

## The poster as modernist progenitor

Review of:

Ruth E. Iskin, *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s-1900s*, Hanover, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2014, 408 pp., 48 col. plates, 140 b & w illus., \$50.00 pbk, ISBN 9781611686166

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Ruth E. Iskin's new cultural history of the poster, *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s-1900s*, seeks to dramatically shift an art historical conception of modernism, in short, by positioning nineteenth-century advertising posters as worthy of sustained attention; posters – created through the chromolithographic process – not photography or film, signal the advent of modernist visual production. The book is part of the series *Interfaces: Studies in Visual Culture*, from Dartmouth College Press, that publishes new approaches to visual culture, due to its increasing importance in daily life, broadly defined. Other texts in the series examine a wide and varied range of objects and forms, including the iconic Brillo box, photography, film noir, and advertising in Japan.

Iskin's argument challenges head on the conventional and extremely influential history of modernism dependent on key theories by Walter Benjamin and Clement Greenberg, articulated in their pivotal texts, including Benjamin's 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (1936), and Greenberg's 'Avant-garde and kitsch' (1939), in addition to other works by Benjamin from the 1930s and Greenberg from the 1960s. Benjamin's writings make a claim for the dissolution of an 'aura' due to the reproductive abilities afforded by the photographic medium; Benjamin famously argues that a reproduced image lacks authenticity - a meaning that could only be derived from a specific context occupied by an original or singular, work - and thus an aura. According to Greenberg, mid-century modernism found its most successful manifestation through originality and medium specificity wherein 'What had to be exhibited was not only that which was unique and irreducible in art in general, but also that which was unique and irreducible in each particular art. Each art had to determine, through its own operations and works, the effects exclusive to itself.'<sup>1</sup> Widely reproduced and distributed, posters would seem to lack an aura, originality or medium specificity, yet, according to Iskin, the consumer of a nineteenth-century poster valued it on par with high art, finding ways to 're-auratize' it, while the artists took advantage of what she characterizes as the medium-specific aspects of chromolithography.

<sup>1</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Modernist painting', *Forum Lectures*, 1960, n.p.  
<http://www.sharecom.ca/greenberg/modernism.html>.

Iskin relies on a host of, loosely-defined, post-structuralist theorists to support her argument, including Mikhail Bakhtin, Homi Bhabha, Pierre Bourdieu, Michel Foucault, and Jacques Rancière. Thinkers more specific to art history include W.J.T. Mitchell, Rosalind Krauss, and Martin Jay, to name some of the most prominent. All scholars are marshalled, along with painstaking primary research, to forge a fully inter-disciplinary inquiry that she argues surpasses conventional art history by integrating a history of design as well as advertising and the history of reproduction. Given that art history is by its nature interdisciplinary, Iskin's claim is puzzling, and seems unnecessary.

Since Benjamin and Greenberg's theories have become thoroughly canonized in art-historical theories and histories of modernism, Iskin's argument flies in the face of a doctrinal and disciplinary-wide belief system. For example, one of the most recent textbooks in modern art, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, perpetuates, and thus trains future art historians in, an understanding of modernism dependent on these thinkers. The authors reinforce Benjamin's conception of the dissolution of aura dependent on photographic practice and Greenberg's notion of a twentieth-century medium specificity.<sup>2</sup> Furthermore, as clearly unworthy of academic attention, turn-of-the-century posters fail to appear in the textbook.

Posters, of course, due to their mass reproduction, would seem like inauthentic and unoriginal artifacts. In fact, In 'Avant-garde and kitsch', Greenberg specifically points to technology, mechanical reproduction in particular, as a central objectionable facet of kitsch: 'Because it can be turned out mechanically, kitsch has become an integral part of our productive system in a way in which true culture could never be'.<sup>3</sup> Thus, according to Iskin, tainted by a particular brand of modernism that positions reproduced imagery as necessarily 'aura-less', the poster has escaped critical attention; this is all to the detriment of a more nuanced understanding of modernism.

