

THE POSTER KING: CATALOGUE ESSAY

I. Sign Language

In 1928 the Royal Academy of Arts hosted an exhibition of posters commissioned for the Underground over the last twenty years. Propped up on the front desk was a prominent sign: **‘There is no Catalogue; a good poster speaks for itself’**.¹ This is not very encouraging for the writer of a catalogue essay on the supreme poster artist Edward McKnight Kauffer. Perhaps it would be better to let these pages remain stylishly blank. Kauffer’s posters need no explanation. Paths wind through landscapes glowing with the promise of a day in the country: take the motor bus to the end of the rainbow. Convolvulus flowers turn their trumpets upward to become footlights on the ‘SUMMERTIME’ stage. White-edged lettering glimmers with muscular romance against black grounds. Constellations in the night sky connect up with zig-zags of electricity. Glamorous simplicity silently prevails.

But then again, there is so much to say. Posters are great starters of conversations: we can’t help but point out to each other things that startle or please us. And an exhibition of posters raises a great many questions: what happens when commercial art is taken out of context and hung in a gallery? Framed and curated, does the poster become a different kind of art? And though posters say a great deal for themselves, they can say different things when we know some of the stories behind them, the influences upon them and the contexts in which they were made. Kauffer himself never stopped talking about them, to the occasional exasperation of his friends. He discussed posters with the kind of rigour and attentiveness more often accorded, in the 1920s, to the paintings of Rembrandt or Titian. He made the poster a subject of study, and it has remained so ever since – more important now than ever in our world of corporate branding and media. The conversations he started will keep going on.

Kauffer compiled an impressively large book which seemed by its very weightiness to confer authority on the subject. *The Art of the Poster*, published in 1924, offered a pioneering history and analysis of an art form which millions of people encountered every day without giving much thought to its tradition or techniques. The opening essay on ‘Origin and Evolution’ acknowledges that brightly-coloured mass-produced posters are a modern affair, born of new printing techniques in the twentieth century. But the modern poster builds on a very long history. ‘The necessity for advertisement seems to be as old as humanity itself’, writes R.A. Stephens, and he goes on to trace the techniques and iconography of signboards from ancient Egypt to eighteenth-century London (where the proliferation of boards in the streets became a hazard for pedestrians); from the engraved trade cards of tailors and bookbinders to the red lion painted outside any Red Lion Inn.² That last example alone was enough to show that advertising could in certain ways pre-empt the visual sophistication of easel painting: Matisse was thought radical for painting a red beach in 1905, but the sign painter had been painting red lions all along and no-one had batted an eyelid.

The Art of the Poster includes a brilliant visual essay by Kauffer himself. Here again is the venerable signboard tradition, but also a sampling from the huge range of sources which might inspire the modern poster artist. The eclecticism here is surprising and yet the inclusion of each image makes perfect sense. It all seems so obvious once Kauffer points it out: *of course* modern posters are directly related to –

Ancient Chinese reliefs

¹ Photograph reproduced in Oliver Green, *Underground Art* (Laurence King: 1990).

² R.A. Stephens, ‘Origin and Evolution’ in *The Art of the Poster*, edited by Edward McKnight Kauffer (Cecil Palmer, 1924), 1.

Greek vase decorations with their clean, flat shapes caught in motion
Byzantine mosaics (and the associated tradition of the religious icon)
English brass engravings (think of the strong contours on the drapery and ruffs)
Cut-paper silhouettes, a delicate art which became bold in the hands of the

Beggarstaff Brothers

Japanese prints, which inspired poster design as much as Impressionism.

This is a fraction of the list. Kauffer's sourcebook gathers ideas from across time and across continents. In its variety and multiplicity and its greediness for connections, this visual anthology confirms above all one central fact about Edward McKnight Kauffer: he was in love with images.

