

a history of the dutch poster 1890-1960

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The period 1940-1960

Many regard the second world war as the end of an era, with crises, political unrest and social readjustment. I would like to make an exception for cultural life in the Netherlands. Much as the Netherlands were subject to the war with all its exasperations in cultural and intellectual life, it was also a period in which many writers, artists and intellectuals were realising, for the first time in their lives, that they had to take a stand. Intellectual freedom, which was a naturally accepted fact in the Netherlands of 1939, was slowly, step by step, taken away by the occupiers. At first it looked as if the new laws would not be so restrictive, but other laws followed and these were again followed by others.

All artists had to choose between joining a so called 'cultural chamber' or not perform, publish or exhibit at all. The occupation forces wished to control all free expression in the Netherlands.

During the years before the occupation, several artists' organisations in the Netherlands already had plans to unite in one organisation, but as soon as, in 1940, the German authorities showed interest, these plans were used as a defence against the Germans.

This organisation, 'De Nederlandsche Organisatie van Kunstenaars' N.O.K., was not a federation but a council.

Dr. J. F. van Royen was the central figure in the N.O.K. In 1941 the N.O.K. was dissolved by the Germans and in 1942 several artists were imprisoned, among them Dr. van Royen, who died in a concentration camp during the same year.

During the war years many artists and designers were active in the resistance. Otto Treumann was making expert drawings of high currency notes and rubber-stamps; Sandberg was member of a group who blew up the population files of the City of Amsterdam; Werkman was printing his protests (he was caught and shot in 1945); Brusse was active in resistance group with many others, of whom some did not witness the liberation in 1945.

The many individuals who took the decision to help or fight for the cause of freedom, realised that they were risking not only their own lives but also the lives of their families and associates.

Those who came together to fight the laws of the occupier in all possible ways were at the same time thinking and dreaming of the new society 'after the war'. This new society was to have none of those faults which **the pre-1939 society** had. All artists would, for instance, be united in one organisation.

When, in 1945, the plans for a federation of artists' societies were realised, Sandberg and Brusse were among the founders. Both designers became, at the same time, members from the first beginning of the group Graphic Artists in the Federation, GKf.

During the years after 1945, when a new, powerful generation of true designers appeared on the field of poster design, 'normal' posters could not yet be produced. Paper shortage, broken industries and a continuing war in Indonesia did not allow the Netherlands a speedy return to normal. However, one can detect three main groups of poster design since 1945. The first group consists of the 'true artists', lithographers and painters in their own right, who draw the color separations on the zinc plates. Among them are Dick Elffers, Jan Bons,* and Nicolaas Wijnberg.* Another group, and the most important, is composed of 'true designers'. They can be regarded as the followers of Zwart, Schuitema and others. They use photographs and type and other elements to compose their



65. J. Bons, 1956

66. N. Wijnberg, 1951



posters. This group is much larger and has among its most important exponents Otto Treumann, Wim Crowel* and Benno Wissing. Their knowledge of printing and typography is often the basis of fascinating designs, while their influence on the younger generation has resulted in many talented designers. Then there is the third group. The 'true typographers', whose use of type-faces and typographic material is the main medium through which they express their ideas. Somewhat inspired by the work of H. N. Werkman, its main leaders are Sandberg* and Brusse.

Of course the above-named designer groups and designers belong to the so-called 'cultural workers'.

Much has been written about the everlasting conflict in the Netherlands between the 'commercial' designers and the 'cultural' designers. It is often assumed that the cultural designers are not able to design posters for commerce.

To show the confusion about this I will insert part of an essay by W. H. Benier, well-known poster collector in the Netherlands.

'... There is, it seems to me, a certain relationship between posters and painting. It is impossible to design posters well unless one is also a painter in oils; a poster, by its very nature and size, demands forceful expression and a daring use of line and area, and this can only be achieved when details are under control or apprehended.

Furthermore, the dash and verve that often help to make posters not only a commercial but also an artistic success, are perhaps somewhat alien to the commercial spirit of our nation.

Following this line of reasoning, we find ourselves rejecting the idea of a clash between the commercial and the artistic poster. The poster that is aimed solely at expressing commercial themes can no more be a complete success than the poster based purely on esthetic motives.

Posters are in fact one of the advertising media which work almost entirely through the senses, and which relegate understanding and explaining to a secondary role. If there is anywhere where advertising and the visual arts touch each other, then it is in the poster'.¹

The reader will understand that the Netherlands has had, and still has, important commercial designers. These designers are often blamed for underestimating the intelligence of the public and damaging the general level of visual communication between industry and the public. Frans Mettes' work, among others, has been thus blamed.