For Iskin, the poster demands attention (in large part because it did demand attention due to its conventionally large size, street location and advertising function), because it 'was at the center of several influential innovations: experimenting with a modernist art language; adapting art to the era of mass culture and reproductive media by establishing a new model for the artwork as a multiple original through the poster's offspring, the original color print of the 1890s; and developing an image-centered design crucial to the emergence of the new fields of graphic design and advertising' (2).

As Iskin notes, others have challenged the modernist split between high art and mass culture, however no one has yet analyzed how the poster negotiates what

<sup>2</sup> On Benjamin see pages 24, 44, 228, and especially 295-9. On Greenberg see pages 109 and 481-2. Hal Foster, Rosalind Krauss, Yve-Alain Bois, Benjamin Buchloh, and David Joselit, *Art since 1900: Modernism, Antimodernism, Postmodernism*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., New York: Thames and Hudson, 2011.

<sup>3</sup> Clement Greenberg, 'Avant-Garde and kitsch', *Partisan Review*, 6: 5, Fall 1939, 40.

she sees as an anachronistic and reductive view of modernism. Posters collapse the supposed chasm separating mass culture and high art because they were advertisements while at the same time demonstrating innovative formal qualities; their street address (a commercial necessity) required and permitted an inventive visual style. To grab the passersby attention, posters displayed a colorful graphic style; furthermore, this novel quality could flourish on the street, not in the salon overseen by conservative jurors. Moreover, the posters' street location ensured a far larger audience than those who would have perused paintings in the salon.

For Iskin, color lithography, a late eighteenth-century development, not the nineteenth-century technology of photography or cinema, is the key industrial modernization that permitted the reproduction and wide distribution of images (Benjamin does acknowledge lithography in section I of 'The work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction', but finds it inferior to the mass reproductive effects of photography) as well as made possible a pre-twentieth-century medium specificity. In lithography, an artist draws an image on a smooth stone with a waxy substance that in the printing process retains the ink that is repelled by the stone's otherwise wet surface. This technology, rather than a reproductive process based on the negative used in photography and film, made available countless images in glorious color, that nevertheless, because of the direct drawing process on the stone, enabled artists to feel connected to the creative process through a kind of touch or feel lacking in photography. While the process was an eighteenth-century development, it was not until the nineteenth century that it was used in its own, for Iskin, medium-specific way. Chromolithography had up to this point been used primarily to reproduce paintings; these modern artists however used this medium for originally designed, commercial works in a graphic style eschewing naturalism (49). This mode had all the hallmarks of modernism: 'simplification of formal means, brilliant colors, flat two-dimensional space, flat color areas devoid of shadows, and an overall emphasis on the surface' (55).

Iskin's lengthy book (the complete text, including index, is over 400 pages), is broken into four parts, two chapters in each. The first part considers the poster as art, its first chapter focusing on how the poster intersects with modernism around 1890. Iskin argues that the poster's key location, on the street, demanded a dramatic graphic, modernist aesthetic formulated by artists guaranteed to draw the passerby's attention (41). The second chapter addresses the subject of the female connoisseur in posters, arguing that while women were clearly not the subjects of earlier posters and paintings, in modern posters women who had a sustained gaze took center stage. Around 1890, Paris saw the beginnings of the new graphic style along with a new type of collector, 'the middle-class modern woman' (123). The coincidental coupling of these events supported a distinctive original subject matter, the woman with an educated, thoughtful gaze. Making the case for a specific visual, not textual vocabulary, this chapter demonstrates Iskin's often comprehensive and nuanced visual analysis. As she points out, French authors could refer to both male and female collectors using the non-gendered *collectionneur*. Iskin makes the brilliant

point that where the written narrative, therefore, fails to situate women as collectors, the iconographic language simply could not avoid identifying the collector's sex; the visual vocabulary of posters promoted women to a collector status denied them in written texts. This inspired argument nearly obscures two questions: what about female poster artists (not addressed in the book), and why is the female connoisseur important to the text's overarching proposal?