Not surprisingly, he was drawn to many different forms of contemporary art. He allied himself, at various stages in his career, to Post-Impressionism, Vorticism, Constructivism, Cubism, and Surrealism. As these movements developed in artists' studios, in small London galleries, and in avant-garde journals sent out to specialist subscribers, Kauffer's posters relayed the Modernist news to millions. Underground travellers were not necessarily conscious of being introduced to Vorticism when they passed an advertisement for the Museum of Practical Geology, featuring a geometric crystal formation striking like lightning down the centre of the sheet. But Vorticist it was, influenced by Kauffer's contact with Wyndham Lewis, and thousands of people saw it who would never have read **BLAST!**

Some may think that Kauffer's adoption of different styles counts against him. Was he merely derivative, reproducing effects hard-won by the painters? These suspicions cannot last very long in the presence of Kauffer's work. He was the very opposite of a dabbler, and incapable of doing things superficially. When Kauffer invoked Cubism, he knew what he was doing; and, if he was a great interpreter of styles, Kauffer was also very much an original.

II. Flying

One of Kauffer's first great successes was his 1916 design *Flight*. It began life as a woodcut before being re-worked as a design in colours, and later purchased by Francis Meynell who used it in an advertising campaign for the newly-launched Daily Herald.³ 'SOARING TO SUCCESS!', ran the slogan at the bottom. Word and image were a perfect fit.

As Mark Haworth-Booth has shown in his excellent biography, much that would characterise Kauffer's work for the next thirty years is already here in *Flight*. There is a great compression of energy, a united effort and purposeful sense of direction, all conveyed with wit and charm. Those big round eyes and proud beaks are full of stalwart character, however far they have been simplified. The design thrives on the concise association of ideas. As Kauffer explained in an essay on symbolism, good posters must translate concepts into signs which are immediately recognisable. 'Symbols convey by imagery what we should otherwise have to ponder over', he noted, and he took the aeroplane as a prime example. 'If we used signs as a means of communication [the aeroplane would] convey to us speed, travel, an engine of war and terror, as well as aspiration on the part of man to be as a bird'.⁴

Flight is eloquent of Kauffer's own tremendous ambition, and of a life spent almost constantly in motion. It was partly that he was in flight from his origins, launching himself by force of will towards a more promising life. But long after he had risen to celebrity he was still trying out different ways of living. He had become by habit, it seems, a searcher and explorer.

³ The evolution and significance of *Flight* is discussed in Mark Haworth-Booth, *E. McKnight Kauffer: A Designer and His Public*, (1979; revised edition V & A Publications, 2005), 17-20.

⁴ EMcKK, 'The Poster and Symbolism', *Penrose's Annual*, 1924, 44.

He began by leaving his native Montana, where his youth had not been a happy one.⁵ His parents divorced when he was three, his mother had no way of supporting him, and there were two miserable years in an orphanage before she remarried. At twelve Kauffer left school to earn a scratch living as a scene-painter, and at seventeen he left town with a travelling repertory company. He had escaped, but there were few opportunities for a young man without money. He tried ranching in California, and then – more promisingly – got a job in Paul Elder's bookstore and art gallery in San Francisco. One of the regular customers there was Professor Joseph McKnight, who became interested in the work of this young shop assistant who went off determinedly each evening to art classes at the Mark Hopkins Institute. McKnight offered to make Kauffer a loan that would allow him to train as an artist in France. Kauffer was so appreciative that he took McKnight's name as part of his own. After two terms at the Art Institute in Chicago, Kauffer booked his passage to Europe and travelled in Italy and Germany before starting at the Académie Moderne in Paris. He settled to work and married Grace Ehrlich, a pianist, but after only a few months the prospect of war in France drove them towards the relative safety of England. Kauffer knew immediately that he loved the country and, though at first it was hard to find work, his life was soon changed – for the second time – by the patronage of a far-sighted individual.

Frank Pick was already embarked on a campaign to deploy excellent design on London's Underground network; as Assistant Joint Manager of the Underground Group he was putting into practice a whole philosophy of commercially useful design.⁶ He quickly realised that Kauffer was as serious as he was about using design to make a functional artwork of the modern city. The first of Kauffer's posters went up: IN WATFORD, OXHEY WOODS. And from this point onwards, Kauffer would never be short of a commission in England. Passengers would look out for a promised 'New Poster by E McKnight Kauffer', or 'EMcKK' as he economically styled himself. Publishers coveted Kauffer designs for their dust wrappers. In a self-portrait from 1920, Kauffer gave himself a fearsome look something like Edgar Allan Poe. He is intense and forbidding, sharply-dressed in a high collar, and with just a hint of frenzied inspiration in the wave of his hair.

