

# UNIVERSAL ELEMENTS IN POLITICAL POSTER AS A VISUAL HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

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**Abstract:** This article is based on a research study we performed in two colleges in Israel. In the research we examined the effectiveness of universal visual elements of graphic in political poster design. The aim of this article is to study the visual elements of graphical design in some well-known historical political posters, to confirm that similar basic rules of design were employed already to historical political posters. The research findings indicate that posters are documents that represent prevalent social attitudes by drawing on historically specific elements of graphic design.

**Key words:** Visual elements, historical political poster, graphic design.

## **Introduction**

Throughout history, posters have been among the few media that enabled reaching a wide audience beyond regular mass media channels (Jacobs and Heller, 1992). For this reason, posters have been one of the most widely disseminated forms of visual messages in the world (Weill1985). This study sought to explore posters that can be, approached as reflections of societies where they originate because they bear the imprint of the state of national culture, political, historical processes and technological development at the time of their creation (Gallo, Quintavalle and Flowers, 2001). Therefore, we can be impressed from the historical processes in history posters and consider them as “visual documents”. In my many years as a art and design lecturer, I witnessed the great influence of referring to historical events and processes, on having deeper understanding of

political poster as historical document, and better appreciation of the effectiveness of the visual design elements to convey the message of the political poster as historical document. Images can stimulate identification and emotional engagement, creating a richer connection to the verbal text. Also images can transfer the message and idea of the political document more directly and concise way, just by a quick view. Sometimes, historical documents are full of details, leaving the reader to find main message of the paper. Political poster conveys the message directly, in a simple manner and with only few words. When teaching the historical continuum from verbal texts, we can risk learning that is centered on facts with visual images and may be inexperienced.

As a teacher and lecturer, I strongly believe and identify with the desire to know and understand multiple disciplines: "The more you know, the more you see" (Aldous Huxley). In order to understand better the messages in political posters generated by visual elements, it is important to understand better the meaning of design elements in posters. The research study examined the objective of the communicative effectiveness of political posters. In order to explore the differences of perception, reaction and interpretation that major groups of compositional elements of graphic design, such as sensory, structural, and dynamic as they emerge as part of professional reflections and critical positions that design students are likely to take in this regard.

I begin with a review of the literature on political posters, following with a review of elements in political posters that symbolize landmarks in understanding and documenting historical processes, proceeding with a description of the research method and the findings, and end with a discussion of the meaning of the findings in theoretical and practical terms. In order to explore the interrelationships between different design elements and individual

assessments of their effectiveness, this research examined the main topics emerging from the eventual interview transcripts (Silverman, 2011).

### **1. Review of the Literature**

The term 'graphic design' was first, coined in 1922, publications on the history of graphic design started to appear in the 1890s as the period when the foundations for it as an applied discipline were, laid (Newark, 2009); Purvis, 1992). As an applied art, graphic design developed in Western Europe in the 1890s with the growth of commercial demand for the dissemination of information about products or services to the general audience in an esthetically appealing manner (Salmon, 2001). Graphic design was, meant to communicate to the intended audience with the aim of persuading it in favor of the offered, product or service, whereby designers adapted the esthetic form of their advertising posters to the message they were, intended to convey.

Under the influence of the Industrial Revolution, graphic design emerged as a discipline that responded to the growing needs of the urban middle classes for services and commodities. The demand for which presupposed widespread literacy, leisure time, and disposable income. As the middle classes gained in prominence in the nineteenth century, there had emerged a broad market for both commercial commodities and luxury goods (Meggs and Purvis, 2012). As industrial output grew, technologically assisted mass production accelerated, and market competition increased, the promotion of products and services was continually looking for innovative and effective ways to stress their uniqueness through advertising (Parry, 2011). In the 1890s, the discipline of graphic design emerged as an effective applied art that went beyond conveying denotative information, in order to use visual composition and color combinations for an attractive esthetic effect. Even though posters have emerged and spread due to the technological advances associated with the Industrial Revolution in the early 19th

