
H-France Review Vol. 16 (August 2016), No. 150

Ruth Iskin, *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s-1900s*. Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College Press, 2014. xxi + 408 pp. Illustrations, bibliography, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (pb). ISBN 978-1-6116-8616-6; \$48.99 U.S. (eb). ISBN 978-1-6116-8617-3.

Review by Venita Datta, Wellesley College.

Ruth Iskin's important study *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design and Collecting, 1860s-1900s* is the first full-length history of the poster, which, as she convincingly argues, was born in France but became an international phenomenon. While other works have focused on the posters of specific artists or the poster as an example of graphic art, hers is the first work to fully integrate the poster into the cultural, political, and social landscape of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As she states in the introduction: "At the core of this book is the conviction that the illustrated poster of the second half of the nineteenth century played a crucial role in visual culture, a role that cannot be understood in one single context, whether art history, the history of design, or the history of advertising" (p. 1). She aims not only to "chart an integrated cultural history of the poster" but also to expand our understanding of the visual culture of modernity" (p. 1).

The Poster is divided into four parts, each containing two chapters. In part one, "The Poster as Art," Iskin examines the poster's place in modernism in one chapter and focuses on the work of Toulouse-Lautrec in the second. The poster not only allowed artists to communicate with a large public directly, but it also advertised the artist as well as the product advertised. As Iskin convincingly argues in the first chapter, the poster was a unique site of experimentation for modernist art in the 1890s, and, indeed, most observers looking at the posters of Pierre Bonnard and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec could hardly claim that they were not artistic works simply because they were advertisements. Nevertheless, Iskin is arguing against a significant art historical tradition, buttressed by the work of the critic Walter Benjamin, which has relegated the poster to the margins of modernist art and instead focused on photography and film. To this end, Iskin distinguishes a French modernist tradition of the 1890s from the New York variety developed in the 1930s. In France, "the poster was at the crux of a progressive struggle to redefine the relationship between high and low culture and democratize the access to art" (p. 72).

Part two is devoted to the "Poster and Print: Reproduction and Consecration" and encompasses chapters on the color print and *Les Maîtres de l'Affiche* or smaller versions of large posters, published as albums and already prized by collectors at the fin de siècle. In both of these chapters, Iskin argues against Walter Benjamin's theory that a work that was reproduced lost its "aura" and could not be accepted as real art. As Iskin ably demonstrates, posters, especially the smaller versions published in an album such as *Les Maîtres de l'Affiche*, were deliberately reproduced in numerous copies and collected as art. Part three covers the "Poster as Design and Advertising," and in this section, Iskin's adeptness at analyzing images is especially evident as she compares the artistic poster to simple advertising ones. Finally, part four, "Collecting and Iconophilia," focuses on the poster as a symbol of visual culture and the new age of spectacle, examining posters as a sign of the "ephemeral archaeology of modernity" (p.

263). Posters were an essential part of modern life, not only because they were symbols of mass consumer culture, but also because they marked the evanescence and constant change of modern life. These chapters, along with the first, are probably those that will be of greatest interest to historians.

While Iskin draws some examples from other European countries, her focus, understandably, is mainly on France, with some important examples drawn from England. On the whole, Iskin's arguments are smart and persuasive. She has done an excellent job of situating the poster within the context of its time, focusing on contemporary accounts by such collectors as Roger Marx, Henri Beraldi, and André Mellerio, as well as the correspondence of Jules Chéret, rightly credited as having pioneered the illustrated color lithographic poster.

I would have liked to know more, however, about the relationship between the avant-garde, especially the little reviews like *La Plume* and *La Revue blanche*, and poster artists. How did the literary avant-garde promote the poster? How did writers view their own work in regard to that of such poster artists as Bonnard and Toulouse-Lautrec, both of whom had close relations with these reviews (both artists designed posters for *La Revue blanche*)? More information too on female collectors and poster artists would also have been helpful, although to be fair, Iskin examines the relationship between performer Jane Avril and Toulouse-Lautrec, whom she commissioned to design posters for her. Iskin also points out that female collectors were represented in images although they were not discussed in written texts about collectors. Finally, gender analysis could have been more prominent in the work. While Iskin points to contemporary comparisons of the poster with prostitution, she could have extended her discussion to include how the fear of women was embedded in a fear of modernization.[1]

One of the book's greatest strengths is Iskin's detailed and subtle visual analysis, although she is ill served by the puzzling placement of some of the images, which are sometimes far removed from the place in the book in which they are discussed. The author occasionally repeats herself, and some reorganization and pruning would have resulted in a shorter work and tighter analysis. Nevertheless, these are rather minor quibbles with an excellent work.

Beautifully illustrated, *The Poster*, which includes numerous color plates, is, of course, a valuable tool for art historians and students of art history, but given its engagement with the social, political and cultural issues of the day, a number of chapters would also be ideal for use in courses on French and/or European cultural history. Iskin is to be commended for producing such an engaging and thoughtful study.

NOTES

[1] Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1995).

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ISSN 1553-9172