

The Posters of British Transport

While the French and the American's were aggressively developing a thriving poster community, the British were lagging behind. It's not that the Brit's disdained posters, but rather that they were conservative in their approach, sticking mostly to posters that featured established corporate identities. The idea of using art to sell a product or a service was new to them. Only the Beggarstuffs, the pseudonym used by the British artists William Nicholson and James Pryde, created posters that would be called art. They worked in collage, creating posters, primarily for the theatre in the 1890's. This image for the Drury Lane presentation of Cinderella is a fine example of their work.





In the 1890's French critic Maurice Talmey summed up the impact of posters this way, "Where once art spoke of authority and religion, the poster speaks to us only of ourselves, our pleasures, our tastes, our interests, our food, our health, our life...Instead of demanding obedience, respect and self-sacrifice, it whispered... amuse yourself, take care of yourself, feed yourself, go to the concert, read romances, buy good soup."

Poster art has always been about the individual and enjoying life as best one can. A strong believer in this approach made his way to London in 1906. Frank Pick was trained as a solicitor when he arrived in London to work for the newly formed Underground Electric Railways of London (UERL), better known today as "The Tube".

Maximizing business has always been the objective and with the UERL it was no different. After being promoted to Traffic Officer in 1908, Pick set out on promoting off-peak travel through the idea that the trains went to great places and that they had purpose other than commuting office workers to and from work. Simply put he wanted to create a positive relationship between the UERL and the citizens of greater London. In addition to the great posters created under Pick, two iconic symbols came during Pick's tenure. In 1915 Edward Johnston created that most famous image, the Underground logo. Stylized over the years, the London Underground bullseye is one of the world's most famous and copied symbols. In 1933, again under Pick's direction, Harry Beck created the other seminal image for the newly renamed London Transport, the transit map. London Transport maps are ubiquitous and a godsend for all who travel by tube.



Both the bullseye and the map fulfilled Frank Pick's objective of building relationships with Londoners and visitors alike. Even today, 100 years later, the bullseye elicits positive emotions, London is a large city, but the sight of that bullseye means that you immediately know where you are and that safe and fast trips to wherever you want to be are close at hand

Pick was a marketer of the first magnitude. His approach was all encompassing, and in addition to posters, included designing new stations, the new headquarters for London Transport, and such seemingly mundane things like the fabric covering for the train's seats.

But this lecture is about posters and that was where Frank Pick flourished. In 1915 he brought two young artists into the UERL stable, F Gregory Brown and E McKnight Kauffer.

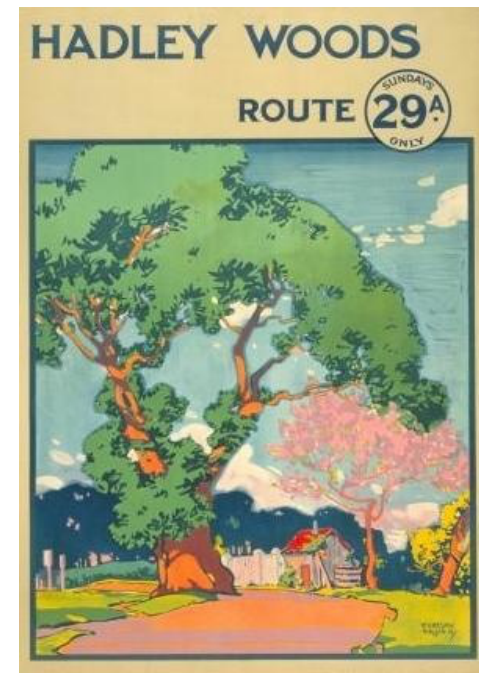
F Gregory Brown worked for clients other than Frank Pick; he was adept in many fields, indeed he won the grand prize for textiles at the 1925 World's Fair in Paris. But his most enduring work was for the UERL and later when the UERL absorbed the Metropolitan railway, bus and tram into the agency we still know today as London Transport. In working for Pick, he specialized on specials and trips out of London.



