

The Basel Poster Collection - Past and Present

What must have been the first Swiss poster exhibition was held at the Gewerbemuseum Basel in November and December 1896. Three years earlier the Museum had moved into its splendid new home on the outskirts of the oldest part of the city centre, which it shared with the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule, and the Director wanted to show the population what the poster - a new medium at that time - actually was, and what forms it took in various countries. The Museum managed to obtain a loan of exhibits from the collection of the Hohenlohe-Museum in Strasbourg, and works from Germany, France, England, Italy, the USA and other countries were on display.

Assistance from printing houses and companies also enabled a Swiss section of this exhibition to be created. These posters remained in the museum after the exhibition had closed, and they formed the nucleus of a rapidly growing collection. Here the museum was fortunate to be in contact with a police unit whose function was to vet posters before they were allowed to be put on public display: when it had finished with the copies submitted to it, these also became part of the collection.

Though the Gewerbemuseum had originally been founded as a private institution, it was later taken over by the state - and in 1916 it became apparent that the management of its collections was deficient and they were in need of reorganisation. As part of this process an Applied Graphic Art Collection was established, for which - despite its primary intention of featuring works created in Switzerland - typical examples of foreign graphic art were acquired, mostly by prominent artists. The librarian managed this collection, which was primarily used for teaching graphic designers and printers, until his retirement in 1943. In the decades that followed the collection does not appear to have been looked after well - but fortunately acquisitions continued to be made, and there were repeated initiatives regarding its organisation and storage. In 1982 it finally became possible to create the post of curator of the poster collection, which the present author has held ever since.

In the interim the collection has grown substantially. It now holds over 50,000 Swiss posters, plus some 10,000 doubles for sale. Their dates of origin range from around 1880 to the present, and each year about 1000 new posters are acquired, together with about hundred older ones. The collection of foreign posters includes a few thousand valuable older (pre-1940) items, and a number of selected exhibition posters to which new examples are regularly added.

There are no thematic restrictions: the collection is open to all posters, no matter what their purpose. The major areas are services, tourism and public transport, consumer goods, politics, social communication and events.

Almost all the posters have been inventoried and photographed. For some time we have had a database, initially for internal use only, that enables posters to be selected in accordance with the most diverse criteria. It is scheduled to be made available on the internet in the next years.

Exhibitions of posters forming part of the collection are held once or twice a year. Visitor numbers are growing at a gratifying rate, principally in three categories: students and teachers at all levels; journalists and publishers; museum staff and collectors.

The poster collection has always been augmented by other works of commercial art, especially in the last twenty years. It now includes over 200,000 advertisements from newspapers and periodicals, brochures, invitations, packages, labels, stickers and other items, illustrating the breadth and diversity of Swiss work in this field.

The Basel Poster Collection sees its function as that of a mirror and an archive of everyday visual culture in Switzerland. After more than a hundred years of collecting and organising, we may be justly proud of an archive which is userfriendly and comprehensive.

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