



▲ TOM ECKERSLEY
GENERAL POST
OFFICE, 1950s
Eckersley was a pioneer of
geometric design in the 30s
and 40s and established the
graphic design course at the
London College of Printing.

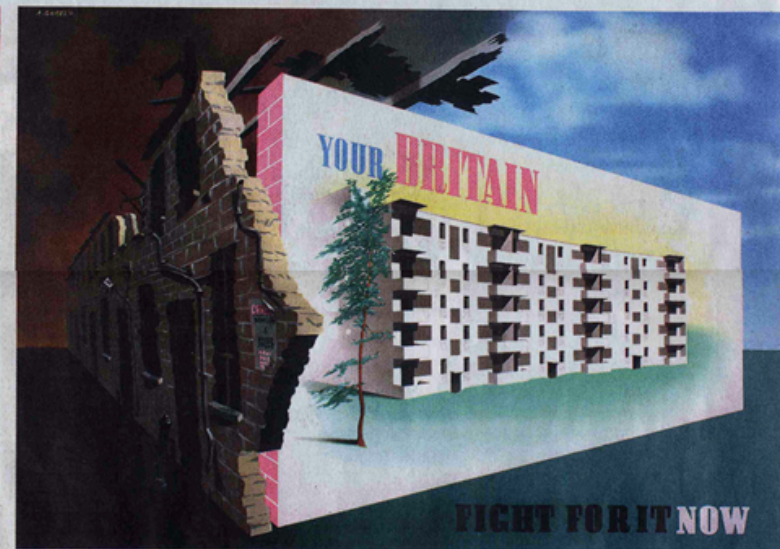
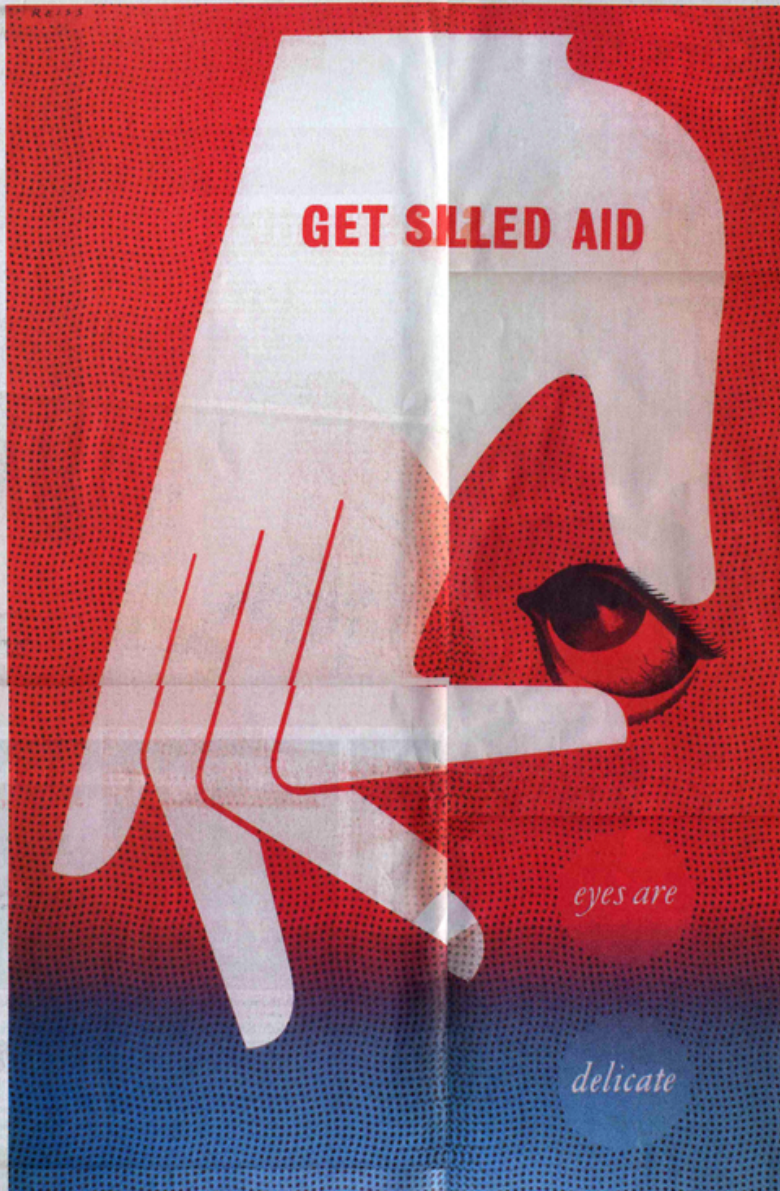
▲ HARRY STEVENS
Miss K White from Purley
gets a thumbs-up from
the postman.
A postie in this cartoonish
poster from the 60s.

▲ ROLAND DAVIES
ROYAL SOCIETY FOR
THE PREVENTION OF
ACCIDENTS, 1950s
Roland Davies was also a
comic artist whose strips
appeared in the Beano and
Knockout in the 1940s. As this
50s example for the Royal
Society for the Prevention of
Accidents shows, his road
safety series tended towards
the action-packed and
melodramatic, and transfixed a
generation of children.