century, it is not until the 1890s that typography started to receive professional attention with regarding its aesthetic effect (Purvis, 1992). At the same time, the emergence of modern graphic design in the 1890s was not without its precursors in the nineteenth century when poster designs were also experimenting with composition and colors. However, by the end of the nineteenth century the poster industry has increasingly, become an influence of the fine arts, which changed the character of graphic design (Bank and van Buuren, 2004). The two art historical movements that were instrumental in this shift in the graphic design of posters were Symbolism and Art Nouveau, to whose context belonged their close connection to the social and political ideas of the time (Facos, 2009). Rebelling against the rationalism of nineteenth-century European art, economy and society, Symbolist artists sought a refuge from the effects, of industrial capitalism on social relations in a greater emphasis on ideas, myths and feelings (Janson, 2004). Consciously using signs and symbols in their works, Symbolist artists were also aware of the ideas of Swiss linguist Ferdinand de Saussure whose works from the 1870s laid the foundation for semiotic theory (Facos, 2009). Similarly, Art Nouveau artists were also seeking to renew their esthetic style in response to the advent of the industrial society. At that time, the mass production of large and colorful posters made possible the concomitant development of the discipline of graphic design. Graphic designers have historically been concerned with communicating the messages the posters contain by using visual elements in order to reach an intended audience.

## **2. Political posters as a visual reflection of historical documentation**

Since they have the ability to affect wide audiences through striking images and bold messages, posters are representative of changing ideas and aesthetics in response to social, cultural and political events (Boekraad, 2008; Rickards, 1970). Furthermore, political posters reflect the society in which they

originate and its ideas (Garrigan, 1975). For political movements, posters have proved to be invaluable means for catalyzing the public opinion and currying its favor (Glaser and Ilic, 2005). Broadly based social movements have also used posters to communicate their aims to the general public (Noriega, Lipsitz, and Barnet-Sanchez, 2001). Likewise, in the past centuries revolutionary movements relied on propaganda posters to advance their political agendas (Barnicoat, 2008). Posters carrying political or social messages that differ from the mainstream views have historically been effective communication tools (Heyman, 2000). Especially during the periods of social and political change, posters gain in importance as instruments of communication (Garrigan, 1975). Likewise, posters have, historically been used to disseminate protest art against war (Bruckner, Chwast, and Heller, 1984). In the United States, posters were ubiquitous during both the First and the Second World Wars, whereas their role has become especially significant during the Vietnam War (Bruckner et al., 1984). It was not until the First World War that posters became a standard communication medium. That was, used for political purposes even though social limitations on what constitutes a poster continued to be, imposed on its graphic design (Irwin 2006). During the First World War, governments took recourse to posters to bolster patriotic feelings, while this communication medium was, also used to disseminate anti-war messages (Garrigan 1975). During the period of the First World War, the poster became an established medium of political propaganda (Barnicoat, 2008). At the same time, between the two World Wars posters were predominantly, used for commercial product and event advertising (Heyman, 2000). This created different types of graphic design poster style and artistic movements that greatly differed across various countries due to their social political, economic and cultural situation after the First World War (Gallo, Quintavalle, and Flowers, 2001; Weill, 1985). By contrast, in the run-up to the

Second World War posters became, mobilized for the war effort by various governments (Heyman, 2000). In the United States, in this period graphic design was, combined with advertisement techniques in order to represent the idea of war engagement in positive light to the public, since both industrial production and the domestic sphere were and mobilized for the military preparations (Bird and Rubenstein 1998). At that period, most U. S. artists devoted themselves to the governmental propaganda as part of the war effort (Jacobs and Heller, 1992). The posters produced by artists employed, by the American War Advertising Company were used by the U. S. government, factories, enterprises and agencies in their efforts to support the war (Bird and Rubenstein 1998). As opposed to U. S. government advertisers, and businesses whose poster campaigns rallied behind the war effort, European poster designers also spread anti-war messages (Rickards, 1970). Toward the end of the Second World War, protest posters in the United States also started to gain public recognition, while developing a special type of graphic design connected to the circumstances of their printing distribution and posting (Barnicoat, 2008). However, political posters still used advertising techniques satirical devices and modern artistic styles used to make a statement about political and social circumstances (Bruckner et al. 1984). U. S. protest posters made use of slogans and messages that employed in their graphic design styles deriving both, from commercial advertising and the fine arts (Bird and Rubenstein 1998). Poster artists used popular print advertising techniques as a means to relate effectively their political messages to a wider audience (Bruckner et al., 1984). By the end of the Second World War, U. S. artists became more socially involved in part due to the significantly reduced demand for their work for government propaganda campaigns (Muller 1989).

### **3. Historical posters as a visual document**

The creation of a poster is the field where the most important problems faced by the graphic designers on their professional path, is to convey the message by visual design elements, in such a way that it will immediate attraction and have the most influence on the viewer. Every generation renews the battle for better design, taking into account the new technologies, types of media, the culture, symbols, slogans, social mood and the category of the vital need: Tax relief, social protections, an active government or a dormant one, war or peace, to stay the course or to change direction, etc.

