

**An Ode to The Poster Artist
(and the modernist ideas that inspired him)**

Diana Withrow

*Oh, I want to see the country
Like when I was a boy –
When the sky was blue and the clouds was white
And the green fields was a joy*

*I want to see the country
But the posters seem to show
The country ain't no more the place
Like what I used to know*

*For the sky is pink and the fields are mauve
And the cottages all turned yellow
And the sheep all green or tangerine
Enough to stun a fellow*

*Oh, I want to see the country
And I wouldn't mind where I went ter
So long as I knoo the trees weren't blue
And the cows all turned magenter – M.E. Durham*

A Complaint to the Poster Artist is one poet's response to the bold colours and abstract images he saw while traveling on London's underground subway system in the 1920's. Although this author humorously criticizes the then unfamiliar modernist style, the London Underground's poster campaign of the early 1900s was an incredible success, applauded by many. From its progressive philosophies on transport and the larger population to its fresh perspectives on advertising and architecture, the London Underground represented Modernism in a physical form. Often abstract in its meaning, here the term 'Modernism' is meant to encapsulate a time of scientific innovation, reflect an era of social progress, and describe a break from traditional artistic style. Early in the 20th century, the advances in transportation and printing, the responses to a growing and war-torn city, and the avant-garde advertising campaigns of the Underground Group (and later the London Underground) all contributed to make the subway system a prime example of Modernism.

Scientific advances, both in transportation and advertising, were integral to the development and success of the London Underground system. Clearly, without progression beyond horse-drawn transport, subways would be little more than a futuristic dream. Following the introduction and popularization of the steam locomotive in the 1800s, it was proposed that London integrate an underground train into its public transportation system. The Metropolitan railway

opened to the public in 1863 as the first underground rail line worldwide (Green and Reed 9). The trains were converted to electric power beginning in 1890 and the popularity of the underground system grew enormously as more lines were added (Green 7).

Even though aspects of the technology behind subterranean transport predated the official beginnings of Modernism (likely circa 1860), they ushered in an era reliant on the machine. By 1900, colour lithography was becoming more popular, inexpensive and efficient than ever (6) as better techniques were made available. Noticing these advancements, Frank Pick—the man responsible for the Underground Group’s publicity beginning in 1908—recognized the potential in poster advertising. Under Pick’s direction, text-filled boxes squeezed between newspaper columns were being quickly replaced by colourful graphic posters promoting transport service.

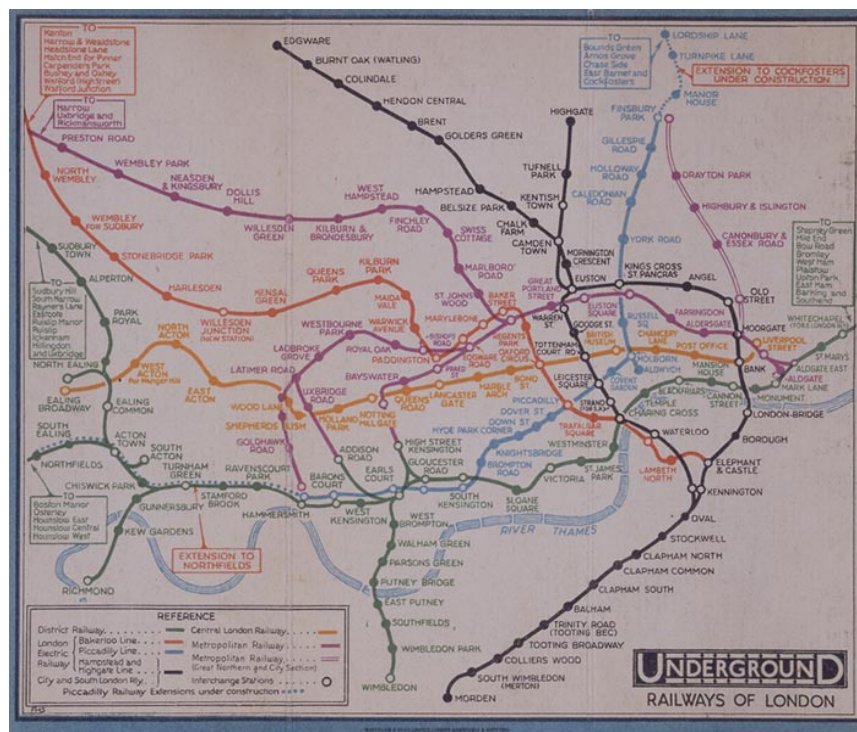


Figure 1. Pocket map of the Underground Railways of London produced from 1930-1932.