▲ ROYSTON COOPER
KEEP BRITAIN TIDY
CAMPAIGN, 1963
Royston Cooper created a
series of wonderfully surreal
animal posters, including a lion
with a union flag flying from its
tail, for the Keep Britain Tidy
Campaign in the 60s. Here, a
pelican points the way to a
tidier 1963.

**▲ EDWARD MCKNIGHT
KAUFFER SHELL MEX
AND BP, 1937**
In the 1920s and 30s, the
American-born McKnight
Kauffer became the most
important graphic designer
in Britain. His posters for
Shell broke new ground in
terms of sophistication,
reflecting his knowledge of
avant-garde art movements
in the US and Europe.



▲ MANFRED REISS
ROSPA, 1940s
'An accident in the works is as
much a gain to the enemy as a
casualty in the armed forces,'
declared Lord McGowan,
president of the Royal Society
for the Prevention of Accidents
in the 1940s, and Manfred
Reiss's striking poster reflects
the increased emphasis on
safety at work.

▲ ABRAM GAMES
ARMY BUREAU OF
CURRENT AFFAIRS, 1942
Abram Games produced many
recruitment posters for the
War Office, where he was made
official poster designer in
1941, but his Your Britain series,
which focused on health,
education and housing, pointed
more to the radical, social-
democratic thrust of the
immediate postwar era.

▲ NEGUS SHARLAND
GPO, 1967
Richard Negus and Philip
Sharland rebranded the Post
Office for the age of Biba and
the Beatles while gently
admonishing careless and
unskilled packers of parcels.

**▲ OGILVY, BENSON &
MATHER BRITISH EGG
MARKETING BOARD**
This 1960s poster was part of a
14-year campaign that included
TV ads featuring Tony Hancock.
The slogan was widely thought
to have been coined by writer
Fay Weldon (then a young ad
copywriter), but she recently
revealed that it was the work of
another member of her team.



Stick 'em up... signposts to a modern new Britain

Vintage posters provide a vivid illustration of society in the past century – and an intriguing glimpse of emerging contemporary artists at work. **Sean O'Hagan** salutes the golden age of graphic design

The history of the modern British poster from 1915 to 1970 is nothing less than a potted history of society, culture, politics and the economy in that period. It is also, of course, a history of art and design as well as advertising. "The poster can tell us many things about ourselves," says the collector, curator, lecturer and writer Paul Rennie, from whose book, *Modern British Posters: Art, Design & Communication*, these wonderful images are taken. "It tells us, for instance, that we are essentially a neat and ordered conservative nation. "The idea that modernism didn't happen in Britain is wrong. It did, but we did not embrace modernity as a headlong rush into the future. We were much more tentative about it and our poster designs reflect that."

Rennie and his wife, Karen, began collecting British posters in the 1980s, driven by a shared interest in graphic design rather than, as with many collectors, a theme such as railways, cinema, politics or even public information. When they began, he says, "British items were generally of little interest to international collectors and were, accordingly, less expensive to purchase." That is no longer the case. Original posters by the likes of Paul Nash, Abram Games and Tom Eckersley for clients such as Shell, British Railways and the Post Office can now change hands for anywhere between £600 and £1,000, depending on their rarity and condition. "These posters were made to be pasted up on billboards," elaborates Rennie. "They were used, not hoarded, so the few that survive in good condition tended to belong to the

artists and have ended up in museums or private collections." Rennie suggests that there are three pivotal periods in British poster design. The first occurred around 1914 with the discovery of "the dazzle effect of colour juxtaposition", which was pioneered by the avant-garde artists of the op-art movement. The second breakthrough came with the outbreak of the second world war, which Rennie calls "the illustrated war, with its mountain of visual propaganda produced in Britain". Surprisingly, he cites the punk movement of the late 70s as the third age of great British poster design, a short-lived era that produced myriad self-financed small cut-and-paste publishers making concert posters and record sleeves. Rennie's book stops short of the punk years, and the psychedelic 60s are only just reflected in Negus Sharland's GPO

poster, pictured above, urging "properly packed parcels please", which looks like it is aimed at people who bought their Christmas presents at Biba. Rennie's own favourite poster artists are "artists who also happened to design posters: Paul Nash, Abram Games and Tom Eckersley". Nash brought his clean lines and love of the English landscape to bear on many of his designs and, at times, there is little that separates his commercial work from his fine art. Games, says Rennie, is responsible for "the beginnings of visual wordplay", while Eckersley is "very simple and direct and possesses a fierce geometry". In the age of Photoshop and computer graphics, even the most recent posters here suggest a world long gone. It is only when Rennie points it out that I realise the age of flyposting has almost come to an end

without us even noticing it. Perhaps his next volume will celebrate that not-so-distant era when every vacant city wall was covered in pasted-up adverts for eggs, albums and tours. Whatever, the long era when the poster told us so much about our way of life seems now officially to be at an end. An exhibition of the posters opens on Thursday at Black Dog Space, London WC1. *Modern British Posters* is published by Black Dog Publishing at £29.95. To order a copy for £22.99 with free UK p&p go to observer.co.uk/bookshop or call 0330 333 6847

Online  See more fabulous vintage posters in our online gallery, at observer.co.uk