Part two explores the similarities and distinctions between the poster and the print, and the dynamics of 'the simultaneous processes of diminishing aura and auratization through consecration practices' (29). Chapter three analyzes the rise of the color print and the practice of lithography, focusing in particular on the 'originally designed color print' (32). Here, Iskin's attention to primary texts is especially productive, as she demonstrates how nineteenth-century thinkers valued posters by either 'downplaying the significance of the reproductive medium', or by identifying chromolithography as a distinctive practice (136). In this chapter she explains how a contemporary critic like André Mellerio could welcome what Iskin calls the 'multiple original' (138). To qualify as a unique chromolithographic product, the work had to be intentionally designed for poster production, rather than simply a reproduction of an existing work. Following this argument to its logical conclusion, Iskin determines that the concept of medium specificity emerged in the 1890s, not in the twentieth century, and was founded on a reproductive technology, not the originality of painting celebrated by Greenberg. Making a case for contemporary relevance, Iskin links the nineteenth-century acceptance of conjoining reproduction and medium specificity to permitting the medium specificity appreciated today in limited editions of video or digital art.

Chapter four takes the subscription publication *Maîtres de l’Affiche* (Masters of the Poster), launched in 1896, as its subject. Gathering together posters considered outstanding exemplars of the form, this portfolio reproduced advertising posters in a smaller size than their original oversize (as large as three by six feet) dimensions suitable for a wall and on better stock than cheap, short-lived commercial paper. This novel process of taking a mass-produced object incontrovertibly deprived of an aura, according to Benjamin, and turning it into fine art, via further, yet limited, reproduction, challenges the dominant and persistent Benjaminian dichotomy between an original that has an aura and the reproduction that clearly lacks it. The chapter addresses head on Benjamin's points about aura, arguing that these mass reproduced posters had an aura due to practices that Bourdieu would recognize as 'consecration' (148). According to Iskin, art historians are far too familiar with a Benjaminian de-auratization process, but have not yet recognized a corresponding auratization mechanism. Re-presenting these posters participated in a new, poster-collecting culture that democratized collecting for a wider public. Moreover, she explains how collectors created a discourse around the poster that re-auratized it, transforming it from a transitory, mass-produced object that functioned commercially to, in book and print collections, a permanent, aestheticized object. She also notes that contemporary critics (unlike Benjamin and Greenberg) were not

troubled by the melding of art and mass culture. Somewhat ironically, the auratization process led to an increased appreciation for the 'original' posters, heretofore ignored as precious objects due to their ephemeral qualities and large size.

Part three address the poster's design and its advertising potential; both chapters provide images of advertising posters *in situ*, helping today's reader understand the proliferation of posters on buildings, hoardings, and in buses; the reader can appreciate their dramatic presence, in size and number.

Chapter five focuses on 'art and advertising on the street' (173). Here Iskin considers the formal qualities of poster design, and how the poster's busy street context littered with competing visual interests compelled artists to develop seductive graphic design qualities. Because this chapter considers the criticism of British posters it is one of the most international in the book which otherwise favors the French poster. Rather than being titled 'The Poster', the book more accurately could have been titled 'The French Poster', as it makes only minor excursions to Great Britain and passing references to artists like Koloman Moser from the Viennese Secession. Given that the book stemmed from Iskin's *Modern Women and Parisian Consumer Culture in Impressionist Painting* (2014), this makes sense, and as she says, 'Paris was the capital of the poster' (2). In this chapter, somewhat repetitively with chapter one, Iskin argues that the advertising poster's 'unique context of urban display' (174) required a graphic modernism in a visual language consisting of 'simplified forms and lines, flat color application, elimination of modeling and excessive details, and frequently, the use of bold colors' (190). Since this chapter focuses on British posters, it would have made sense to consider British caricatures. For example, as Brian Maidment demonstrates, early nineteenth-century caricatures explicitly responded to their urban context of display in print shop windows through subject matter that depicted people in front of gallery shop windows looking at prints.<sup>4</sup>

