

Tom Eckersley OBE RDI AGI

(1914 – 1997)

Exhibition Catalogue Essay

Introduction and overall context

Tom Eckersley was a distinguished member of an “outsider” generation that transformed graphic design in Britain and contributed to an explosion of visual culture in Britain after WW2. His contemporaries Abram Games, FHK Henrion and Hans Schleger (Zéró) were from Jewish and émigré origins whilst Tom was from a north-country Nonconformist background.

This exhibition of posters and catalogue text serves several purposes. The first is to honour the achievements in poster design and graphic communication of Tom Eckersley. The second is to mark the redevelopment of the London College of Printing by architects Allies and Morrison and to celebrate the institutional evolution of the College into the London College of Communication as part of the University of the Arts, London. It is especially appropriate that an exhibition of Tom’s work should serve these purposes as Tom’s career combined design practice and education in a most satisfying and productive way.

This exhibition has been made possible by the generous loan of material from Tom Eckersley and his family. The material was originally loaned to the

School of Graphic Design shortly before Tom's death. The Eckersley Archive established a historical study resource within the department and provided the initial basis for the development of an active research community within the department, College and University.

Tom Eckersley retained copies of many of his posters from throughout his career in a charmingly unselfconscious way. They were retained to act as teaching aids as much as to document his own achievements. Many of the posters were stored in Tom's studio in conditions that were far from what we would, today, consider appropriate for historical documents of a fragile and ephemeral nature. Thanks to the redevelopment of the College the Eckersley Archive is now stored appropriately and forms part of a growing and maturing historical collection within the College that supports a wide range of research activities. This exhibition and catalogue are part of an attempt to promote Tom's work beyond the confines of College and history and were made possible by grant support from the AHRB. The support extends to the creation of an internet resource, integrated into the College websites, that projects Tom's work and achievements to a global and digitalised world. Communication indeed.

Tom's sons Paul, Anthony and Richard, along with their families, have supported this ongoing project throughout. It is a great shame that both Paul and Anthony, who were each associated with the College, have died before being able to witness the full realisation of this project and to sense the esteem and affection in which Tom Eckersley is held within the College and the wider design community. Tom's surviving son Richard, along with the extended Eckersley family, will I hope sense this respect and appreciation.

Tom Eckersley was born on August 30th 1914 in Lancashire. The details of Tom's early life are obscure. George Him, writing in 1980, recalled that Tom was born in a small Lancashire town and that his father was a man of deep religious faith whose vocation was denied through ill health. His father remained, nevertheless, a Methodist lay-preacher throughout his life and emphasised the importance of values associated with learning and tolerance. The house was, as befits the popular mythologies of utopian Nonconformism, full of books. These formed the basis for a practical, rather than philosophical, intelligence. Tom recalled a quiet and sickly childhood spent reading and drawing. Tom always focussed on the practicalities of design and, later in his life, regretted the theoretical obfuscation that seemed to develop as part-and-parcel of an increasingly academic approach to design education. Tom always kept it simple in poster design, even when using his technical skill to produce designs that were both charming and sophisticated.

Tom's mother suggested, after seeing an article in the local paper, that he enrol at Salford School of Art and make a career from his drawing. He was successful in his application, based on the submission of "scribblings," and attended the school from the age of 16 beginning in 1930 through to 1934. Perhaps because of his sheltered upbringing Tom was at first a little shy, diffident and in awe of the older students. Things changed when Tom visited an exhibition of posters from Continental Europe held at the school and Tom resolved to become a poster designer. His application, discipline and skill were recognised at the school and he was awarded the Heywood medal as the best student.

At the school Tom had become friends with a fellow student Eric Lombers. The two students began to produce posters and to compete with the designs they saw on the hoardings. Their benchmarks were already beyond the confines of the school. Tom and Eric began to submit work to the advertising agencies in London who usually replied with vague and non-committal praise. The two quickly resolved to move to London and to establish themselves as freelance poster designers. This they did in 1934.

The 1930s

The poster scene in Britain during the 1930s requires some contextualisation before the work of Eckersley Lombers can be properly appreciated.