By the mid-20s, Kauffer was famous. (The aspirant Charles Ryder in *Brideshead Revisited* hangs a Kauffer poster on his Oxford wall.) But he was still unsettled. He left Grace and their young daughter Ann, and went to live with the textile designer Marion Dorn, who would be his partner for the next thirty years. They were tenants at the Adelphi, and in rooms on High Holborn designed by Frederick Etchells, and then at Swan Court in Chelsea. It was not until 1938, by which time Kauffer was approaching fifty, that he and Marion found their 'first real home'.⁷ It was (again) a complete change: The White House was a large cottage near Henley in Buckinghamshire, surrounded by fields and peace. Kauffer was overjoyed, and his posters became landscape paintings in celebration of English country. One of the best, luminous with colour, took its title from a poem by Thomas Hood:

How bravely Autumn paints upon the sky
The gorgeous fame of Summer which is fled!⁸

It is a poem about the passing glories of artists as well as nature, and it looks – in retrospect – sadly apt. Commissions dwindled the following year when war was declared and without British citizenship Kauffer was in a difficult position. He was officially an 'alien' and felt sorely unwanted, though friends and clients did all they could to persuade him otherwise.

⁵ Biographical detail here and elsewhere is derived from Haworth-Booth's entry for Kauffer in the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* and his work in *E. McKnight Kauffer*.

⁶ On Frank Pick and the aesthetics of the Underground see Michael Saler, *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and the London Underground* (Oxford University Press, 2001).

⁷ EMcKK to Jack Beddington, 23 February 1941, quoted Haworth-Booth, *E. McKnight Kauffer*, 97.

⁸ Thomas Hood, 'Sonnet Written in a Volume of Shakespeare'.

In the summer of 1940, he and Marion set off at short notice. Abandoning their lately-found home, they made their way back to America. Kauffer would have to launch himself all over again. He would always remember that Arnold Bennett (for whom Kauffer had done some of his most subtle book illustrations) had once compared him with 'a bird, forever in flight, forever searching for a place to come to rest'.⁹

III. Focus

Kauffer's art and life were shaped by movement. But along with his tendency to restlessness and flight went a profound need for order, precision, patience, exactitude. His studios and his homes were always immaculate. Though he moved at regular intervals, there was never any sign of hasty unpacking or makeshift arrangements. Nor was there any hint of the bohemian messiness usually associated with artists' studios. Crowded shelves, old palettes, abandoned mugs of tea and knick-knacks: this was not Kauffer's style.

He favoured a streamlined modernism that was both dynamic and poised, very much like his own designs. The furniture was co-ordinated and built-in; surfaces were clear and possessions neatly organised in cupboards. Harold Acton remembered that 'Ted's flat was all beige and aluminium, ultra-modern, austere yet comfortable with discreet lighting and the latest gadgets.'¹⁰ Kenneth Clark reported that the studio at Swan Court was 'full of things that went in and out and up and down'.¹¹ These were places which might have impressed Le Corbusier as being 'machines à habiter'.

Kauffer wanted to simplify, both in his home and his work. He wanted clear lines and focus. 'We live in an age of T-squares and compasses' he wrote, and he used these authoritative tools to impose orderliness on the muddle of life.¹² He was scrupulous in his working methods, ensuring that every line was exactly the right one, every angle precisely measured. The use of geometry was always important in his designs, as was the inclusion of a focal still-point. A good poster, he argued, should be concentric rather than eccentric, drawing the attention of the observer towards the centre of the sheet.¹³ And many of Kauffer's best posters show how effective this concentric formation can be. Colours radiate out from behind a mammoth you might see at the Museum of Natural History; shoppers fly round in the vortex of 'Winter Sales'; the path which leads off into the distance of 'DEVON'S MOORS' takes the eye to the very centre of the design where the lighter sky forms a halo around it.

