which Games worked was quite specific. His address was aimed entirely at army and service personnel. Between the retreat from Dunkirk (May-June 1940) and the invasion of Europe (June 1944) British army personnel were involved in an intense period of rehabilitation, defensive activity and offensive training. In addition, after the entry of The United States into the war there was the additional effort of integrating different cultural and military traditions within the framework of “combined operations”. The military context is reflected in the design of communications that are direct and that “pull no punches”. The consequences of irresponsible behaviour with guns and ammunition, often fatal, are portrayed straight. Similarly, the consequences of “careless talk” are shown by reference to a corpse or coffin. The most notable feature of the poster designs by Abram Games is their absolute refusal to skirt around the issues of military and personal discipline. This was extended, in a notable series of designs, to issues of personal health and fitness, hygiene and of collective

responsibility for food production and self-sufficiency. All of these themes are presented within the narrative of this book.

All the designs produced by Abram Games were created using his favourite tool, the airbrush. This was a staple of poster designers during the 1930s and Games was a master of it. He had become proficient in photographic retouching in his father's studio as a child. The posters reveal that artistic technique is always allied to conceptual invention, integrity and refinement. Notwithstanding his debt to pioneer pre-war designers such as McKnight Kauffer and Cassandre, Games was able, through this period of intense creativity during the war, to define a new symbolic language based on visual transformations, overlaps and of visual congruence. Thus spades and forks become knives and forks on a table, spades become ships and, later on, newspapers become dynamic figures (pp50-51 and pp162-169). Eventually, this was to be expressed in the maxim that Games used to describe his working method and its ambition towards balancing message and technique: "maximum meaning, minimum means".

Perhaps the unrelentingly hard-hitting nature of these war posters made its own contribution to the necessarily brutalising environment of army life. Most war propaganda supports, after all, the prevailing cultural norms of war – physical aggression, ferocious masculinity and exaggerated nationalism. The Games posters are relieved by the successful projection within the design of an idealistic social, or collective, project. Taken as a group, the posters give visual expression to the thesis promoted by George Orwell that war and revolutionary social change are necessarily and inevitably combined (see Orwell (1941) *The Lion and the Unicorn*). By giving these ideas visual form Games made a substantial contribution to the phenomenon of "social vision" in Britain (see Stuart Hall on "Picture Post" for example) and, at the same time, forced the pace of social change. Games was able to communicate effectively though the rigorous reduction of any unnecessary elements in the pictorial design of his posters. However, his posters are never simplistic and, crucially, they retain a utopian idealism through the projection of personal integrity

and collective solidarity. Rights and responsibilities, ethics and consequences, have never been so perfectly expressed in poster design. Nowhere is this more evident than in the book designs for "Target for Tomorrow" from 1943-44 (p68) which combine the pictorial representation of technological advance, planning and social democracy in the projection of social utopia. The only omission from the catalogue of work included in the book appears to be the double-sided photographic and information posters that Games produced, at fortnightly intervals, for the Army Bureau of Current Affairs. Since the activities of ABCA are recognised as part of a significant and successful political consciousness raising effort that occurred during the war it is especially surprising that this material has been overlooked.

After the war Games made a crucial contribution to the extension of this project. In 1951 he designed the emblem for the Festival of Britain (see p76). The emblem expertly summarised the ambition of the Festival in visual shorthand and managed to combine the projection of national culture with a sense of fun. The successful creation of a symbol for a post-Imperial national identity was sort lived. The Festival infrastructure was dismantled and the citizenry of the Festival were recast as subjects for the coronation in 1953. The conjunction of emancipatory politics and social inhibition implicit within the Festival project successfully anticipated the social and sexual revolution of the 1960s.

Games was also employed, between 1956-57, as art-director at Penguin Books (see p75). The creation of visually sophisticated book jackets and of a coherent visual identity for the publishing house had been the means by which Allen Lane placed his enterprise at the centre of a new national meritocracy. It was no accident that Abram Games had a role at the centre of these idealistic changes to British society. Not content with having helped effect this change through practical means in Britain, Games worked hard to make a similar contribution to the idealism surrounding the founding of modern Israel. This last aspect of his work forms the basis of June Rose's text (see pp170-183).

Abram Games was also interested in technical innovation and made a contribution to industrial design through his refinements to the Cona Coffee machine. His relationship with the company had begun in 1950 and culminated, in 1962, with the launch of the Cona Rex machine (see p29).

Another project that occupied him was the development of a new copying device. This had begun through a contact with the Gestetner family, whose firm made office machines. The resulting project transformed the studio into engineering workshop and several prototypes and patents were produced and patents registered. Although several large firms expressed interest in these developments, Xerox, Kodak, IBM and Unilever amongst them, the technical inventions developed by Games were eventually superseded by the advent of computer technologies.

This book combines three very different but complementary texts. Together, they give an unambiguous picture of a significant and unique contribution to the visual culture of Britain in the middle years of the 20th century. The evidence presented in this book provides powerful proof, if any were needed, of an idealism and integrity that shaped the development of English Modernism. Those qualities are revealed on every page of this book.

The book has been pleasingly designed, by Lund Humphries, to be uniform with Schleger (2001).

This augurs well for the future as marking the beginning of a coherent and detailed historical account of the development of graphic design in Britain. A series of books now seems inevitable.

Let us hope that these high standards can be maintained.

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5th March 2004

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