In chapter six, Iskin considers the interaction of word and image, giving posters credit for uniquely integrating word and image in a modern fashion that privileges the image. Due to their advertising nature, posters have been overlooked by scholars, however they created 'a hybrid language that forged new relationships between verbal utterances and visual images' (211). Ironically, in this chapter the visual analysis seems less convincing than the typically excellent analysis in other chapters, in that it does not successfully demonstrate that poster artists intentionally unified text with image in a coherent, compositionally integrated whole. Furthermore, Iskin claims a 'reduced legibility' for letters and words in a poster by Alfred Roller (*Ausstell[un]g der Vereinigung Bildener Künstler Österreichs Secession. Wien [14<sup>th</sup> Exhibition of the Secession], 1902*), yet the somewhat puffy and blocky letters are still quite legible (Fig. 6.19, 237). The lack of convincing visual analysis in

<sup>4</sup> Brian Maidment, *Comedy, Caricature and the Social Order, 1820-50*, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2014, 114. Iskin does address caricatures of posters, but not the caricature itself (254).

specific details speaks to an overall absence of attention to other contemporary visual forms combining in distinctive ways image and words. For example, early nineteenth-century albums provide an example of original integration of image and text. Furthermore, another late nineteenth-century visual form that combines word and image and uses frequently a reductive or stylized visual form includes comics. Although comics were not posted in the street like posters, they nevertheless had large dimensions when published in newspapers, measuring up to a foot wide by several feet tall.

Part four examines collecting, iconophobia and iconophilia (love of images). Chapter seven explores the poster's spectacular qualities and abilities. As Iskin notes, it was originally in the mid-nineteenth century that critics began describing, due to the poster's unique effects, one 'being "under the influence of spectacle"' (34). Even though photography and cinema, as modern forms of public images, dominate the collective unconscious as the preeminently modern visual mode, they were not widely available until after the turn of the twentieth century, meanwhile posters flourished. Such a powerful influence could be used for ill or good, leading commentators to either celebrate or denigrate the poster. In this oddly short chapter of only 16 pages, Iskin explains how some worried, contemporary critics, believing in the transparent power of images to directly access a viewer's unconscious, warned readers about 'the threat to human agency posed by the invasions of images in posters and other media into everyday life' (256).

Perhaps it is Iskin's own love of images that explains the lengthy, nearly 40-page, final chapter eight, in which she attends to the 'iconophile' who embraced the new imagery and began collecting posters, creating a body of images that could then later be studied. These iconophiles in particular valued avant-garde art prints and everyday posters (264). Linking this chapter to the one on female connoisseurs could have made that material more central to Iskin's argument; the absence of such a connection speaks to larger organizational issues in that the chapters do not seem sufficiently integrated (more on that below).

For an extremely well-illustrated book all about images, the images' organization and sources are bafflingly unclear. The beautiful color reproductions, separated out in two unpaginated parts of the book, are not linked with their black-and-white counterparts. As just one of many examples, one reads about the 'muted' green in Bonnard's *L'Estampe et l'Affiche* (1897, Fig. 3.1), yet one is not directed to its color reproduction as Plate 24, to examine the colors for oneself (130). The reader has to hunt through the color plates to see if a particular black-and-white image is reproduced there. Moreover, one cannot claim that Lucian Bernhard 'revolutionized the advertising poster with *Priester....*' without providing an image of the groundbreaking work (239).<sup>5</sup>

By a large margin, most of the posters in the book are reproductions sourced from Posters Please Archive, as Iskin notes on page xi. What Iskin does not explain,

<sup>5</sup> Without explanation a note directs one to a website.