Kauffer designed, he said, for the fast-moving public; he worked for an audience who would be rushing past his posters to catch a train or get to the next appointment. He saw that the contemporary poster, in a hurried contemporary world, needed 'veracity, brevity, vigour'.¹⁴ Simulating the experience of the distracted passer-by, he worked at an easel with long-handled brushes so that he could gauge the effect of his work from a distance. But he also aspired to make that rushing crowd pause for a moment. His posters must be eye-catchers, but they must also reward the person who stops for a moment to take in the design.

⁹ Kauffer recalled this in an interview, 'Edward McKnight Kauffer: Poster Designer', *Portfolio*, vol 1, issue 1, 1950, quoted in Haworth-Booth, *E. McKnight Kauffer*, 58.

¹⁰ Harold Acton, *Memoirs of an Aesthete* (London: Methuen, 1948), 198.

¹¹ Kenneth Clark in conversation with Mark Haworth-Booth, 1971, cited in *Edward McKnight Kauffer*, 61.

¹² Cited by Grace Shulman in *First Loves and Other Adventures* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 2009), 55.

¹³ See Brian Webb and Peyton Skipwith, *Design: Edward McKnight Kauffer* (Antique Collectors' Club, 2007), 26, 28.

¹⁴ 'The Poster and Symbolism', 43.

Moving and pausing: that is one of the rhythms of his work. A butterfly alights for a moment on the straw hat in 'SUMMER SHELL', all a-quiver, about to move off.

Always on the look-out for telling contrasts, Kauffer liked to juxtapose mechanical forms with signs of his own painterliness. So his poster for 'SHELL LUBRICATING OILS' is all about smooth-running machinery but, around the edges of the sheet, brush-marks are left exposed. Many of Kauffer's Shell designs include a little robot man (giving Bibendum a run for his money), but he is actually based on, and clearly recognisable as, an artists' lay figure. It was part of Kauffer's interest in precision that he would compare the expressive imperfections of hand-drawn lines with lines made by a compass or set-square. Like the great Modernist painter Fernand Léger, Kauffer often turned humans into machines and back again. The two large hands in 'MAGICIANS PREFER SHELL' are plump, friendly, human hands – or are they made of tubular steel?

Kauffer worked in terms of balanced shapes and the abstract relation of parts to a whole. He was in this sense a formalist, and it is easy to see how he and Roger Fry became friends. It was Fry who had introduced the English to modern European art by staging the Post-Impressionist Exhibitions in 1910 and 1912, and Fry who set the art world talking about 'rhythm', 'design', 'inter-related masses'. Soon after Kauffer's arrival in England, Fry supported the young artist by displaying his work at the Omega Workshops in Fitzroy Square, and including him in an Omega publication of *Original Woodcut by Various Artists* (quite rightly, since his rare woodcuts from this time have magnetic clarity). Fry remained a firm friend and an influential advocate, grasping the seriousness of what Kauffer was trying to do. And in no small way Kauffer continued Fry's own work by acclimatising the British public beyond the galleries to the shapes and ideas of Modernism.

It was Fry who came to the rescue when other reviewers were baffled by Kauffer's major project of the mid-20s, an illustrated edition of *The Anatomy of Melancholy* for the Nonesuch Press. It was a huge undertaking: Kauffer produced 150 drawings to accompany Robert Burton's 1621 text, simplifying and stylising while also alluding back to the seventeenth-century woodcuts. It was a long way from dynamic modern posters, but it expressed Kauffer's sustained intellectual fascination with systems, catalogues and taxonomies. Fry saw that Burton's giant Renaissance project connected in Kauffer's mind with the signs and symbols which so interested him in Modernist art. His 'Cubbistico-cabbalistic' style was full of purpose, Fry argued in a long appreciation for the *Burlington*: Kauffer was using Cubism and Futurism to suggest 'the half-magical and cabbalistic flavour of Renaissance science'.¹⁵

There is something in Kauffer's love of Burton which links with his love of gadgets in his studio and paintbrushes stored ritually in descending order of size. He found magic in this pedantry, and he turned his own need for precision into an exploration of man's quest for order. The poet Marianne Moore, who was a close friend of Kauffer in his later years, summed all this up with a phrase characteristic of her own imaginative exactitude: 'Edward McKnight Kauffer', she said in 1949, 'is a parable of uncompromise'.¹⁶

IV. Imagining

¹⁵ Roger Fry, 'Book Illustration and a Modern Example', first published in the *Burlington Magazine* and reprinted in *Transformations* (Chatto & Windus, 1926), 166, and see also Fry's letter to EMCKK, 5 January 1926, in *Letters of Roger Fry*, ed. Denys Sutton (Chatto & Windus, 1972), 589.