The following questions can be considered in order to construct significant meaning of the poster using the visual graphic design elements:

How to visualize the problem, how to create an idea and how to solve the problem? Which medium should be used: Photography, drawing or collage in combination image with the typography and how to compose the entire picture in color in order to convey the message?

The solution is marked by personal perspective and vision of the problem. It is important to create an interesting and understandable answers for all who will see this poster, or at least for those, whom we plan to reach. Posters should be understandable to people from many nations and many cultural backgrounds. Posters can bring us closer to places and people have no direct connection with them in place and time. In this respect, the camera has made many worlds visible, even if there is no chance or possibility to experience them directly.

The poster is a kind of key-visual, point of departure from the initial concept, as the basis for a given time and in historical political processes relevant to the creation of the poster and advertising. In order to illustrate the role of visual in the poster, we selected some posters that played major role to enhance essential historical processes. For example, the governments needed to recruit lots of

people and their support. One way is to design posters that convey messages that the country need you or to make the army look exciting or would feel proud if they did and guilty or embarrassed if they did not join.

In order to illustrate the effect of historical posters transfer by elements, 4, well-known historical posters of graphic design are analyzed with respect to composition, typography, color and visual, with the inspiration on modern graphic design posters.

**Poster no.1: “What Are You Doing for Preparedness”**



USA was neutralized country with small unprofessional army and military service was voluntary. As USA joined World War I, they have an urgency to recruit massive number of people in a very short time. The poster is one of the most significant poster is the World War I that produced one of the most memorable images in American history: The U.S. Army recruiting poster that depicts a commanding Uncle Sam pointing his finger at the viewer and urging young men to enlist in the war effort. More than 4 million copies of it were, printed between 1917 and 1918.

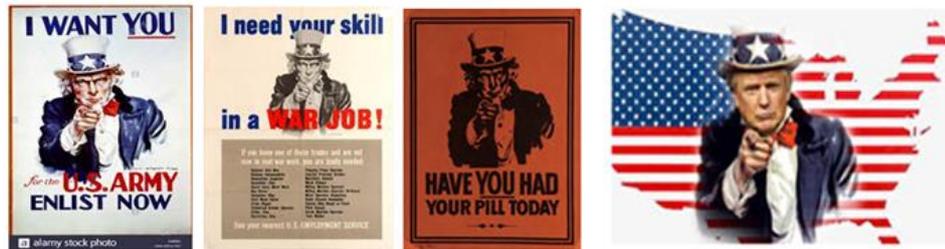
Uncle Sam is admonishing young men to join the U.S. army. ‘Uncle Sam’ is a character that often is used to personify the US Government. For

example, a phrase commonly used in the United States is, 'I owe money to Uncle Sam,' which means one owes taxes to the United States Government. Uncle Sam is mentioned in the British folk song mocking the rag-tag US Revolutionary Army, 'Yankee Doodle' in 1775 (Lossing, 1850). However, reports of 'Uncle Sam' have dated back to the 1st half of the 18th century and the creation of the United States. The creator of the iconic 'Uncle Sam' image is credited to the popular American political illustrator James Montgomery Flagg (1877-1960). Flagg's portrayal of Uncle Sam was first published on the cover of the magazine Leslie's Weekly, on July 6, 1916, with the caption, "What Are You Doing for Preparedness?" (Library of Congress Archives) and later the image was adapted by the U.S. Army for the poster with the new, unforgettable call to action. This poster is an appeal for the youth to save their money and buy war savings stamps. The tone is hopeful; a personal appeal is made to the reader of this poster that they do not have to directly engage in overseas combat to help the US to win the war; instead simply support the war effort financially, can make a difference. This means that all American's can get involved, not just those who are young, healthy and male.

- The visual element in this poster is a strong symbolic visual composition. The character representing the message looks straight to the observer with the finger also pointed straight to the observer. This create a powerful straight message.

- The colors that dominate the poster are same as in the American flag colors.

This historical poster design is an inspiration for political and global messages even today, as a visual familiar icon. Example in the following posters.



Poster no. 2: “We Can Do It!”



The heroic efforts of women during WWI showed the world that women had the ability to take on essential roles in public life (Dumenil, 2002, and Adie, 2013). According to Dumenil, “For many women, the war effort offered opportunities for volunteer service to the nation that also provided the personal satisfaction of fulfilling, meaningful work, even though it was unpaid labor”.