Beyond its unprecedented (and since unrivaled) poster campaign, the London Underground is also well known for its iconic route map. Surprisingly, it was not until 1933 that the growing dependence on electricity in daily life inspired Henry Beck’s design for the now famous map (Figures 1&2). Modeled after an electric circuit, the map’s straight-line style has since been imitated by transport systems worldwide. Although Pick resisted the design at first, he soon came to realize that Beck’s map was functional and made traveling easier for passengers who responded very well to the new layout. The new transport map exemplified the modernist “fitness for purpose” doctrine Pick used to govern the company (Green 12).



Figure 2. Henry Beck's circuit-inspired design introduced in 1933

By 1900, London had become the largest city in the world (7) and the transport system had to respond to the needs of a constantly growing population. Country living – and therefore commuting – had become the norm and people from a wide range of social backgrounds had begun to rely on public transport. Frank Pick's marketing strategy was motivated by a social goal to civilize the people living in and around London (Saler 104). He held the opinion, representative of modernist thinking “that the English ‘common people’ had the capacity to appreciate art” (27). From propaganda to light-hearted Cockney humour (Fig. 3), the Underground's advertising campaign was at its prime under his direction between 1908 and 1933 (Green 43).



Figure 3. No Need to Ask A P'liceman by John Hassall was the first modern graphic poster to be produced by the Underground (1908)

Heavily motivated by the Design and Industry Association's philosophy "fitness for purpose" (12), Pick aimed to create a publicity program that presented information "in an attractive and readily comprehensible form" (10). The emphasis on design and function characteristic of modernist style, was at the forefront of Pick's plan. In 1913, he commissioned Edward Johnston to create a font specifically for the Underground so that pertinent information was clear and easily distinguishable from other ads. Johnston designed a bold, geometric typeface without endstrokes or serifs to maximize clarity (10) and the font has since been featured (under his name) throughout tube stations, signage and advertising. Following the theme of clarity, Pick created grids for posters on station walls (9) and collaborated with the architect Charles Holden to build stations with a pale Portland stone to accentuate the posters (Saler 105). The Underground undoubtedly thrived due to its mindfulness of utility in style but it also succeeded in integrating modern art into daily life.

"Art must come down off her pedestal and frame and work for her living" said Pick in 1916 (73). He hired prominent modern artists of the time including Henry Moore, Jacob Epstein (15) and Paul Nash (Green and Reed 51) to create artwork for stations and posters. The poster art used bright colours, simple lines, geometric shapes and abstract forms (Green 45) characteristic of the avant-garde styles of Modernism, and exposed the average London commuter to Cubism, Futurism and Vorticism (13), effectively converting the "public transport system to a public work of art" (Saler 103). Michael Saler, author of *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England*, argues that the London Underground, more than any single work of modernist art, was the most successful accomplishment of the avant-garde goal to make modern art as common to modern life as the morning coffee.

To expose the public to the arts and entertainment available to them in the London area, he often commissioned posters that focused on London attractions that were reachable via the Underground, in lieu of marketing the Underground's service itself. Ads featured images of the zoo, theatres, and galleries and indicated their nearest stations (Green 48). Edward McNight Kauffer's *London History at the London Museum* for example, uses bold, well-defined colours to encourage people to visit the museum (Fig. 4).

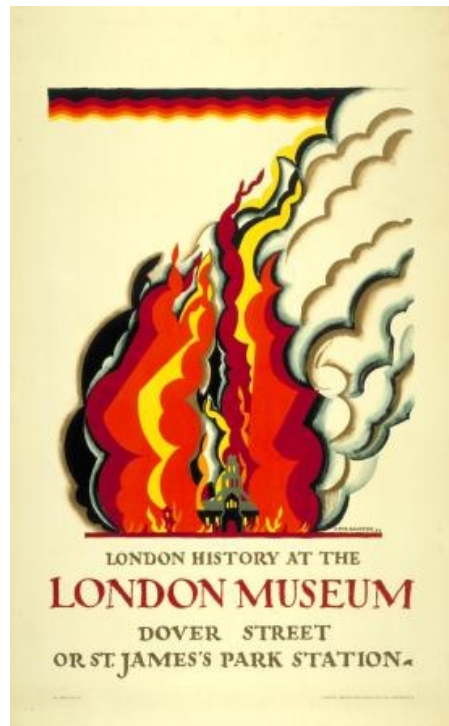


Figure 4. London History at the London Museum. Edward M. Kauffer, 1922

Attendance at these locations soared when ads were published or new stations were built nearby (Saler 104). A paradisiacal London, where Sundays were spent taking day trips via Underground, began to emerge.

Unfortunately, it wasn't long until notions of Paradise were limited to church sermons and children's storybooks. With the declaration of the First World War, posters on the tube between 1914 and 1918 were used to promote very different social agendas like army recruitment (Fig. 5).