Brown remains a personal favorite with his posters for the British countryside holding a special place. Waltham Abbey by Tram (previous slide) is a classic Brown poster from 1916. Located 15 miles northeast of London on the River Lea, Waltham Abbey is a country town; in 1916, a great little place to spend a day, have lunch, or walk by the river. Brown's use of colors and his appreciation of Japanese printmaking were clearly evident in his early work.

Keeping the busses and trams running was the goal of the company, so on weekends, when inner city transport slowed, special routes existed to take people to the country, to get out of town, or to visit family. Hadley Woods is 11 miles north of Central London and was fairly bucolic in 1916 when Brown created this poster.

The Brits would do a lot of strange things, from a transportation perspective that is. The London North Eastern Railway (LNER) would rent out sleeping cars (carriages) that could be dropped off at beachside locations for a week's holiday. As this Brown poster shows, London Transport would rent out their buses as well.





Edward McKnight Kauffer was an American, who moved to England in 1915. Between his birth in Great Falls, Montana in 1890 and London, he studied in San Francisco, the Art Institute of Chicago, and the Academie Moderne in Paris. His studies in Paris were sponsored by University of Utah Art Professor, Joseph McKnight; and Kauffer was so grateful that he adopted the middle name McKnight in tribute to his mentor.

Kauffer was a giant in the art world, as Art Historian Anthony Blunt lamented “ Mr. McKnight Kauffer is an artist that makes me resent the division of the arts into major and minor...Since he is an illustrator and designer of book-covers and posters, he must, technically be classified as minor... but if he is minor who then is major...”

His earliest works for London Transport were landscapes in gouache with “In Watford” from 1916 being a prime example; another of the London daytrip posters, this one for a small town some 20 miles northwest of London.

McKnight's seminal work was the graphic image, "Flight". Kauffer saw the first exhibit of the Vorticists in 1916, and this avant-garde movement of English abstractionists who worshipped the machine as an icon and war as a cleansing ritual had an impact on his own work. Through its minimalism and dynamism "Flight" echoes the Vorticists' obsession with speed as a metaphor for the Machine Age. Francis Meynell, a well-known English book publisher and printer, who organized a poster campaign for the Labour Party newspaper, The Daily Herald, bought "Flight". Meynell believed that the soaring birds represented hope, and the unprecedented design somehow suggested renewal after the bloody world war. The poster was ubiquitous and soared its maker into the public eye. Kauffer soon received commissions to design campaigns for major English wine, clothing, publishing, automobile and petroleum companies.

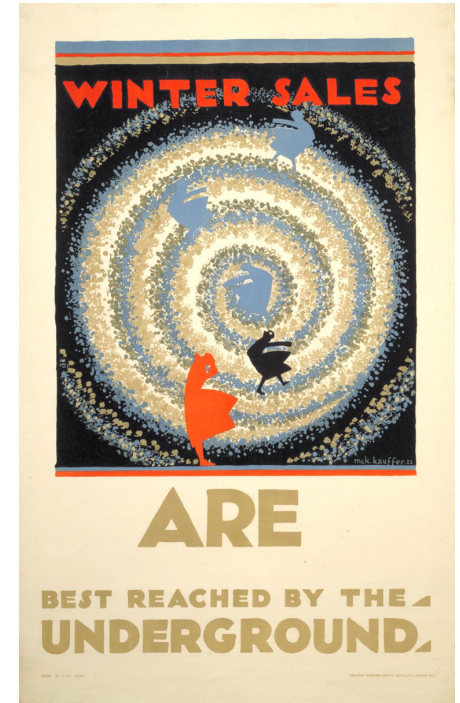
For London Transport he soon produced some of his most famous work, "Power, the nerve center of the Underground" stayed with the theme of machines and industrial might, while "Winter Sales" revolutionized the London Transport poster genre. Here were posters that conveyed action, feelings, and the challenges of life through abstract imagery.





The London Underground was developing a subterranean network that connected worker and shopper alike with the trendy shopping districts of London. Bond Street, Oxford Street, Piccadilly and Kensington High Street all had convenient stops where one could pop out of the subway and be within yards of favorite shops and stores.

