

POSTER DESIGN Resource Box

NOTES FOR TEACHERS

These notes are intended primarily for Design & Technology KS 3 – 5 teachers. The notes are divided into three sections focussing on pre-visit preparation, using the resources in the Museum, and post-visit follow up in the classroom.



Posters originated in the late nineteenth century as a marriage of street art to commercial design. Despite the development of other media, they are still a powerful form of communication. In schools, posters can be used to support work in most subjects at all Key Stages. They are particularly useful as a medium for exploration in the Art & Design curriculum, and a good topic for graphic design work in the Design & Technology curriculum.

BEFORE YOUR VISIT

Even in the early days, posters were large and bold. They were in competition with the distractions the surroundings had to offer and had to make maximum impact. So that they could be understood quickly, posters often concentrated on one large, eye-catching image, supported by only the necessary information, and used simple outlines and strong colours.

As posters are viewed from a distance and must be easily understood, they share some of the characteristics of other forms of visual communication to be found in the street, such as direction signs and road signs. Pupils should appreciate that these signs are registered by the viewer in seconds.

Ask pupils to observe people looking at posters, or to note how they look at posters themselves. They could record the distance that people stand from posters of a particular scale, and how long they spend looking at each poster.

There are many types of poster. Some call us to action. Others attempt to change our viewpoint or alter our behaviour. Posters advertising products must first convince us of the product's desirability and then persuade us to buy it.

IN THE PRINTS & DRAWINGS STUDY ROOM

Pupils can best learn how a poster works by studying a small number in great detail. They will need to think about how the design captures the viewer's attention and leads the eye on from one feature to another. They will also need to analyse the contribution made by both text and pictures to the message to be put across. It is helpful to look at one or two posters as a group before pupils study posters by themselves.

Capturing attention

A poster must be noticed in order to do its work. Bright, contrasting colours help the poster to stand out from its surroundings and the surface on which it is mounted. Many posters use a border to mark it off from what is outside. As with a picture frame, our eyes are drawn to what is inside the frame.

Composition

When we first look at a poster, our minds are unable to register every part of it. Often it takes a while to understand the different elements of the poster and how they are related. Once a poster has captured our attention, it does not let our eyes wander at random; the designer encourages us to move from one part of the poster to the next in a specific sequence.

The first step in getting pupils to understand how the eye is led around is for them to recognize the different design elements that make up a poster. A poster generally contains three or four elements, which may be either pictures or text. The 1948 poster for the National Exhibition of Children's Art, for example, has three main elements: the central picture of two children, the headline of the exhibition title and sponsors, and the practical details of location, opening times and admission prices.

Get pupils to think about these different elements and how they are positioned. Ask pupils to identify and sketch the first feature to strike them when they glance at poster in the Print Room. Discuss how this feature capture their attention. Was it:

- the largest thing in the poster?
- the most brightly coloured?
- on a contrasting background?
- in the centre of the poster?
- instantly recognisable, such as a face or product?
- something that struck them for some other reason?

The first feature is the most important in the design and it is often the one we can recognize most easily. In poster advertising products, chocolate bars for example, a picture of the product itself is an obvious choice.

Next, ask pupils to identify and sketch the second feature they noticed. Pupils should label their sketches to show ho the eye is led from the first feature to the second, and how these features relate to one another. Again, there may be a number of possibilities. Was the second feature:

- the next largest in the poster?
- nearest to the first poster detail?
- in the same colour or a complementary colour?
- connected to the first by an image, a line, graduated colour, by something that points to it or another graphic device?
- or was it noticed for another for some other reason?

The poster of the Twilfit Corsets uses a number of these methods to lead the eye around the poster. The woman in the centre captures our attention first. We note her dress, her stance, the background and the mirror. This is the principal feature. From here the women's arm leads us up to the second element, the slogan 'Twilfit Corsets'. This is reinforced by the logo and the word Twilfit being the same colour as the picture background. When our attention returns to the picture, we are led down to the bottom of the poster by the figure breaking out of frame, and by the scarf on the floor. We then see the final element in the design, and can read additional information important to the product.

