

Arts And Antiques

E. McKnight Kauffer: The Poster King by Abby Cronin

The gifted graphic artist Edward Kauffer was a pioneer in every sense of the word. Born in 1890 in Great Falls, Montana, he was the only child of John and Anna Kauffer. Sadly, his parents' divorced when young Ted was only three and he spent two years in an orphanage while his mother went out to work. After his mother remarried happily in 1899 Kauffer's childhood was markedly more stable. The family settled in Evansville, Indiana which Kauffer remembered as 'lonely, nostalgic and uninspiring'. From an early age he was a solitary lad and spent time sketching flowers and copying images from Wild West paintings, notably those of Frederic Remington. Yet beneath his quiet facade, there was a pioneering spirit, a desire to get away - like the galloping pace of Remington's horses, a momentum which was to characterise his development as an artist.

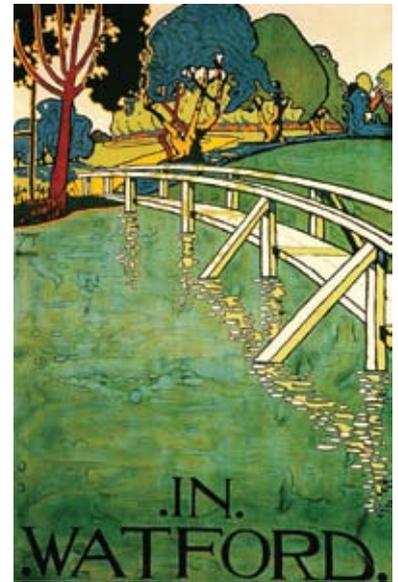
In his teens, encouraged by his stepfather to pursue his artistic bent, Kauffer found work as a scene painter with a travelling repertory theatre company which took him to California. There he studied at an art school in the evenings while working as a bookseller during the day. In the bookshop he met Professor Joseph E McKnight, a regular customer. The professor admired Kauffer's paintings and recognised his artistic promise. They formed a strong friendship and the professor offered to loan the young Kauffer enough funds to continue his studies in Paris. Ted was so grateful to McKnight for his generosity that he adopted 'McKnight' as his

middle name and has been known as Edward McKnight Kauffer ever since.

Before travelling to Paris, Kauffer spent six months in Chicago where he took courses at the Art Institute. The timing of his stay coincided with the remarkable Armory Show of 1913. This exhibition displayed important post-impressionist paintings by European masters whose art had not yet been seen in the United States. Works by Picasso, Duchamp, Kandinsky, Matisse, Gauguin and Van Gogh outraged many critics and students, but the impact of these artists' visions opened Kauffer's eyes to recent movements in modern art. Just before the outbreak of the First World War, Kauffer left Chicago for Europe. He lived briefly in Munich, a city throbbing with artistic, musical and choreographic experimentation. There Kauffer became acquainted with the poster art of the Munich realist school designer Ludwig Holwein. The elegance and simplicity of Holwein's designs were stimulating; they helped him appreciate the importance of typographical content in posters. It was through Holwein's poster designs that Kauffer came to understand that art could be used to advertise, provide information and promote commercial enterprises. Indeed, posters by Mucha, Lautrec and Cheret were already integral to the surface life of city streets in the 1890s.

When the war broke out in 1914 Kauffer went quickly to Paris and then to England. Now married and in search of work, he and his American wife found themselves in London where friends introduced him to Frank Pick, publicity manager for London Underground Electric Railways. Pick was instrumental in insisting that advertising needed to be modernised and that posters were an important way to achieve this. Pick wanted posters to be displayed strategically both inside and outside stations, on main walls and platforms, and changed frequently. It was Pick who commissioned Kauffer to design posters for the Underground, a relationship which

Exhibition of Modern Art 1919 V&A Museum



In Watford 1915 © TfL London Transport Museum

established Kauffer as one of Britain's most celebrated graphic designers. Through the inter-war years, from 1915 to 1940, Kauffer created an extraordinary variety of posters for the London Underground and Shell-Mex, the joint publicity branch of Shell and BP.

McKnight Kauffer's visual synthesis of artistic styles was unique. His first posters for the London Underground were painterly landscapes; they prompted visits to suburban areas of beauty. In Watford, 1915, was followed by other boldly painted views of the countryside such as Oxley Woods and Surrey in 1916. These posters revealed the influence of Van Gogh and the Fauves in Kauffer's use of colour and space. A few years later heavily influenced by the Vorticist group, the style of his posters was increasingly hard-edged. In his poster, Exhibition of Modern Art: The London Group, designed in 1919, there are primitive figures, no doubt an explicit reference to the sculptures of Gaudier-Brzeska and Epstein. It was the Vorticist painter Wyndham Lewis who described Kauffer as 'The Poster King.'