The Dutch designer has been further stigmatized as a result of the comparison between the Swiss poster and the Dutch poster. Bernard Majorick even wrote in Delta in 1961: 'The Alpine height of Swiss commercial advertising has not yet been reached;...'²

Benier wrote in 1948: '...We are experiencing at the moment the sensational impact of the Swiss poster, which, with its naturalistic enlargement of details on a plain or slightly faded background, has aroused admiration and gained supporters (C. van Velsen*), but also opponents, who sharply criticize the slickness of this approach (Dick Elffers, Karel Thole, and Fedde Weidema).

The latter, each in his own way and with his own palette, are trying to incorporate in our posters once again old pictorial possibilities which, because of the spray-gun, the camera, and the urge towards three dimensionality, we had rather tended to lose sight of.'³

This comparison of Swiss and Dutch posters is also the result of the Dutch inferiority complex. As shown above, this complex leads to an overdrawn statement.



67. W. Crowel, 1963

stichting 40-45

ZWITSERSCHE
ZWITSERSCHE
AFFICHES
ZWITSERSCHE
ZWITSERSCHE
ZWITSERSCHE
ZWITSERSCHE

1000-augustus 1946
in het stedelijk museum te amsterdam
de katen zijn bestemd voor de
stichting 40-45

68. W. H. J. B. Sandberg, 1946

69. C. van Velsen, 1948





70. B. Wissing, 1949



71. G. Wernars, 1959



72. L. Emmerik, 1960

Other statements on Dutch graphic art also contain, in my view, overdrawn assertions like 'the father of modern Dutch commercial art, and not of poster art alone, was H. N. Werkman...' by Dr. H. Jaffé. Werkman was certainly a forerunner but could never have played this role, since his work received general attention only some years after his death in 1945, and there is no proof that it has had any influence apart from its influence on Sandberg and Brusse.

If one looks at poster design in the Netherlands of the 1960's it may be advisable to read the very clear and simple statement of the Museum of Modern Art's Mildred Constantine: 'The swiftness and sureness of public reaction to printed visual materials, designed to have immediate impact and cumulative effect, has convinced governments, business and social organisations, of the ability of posters to project an idea, to offer visual communication in contemporary terms. A trinity composed of harmony of arrangement, clarity of concept, and practicality of presentation, can translate a multitude of ideas into a terse verbal and pictorial message. Although simplicity is essential, this simplicity must be abstracted from the complexities which arise when a subject passes through the mind of a seller and designer to a buyer. It must be the end-result of the stripping away of all irrelevancies. The designer can help to present a subject, whether a commodity or an idea, stripped to its pith. This simplification permits easy repetition, and repetition provides the most elementary means of impression and education.'⁴

With this statement as a basis, it appears that the series of posters for the van Abbemuseum by Crouwel, and those for the Boymans van Beuningen by Wissing,* are very static but very valuable in their design. The series of small posters by Brattinga seem to make him a 'designer of a new type' (Katzumi Masaru, in *Graphic Design* no. 6, 1962).

Another series, by Dick Bruna – not design-like as the above mentioned at all – is playful and simple, and is used for propaganda about a series of paperbacks.

Other poster designers (though they do not turn out series for one client or on a particular subject) are Gerard Wernars,* who has a valuable, rather un-Dutch sense of humor; Ralph Prins, strongly influenced by Zwart etc.; Mart Kempers, with very strong tendencies toward the more 'painter-like' group of Elffers; Strijbosch, a painter in his own right, but leaning toward the Crouwel solutions; Emmerik,* static and bold, and a number of others, all equally valuable.

I would like to end with a second quotation from Mildred Constantine: '...Posters have a social role to play – they give information, they counsel and teach, they are a medium of human need and necessity. They must catch the attention and sustain the interest either through immediate effect, or by registering ideas and emotions to which the observer sub-consciously reacts.

The creative artist, by applying his probing insight, his deep understanding and dynamic imagination, can enrich a presentation, can translate into the universal language of the poster, the human, scientific and educational factors which must reach a defined public'.

1. *Revue der reclame*, 1948, vol.VIII, nos.6 and 7.
2. Bernard Majorick, in *Delta*, 1961, vol.IV, no.2.
3. Cf. note 1.
4. Mildred Constantine, in *The Museum of Modern Art Bulletin*, 1951, vol.XVIII, no.4.



