

Moving Pictures

A review of the exhibition: *Art for All: British Posters for Transport*, June 2010

by Geoffrey Detrani

If you've traveled by subway you know that, besides being a means to convey people, trains and train stations are perfect for the conveyance of message. They are inscribed spaces - public communiqués and commercial prods abound.

There used to be an advertising campaign in the New York subway that was the system's take on travel inducements. The series was a "take the train to your getaway destination" sort of thing and deployed a simple picture and a brief hook of text. The destinations ranged from beaches and parks to museums and historic sites, and the message was that the subway can set you free! You, car-less apartment dweller, have a ready means of egress from the teeming channels that are the urban canyon-scape.

As a tool of graphic communication, the campaign was simple. It used the blunt end of the stick (deadpan depiction of the object desired) to hit the mark. In the taxonomy of pictures, the posters fell easily to the side of advertisement rather than art with a capital A. But one thing that art and advertising have often shared is their common role in the service of inducement - a prompt to buy this, a lure to believe that.

So, it's no surprise to learn that posters of the London underground operated in just this manner - as goads and inducements prompting riders to shop, to recreate, to arrive early, to wait patiently, to dream big, to walk a Roman wall, to stagger their queue's, to "visit the empire," to dream of a sylvan countryside or to associate themselves with activities befitting their class or the class they aspired to join.

"Art for All: British Posters for Transport," at the Yale Center for British Art, is a cheerful exhibition of around 100 bright, boldly designed, colorful and buoyant lithographs from 1908 to 1987. These are didactic works, in that each poster served a point, usually in a straight forward manner, made by artists and designers who referenced the artistic fashions of their times. Consequently, we see the staid, visually literal posters of the early years of the 20th century, the Bauhaus and Constructivist influenced works of the early middle century, and the odd post-modern riff.

But a great many of the posters are paeans to commerce, prompting riders to travel to the shopping spots and to get there early because latecomers reap the thin rewards of whatever is left.

One bizarre and amusing work in this vein is "Shop By Underground," (1926) in which several stunned-looking, unnervingly wide-eyed children stand awkwardly transfixed on a train platform with their personified toys (freshly purchased) aside them.

Another is “Winter Sales Are Best Reached by the Underground, (1922) which depicts a quintet of eager, wind blown, would-be shoppers swirling around what appears to be a dangerous vortex of snow and commercial mirth. We can’t know how this strange image was deciphered at the time but it fairly bursts with ironic-comic humor.

By far my favorite work is “Scarborough: Yorkshire by LNER” (1923-47). It’s a single image that was part of a six-lithograph suite that, when contiguously assembled, formed an imaginative birds eye vista of resorts along the English coast. Though the subject is prosaic enough, the technique and coloring are of a rich, beautiful clarity that is strongly reminiscent of Japanese Ukiyo-E woodblock prints. It’s easy to see how this poster could be an aid-to-spirit of someone caught in the workaday grind of a crowded subway train.

The sheer power of the train system is also an overt theme – as if to remind riders of the improbability of this massive achievement of will and steel. One poster, fittingly entitled, “Power-The Nerve Center of London’s Underground,” (1931) embodies the mighty, masculine iconography of machine lust. A stylized factory becomes a spinning turbine, becomes a muscled forearm and tightly clenched fist, becomes a bolt of electricity. But this otherwise triumphalist work strikes a minor, disquieting note in that the bolt of electricity emanating from the fist is oddly and exactly like the double, slanted, angular insignia of the Nazi SS. There is no small irony in noting that it was the very Underground tunnels themselves that gave safety and solace to many Londoners who, just a few short years hence, would scurry to their protective depths to escape the scourge of German aerial bombardment.

Like the current “if you see something, say something,” subway campaign this work reminds us of the darker side of art for all.