The slogan “We Can Do It!” was first published in a propaganda poster in 1943 during World War II to raise the morale of the workers. In the 1980s, it was renewed and the heroine of a proclamation known as “the riveting Rosie” became a symbol of feminism and political empowerment. The poster shows the proud female power of World War II. Rosie the Riveter, by contrast, used inclusive language to inspire a collective call to action - “We Can Do It!”. She is very determined, looking you directly in the eye and inviting you to join her (and

others like her) and roll up your own sleeves. Rosie is common figure. She has her hair up in a simple kerchief that marks her as a member of the working class. Is it no wonder that women across the country identified with Rosie and continue to emulate her passionate model of female empowerment.

- The visual element in the poster is her size stands out across the poster format with an expression of confidence and strength.
- Choosing the composition to photograph her torso brings the character closer to the observer like showing confidence to the beholder.
- The colors in the poster selection are basic colors that add strength that highlights the woman's image. In her attire as a factory worker with the collected hair, she conveys professional credibility and a desire to be like her.

The figure in the poster has been a symbol of self-confidence ever since in the posters of the proud woman who works and serves, as inspiration for its colorful and theme design as an icon for conveying a message. Some examples:



Kendall Jenner, model and media personality, dresses up as feminist icon Rosie the Riveter to urge young women to vote.

Rather than celebrating intersectional feminism, the New Yorker's recent reimage of iconic poster girl 'Rosie the Riveter' as a woman of color, is a slap in the face of African American history, writes

### **Poster no. 3: “Keep Calm and Carry On”**



The "Keep Calm and Carry On" poster was designed by the Ministry of Information during the year 1939. A career civil servant named A. P. Waterfield came up with "Your Courage" as "a rallying war-cry that will bring out the best in everyone and put in an offensive mood at once"

The poster design, which consists of these words in a sans-serif column beneath a crown, typically on a monochrome background or before a Union Jack, has become a ubiquitous fixture in hipper scenes.

Motivational poster produced by the British government in 1939, meant to buoy civilian morale amidst devastating German air raids on London it was never actually distributed, however, that an artifact of such historical gravity, associated with such trauma, could be emptied of its meaning and distributed as a trendy wall decoration is certainly upsetting.

The 'Keep Calm' design was never officially issued and only a very small number of originals have survived to the present day. It was not until a copy was discovered in a bookshop in Northumberland in 2000 and reproductions of it began to be sold a year later, that its fame was established.

- This typographic poster expressed the message with the help of a typographical sentence built in an elegantly arranged central composition. The entire sentence serves as a firm foundation for the British royal crown designed as a royal emblem.

- The choice of colors is aimed at the quality and cleanliness of white color fonts on the red background, highlighting the typographic sentence.

This historical poster has been honored to be a symbol of motivation and good spirit in the past. Today, this typographic poster in its original form continues to inspire a reassuring and encouraging message. Example:



**Poster no. 4: “The Victory of Communism is Inevitable”**



Lenin Soviet propaganda poster ‘The Victory of Communism is Inevitable’ featuring illustration of Lenin pointing forward and a Soviet worker holding a flaming torch behind him. Russia, 1969, designer: V. Konuhov. Vladimir Ilich Lenin, 1870-1924, a founder of the Bolshevik Party as a speaker on a factory chimney background. His body is tilted forward, his hand raised and his gaze is directed towards the horizon, the future. To his left is a red, symbolic flag Communist rule.

From looking at political poster, we can understand the era and the purpose of the poster, showing Lenin as a determined leader of the people, party and Soviet progression. The leader that will bring victory.

- This poster is a symbolic image of the communism pride and progression. It combines the leading elements of the flagship, industry and the leader with vision.

- The purpose of this poster is to glorify the image of the leader Lenin therefore the position is in an oblique composition that emphasizes the momentum towards the future.

- The typography serves as a platform base and allows the balance between the character and the security of his standing base.

- Behind the figure is the backdrop whose role is to frame Lenin's dominant figure and to show Lenin's success as a leader thanks to the industry in the background.

- The red color, the color of the communist flag. It is repeated in every poster that the communist regime in the Soviet Union spreads to strengthen its support and to convey the ideology to all strata of the people.

The desire to present the charismatic leader during a speech creates the profile look towards the future. This position of the character in order to transmit confidence and power is a visual language used also in poster designs today. Example: The presidential posters of Barak Obama in profile picture as a powerful image.