266. W. J. H. B. Sandberg, 1957



267. W. Strijbosch, 1958



268. W. Crouwel and Koh Liang Ie, 1958



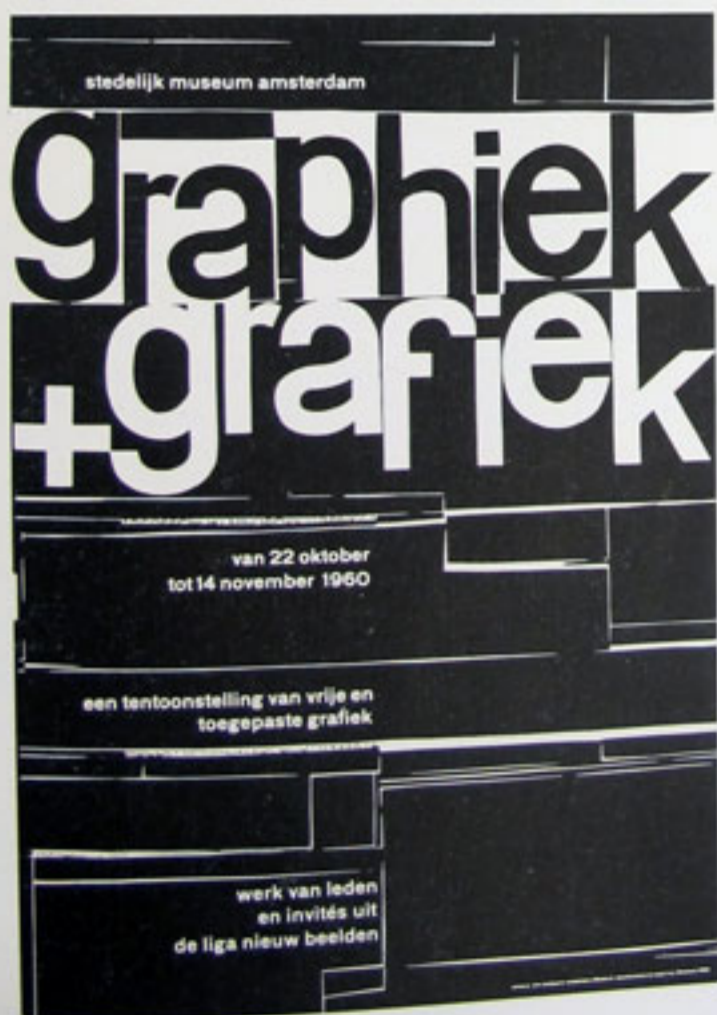
270. P. Brattinga, 1959



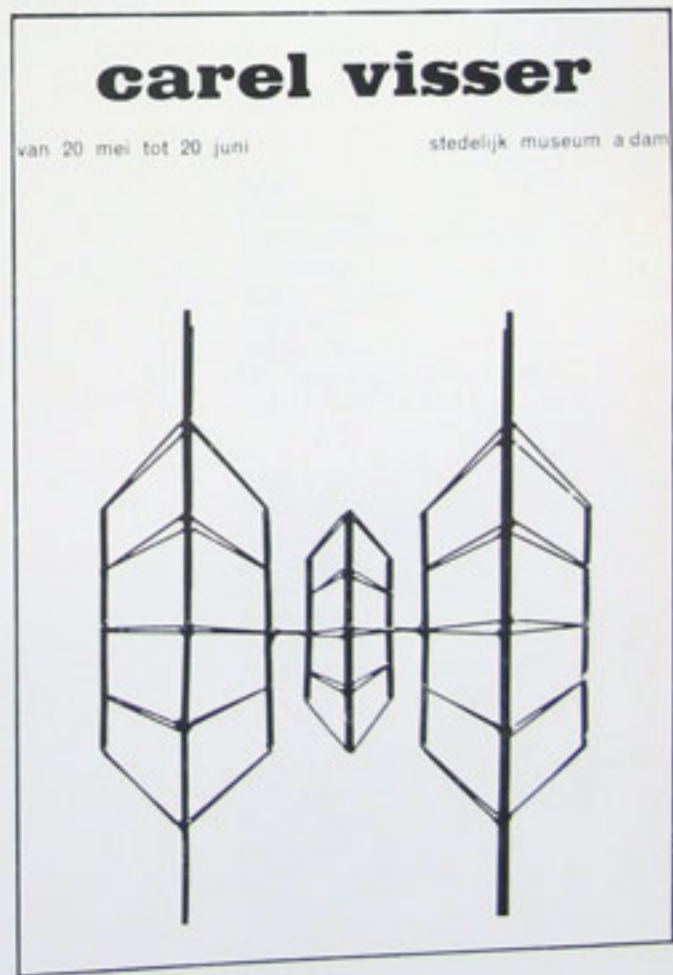
269. W. Crouwel and Koh Liang Ie, 1958



274. G. Wernars, 1961



275. W. Strijbosch, 1960



276. P. Brattinga, 1960

163
J.C.B. Sluyters
Arti et Amicitia
1918 110x81
signed bottom centre
colour litho
Senefelder, Amsterdam
SM 25.18a/TK.50

177
J.C.B. Sluyters
Artisten Winterfeest
Artists' Winter show
1919 122x77
signed middle centre
colour litho
Senefelder, Amsterdam(?)
SM 1.18/F.16

164
J.C.B. Sluyters
De rode danseres
Playbill
1922 120x82
signed below left
colour litho
Senefelder, Amsterdam
SM 1.21/Th.142

175
J.C.B. Sluyters
Manus Peet
Novel by Is. Querido
1924 109x80
signed below right
colour litho
Senefelder, Amsterdam
SM 1.19/BT.71

257
Th. Stradman
Camping
1958 99x69
signed centre left
colour litho
De Jong & Co., Hilversum
SM 16.24/C.620

267
W. Strijbosch
Liga
Exhibition
1958 98x68
name in printed letters bottom centre
litho (black)
De Jong & Co., Hilversum
SM 31.6/1958.37

275
W. Strijbosch
Grafiek
Exhibition of graphic art
1960 98x68
name in printed letters below right
litho (black)
De Jong & Co., Hilversum
SM 31.21/1960.29

29,84
J. Thorn Prikker
L'art appliqué
Periodical
1896 128x88
signed below right
litho (olive green)
S. Lankhout & Co., the Hague
SM 3.36/BT.1

97
J. Thorn Prikker
Holländische Kunstausstellung
1903 85x121
signed below right
colour litho
S. Lankhout & Co., the Hague
SM 5.25/TK/D.11

Frontispice
J. Th. Toorop
Delftsche slaolie
Delft salad oil
1895 94x63
initials below right
colour litho