¹⁶ Marianne Moore, introduction to *Drawings for the Ballet*, exhibition catalogue (New York: American-British Art Gallery, 1949), reprinted in *The Complete Prose of Marianne Moore*, ed. by Patricia C. Willis (Viking, 1986), 427. On the relationship between Kauffer's art and Moore's poetry, see Grace Shulman in *Conversant Essays: Contemporary Poets on Poetry*, ed. by James McCorkle (Wayne State University Press, 1990), 241-7.

In typically methodical style, Kauffer listed four stages of poster design: idea, thought (both determined by the needs of the commercial patron), followed by imagination, and interpretation.¹⁷ It was the interplay of these elements that made his posters so much admired. They were fit for purpose as well as being aesthetically innovative, and the one quality could not be separated from the other. But perhaps it is their imaginative strength which brings us most pleasure today when we look at these images in a gallery away from their commercial uses. It is what Marianne Moore called the 'flash of splendour apart from the pretext'.¹⁸

The humour in Kauffer's work has sometimes been underestimated, but his illustrations (more than his posters) were often done with a smile. Roger Fry loved the 'humorous antiquarianism' in Kauffer's engravings for Burton's *Anatomy*, sensing in them a spirit of 'affectionate raillery' towards a writer four hundred years old.¹⁹ The dust jacket of Lytton Strachey's *Queen Victoria* showed the Queen's head poking out from puffed expanses of black dress. Characterful line drawings for Shell newspaper adverts (replete with happy motorists zipping along) set the pattern for the 1930s work of Edward Bawden, who looked up to Kauffer as a model and admiringly collected his posters.²⁰ John Betjeman was delighted with Kauffer's mischievously bizarre cover for *Continual Dew*, which featured a semi-surrealist hand sprouting (literally, and like a cabbage) from a sky pouring down with rain.

Kauffer was extremely good on weather. The 'Winter Sales' posters he produced in 1919 (for Derry and Tom's), 1921, 1922 and 1924 (for London Underground) are all richly atmospheric, with stylised umbrellas and diagonally slanting rain. The 1924 version involved a whirlwind of snow, with shoppers bent double, caught in the spin. It looks familiar today because Saul Bass followed Kauffer's lead when he designed the iconic title sequence for Hitchcock's *Vertigo* in 1954. And then came the psychedelic spinning circles of the 1960s, including the titles for *Arabesque* and many more. But Kauffer's 'Winter Sales' was the earliest and most elegant example, and wittily exploited its setting in the Underground. Though wise shoppers should take the Tube to avoid gales in the street, Kauffer's great circle of wind recalls the gusts that blow through the Underground tunnels when a train is approaching – a train which will whizz you at whirlwind speed towards the January bargains.

Kauffer could do sinister weather: he was an ideal designer for the title sequence of Hitchcock's *The Lodger: A Story of London Fog*. On the Underground, however, he was more often called upon to fill Londoners with the joys of spring. Frank Pick had established a tradition of seasonal hoardings, enticing people to go (by train or bus, of course) to places which were particularly appealing at this time of year. This brought out Kauffer's strong literary vein, and he would often link his images with poetry. 'Flowers o' the Corn' paid homage to Byron; a 1932 image was accompanied by enticing words from Izaak Walton: 'Look! Under that broad beech tree I sat down when I was last this way'. The boldness and modernity of Kauffer's posters did not stop them from engaging powerfully with memory, rural dreams, and versions of pastoral.

V. 'Tis all mine, and none mine

¹⁷ 'The Poster and Symbolism', 45.

¹⁸ Marianne Moore to EMcKK, 11 December 1951, in *Selected Letters of Marianne Moore*, ed. by Bonnie Costello et al. (Penguin, 1998).

