

Larson on Iskin (2014)

Iskin, Ruth E. *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s–1900s*. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2014. Pp. xxi + 408. 48 color and 188 b&w illustrations. ISBN: 978-1-61168-616-6

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Ruth Iskin's *The Poster: Art, Advertising, Design, and Collecting, 1860s–1900s* proposes a cultural history of the illustrated poster in late nineteenth-century Europe. Though international in scope, Iskin devotes large portions of her book to French artwork and criticism and argues that the modern color lithographic poster was born in the Hexagon. As she states in her introduction, the poster, while prolific in late nineteenth-century urban life, remains marginalized by art historians and is frequently obscured by "high art" mediums such as photography or sculpture. Her interdisciplinary study thus seeks to draw attention to the poster and its intersecting fields of popular culture, art, graphic design, and advertising. Iskin's theoretical framework, though underdeveloped at times, draws from the writings of Benjamin, Bourdieu, Bakhtin, and Rancière, and her artistic analysis centers primarily on works by Jules Chéret, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Pierre Bonnard. Her discussion is supplemented by nearly two hundred black and white reproductions of nineteenth-century illustrations, as well as two stunning sections of selected color plates.

The study is divided into four major sections, the first of which is devoted to the status of poster advertisements in urban life. In chapter one, Iskin argues that the poster served as an unprecedented experimental medium for avant-garde visual art and urges scholars to acknowledge its contributions to modernist discourses. As a testament to the poster's artistic novelty, chapter two traces the shift in iconography from the male to the female print connoisseur in the 1890s. Iskin links the increased representation of the female print collector in posters to aesthetic controversies surrounding modern color lithography. However, her otherwise engaging discussion of Jane Avril, frequently depicted as a collector, could benefit from a more nuanced approach that draws from nineteenth-century discourses on sexual difference and the New Woman.

In Part II, Iskin discusses the ambivalent reception of the color print by critics in the era of mass reproduction. Chapters three and four provide a comparative analysis of Roger Marx, André Mellerio, and Walter Benjamin, and their respective discussions of the artistic value of the original color art print. Specifically, chapter four considers color lithography in the context of Benjamin's seminal theories on the diminishing aura in the age of reproduction and how the poster challenges the rigid dichotomy of "original" and "copy." While many contemporary art scholars remain focused on the loss of aura in reproductive mediums, Iskin convincingly points to a need to recognize its complement, auraticity, in discussions of poster reproduction.

Part III is primarily focused on the design strategies of poster advertising. In chapter five, Iskin examines both written and visual portrayals of the poster's function in French and British society and views it as a site of experimentation for the emerging field of graphic design. In her comparative analysis of French and British criticism of the period, she challenges the widely accepted myth that the poster turned the street into a museum for the masses and instead demonstrates that the marketing tactics of poster advertising targeted spectators based on gender, class, and professional differences. In the following chapter, Iskin's continued discussion of the poster's commercial role draws its inspiration from Bakhtin's work on the hybridity of language. She argues that in reworking the ratio of the image to the text in late nineteenth-century Europe, poster artists designed a new form of visual communication that united image and word into a single, interrelated utterance.

The final section is devoted to the iconography of poster advertisements and poster collecting. In chapter seven, Iskin examines the poster's contributions to the culture of spectacle that characterized metropolitan life in the late nineteenth century. While images were a ubiquitous part of everyday life for city dwellers, critics and journalists voiced their anxieties about the dangerous influence that posters had on the most susceptible members of society: women and children. This iconophobia, however, was counterbalanced by those who embraced the emergence of the image-centered culture of the fin de siècle. In the final chapter, Iskin considers the figure of the iconophile and his contributions to the cultural history of the poster. A curator and scholar in his own right, the iconophile believed that the ephemeral print held the key to understanding the culture of city life and sought to preserve prints for future historians. Iskin's study attempts to do just that, and though its theoretical approach might have been further elaborated, it will be of particular interest to scholars of nineteenth-century visual culture and urban life.

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