is that Posters Please Archive is not exactly that. There is currently no such thing as the 'Posters Please Archive'. Instead, it is, more accurately, the 'Poster Price Guide', provided by Rennert's Gallery, a 'trustworthy' (according to its own website) source for posters; indeed, it operates Poster Auctions International, Inc., and Posters Please, Inc., a 'private retailer of vintage posters'.<sup>6</sup> The Guide is aimed at the collector. In other words, the source of the image and information about a poster depend on its status as a commodity. Perhaps some, less commercially-appealing posters — those with political messages, for example — might be excluded, if the major source of images is a for-profit endeavor. Even though the book ends its examination of the poster around 1900, Iskin might also have acknowledged this source in her section explicitly on collecting, in the interests of full disclosure. How has collecting itself affected what she has been able to study and reproduce?

Perhaps this source, that sees posters as a commodity, could explain a lack of material that might have been included, such as more politically charged works, like those published in *Simplicissimus*, the German satirical publication launched in 1896. These images too share many of the characteristics Iskin cites as belonging to contemporary advertising posters: a dynamic, flat, colorful graphic quality and a sensitivity to integrating image and text. Likewise, abolitionist woodcut and letterpress images from the United States of America combined imagery with an interesting (if perhaps in disarray) variety of typeface.<sup>7</sup> It's easy to imagine that unobjectionable advertising posters find more favor with collectors than potentially controversial images like these.

In addition to some political imagery that would seem to fit Iskin's criteria for a modern, graphic design, Post-Impressionist paintings would also seem appropriate (barring an integration of image and text). At least simultaneous with if not actually earlier than the posters Iskin discusses, Post-Impressionist paintings displayed the flat application of bright colors she draws attention to in poster design. If, according to Iskin, this visual style developed as a result of a busy urban context that demanded a reductive visual mode, then how would one explain this style emerging in Post-Impressionist painting? Although 'Impressionism' appears in the index, 'Post-Impressionism' does not. Of the two, clearly Post-Impressionism is at least if not more visually relevant. According to Iskin, artists like Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec and Pierre Bonnard experimented with their modern style first only in posters (not their paintings) due to their advertising function, but this claim does not explain works by artists like Paul Gauguin (54-5).

Other minor quibbles include a lack of coherent organization. It is not always clear why one chapter precedes another for example, and some aspects of the book are repetitive. Because the text brings together new material with a number of previously published essays this occasional disorganization makes sense, but it also means that the whole does not seem fully knitted together. For example when

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.posterauction.com/about-us>

<sup>7</sup> On abolitionist imagery see Colin Moore, *Propaganda Prints*, London: A&C Black, 2010, 78.

discussing the auratizing process of collectors (around page 166), Iskin does not connect this to women connoisseurs discussed in an earlier chapter. Also contributing to a sense of repetitiveness: the painstaking primary research in the text is demonstrated in part due to too much direct quoting as evidence, instead of synthesizing it into a seamless and well-integrated whole.

However, these relatively inconsequential flaws do not diminish Iskin's significant contribution to the discourse on visual modernism. She asks, 'What are the consequences for the modernist narrative of repositioning the poster as integral, rather than marginal, to the avant-garde practices of the 1890s?' (41). The answer both does and does not include a radical onslaught to well-established modernist theories. On the one hand, the text makes a well-documented and convincing case that scholars have overestimated Benjamin by privileging studies of photography and film over considerations of the poster. Modern visual production, Iskin argues, did not necessarily terminate an object's aura, instead it simultaneously re-auratized it. On the other hand, the text seems to accept a Greenbergian notion of modernism as medium specific since it does not upend it, but simply shifts that moment earlier in time. One of Iskin's key contributions is the notion that 'original' meant originally made for reproduction; this revelation helps explain how the contemporary art world unwittingly relies on the reproductive process and values inaugurated by lithographs and their collectors to create limited editions in, for example, art photography and DVDs.

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