## 5. Research population

There is no culture without visual textual traditions and customs. These bear witness to the fact that visual thinking is just as crucial to human understanding, if not more so, than verbal thinking. We live in a visual culture, where the image is much more powerful emotionally than the spoken word, but this is oversimplification. Humans have always created and experienced visual forms throughout their history. Posters can bring history visual documents that give us a bright picture of political historical processes. Within the framework of the present research, the research sample included 46 research participants. The convenience sampling technique has, been applied to elicit the participation of 16 males and 30 females in the research. The research questionnaires have been, distributed among the students of Ashkelon Academic College and among the students of Rehovot College, Israel. In addition, the questionnaires were, distributed to a number of lecturers at these educational institutions and to the relatives of the primary researcher.

According to current research results, future research projects can be, consulted to examine the familiar and understandable visual language expressions of social activism posters, such as posters promoting condom use or ecological awareness, whose message is, to a lesser extent, that of posters for election campaigns. This will not only explore the contribution of design elements to the media effectiveness of these posters, but also how their meaning can be, constructed by various topics.

As a graphic design teacher, I see the importance of being familiar with and understanding the language of visual graphic design, symbols and meaning. As a Renaissance artist, Leonardo da Vinci said, "Know to see". ("The Story of Art", E. H. Gombrich 2007).

Understanding a message in a poster requires the viewers to ask themselves questions about the various design elements appearing in the work, exploring their meaning, exploring their symbols, different assumptions and reasoning, as well as identifying and deciphering the hidden messages. It would therefore be appropriate to teach art and design in schools or higher education as optional courses. Teaching that emphasizes thinking development will assist students in asking and answering questions.

## **6. Conclusions**

"Posters sold the war," said David H. Mihaly, the curator of graphic arts and social history at the Huntington Library, Art Collections, and Botanical Gardens in San Marino, California, where 55 posters "selling the war" were on view. "These posters inspired you to enlist, to pick up the flag and support your country. They made you in some cases fear an enemy or created a fear you did not know you had. Nations needed to convince their citizens that this war was just, and we needed to participate and not sit and watch. There were certainly propaganda posters before 1917, but the organization and mass distribution of World War I posters distinguished them from previous printings", David H Mihaly.

Political posters are extraordinarily clear reflections of the values, trends and important events of their time. The political poster acts as an indicator, shaping attitudes and trends and thus is a mirror of the times. Every generation create and renew political posters. Some political posters borrow from past posters ideas as 'National pride' in call to action posters and lexicon of perpetual political

war. As has been said, there is no future without history, so too, with reference to historical posters.

Therefore, we advocate that historical posters be and should be viewed as visual document of the processes they have undertaken to support and enhance. We can enrich our historical knowledge from political posters, mainly on the issues nations and governments confronted with and the way they promoted to aid to enhance the solution and about the icons and symbols of that period that poster designers found most suitable.

Verna B. Grimm (1892-1958) was appointed the first librarian of The American Legion Library in 1923. Grimm was instrumental in gathering war posters from numerous sources; she once wrote that she "secured our posters from so many sources it is difficult to give them". Most were obtained from private parties and significant number were purchased from the American Library Service. Grimm urged the collection be, built "as important records of historical interest and of particular value to the student in future years".

Each poster tells a story, is visually appealing and reflects how society coped with specific situation, like being at war. As Grimm wrote 70 years ago, "Students and children will be interested in learning of these phases of the World War not found in history textbooks. They will learn that the war was not just a series of battles, but that with it life had to be lived as gallantly as possible and these personal associations helped make the ordeal endurable." The posters displayed are part of the collection of posters held by The American Legion National Headquarters.

Creating design posters, with their, formal components, gives the viewer an experience and response, esthetic illustrated and emotional, which is the basis for understanding the poster message in our cultural environment. Part of being an individual expression of an artist, poster design and its elements are, related to the

time and place in which one creates, reflects and participates in establishing his cultural identity and social context.

It can be said that the historical posters were photographs aimed at a particular purpose through which the figures of the period can be clearly seen and the events of the period can be clearly understood.

Posters for the generations were and are an expression of a repeated dialectical process between reliance about design elements, conventions and art design language known from the past, with the situation they were design and the life they continue, creating with the same elements new subjects, messages and idea

In order to preserve posters as historical documents, a Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) was founded as an educational and research archive that collects preserves documents and exhibits posters relating to historical and contemporary movements for social change. This educational research archive, represent posters from the 19th Century to present days—includes the largest collection of post-World War II posters in the United States.

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