

Abstract

Anita Kern

Graphic design in Austria in the 20th century

(Verlag Anton Pustet, Salzburg München Wien 2008)

In the years after 1900 Austrian product design became world-famous; at the beginning of the 20th century graphic design from Austria was winning international acclaim. Austrian graphic designers played a key part in the development of the modern poster. By contrast, the post-1945 era has yielded very little of note in this field.

Austrian graphic designers and their work belong to the "familiar unknowns of the visual culture of the 20th century" (Bernhard Denscher).

Design is generally associated with product design. There is little awareness of two-dimensional design and even less of Austrian graphic design, despite the fact that it was of international significance before it was catapulted into relative obscurity by the violent upheaval of the Nazi period and the subsequent era of the Cold war. Austrian graphic design made a "recovery" of sorts in the wake of the movements that stirred the visual arts, architecture and literature in the 1960s and '70s, and after the eclecticism of the 1980s it blossomed anew in the 1990s – but it never regained the originality of the Viennese Group (centred on Julius Klinger) of the 1920s or the brilliance of Joseph Binder in the 1930s. Originality and innovation are attributes of applied graphic art in Austria only in the early period, the first third of the 20th century.

This first survey of Austrian graphic design in the second half of the 20th century provides a selective record of the art of the period. It is based on a retrospective overview of the first half of the preceding century with its major design movements and protagonists of applied design, whose influence is still felt today. Examination of graphic design since 1945 involved studying the life, work and historical context of fifteen selected graphic designers of note. These artists and their work are individual – yet they represent the era in which they live. Their work is strongly influenced by the social and economic conditions of the period; their graphic creations are a powerful mirror of the times.

This cultural context also serves to explain the different trends in eastern and western Austria.

From the search for something specifically Austrian in graphic design grew the mechanisms that enabled the language of form to develop in an international context – long before the emergence of global networking. Visual language was and is supranational but it has distinctive regional features.