HAND LETTERING DURING THE GOLDEN AGE OF THE ROCK POSTER:
INFLUENCES, PURPOSE, AND LEGACY

Anya Sheldon
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The relationship between word and image, the giants of visual expression, is a compelling discussion, and one that can be approached with the help of LSD, figuratively speaking. The tendency is to see the two elements of composition as separate, neatly divided from each other by distinct purposes and appearances. Essential in the discussion of word and image, however, is acknowledging the ability to hybridize them. In their book *Lettering & Type: Creating Letters and Designing Typefaces*, authors Bruce Willen and Nolen Strals explore this interface with their introduction of the term “opaque word” to connote letters elevated to become a design’s image. They explain that because the abstract nature of letterforms allows for their physical distortion, letters themselves can convey expressive and informational ideas rather than serve solely as what Noel and Strals call “an invisible crystal goblet”\(^1\) for the content of the text.

One of the most profound applications of the opaque word was during the proliferation of hand-lettered posters promoting psychedelic rock concerts in 1960s and 70s San Francisco. Posters are, after all, an opportune vehicle to harness the potential of the opaque word, as they call for visual expression as well as publicity information in limited space. The lettering of psychedelic posters is characterized by unconventional embrace of high-contrast palettes and the warping effects artists explored. These techniques were intended to reflect the experience of attending psychedelic music concerts, whose long durations and culture of drug use created a distortion of reality. They also spoke to a much deeper theme. The psychedelic poster movement was rooted in rebellion, a concept woven into the history of its predecessors and the spirit of the Hippie movement of which it was a part. Rejection of norms was evident in the movement’s defiance of conventional poster design as well as of orthodox artistic schools of

thought, its intentional narrowing of audience, and its influence on current poster artists who reject digitization in favor of hand-lettering. The hybridization of word and image gave artists the tools to reject societal convention in the spirit of their times and, as a result, reach new heights of innovation.

A look at the trajectory of hand-lettered posters throughout the past two centuries illuminates the groundwork for the psychedelic poster movement. Early posters of the 19th century featured a somewhat disjointed pair of a representative visual and some lettering, but by the turn of the century, posters that focused on design as a whole, known as “art posters,” emerged and began to dominate the poster-making scene\(^2\). Characteristic of these works was stylized typography. The distorted and idiosyncratic text drew from the personalized ornamentation that Arts and Crafts movement artists used to counter the mass production of the Industrial Revolution, and it indirectly related to the intricate Gothic lettering found in medieval bibles and Arabic calligraphy that came before\(^3\).

From these influences, as well as Oriental art and the Rococo movement, emerged Art Nouveau, whose elegant, organic alphabets scholars cite as the historical inspiration most evident in the psychedelic posters\(^4\). In accordance with the fluctuation between type and hand-lettering that occurred throughout poster-making history, Art Nouveau and psychedelic artists both sought to reject the clean typographic aesthetic of Victorian era and 1950s and 60s “boxing-style” posters that preceded them, respectively (see figures 1). Artists of the two younger movements instead embraced the vivacity of organic forms. In the case of Art Nouveau, this pursuit was in the spirit of glorifying the human figure and the flourish of the

Psychedelic poster artists also utilized imagery from nature and of the figure but distinguished themselves from their predecessors by choosing to express their concept of a natural existence through the use of LSD, the sensory experience of which psychedelic art captured. With the innovation of Art Nouveau artists like Henri Toulouse-Lautrec, Alphonse Mucha, and Alfred Roller to serve as historical example, psychedelic artists adopted a similar curvilinearity of line and returned to a number of lettering techniques visible in posters at the turn of the century. Especially illustrative of the depth of influence is a comparison of the reliance on negative space for legibility evident in Alfred Roller’s 1903 Sixteenth Vienna Secession Exhibition Poster and later in Victor Moscoso’s 1967 “Three Little Bares” poster, and the circular letter wrap in Alphonse Mucha’s 1897 poster for Theatre de la Renaissance later employed in Moscoso’s 1967 poster “From the Plains of Quicksilver” (see figures 2 and 3).

However interconnected with the past they were, psychedelic poster artists quickly distinguished themselves with the extreme lengths to which they took the distortion of hand-lettering, almost to the point of illegibility. Leaders in the movement went beyond a rejection of the straight-forward wood-block type of music gig posters before them to a more general jettisoning of the principals of traditional fine art training in orthodox schools\(^5\). They used jarring color palettes, incorporated letters into landscapes and figures, created dense jumbles of text, integrated letterforms into optical illusions, and developed highly-intricate hand-lettered fonts, many of which were simply too challenging to read for the casual passerby (see figure 4). The result, called the “slow poster” because of the time required to read it, laughed in face of the consensus that so-called effective lettering employed forms that struck the balance between beauty and legibility in order to appeal to the widest audience. Instead, the near-visual cryptography was another unifying factor for the few in an underground subculture that could

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decipher the text, often through the use of hallucinogens⁶. Nolen and Strals further validate the use of near-illegibility: “In certain cases, it is justifiable or even desirable to make readers exert themselves to decipher the content. Like a couture gown, specific display letters may not be appropriate for all situations, but they can convey a dramatic first impression when used judiciously⁷. The work of psychedelic poster artists flourished because of these first impressions, not only because the graphic style was visually commanding, but also because the unconventional visual intensity across all psychedelic posters unified them as part of the break from society occurring at the time.

The potency of this message, however, could only endure as long as psychedelic music and the Hippie movement stayed relevant. The mid-1970s saw the formation of the mainstream music industry and the corporatization of music gig promotion, which produced posters with a new “professional maturity” captured in their polished typography⁸. The eventual replacement of the hand with the computer as the design tool of choice for many artists fostered a widespread digitization of poster lettering. Despite this enduring shift, the spirit of rebellion against artistic norms so apparent in the psychedelic poster movement has transferred to many artists producing posters today who reject the computer. Reawakened amongst artists is an appreciation for the ability of lettering to offer, as graphic designer Nancy Harris Roumey explains, “an infusion of freshness and surprise. There’s a soulfulness, a humanistic quality that connects the reader to lettering (Nolen, “Lettering,” 85). Distinguished contemporary poster designers Jeff Wood and Mike Budai cite the spirit and conceptual approach to psychedelic

poster art as major formative roles in their work\(^9\) (see figure 5). As a result, the opaque word and its strong linkage during the psychedelic poster movement to a sentiment of rejection of convention and a resulting embrace of innovative visual expression lives on.

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Image Gallery

Figure 1
From left to right: boxing-style poster (1956), Victorian-era poster (1843).

Figure 2
From left to right: Alfred Roller (1903), Victor Moscoso (1967)
Figure 3
From left to right: Alphonse Mucha (1897), Victor Moscoso (1967)
Figure 4
Figure 5
From left: Jeff Wood (2009), Mike Budai (2008)
Bibliography