Looking at the pictures

Pictures are often quicker and easier to understand than words. In posters they can be used to convey ideas in subtle ways that would require lengthy explanation in words. Ask pupils to list everything they can see in one picture on a poster. If the picture includes a person, they should note not just physical appearance, but also the expression, body language and the activity engaged in. Interior scenes should be described in detail, including lighting and furnishings. Exterior settings can often be placed in season. If a poster has more than one picture, pupils should note if features are repeated or occur only once.

Note also the style. Photographs can be made to look stark and dramatic, or soft and reassuring. Black-and-white images will give a different effect to colour. Drawings and paintings can be used to give the impression of simplicity or innocence, or imply an artistic, cultured quality.

The next stage is for pupils to work out why these choices have been made. Nothing in the poster is there by accident; a decision has been made to portray each element that way it is. Have these choices been made to suggest:

- a particular mood or atmosphere?
- a particular lifestyle?
- a particular social status?
- wealth (or poverty), power (or weakness), wit (or foolishness)?
- something else?

Some pictures give enough clues to suggest a storyline. This can range from the simple deduction that the cold bottle in a picture has just come from the refrigerator to a complex analysis of what appears to be happening at a dinner party. Humour is a very effective way of drawing on our past experiences.

Most of the message in the 1984 Brook Street Girl poster is conveyed by the pictures. It is suggested that the 'Sloppy girl' has brought a bag of sandwiches. The bag looks plain and cheap, with words like 'lovely' and 'snacks' on it and the name of the sandwich bar is 'Crumbs'. All this can be easily read upside down. The sandwiches are still in the bag, and are flat and unexciting. Even the change is in low denomination coins. By contrast, the 'Brook Street girl' has arranged lunch on a clean, attractive plate, with a gleaming knife. The sandwiches look fresh and filling is quite expensive. The meal is well arranged, and the grapes have even been washed. The clues suggest that Brook Street staff are classier and more professional than staff from other temping agencies. It is not clear whether the lunch is intended for the temp or her manager.

Looking at the text

Most posters include text as well as pictures. Text can provide factual information such as names, pictures, dates, times. It also tells us the things the designer or client thought were important; the Twilfit Corsets poster from about 1915 advertises the product as being 'British made', especially significant at times of war, as well as 'rustproof and fully guaranteed'.

The overall size of the text will reflect the type of site the poster has been designed for whereas the relative size of different parts of the text reflects the importance given to the different elements.

The choice of typeface also conveys messages. A serif typeface today suggests established, traditional values; a sans serif typeface is bolder and more modern. In the poster of the Brook Street girl the text seems clean and crisp.

Ask pupils to write down all the text on one poster, and identify the different messages it conveys. Finally, ask pupils to put together the information derived from their analysis of all parts of the poster. They should now be able to understand the design of most posters and discuss their strengths and weaknesses.

BACK AT SCHOOL

Once pupils understand how a poster works, they can apply what they have learnt in the Print Room to their own poster design. Since they are now in the position of designer, they should approach the process in reverse.

Pupils should first list the information that they need to give, and also the impressions or emotions that they want to generate. This will be the overall message of the poster. Next, divide the message between the text and an appropriate picture or pictures. The text can be further sub-divided according to its relative importance, and this, together with the site proposed for its use, will determine the text size.

Once pupils have outlined the components of their poster, it is important that they sketch a number of designs. This will allow them to explore a range of ideas, and assess the designs as they progress. The composition of the poster should give greatest prominence to the most important part of the message. This should lead the eye to the next most important part of the message and so on round the poster. Experiment with layouts as even quite small changes will alter the way the eye is led round the poster. When pupils have finished their posters, they can use their experience from the Print Room session to evaluate each other's work. Encourage pupils to develop an expressive vocabulary, especially when describing subjective elements like the impression that a particular poster makes on them.

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