Kauffer's "Winer Sales" posters convey the message that above ground travel was not the best way to shop in the cold, windy and wet London winters. His abstract imagery easily conveyed the vagaries of weather through the slashing rain or the wind and snow vortices.

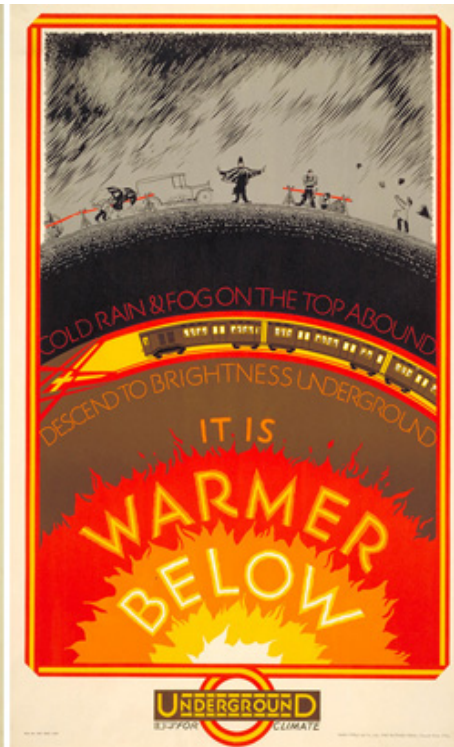
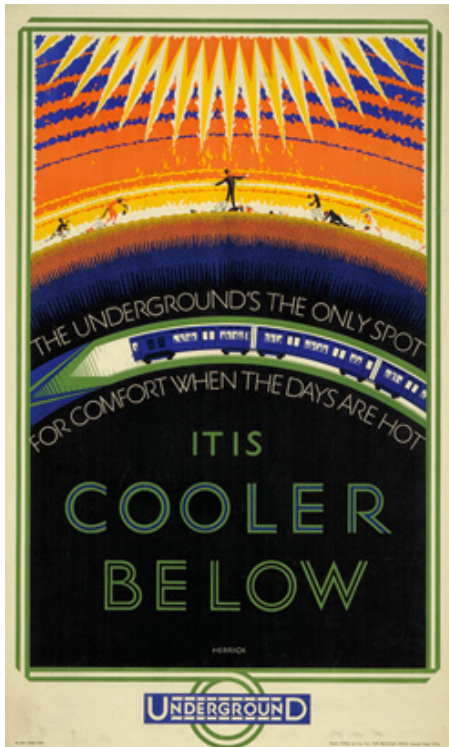




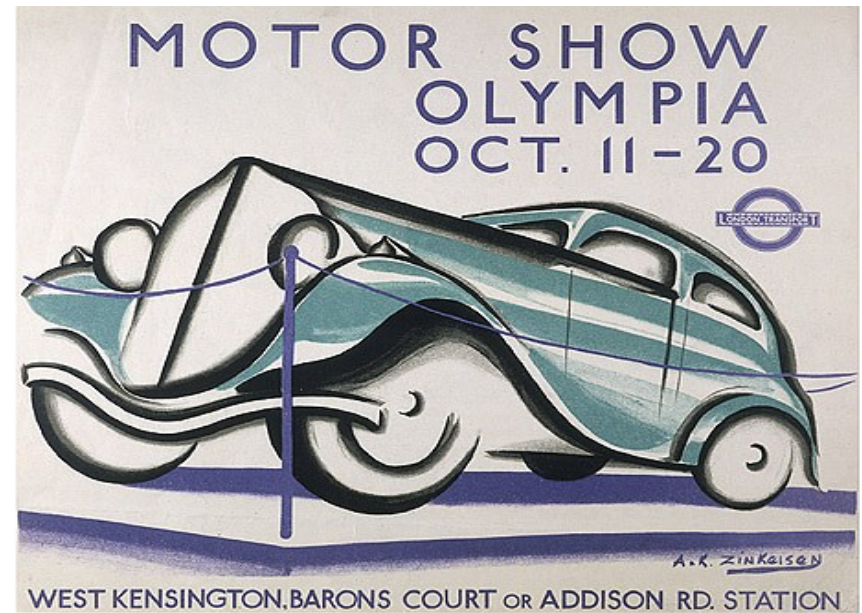
The Underground constantly reminded Londoners that travel need not be curtailed by bad weather. Most of the mainline train stations were collocated with a tube stop, so visitors from outside the city could make their way into London by train and tube with little exposure to the elements. This stunning 1929 poster by Frederick Manner, re-enforced the benefits of tube travel.