The decade has been recognised as a “golden age” of poster design. This reputation is based, in part, on the acknowledged cultural significance of the poster at this time. The mass media remained in their infancy and the poster trumpeted its populist messages from the hoardings without significant competition. The other forms of commercial art – packaging, point-of-sale and print advertising (newspapers and magazines) were small scale and provincial in contrast.

Furthermore, the poster associated itself, in the aftermath of WW1, with the developing desire for a progressive politics of change that demanded “homes fit for heroes” and “votes for women.” In Europe, the poster was central to the communication of the new ideology of Communist Russia and also in support of its developing counterpart, Fascism. It is therefore fair to claim that the

poster was, during the 1930s at the forefront of an international political consciousness raising effort.

In contrast to these big themes the poster in Britain may appear conservative and limited in its objectives. This view conforms with the prevailing orthodoxy of International Modernism that projects Modernism as a set of ideas and a phenomenon that links Moscow, Berlin, Paris and New York and passes Britain by. The chief characteristic of British poster design during the 1930s is its appeal through good taste and the projection of a idealised rural or seaside landscape that is necessarily conservative in its implicit social structure.

Generally, the development of poster design during the 1930s is associated with the development of improved processes of mechanical reproduction in its applications to the popular press and advertising. The increased use of photography, with its implicit appeal to truth, was a powerful element in the developing rhetoric of the visual culture of the time. Photographic elements could only be incorporated into lithographic work through the half-tone and process blocks.

In Britain, the political economy of poster production had developed very differently from elsewhere in Europe. From the very beginnings of poster production during the 1860s the British cultural establishment took an ambivalent, if not hostile, view of this metropolitan manifestation of industrial capitalism. Accordingly, the display of advertising material was very strictly controlled from the start. The principle instruments of this control were by-laws that forbid the unauthorised display of advertising material and, simultaneously, through the development of an economy of poster display

structured by the relative scarcity of authorised poster sites. The usual laws of supply-and-demand were soon in operation so that poster advertising quickly became priced beyond the scope of anything but the largest concerns. The full explanation of this cultural ambivalence towards posters and advertising in Britain are beyond the scope of this essay. At this stage we need only contrast this to the sense of excitement generated by the poster in the different cultural contexts of France and Germany.

The development of Modernist poster design was further limited in Britain by the alignment, from the end of the 1920s, of progressive “tasteful” design interests with the conservationist agenda favoured by the Council for the Protection of Rural England. Accordingly, the advertising industry adopted a policy of restraint and self governance.

It was therefore into this environment of relatively limited opportunity that Eckersley Lombers plunged during 1934. The duo immediately began to submit designs to prospective clients. The advisory committee for publicity at the Post Office records that, on November 6th 1934, a design for a poster had been submitted by Tom Eckersley and Eric Lombers *Plan Your Evenings on the Telephone*. The design was rejected. The archive contains newspaper illustrations for the *News Chronicle* that were published at the end of the year.

Success quickly followed this early disappointment. The London Transport Museum records that, during 1935, the duo had 10 posters printed, published and displayed by London Transport. The successful association with London Transport immediately established the duo amongst the top echelon of poster designers in Britain during the 1930s. This position was further emphasised

by the appearance, at regular intervals during the decade, of poster designs by Eckersley Lombers amongst the elections made by design publications *Art and Industry*, *Commercial Art* and *Modern Publicity*.

The association between Eckersley Lombers with the Post Office and London Transport brought the young designers into contact with some of the most important and influential personalities in the British design establishment. Through the Post Office Eckersley Lombers came into contact with Sir Stephen Tallents who had established the Empire Marketing Board in the 1920s and had subsequently become the father of the British documentary film movement through his Empire Film Unit and later through the GPO Film Unit. Also at the Post Office were Alan Clark and Jack Beddington as advisors along with the Bloomsbury artist Clive Bell. Later, the appointment of Alexander Highet assured the continuation of these early efforts. As it happened, Jack Beddington was advertising executive at the Shell Mex and was responsible, throughout the 1930s, for a steady stream of posters, books and films that together comprise one of the great advertising campaigns of the twentieth century.