S. Lankhout & Co., the Hague
SM 4.28/C.3

37,99
J. Th. Toorop
V.V.V. Katwijk
Tourist Association
1900 97x70
signed below right
colour litho
S. Lankhout & Co., the Hague
SM 4.18/VT.11

103
J. Th. Toorop
Levensverzekeringmaatschappij
Arnhem
Life-insurance company
1900 96x68
signed below right
colour litho
S. Lankhout & Co., the Hague
SM 4.19/VF.11

104
J. Th. Toorop
Het Hooge Land
Charitable institution (exhibition)
1902 96x68
initials below left
colour litho
S. Lankhout & Co., the Hague
SM 4.25/L.2

117
J. Th. Toorop
Pandorra
Playbill
1912 113x85
signed below right
colour litho
S. Lankhout & Co., the Hague
SM 24.27/Th.118

213
O. H. Treumann
Jaarbeurs
Trade fair
1949 96x69
signed below right
colour litho
De Maas, Rotterdam
SM 26.16/J.61

64,216
O. H. Treumann
Sonsbeek
Open-air exhibition of sculptures
1949 98x68
signed below left
colour litho
Senefelder, Amsterdam
SM 5.9a/TK.228

220
O. H. Treumann
Sonsbeek
Open-air exhibition sculptures
1952 100x67
signed below right
colour litho
H. Veenman & Zoon, Wageningen
SM 5.4a/TK.254

252
O. H. Treumann
Jaarbeurs
Trade fair
1954 111x81
signed below left
colour litho
De Jong & Co., Hilversum
SM 25.30a/J.79

246
O. H. Treumann
Geef een boek
Give a book
1957 65x45
signed below left
colour litho
De Jong & Co., Hilversum
SM 20.15/BT.153

248
O. H. Treumann
Joodse rituele kunst
Exhibition of Jewish ritual art
1958 76x53
name in printed letters below left
colour litho
De Jong & Co., Hilversum
SM 6.3a/1958.23

165
O. van Tussenbroek
Tentoonstelling van weefkunst en
ceramiek
Exhibition of textiles and ceramics
1920 87x61
signed below right
colour litho (by Van Tussenbroek)
Emrik & Binger, Haarlem
SM 5.3/TK.67