

Motocycles Comiot by Theophile Steinlen, 1889
Job by Alphonse Mucha, 1898
Poster, January 18 to February 12, By Ben Shahn, around 1930

Poster Art (aka Advertising or Propaganda)

We are so inundated with advertising that we take it for granted as the background of our existence and we may not realize its effect on us. We may even think that we are immune to its influence; that we are too savvy for that trick. We also may have certain beliefs regarding the types of information surrounding us. We may believe that advertising is part of the American way of life and that it can be so entertaining, that its absence is difficult to imagine. Just look at all the hype around the Super Bowl half-time commercials! The word, “propaganda”, however, conjures up ideas and feelings associated with falsehood-telling countries considered to be our enemy. However, believe it or not, all advertising is a form of propaganda. The dictionary defines propaganda as “A systematic effort to persuade a body of people to support or adopt a particular opinion, attitude, or course of action. Any selection of facts, ideas, or allegations forming the basis of such an effort.” With this definition in mind, even health promotion articles and fact sheets, which aim to disseminate beneficial, scientific facts, are a form of propaganda. Rarely do people use the word in this context. Last fall, in my Board of Health office, a man from the Mosquito Control Program and I were talking about the West Nile virus and the importance of avoiding all forms of containers holding water, as the mosquito which spreads the virus is dependent on small containers for breeding. Looking ahead to next spring’s efforts to prevent the disease, he said, “Propaganda, that is all you can do. Get that propaganda out there.” I was surprised but did not disagree with his word choice. The word, then, is neutral. It can be used to beneficial ends or evil ones and all sorts of selfish uses in between. If we can help the students to be aware of the message and to develop an awareness of the purpose, they can be informed citizens making informed decisions. That is what this unit is about: awareness and making informed decisions. Aim at actively coordinating our eyes and our minds to achieve this awareness. We try to discover two things. What do the posters want us to think? What do they want us to buy or do? Our posters are commercials or advertisements on paper.

The posters we will look at this month date from the turn of the last century. They advertise products, lifestyles and an event. Let’s talk about advertising for a minute. (You know I like to interview the class for a couple minutes.) **What do you think about advertising, the kind you see in magazines, on billboards, on TV and popping up on the computer? How does it work? What is the goal? What are the advertisers trying to do?** (If they say anything such as “sell us something” or “get our attention” or “entertain us”, they are right on target and will see similarities in the art we view this month.)

Advertising is a form of propaganda. Propaganda is spreading the word about something. To make the idea spread quickly and to make the idea stick, the artists and writers use certain techniques. You can write the categories on the board and let the children spot the techniques. Here are some of the techniques:

- 1. Visibility:** Something must grab your attention. The artists and writers want you to see their poster or magazine page more than someone else’s poster. How do they do that? Some things you can look for are:

- a. **Color**
 - b. **Contrast**
 - c. **Bold words**
 - d. **Exciting content**
 - e. **Humor**
 - f. **Shock value**
 - g. **Different, unique**
 - h. Anything else?
2. **Message:** The advertising has a message.
- a. If the writers and artists think the people will like the idea, then they can tell it like it is.
 - b. If they think the people will not like the message or might even hesitate (too different, too costly, not their style, etc.) then they will try to:
 - i. **Disguise it.**
 - ii. **Ignore it.** They can skip the message and just make it a memorable advertisement, one that can't be forgotten. After a while, viewers will get to know the message and by then they have enjoyed the advertising campaign for some time.
 - iii. **Change it** for different groups of people. For a health conscious population, emphasize that the bread is full of fiber. For those who are less health conscious, emphasize that the bread is soft.
 - iv. **Use celebrities** to endorse the product or be linked with the product.
 - v. **Use beautiful people** to advertise the product or idea.
 - vi. **Use experts** to talk about the idea or product.
 - vii. **Use social values to pressure you.** Society wants you to be a good person or a patriotic person or a healthy person.
 - viii. **Stigmatize:** Part of the successful anti-smoking campaign stigmatizes smoking in public and around children.
 - ix. **Suggest through association.** This technique is used when a vitamin advertisement shows healthy, strong, happy people. It is suggested that the vitamin made them strong, healthy and happy.

Suggestions for all three prints:

What techniques were used in these posters we see today? (Just write the main idea, not the whole explanation.)

Did the poster succeed?

What is the message?