The poster campaigns of the Empire Marketing Board had been organised with advice from Frank Pick of London Transport. Pick is undoubtedly one of the most important personalities in the history of design in Britain and a few words need to be said about him. Pick was not a designer but was an administrator of genius who conceived the idea of an integrated transport system comprising underground railways, trams and buses and serving the whole metropolitan area of London. The organisation would, Pick thought, project its ambitions of service, punctuality and reliability through the co-

ordination of typography, advertising, architecture and engineering in the service of community. The legacies of Pick's time at London Transport still shape the modern city and inform the daily lives of all its inhabitants. Pick joined the organisation whilst it was still an agglomeration of privately owned interests. His vision was enlightened and practical and at the same time utopian in its service to the garden suburbs and beyond.

It was not entirely surprising that Pick's scheme should have an element of utopia about it. Pick was born into the Chapel community of York and married a Quaker. The architectural planning and rational city management echo the visionary schemes of Quaker, William Penn in America.

The records at London Transport show that Eckersley Lombers enjoyed the consistent patronage of Frank Pick. By the end of the decade they had contributed some 36 posters to the London Transport campaign on a wide variety of themes. They had also contributed to Beddington's campaign at Shell Mex and, during 1937, had received their first commission from the Post Office.

Eckersley Lombers always supplied full size artwork with hand drawn lettering for their poster design submissions. The fee structure for the work had been the subject of discussion between Pick, Beddington and Clark in their days at the Empire Marketing Board and at the Post Office. The fees at the Post Office were 5 guineas for rough. Eckersley placed this figure in context by recalling that the rent on their Ebury St studio was 15 shillings a week. The studio was conveniently placed for visits to Pick's office at the London

Transport headquarters and for the Westminster School of Art where Eckersley and Lombers taught the poster class.

During the 1930s the term “graphic design” did not really exist. Eckersley recalled that there were “commercial artists” who did a variety of work in whatever style was required for small advertising purposes. These jobbing artists were, whatever the technical merits of their work, looked down upon by the poster artists who considered themselves to be working at a more elevated level.

In many respects this was true. The poster was the undisputed summit of advertising in the period before WW2. The large scale of the work was, along with its public display, a sign of its significance. Furthermore the combination of craft skills and fine art aesthetics within the design characterised the tasteful poster of the 1930s and allowed poster artists to claim some link to the high culture of gallery painting. Richard Hollis, for example, has discerned links between the designs of Eckersley Lombers and the art of Miro and Max Ernst. Evelyn Waugh acknowledged the special cultural status of posters by including a poster by McKnight Kauffer amongst the eclectic furnishings and decorations of Charles Ryder’s set in “Brideshead Revisited.”

By the end of the 1930s Eckersley Lombers had successfully integrated themselves into the small world of British poster design. The advent of WW2 would transform their lives, break the partnership and revolutionise the practice and processes of design.

WW2 and the 1940s

The propaganda demands of war disrupted the cosy relationships between politics, establishment and the media. The political economy of 1930s visual culture had been characterised, as described above, by an artistic sensibility and limited opportunity. For the most part, the key advertisers and their poster advertisements addressed a metropolitan audience much like themselves. The circumstances of approaching war made the development of a mass media an urgent priority so as to underwrite the propaganda efforts required to mobilise the support of all.

Accordingly, the printing industry and its designers were obliged to embrace the technical possibilities of photo mechanical offset lithography so as to reduce the make ready and to speed up the time required to create effective communications. The beginnings of war, in September 1939, made this shift imperative.

This shift in technologies had been, in some senses inevitable. The artistic posters favoured during the 1930s took months to prepare and were expensive in terms of labour and materials. The whole process was dependent on a craft tradition that dated, more or less, to the beginnings of industrial lithography in the 1860s, if not to the very origins of the process itself. The relatively few, and very big, lithographic printers that controlled the poster printing business had an effective regional monopoly on plant and craft skills which made them reluctant to invest in new machinery and processes.

