

**URGENT. THE
POWER OF THE
POSTER. DIRECT
MESSAGES FROM
THE OSBORNE
ROBINSON POSTER
COLLECTION.
AVENUE GALLERY,
UNIVERSITY OF
NORTHAMPTON.
16-27 JAN 2017.**

What use is a printed poster, when we have the Internet?

Ephemeral. Vernacular. Some amateur, some professional – each one urgent! The posters in this eclectic exhibition exemplify clear and direct graphic communication. Some are a call to action; others issue a warning yet all communicate with clarity and urgency. Some demonstrate ruthless graphic efficiency, with little room for exposition or explanation whilst others are almost majestic in their illustrative beauty. Although most are considered great examples of graphic design in their own right, a small number waste little time with recognised typographic conventions or printing finesses.

Ironically these posters were never meant to reside in frames and as such they make for an incongruous sight in a pristine gallery. They are truly ephemeral, produced in response to an urgent need to communicate disparate and sometimes desperate messages. They are unapologetic and non-conformist. They attempt to distill complex social and political issues into singular, powerful visual statements. They rile us, and shake us out of our complacency. Unlike the World Wide Web, a poster navigates to us. A poster stops us in the street. A poster does not need a power source or a broadband signal, a like, a re-tweet or a share. Posters get in our way; they reside in the community, not just within a social media echo chamber. You can't swipe a billboard left and right, or up and down.

In a world of transitory digital media, the posters in this exhibition – spanning the 20th Century – remind us that the primary mode of mass-communication was once the preserve of printed material. It is my hope that students study these posters and use them to inspire their own design work. These posters are as vital today as they were 30 years ago. War, drink driving, unwanted pregnancy, homelessness, unemployment; these issues occupy the headlines daily and are a constant feature of many a Twitter feed.

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In the Osborne Robinson Poster Collection, the University of Northampton owns one of the largest and most varied poster collections in the country. It has its origins in a donation of two thousand posters which were the life-time collection of Thomas Osborne Robinson OBE (1904-1976), a renowned Northampton-born stage-set and costume designer, who gave them to the then Northampton School of Art in the 1970s so that local students could benefit from first-hand access to work by some of the great names of poster design. Further generous donations have boosted the collection so that it now contains some ten thousand items spanning the whole of 20th century design.

The Collection is perhaps best known for its early British posters, including classic examples from the railway, London Transport and Shell Motor Oil advertising campaigns of the 1930s. These reflect Osborne Robinson's love for the Art Deco style of that era, which defined his early career at the Theatre Royal in Northampton. However his work took him all over the world, and through his travels he acquired an eclectic range of items from over thirty-six different countries, including a significant set of Polish film and theatre posters from the 1950s, and smaller contrasting groups of propaganda and travel posters from 1960s Soviet Russia and the USA.

Today, the Collection provides an invaluable resource for teaching and research into the historical, sociological, cultural and technical aspects of poster design. In recent years it has formed the basis of an international conference, regular exhibitions and loans to national museums as well as student and staff research projects.

Because of limited space it is open to students, staff and external researchers by appointment only: please email suzanne.stenning@northampton.ac.uk or phone 01604 893050 for more information.