Suggested participation:

Bring in favorite magazine ads that illustrate some of the above points and ask the class to analyze them. You could ask the teacher if a bulletin board entitled something such as "Think about It!" or "Be Informed" could be used in the classroom and students could add to it as they find examples.

Suggested follow-up activities:

Create an advertising poster.

Make an advertising video.

In either case, have the students explain:

1. The targeted population.
2. Identify the techniques used.

Have fun!

Motocycles Comiot by Theophile Steinlen, 1889

Suggestions:

- What is being advertised? (The motorcycle is being advertised. I believe the name “Comiot” is simply the brand name, such as Harley.)
- What is new and exciting in this picture for the people of 1889?
- How do you know?
 - Talk about the rarity of motor vehicles.
 - The peasants vs. the modern, exciting woman
 - The contrast of clothing
 - The geese (Make way for this new, exciting thing.)
- Is it a successful poster?
 - Why? (Humor, action, contrast, dynamic composition)
 - How did the artist do that?
 - Did the artist use words to convince us?
- What is the message?
 - If you are a modern exciting woman, you will want to buy our motorcycle.
 - If you don’t want to look like a dull, fat peasant, a country bumpkin or a hick, you will buy our motorcycle.
 - If you want people to know that you have extra money to spend and if you want to show off your new, modern clothes, you will buy our motorcycle.
 - You can also turn around the above messages. If you buy our motorcycle, you will be attractive, happy, modern and will have fashionable clothes.
- Is the message disguised in any way?
 - There is no dirt on the woman’s face from her fast ride over dusty roads.
 - There is no mud splattered on her long skirt.
- Does the poster make promises?
- Or does the poster just suggest ideas by associating and linking ideas and images. (Link might be a good word to use to teach the concept of association, because of the television show “Weakest Link” (was on in 2002). Links are connections. They can be strong or they can be weak. In a chain, one weak link makes the whole chain weak. (On a humorous aside, my daughter, Joanna, mis-spoke this title as “The Leakest Wink”. She now has a hard time saying it correctly. The “link” has been made. We find ourselves wishing the strange, always perfect hostess on the show would say this by mistake some time.)

***Job* by Alphonse Mucha, 1898**

- Is this a successful poster?
Why do you think so?
- What techniques did the artist use?
- What makes this image stick in your mind?
- What is being advertised? (Believe it or not, cigarette paper is being advertised! Don't tell them right away if they don't see it.)
- What is the message? (Buy Job brand cigarettes!)
- Has the message been changed? Disguised?
How? There is no hint of smoke, coughing, or disease.
The product name is even partially covered. Maybe they don't want us to think too much about the product.
- Will we be beautiful if we use a particular product? Will we be beautiful if we smoke?
- Is this poster like today's cigarette advertisements? Has advertising changed much in 111 years?

I'll bring in examples of magazine cigarette ads and a brief history of cigarettes in the US. It explains that the paper was a big selling product until fairly recently when the pre-rolled ones were readily available and that it was a sign of liberation for females, called the "Torch of Freedom".

Many years ago, the first time this unit was presented at Dennettlementary School, the docent asked a class of second graders, "What do you think the woman is selling?" A boy answered enthusiastically, "I don't know but I want it!"

Poster, January 18 to February 12
By Ben Shahn, around 1930

- What do you notice first?
 - Why is that?
 - What did the artist do to make us notice the poster?
- Close your eyes. Can you see the poster?
- What makes the image stick in our minds? List some techniques used by the artist.
 - Bold imagery.
 - Small number of images.
 - Large size images.
 - Contrast, bright colors against black and white
 - Humor – silly horse and clown
 - Information (date) is clearly displayed.
- What is being advertised?
 - You might not know.
 - Why did the artist leave that out?
 - Curiosity might make you ask people about it. “What is happening on January 18?”
- What is the message?
 - Come to Ben Shahn’s exhibit! It will be fun!
- Has the message been changed in any way to disguise the actual product or event?
 - Maybe. We don’t usually think of art museums and art exhibits as fun and exciting. We don’t usually plan on seeing clowns or silly horses at these places, either. Maybe we are being tricked into going. Or, maybe the “trick” to get us there will turn out to be true. Maybe the exhibit was fun, exciting and silly.

The vote:

Which was their favorite poster, for any reason at all?

Which was the most successful poster?

**** The artist bios and brief description of the prints will be brought to the meeting.

See you then, Friday, March 27, 2009.

Images are on the next page.