The transition from one type of printing economy to another is evident in the different firms associated with poster production before the war and during it. The propaganda poster campaigns of WW2 were such that the demands of a single organisation could effectively mobilise the entire resources of a medium sized regional printer. Accordingly, the campaigns were allocated to specific printers. Loxley Brothers of Sheffield printed all the industrial safety posters commissioned by the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (RoSPA). Loxley Brothers had been busy, during the 1930s, producing letterpress, packaging and point-of-sale for Rowntree's of York. The two companies had close links based on Yorkshire Nonconformism.

The last posters of the Eckersley Lombers partnership are date from the early part of the war. The archive contains a poster for Austin Reed, tailors to the officer class, which is signed and dated 1940. Thereafter Tom Eckersley became part of the Royal Air Force and was assigned to cartographic work. Eric Lombers went into the Army. There was a brief effort to re-establish the partnership towards the end of the war; GPO and RoSPA posters signed by both designers are dated 1944.

Tom Eckersley made a remarkable contribution to poster design during WW2 at the same time as being in the RAF. He seems, uniquely, to have been able to combine his technical drawing and cartographic duties with working on briefs given him by RoSPA. Once visualised, he would work up the solution on his 24 hour leave at home. Tom was the designer most often used by RoSPA during the war period. A catalogue of the industrial safety posters produced by RoSPA during WW2 lists some 22 published designs by Tom Eckersley. The average of other designers is about 6 for the same period.

Obviously, personal circumstances count for something, and it is worth noting that Tom's role within the RAF allowed him a stable working environment in addition to his family home with wife, Daisy, and two young children. The RoSPA campaign made use, exceptionally, of émigré designers and their circumstances of internment and marginalisation must have made working very difficult.

It is worth commenting, briefly, on the RoSPA campaign. The industrial safety posters were aimed at workers in factories and workshops associated with the productive effort to support the military. The authorities were dismayed to find that hospital resources, available to the potential victims of enemy action, were being used by persons who had injured themselves in work-place accidents. These were mostly identified as preventable. Ernest Bevin, Minister of Labour for the duration, authorised a programme of safety education as part of an effective initiation, for neophyte workers, into the industrial workplace. Bevin understood that any progress on the safety issue made during the war would be translated into a permanent welfare gain on the part of "his people."

The RoSPA campaign therefore contributed to the realignment between labour and capital identified, by George Orwell and others, as a necessary condition for victory. Bevin's political contribution to underwriting the campaign insured that social gains of this realignment were lasting and permanent. Tom Eckersley's contribution to the development of a coherent visual language associated with this political project cannot be overstated. It should be recognised that similar, welfarist, posters only appear later in Europe as part of the social democratic project of reconstruction. Tom's

contribution to poster design in Britain was acknowledged in a feature by Mary Gowing in “Art and Industry” and by the award of an OBE in 1948. International recognition came through the pages of “Graphis” and “Gebrauchshgraphik.”

Notwithstanding this recognition the immediate post war period was a difficult one for graphic designers. The volumes of work associated with the propaganda efforts of WW2 began to fall away and were only partly replaced by other types of government communications. The advertising industry remained in reduced circumstances for many years whilst rationing remained in place and the export market was ruthlessly pursued.

Tom found his fair share of clients as a freelance graphic designer. He produced posters of the GPO, for London Transport and made a series of posters for Gillette. An additional source of income at this time was as a book illustrator. Tom drew the pictures for Daisy Eckersley’s story “Cat O’ Nine Lives” for Peter Lunn, published in 1946. In 1947 Tom made the pictures for “Animals on Parade” with words by E A Cabrelly and published by the Conrad Press. The second of these has large colour illustrations in the tradition of the French educational texts of Père Castor or Kathleen Hale’s “Orlando” books.

The 1950s

The Festival of Britain in 1951 established a template for the integration of architecture, art and design into a coherent and material expression of post-war optimism. Eckersley entered the competition to design the symbol for the

Festival but was unsuccessful against the jaunty Britannia and bunting design by Abram Games. The list of possible candidates had also included Robin Day, Milner Gray and F H K Henrion. This cohort, along with Hans Schleger, effectively transformed the role of designer in mid century Britain. Eckersley's inclusion amongst this group recognises his position as at the very top of graphic design at that time.