In 1920, another young artist, FC Herrick joined the London Transport and proceeded to create some truly unique and stunning work. Herrick created many posters of note and also mentored many of the younger artists that joined London Transport. Herrick's "Nightly Carnival" is actually a map of sorts featuring, as the stars in the sky, London Underground tube stops. On either side of the image are lists of London theatres with numbers that relate to the numbers on the stars in the sky.



Herrick had his time with the weather theme by producing two posters in 1926 and 1927 reminding everyone that in summer the Underground was Cool and in Winter it was Warm. Reminding everyone of the comforts of tube travel was essential to building trust between the tube and those who used. Frank Pick knew it was essential that the tube be a part of everyone's daily routine – dependable and always ready to serve.



But promoting the Underground was not the only objective. Events and destinations were important as well. This poster announcing the upcoming football matches is a good example of the informative posters put out by London Transport.

Others were more stylish event posters including this 1934 poster for the annual motor show at the Olympia Pavillion. By Scottish born artist Anna Katrina Zinkeisen, one of many female artists that worked for London Transport.

Walter Spradbery created 90 posters for London Transport between the early 20's and the 1940's. Like Gregory Brown he specialized in destination posters, and also like Brown was a student of Japanese printmaking. Ascot Sunday from 1924 is a fine example of his work.

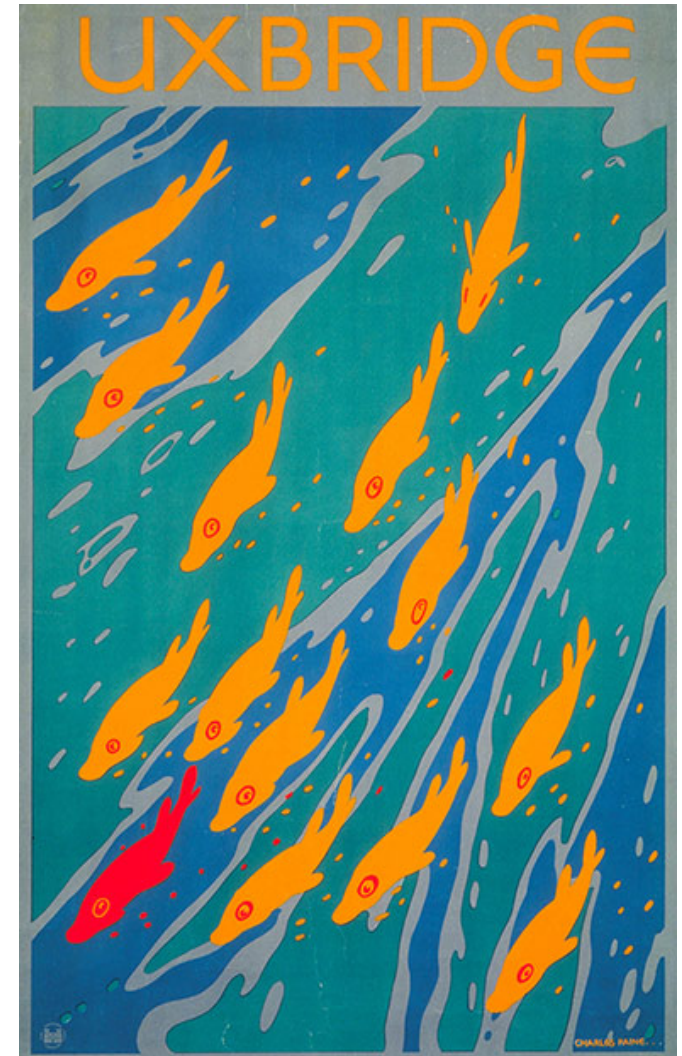
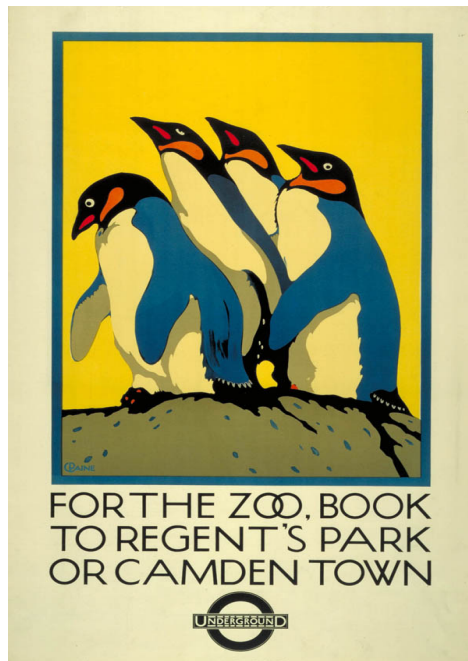
Bernard Kearley and Kate Burrell collaborated on this poster for the annual Oxford Cambridge rowing races. In typical British fashion, the simple title “Boat Race” was sufficient to describe the event.