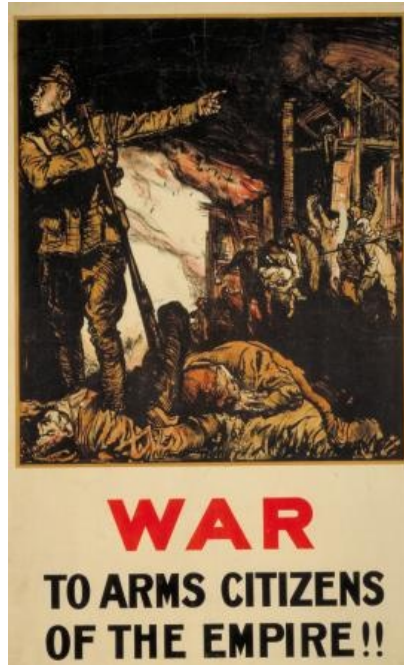


Figure 5. A recruitment poster by Frank William Brangwyn produced by Underground Electric Railways Ltd. in 1914.

Posters printed during the war also attempted to provide a sense of comfort and pride despite the constant threat of war violence (Fig. 6). Even station architecture had social objectives. Architects were encouraged to “establish a common style...[to] restore a communal order and civic spirit among the people in a less integrated and devout age” (104).

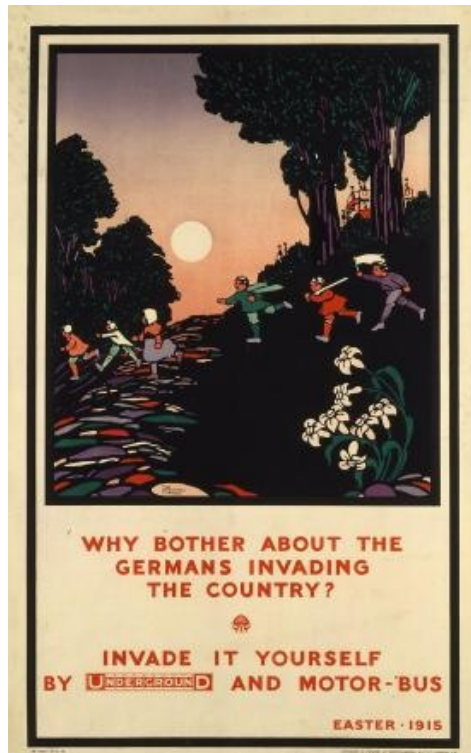


Figure 6. Why Bother about the Germans Invading the Country by The Brothers Warbys published in 1915 by the Underground Electric Railway

Life in the modernist era cannot be easily narrowed to a discrete event, environment or idea. The amalgamation of science, social change and experimental art are however, a common thread throughout Modernism. With the reliance on technological advances in transportation and advertising, the attempts to unify and cultivate citizens of all classes and the displays of new and experimental art and design, the London Underground system is a physical manifestation of Modernism. As with any change, some complaints are bound to surface, but overall the London Underground's adoption and implementation of modernist principles deserves praise. And so, *An Ode to the Poster Artist...*

*Oh, I wish I saw the underground
like when it was brand new –
when the ads was great and the boss was Pick
and the Modernism shone right through*

*I want to see the adverts
and the posters that proudly show
the country, zoo and theatre
I so desire to know*

*For the ads is bright and the trains move quick
and the Londoners move and shuffle
I'd rather skip the air raids though
and all that war kafuffle*

*Oh I want to see the posters
Gee, how they'd make me smile
but for now I'll rest, and do my best
to appreciate modernist style.*

Images courtesy of:

Figure 3:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1331_modernism/highlights_19.html>.

Figure 4:

<http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1331_modernism/highlights_19.html>.

Figure 3:

<<http://www.ltmcollection.org/posters/poster/link.html?IXabout=abc&IXinv=1983/4/7>>.

Figure 4:

<<http://www.ltmcollection.org/posters/popup.html?IXinv=1983/4/1449&IXimgsrc=1735-56&IXimgheight=450&IXimgwidth=278>>.

Figure 5:

<http://www.ltmcollection.org/posters/poster/poster.html?_IXSR_=O5qNdK5TBLT&_IXMAXHITS_=1&IXinv=1983/4/672&IXsummary=themes/theme_>.

Figure 6:

<http://www.ltmcollection.org/posters/poster/poster.html?design=abc&_IXSESSION_=uALZFz5aQZX&IXthemeid=1>.

Works Cited

Green, Oliver and John Reed. *The London Transport Golden Jubilee Book*. London: The Daily Telegraph, 1983.

Green, Oliver. *Underground Art: London Transport Posters*. 2nd ed. London: Laurence King, 2001.

Saler, Michael T. *The Avant-Garde in Interwar England: Medieval Modernism and The London Underground*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999.