Further recognition came in Tom's successful election to the Alliance Graphique Internationale (AGI). The origins of AGI were Franco-Swiss and marked a European attempt to develop an international community of design in the graphic arts. The name Alliance Graphique had first been used at the beginnings of the 1930s by Cassandre and Charles Loupot who had created a creative agency in Paris. Their Alliance had ended with the premature death of their partner and business manager. The new, post-war, Alliance Graphique began informally as a consequence of the important poster exhibition organised by Paul Colin in 1948 under the title "Exposition de l'Affiche Française." This was followed by a wider ranging exhibition on advertising art in 1949 and by an industrial arts exhibition in 1950. The latter subsequently travelled to Basel and it was there that contact between French and Swiss graphic designers was established. When AGI was first established by Donald Brun, Fritz Bühler, Jean Colin, Jean Picart le Doux and Jacques Nathan Garamond it was as an exhibition society. Its first international exhibitions were held in Paris during 1955, London in 1956 and Lausanne in 1958. Eckersley was elected an exhibiting member in 1950 when British representation was exceptional. By 1956, the British representatives numbered Tom and Pat Keely, the émigrés Henrion, Schleger and Lewitt and

Him. Ashley Havinden provided British representation on the exhibition organising committee.

The AGI exhibitions were a pan European attempt to offer an alternative vision of graphic design to that prevailing in the USA and represented by the annual conference at Aspen that had begun in 1949. The link between applied art and industry taught at the Bauhaus had successfully been transferred to North America as part of a trajectory of Modernist ideas that linked Moscow, Berlin, Paris and New York. The alignment between Modernist values and consumer capitalism was, in North America, taken as a given. In Europe an opportunity existed, within the context of reconstruction, for design to align itself with the utopian idealism of social democracy.

The AGI gave Tom Eckersley an opportunity to share ideas from across Europe and to become aware of international developments in graphic design and poster art. The internationalism of Tom's outlook was reflected in the choice of posters he made to illustrate his "Poster Design," published in 1954. This was a handbook for students whose publication reflected important changes in art education in Britain after WW2. Before WW2 art education had been, more-or-less, of the fine art or commercial and trade variety. The outlook was certainly insular, if not parochial. Post-war developments focused on developing specific skills for a market defined by rapidly changing technologies and material science. Furthermore, the future success of British industry was dependent on both a home market of consumer products aimed at a widening segment of society and an international export market. By the time of the 1956 AGI exhibition in London, it was clear that graphic design,

communication and advertising would all have substantial contributions to make to that project.

In 1957 Tom Eckersley was invited to join the staff at the London College of Printing. The College needed to place itself at the forefront of the developments noted above.

The 1960s (LCP graphic education and swinging London)

Conclusion and Valedictory

Bibliography

Barden M (1993) **Post Early - GPO Posters 1920-1960**

London, Camberwell Press

Camden Arts Centre (1980) **Tom Eckersley** London, Arckwright Trust

Cooper A (1938) **Making a Poster** London, Studio Publications

Eckersley T (1954) **Poster Design** London, Studio Publications

Gowing M (1947) **What Made the Umbrella Weep Mr Eckersley?**

London, Art and Industry

Green O (1990) **Underground Art** London, Studio Vista

Hayward Gallery (1970) **The Thirties** London, Arts Council

Hewitt J (1998) **The Shell Poster Book** London, Profile Books

Hollis R (1997) **Obituary Notice** London, The Guardian

Hutchison H F (1963) **London Transport Posters**

London, London Transport Board

Laver J (1949) **Art for All London**, Art and Technics Ltd

London College of Printing (1994) **Tom Eckersley – His Life and Work**

London, LCP

Rennie P (2004) **RoSPA's Industrial Safety Posters During WW2**

London LCC.

Timmers M (1998) **The Power of the Poster**

London, Victoria and Albert Museum Publications

Waugh E (1945) **Brideshead Revisited** London, Chapman and Hall