¹⁹ Fry, *Transformations*, 168, 164.

²⁰ See the 1923 newspaper advertisements reproduced in Webb and Skipwith, 44-5. Malcolm Yorke in *Edward Bawden and his Circle* (2005; Antique Collectors' Club, 2007), 28, suggests that Bawden was collecting Kauffer while still a student in the mid-20s. Bawden would later become a designer for both Frank Pick and Jack Beddington.

‘Omne meum, nihil meum.’ That was Kauffer’s epigraph for *The Art of the Poster*, a book in which he gathered material from many sources and yet which was so distinctively his. It was the description Robert Burton had used of his *Anatomy*, and centuries later it had special significance for an artist whose working life was shaped by his many patrons, clients, and friends.

Kauffer worked privately and liked to be in control of his own affairs. But he believed in the fundamental sociability of culture. He had, after all, named himself McKnight after the man who first gave him a chance. For many artists in London in the 1920s and 30s, Kauffer was a trusted friend and collaborator. He would help young designers by introducing them to his own clients (as he did when the talented Hans Schlegel arrived from Berlin). He would spend long evenings at the Cafe Royal with Jack Beddington and other Shell designers. Or he would go out with T.S. Eliot and be mistaken for his brother because the two friends looked so alike. Then there was the evening at Eliot’s flat with Mary Hutchinson, and Leonard and Virginia Woolf. Eliot had sent everyone in advance his draft of the poem which would become *Ash Wednesday*, so everyone had the chance to prepare apposite remarks. Eliot went round the room asking each of his guests for comments, with Kauffer due to take his turn after Virginia Woolf.²¹ Few people would have passed this particular test, and whatever Kauffer said that night has been forgotten. But Eliot did very much mind what Kauffer thought. He would send him books for a second opinion (as he did when he first discovered Auden in 1930), and Kauffer was the only illustrator he allowed near his poetry.²²

Throughout the interwar years, with Marion Dorn’s reputation growing alongside his own, Kauffer lived in the midst of artistic and literary London. And all the time his art was drawing on, and feeding in its turn, the great experiments of Modernism. There was nothing marginal about advertising in this period: it is no coincidence that Joyce chose an advertising salesman as the hero of *Ulysses* or that Woolf made her characters in *Mrs Dalloway* stop in their tracks, all over London, to watch an aeroplane write KREEMO TOFFEE in the sky. Both knew that advertisers were the makers of icons, the artists and writers of the streets. Edward McKnight Kauffer believed passionately that if designers and businessmen would collaborate in ambitious ways, commercial art could change the experience of the city for the better.

The importance of this collaborative principle became painfully clear to Kauffer when he returned to America in 1940 and found that commercial clients there were not so willing to take risks. He wrote to friends back in England of his ‘desolation’. ‘Nothing will happen here in my lifetime (I now realise, alas) to break the deadly and mechanised advertising system – that’s all it is – and “where there is no vision, the people perish”.’²³ In fact Kauffer did some superb work during his fourteen years in America, and opportunities did start to open up. But he was increasingly caught in the hold of depression. Marianne Moore did all she could to offer spiritual support and her letters are moving testament to the devoted friendships Kauffer was still forming in his American years. Despite the great efforts of friends near at hand and those he longed for back in England, Kauffer died in New York in 1954. It was a sad conclusion. Yet the work he left behind, and which continues to exert influence both in England and America, still seems to throb (or pulse, or crackle) with anticipatory energy.

²¹ Recounted in Leonard Woolf, *Downhill all the Way* (Hogarth Press, 1967), 109-10.

²² See T.S. Eliot to EMCKK, 6 January 1930, quoted John Haffenden, *W.H. Auden: The Critical Heritage* (1983; Routledge, 1997), 77 and Haworth-Booth, *E. McKnight Kauffer*, 55-6.

²³ EMCKK to Marcus Brumwell, 3 June 1949, alluding to Proverbs 29: 18, collection of Simon Rendall.

I am much indebted throughout this essay to the work of Mark Haworth-Booth and I am tremendously grateful to Simon Rendall for his warm help and encouragement and for sharing so openly his knowledge of his grandfather.

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