Of course, the British sense of humor was never far from center stage, as in this poster for the Smithfield Club Show of 1928 by Compton Bennett. The show is the annual British farm show where breeders of livestock bring their best to compete for prizes. Still held today, but now in the East of England, the Smithfield show was held at London's Royal Agricultural hall until 1938.



Charles Paine was a protégé of FC Herrick. His style was unique although like Brown and Spradbury he utilized classic printmaking in many of his posters. Uxbridge from 1921 utilizes colors and imagery that is reminiscent of Kauffer's Flight.

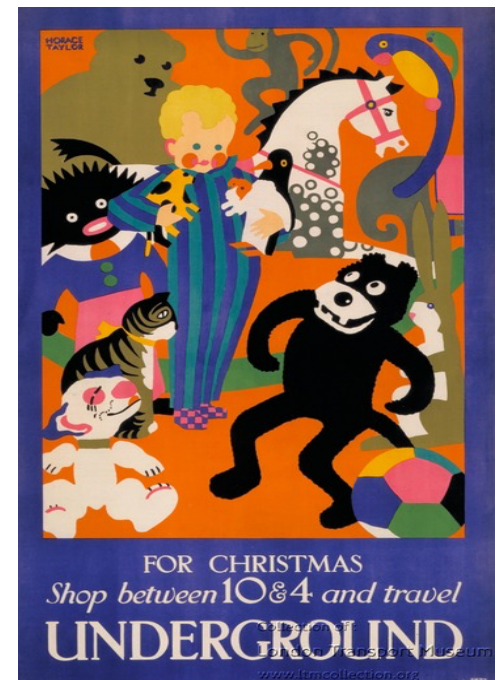
"For the Zoo" is one of Paine's most famous images. Here he captures the Penguin's perfectly in an image that is both striking and full of whimsy.



Whimsy was the hallmark of Horace Taylor's work. "To Summer Sales" gaily and brightly portrays two ladies ravaging the sales rack during the 1934 summer shopping sale season. The bright colors convey the enthusiasm of the summer season in London.



"For Christmas Shop Between 10 & 4" is another whimsical feast by Taylor as an array of stuffed animals surround a young boy. The poster encompasses Frank Pick's agenda of promoting off peak travel.



The use of poster art to advertize London Transport did not go unnoticed by the British Railways although the 4 major systems employed posters to varying degrees.

In our next lecture we'll discuss those and the man regarded as England's greatest poster artist, Tom Purvis.

