# One Century's worth of Poster Styles

Graphic Design plays a major role in modern life. It is a crucial element in advertising and in conveying information quickly in a society that appears to be moving at the speed of light. Like the society around it, graphic design is changing quickly. Computers have displaced handwork and speeded up the processes of design and rendering. Computers have had an enormous impact in the field in a relatively short time – they have only been widely used since the 1970s.

A few major art trends that developed in poster design over the past century are noted below. As you read through this very short history, look closely at how the creators used type and image to communicate their message, and how or if this type/image layout changed over the decades. This history is necessary for you to learn about poster development and the impact of computers and computer graphics software on the form.

- Type "poster history" into any Internet search engine to explore various countries' influences on this art form.

Posters were the main means to make announcements in Europe in the 1870's, and this dominant form of mass communication spread quickly to America. Streets literally turned into impromptu art galleries as artists ushered in a new age of advertising. In the 1890's, Toulouse-Lautrec's first poster, Moulin Rouge, elevated the status of the poster to an art form as he integrated type and image in a way that was unprecedented However, many historians believe that Cheret was the father of the modern poster:
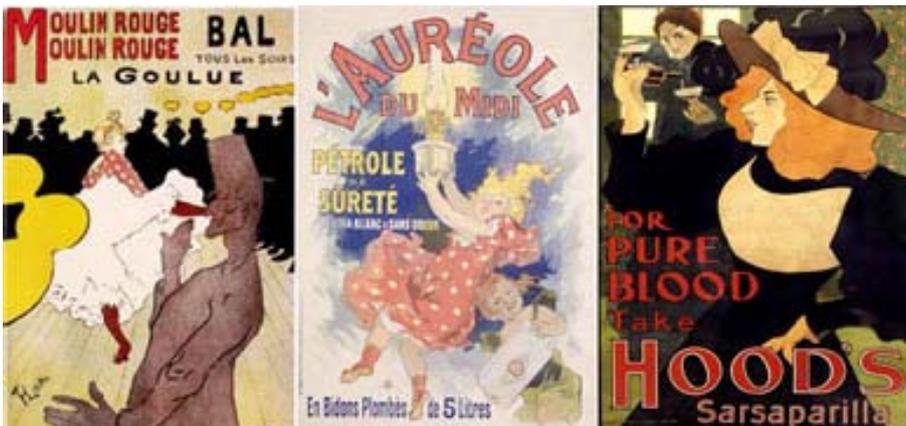
ABOVE from left to right (late 1800's): Toulouse-Lautrec's Moulin Rouge; Jules Cheret; William H. Bradley.

Poster artists mimicked this styling that included hand-drawn letterforms and artwork. In each country, the poster was designated to celebrate that country's society and its unique cultural institutions. Accordingly, each country developed a style that spoke volumes about that country's culture. But, the themes remained the same throughout: An event – whether entertaining or political – and advertising remained the mainstays for poster subjects during this era.

By the turn of the century, **Art Nouveau** was the rage, and Alphonse Mucha dominated this style to carry messages all over the world:

ABOVE: Ornate borders, typestyles (often hand lettered), voluminous hair and fabrics, contrasting textures, and high-contrast circular vs. square forms exemplified the Art Nouveau style, along with soft pastels and large areas of flat colour or gradients.

Art Nouveau led to **Art Deco**, a style that was a bit leaner and less ornate. Instead of curlicues and swirls, Art Deco brought a distinct angular construction to forms. Although contrasting circular motifs were still utilized in Art Deco, the layout and design became more geometric.

WWI brought another style to the poster, a more economical – or leaner – design that used minimal type, muted colours, and less decoration. During WWII, as the poster became a primary means to communicate political propaganda throughout the world, designers used bolder colours in limited palettes. International economics dictated this style, but so did various street schools like the **Constructivist** movement in Soviet Russia, a style that influenced the modernist Bauhaus School of Design (Germany) and Swiss poster design:

ABOVE: The Bauhaus influence is seen in these posters: minimal colour, a focus on blacks and reds, and sans-serif typefaces.

The focus on topics other than war began around the turn of the twentieth century as well – travel, movies, automobiles, and fashion began to emerge as reasons to utilize poster design as these industries began to expand globally.

A new style was created in New York when Seymour Chwast and Milton Glaser opened Push Pin Studios in 1954. Their style, which borrowed from **Surrealism** and **Expressionism**, Art Deco and 1930's comic art, transformed not just poster art, but the entire graphic design world.

Push Pin's work influenced the likes of Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Peter Max. Bold outlines and equally bold colours and subject matter defined **Conceptual design**, and led to trends such as **Pop** and **Psychedelic** Art. Poster topics expanded to include anti-war sentiments, specific musicians, and "feelings" or concepts. Note that the typefaces elaborated on the sans serif style (as in the "Dylan" heading below), and included the hand-drawn letterforms found in posters developed during the Art Nouveau period, but these hand-drawn letters were looser, less conforming:

ABOVE from left to right: Roy Lichtenstein's comic book style; Peter Max's Love; Milton Glaser's Dylan.