In several early posters McKnight Kauffer achieved a stunning balance between visual and topographic content. One of his most successful designs was Flight, 1919. He developed this image from a woodcut into a more sophisticated poster which was bought by the Daily Herald and used to launch that newspaper in 1919. The elegance and simplicity of Flight captured the energy of splintered planes in geometric clusters against a yellow background. The full title of this poster: Soaring to Success! Daily Herald - The Early Bird perfectly expresses this dynamism. In the 1920s commissions continued to come from London Underground, London's museums, book publishers and newspaper advertisers. His 1922 poster Winter Sales are best reached by Underground, has a swirling central focus where silhouetted figures push against the rain in London's streets. Several Kauffer book jackets graced publications by the Hogarth Press, Gollancz, and the BBC handbook, to name but a few. His extensive

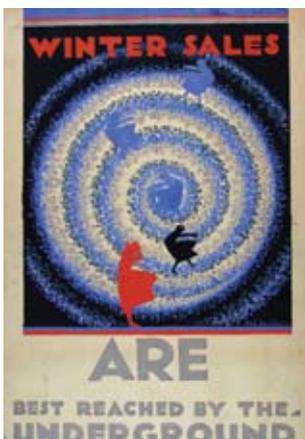


Soaring to Success! Daily Herald – The Early Bird 1919 V&A Museum

repertoire included illustrations for books, tickets, theatre programmes, film posters, photomurals, costumes and stage sets.

By the mid-twenties he had separated from his wife and daughter and established a permanent relationship with textile designer Marian Dorn. Their furnishing designs were widely admired. One of Kauffer's abstract rugs, 1929, is a pattern heavily influenced by the geometry of Constructivism. And, unusually, the editor of *The Studio* magazine introduced a new cover design by Kauffer in the January

Winter sales are best reached by Underground
© TfL from the London Transport Museum
BELOW: BP Ethyl Controls Horse-Power 1933
BP Archive



Checkmate-photo-Bill Cooper

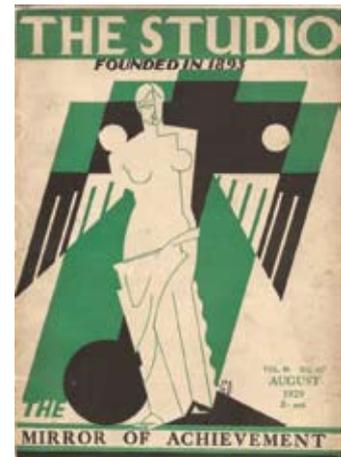
1929 issue. The cover incorporated the classic tradition of the West in the form of 'Greek sculpture, silhouetted against the symbol of the new age, the aeroplane, pointing upwards as if to soar to heights yet undreamed of'.⁽¹⁾

Throughout the twenties and thirties one of Kauffer's main patrons was Shell-Mex. He did a series of 'lorry bills' displayed on the sides of the company's delivery lorries. The series was instrumental in establishing Shell as a brand. A fine example of these lorry bills is the 1933 poster BP Ethyl Controls Horse-power, a clever blend of Vorticist elements, precise typography and a photo image of a powerful male figure reining in the horse. Ever fascinated with theatre and dance, Kauffer created stage sets and costumes for a number of major theatrical productions. Perhaps he is best known for the set and costumes he designed for Ninette de Valois's ballet *Checkmate*, 1937, performed in Paris by the Sadler's Wells Company, at the Metropolitan Opera House in 1949, and in the repertoire of the Royal Ballet at Covent Garden. These designs are still in use and can be seen again at Sadler's Wells in October 2011 when the Birmingham Royal Ballet performs *Checkmate* as part of its Autumn Glory programme.

Although Kauffer is better known in England than in America, a retrospective exhibition (1937) of his work at the Museum of Modern Art in New York enhanced his reputation in the United States. Towards the end of the thirties work in England was harder to find; since he had not taken British citizenship, he was regarded as an alien. War was looming and American citizens were considered a liability. The option to remain in England faded and in 1940 he and Marian left on the last passenger ship to the United States, leaving most of their belongings behind. They settled in New York for fourteen years until his death in 1954.

Though he worked for various American clients during those times, Kauffer missed England deeply. In a letter to a friend read he wrote: 'My American youth may now be useful at last.'⁽²⁾ Indeed, it turned out to be so. He received a generous commission from American Airlines between 1946 and 1953. This, together with illustrations for books, Barnum and Bailey's circus, the New York subways and

many other institutions made it possible for him to survive financially. Public recognition came when he was awarded a 'Certificate of Honor' from the American Red Cross in 1945 and made an Honorary Advisor to the Department of Public Information of the United Nations in 1947. In 1950 he revisited the American Southwest and called it 'a good kind of reality - robust, uncomplicated, direct, with brilliant light and great spaces'.⁽³⁾ Kauffer's career was like his most famous design *Flight*, constantly forward-looking, aspiring and visionary. He was a pioneer to the end.



Edward McKnight Kauffer's STUDIO cover 1929
Courtesy of Mike Ashworth on Flickr

An exhibition: The Poster King: Edward McKnight Kauffer opens at The Estorick Collection, 39a Canonbury Square, London N1 2AN on 14th September 2011 and closes on 18th December 2011.

www.estorickcollection.com

Images courtesy of: The Victoria and Albert Museum, London Transport Museum, BP Archive, Birmingham Royal Ballet, The Studio magazine January 1929.

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Notes

- (1) Skipwith P. E. *McKnight Kauffer Design* Antique Collectors' Club 2007 p.60
- (2) Skipwith P. *Ibid.* p.31
- (3) Haworth-Booth M. *E McKnight Kauffer: A Designer and His Public V&A Publications* 2005 p.106