Posters in Miniature: The Ephemeral Cinderella

In 1845 a new form of graphic art called the poster stamp, referred to by contemporary collectors as “Cinderellas,” was launched in Austria as a means of commemorating and advertising an important Viennese trade exhibition. Based on the printed postage stamp, which had itself only just been introduced in England in 1840, poster stamps tended to be somewhat larger and were intended to bear messages rather than serve any official function. Circulated on envelopes, theater programs, packages and invoices, and assembled in collector’s booklets and albums, poster stamps gradually became so popular across Europe and America as an advertising medium that soon they were being designed in the tens of thousands. In 1914 for example, over 50,000 individual stamp designs were produced in Germany alone.

Despite their commemorative origins, as poster stamp production trickled off in the 1930’s, so did recollection of their existence to all but a handful of collectors of historical ephemera. There is, for example, no Library of Congress classification for these objects, and virtually no art historical literature on them. This is astonishing when we consider that their designers included many of the most prominent graphic artists working in Europe and America over a sixty year period when poster art was at its height, that they engage all the important art movements and styles of the era including beaux-arts, art nouveau, art deco, constructivism, futurism, dada, and surrealism, and that they present us with some of the most imaginative, visually arresting, and widely-disseminated pictorial art ever produced.

This exhibit showcases representative specimens of the medium from a substantial and significant collection of poster stamps generously gifted this year to the Vassar College Libraries by the Poughkeepsie ephemerist and collector Arthur Groten. As examples of an important but almost forgotten form of social media, we hope this collection will serve in the future as a material basis for reflection on relationships between high and low, art and industry, culture and communication, scale and distribution, memory and evanescence.
Exhibitions, Fairs, and Cultural Events

One of the first uses of poster stamps was to advertise exhibitions and trade fairs, which were a chief means of disseminating information about fashion, invention, and the progress of arts and manufactures in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Stamps would be printed and distributed well in advance of an upcoming fair, motor show, or handicraft exhibition in order to encourage attendance. Stamps were also sold as inexpensive souvenirs at these exhibitions to serve as visual reminders of what must have been an exciting and uncommon experience for all attending. Included among these were stamps celebrating important art exhibitions and musical festivals, such as these displayed here designed by the Secessionists Bertold Loeffler (1874-1960) and Otto Friedrich (1862-1937), and the Austrian Expressionist Egon Schiele (1890-1918).
Transportation and Tourism

Nothing characterised the opportunities opened to ordinary people by the great age of invention that straddled the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as the rise of mass transportation and communication and the expanding availability of efficient and affordable travel. Not only were information and goods being brought more efficiently to more people, but increasing numbers of people were being carried to new and more distant locales. Thus, advertising, technology, and tourism were bound into a dynamic and self-propelling system.

The poster stamp, an agent of commerce and mass circulation itself, helped to make places into destinations, whether exotic or familiar, as well as to popularize the latest forms of transport. It did this by featuring ships, aircraft, trains, and automobiles directly, often in advertisements for the many trade shows in which the latest cars, boats, and airplanes were introduced. Poster stamps also functioned as diminutive but widely-disseminated versions of the popular travel posters of the era, thus serving as tiny windows onto worlds of new sights and experiences that, with increasing efficiencies of speed, economy, and comfort, offered new opportunities for adventure and change.
Commercial Advertising in Europe and America

The Germans are credited with turning the poster stamp to purely commercial use at the very beginning the Twentieth Century. The United States followed suit when modern German printing presses were imported in 1910. France, Great Britain, Italy, and other countries soon began printing commercial stamps of their own.

Able to disseminate messages about products in great numbers at low cost, the poster stamp quickly found a niche for itself in the very beginning of the advertising age. One appeal was its interactivity. An early form of social media, people affixed stamps of their favorite products to their outgoing letters and envelopes, and also formed collectors’ clubs.

Because of its size constraint, the medium served as a laboratory for early advertisers to work out the most effective and economical elements of visual persuasion. Artists learned that in order to make a successful pitch they needed to restrict elements of their designs to the bare fundamentals. Standards were developed, for instance, for the use of color in advertising that are still adhered to today.