Few new poster styles have emerged since the development of Push Pin Studios. Some artists have leaned toward a combination of styles (such as Bob Masse's U2 Concert poster shown below – a mix of Art Nouveau and Pop Art design and colours), but **type and art** has given way to a mix of type and **photographs** since the onset of digital photography and computer graphics:
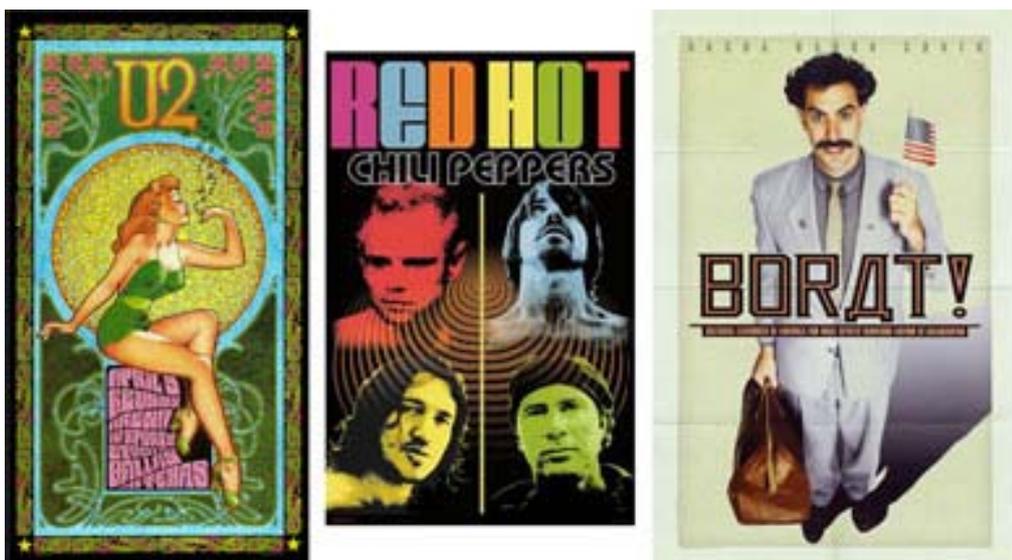
ABOVE from left to right: Bob Masse for U2; Promotion for Red Hot Chili Peppers – a combination of photographic images and psychedelic colours; Promotion for the movie Borat! that uses photography in a design reminiscent of an American "enlist in the army" WWI poster with muted colours and unusual perspectives like this bird's eye view (don't forget that flag!). Typefaces shown here are varied and creative.

Although the role of the poster has been dominated by promotional houses over the past decade, calls for posters designed by individual designers and artists are making a come-back. The wealth of graphics, desktop publishing and digital imaging applications available to individual designers allows exciting work to be created without the infrastructure previously required to participate in this field.

The electronic digital computer was designed during World War II, initially for military reasons. As time progressed, the computer advanced, becoming more accessible for commercial use. This was particularly possible by its size reduction. The first high speed electronic digital computer, ENIAC, covered the entirety of a large room, consisting of loud teletype machines, humming tape drives, a great amount of electronic circuitry and many other devices that covered all of the walls. Today we can find a computer the size of a human hand, consisting of a screen and keyboard, with a large amount of capabilities beyond comparison to the ENIAC. As a matter of fact, the ENIAC could only handle 20 numbers of 10 decimal digits each at a time.

Though it began its process as early as 1946, the electronic digital computer was not solely introduced to graphic design until the late 1970s and made a real change in the early 1980s. This was possible with the assistance of image software created particularly for graphic design and advertising purposes. Now, for example, photographic images can be converted into digital images on the computer through these software programs. A graphic designer can now manipulate colours, content, and dimensions of their designs. They could even create their design initially on the computer. Such image software programs as Adobe Illustrator, Adobe Photoshop, and QuarkXPress make this possible. These graphic design programs also assist small businesses and individuals. New possibilities formed in the world of graphic design. For example, with Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator, a graphic designer can scan photographs onto the computer, manipulate them, and incorporate the photo into an exclusive graphic design template. These design templates are stored onto computers, allowing for future amendments.

As for the computer, the main system used by graphic designers is the Apple Macintosh. The first Apple was created in 1977. This new change in the graphic design field made it easier to present clean-cut work. It also created more jobs in the graphic design field, such as web design and media design. Though media design uses other technical devices, both of these jobs depend solely on the computer.
The computer brought upon other changes, such as computer fonts, expanding the invention of font types. Before, fonts were created by hand, etched in stone and made on individual plates (movable type). Today there are font programs that assist typographers in creating new fonts. There are also font packages that come with personal computers, or that can be easily bought for low prices.

Graphic design costs have definitely been cut due to computer software. Instead of shipping or delivering job samples across the town, country, or the world, these same jobs can now be sent by the click of a key, that is, the key to electronic mail, instantly sending mail anywhere across the entire world if necessary. With electronic mail, all things are possible.

The above changes are considered, for the most, positive effects of the computer in graphic design. On the other hand, there have been some reported downfalls of computer-aided design. Graphic design has a lack of creativity today due to the clarity of the computer graphic design software. This clarity causes the designer to use his or her creativity less. For example, in the designer software, though there are a lot of function tools to help the designer create, there are still tools absent from these programs. To illustrate, earlier versions of Adobe Photoshop allowed text to overlay an imported image, but could not be easily deleted as it is now in the latest version of 6.0. This possibly limited the creativity of a graphic designer on what text to incorporate in the image. Another problem the computer creates is clientele impatience. Too many times a client comes into a design firm asking for a job to be done 'yesterday,' which is definitely impossible. Short notices like these also cause the graphic designer to have a lack of creativity because they immediately start to focus on the impatient statements of the clients. A job that used to take six months can now be done in one month, and unfortunately, the clients know that.