

Hans Sachs on American Tastes in Advertising (1911)

Abstract

Hans Sachs was a Berlin dentist, and more famously, a collector of advertising posters. He founded the *Verein der Plakatfreunde*, an association for those interested in poster art, sometime after the turn of the century. He soon became a promoter of graphic design and keen-eyed critic of the new advertising styles. Sachs edited the society's newsletter, *Das Plakat*, which was a lavishly-illustrated review of new poster designs, and the magazine quickly became a touchstone for the new professional fields of advertising and graphic design. In this excerpt from 1911, Sachs—who had been an enthusiast for American “modernity” in his earlier days—turns against the “American style,” with a language that frames its critique with ideas drawn from popular ethnography and reflects growing international tensions—tensions that led to the First World War.

Sachs, who was Jewish, would later be arrested by the National Socialists in 1938 and sent to the Sachsenhausen concentration camp, before being released. He fled to New York, where he was able to restart his dentistry practice, aided by a recommendation from one of his former Berlin patients, Albert Einstein.

Source

On Graphic Design in America

[...] I am one of those who have been thoroughly cured of the enthusiasm for America—the climax of which is probably reached at the moment when one enters the country for the first time; —[one of those] who have returned from a stay of several months in the land of unlimited possibilities, rich in disappointments and disillusionments, as far as they concern the study of art and everything connected with it, who acknowledge and admire the wealth of the country, the fruitfulness of all possibilities of acquisition, the imposing manner of commercial exchange and whatever else one may attribute to the Yankee, and yet praise the day when German culture, German comfort and aesthetics, a sense of beauty and an understanding of art shape one's the daily environment.

[...]

But in order to get a little closer to this small field, in order to be able to judge and appreciate it properly, it is necessary to take a few general looks back at the past and the development of what we call “art” in the higher sense, to uncover from it and its past in “Dollarica” a few connections with the flourishing and blossoming of the graphic arts.

[...]

For the lack of a sense of beauty, of aesthetic feeling, is not expressed in what we call a cheap, bad, spoiled taste, no, it is the endeavor to combine practical life with the joy of looking, the understanding for an embellishment, for an artistic refinement of our surroundings, our home, our objects of daily use, that is missing in general. It is really no exaggeration to say that the aesthetic needs of the American are more quickly and completely satisfied by an ingenious toilet flush than by a tasteful façade.

[...]

In Chicago, where the enormous commercial traffic of the western half of America is concentrated, the

hunt for the dollar is perhaps greater than in any other city in the world. People rush, they earn, they go in and out of the open banking houses even at night, and even a permanent opera cannot survive in this city, which is the size of Berlin; only for a six-week guest performance does the ensemble of the New York Metropolitan Opera appear in Chicago every year. Now this city, as is well known, is almost half German. The number of Germans living there or descended from German parents is larger than the population of Hamburg, and one can say that the Germans have by far the lion's share in the development of this city.

[...]

Have all these peoples forgotten their old culture, their sense of beauty, have they given it up? They have; sometimes with difficulty, mostly easily, they have unconsciously been absorbed into this country, which serves only practical work and the acquisition of money; they have assimilated each other, have become similar to each other, have produced a new type, on which one must base one's judgment about the sense of art as well as about other qualities of the American. Is it true that a new type has emerged here? Repeatedly, the question has been discussed whether, under the influence of the peculiar soil conditions as well as the climate, a fusion of the various elements flowing together here could really take place, whether one could really speak of an American race. A professor at Columbia University, Franz Boas, an outstanding anthropologist, is to be thanked for many clarifications on this important question. His studies of Sicilians and Eastern Europeans establish the fact that already in the next generation the type of the descendants is completely changed. And further, even children born shortly after the arrival of their parents in America develop, in every part of the body, in such a way that they are essentially different from their siblings born earlier in Europe. This is especially true of the shape of the skull and the expression of the face, which rapidly develops into that type which we know as the American and find so characteristic. Thus, the basis for the emergence of a new race is created, so that we are indeed justified in speaking of an independent American race, whose peculiarities are sharply defined and are not to be sought merely in the difference of language and other externals. The term "art" is still alien to this race.

[...]

I mentioned that we can find an explanation for the lack of understanding for the fine arts. The accumulation of enormous riches in the hands of a few chosen ones had to result in the most unhealthy development in intellectual and aesthetic matters. The errand boy, the worker in the steel mill had become millionaires overnight, not merely in European newspaper reports, but in fact. [...]

The number of buildings in the construction of which beauty and practicality were considered in equal measure is unspeakably low. Or they are located in an environment that completely cancels or weakens the aesthetic impression. They are smothered by the gigantic palaces of commerce that spread out obtrusively all around them and reach up exuberantly to dizzying heights, so that one feels alienated by a beauty that seems quite unnatural in such a prosaic setting. The most unpleasant, sober and monotonous are the skyscrapers and, unfortunately, the public buildings. While in the former still no new approach has been attempted, the public buildings copy either ancient temples in mostly attenuated form or each other. [...]

Space and time are not available to me in sufficient measure to describe further details which are most unsettling to the aesthetically sensitive, artistic seeker. [...]

Everything that relates to advertising and its distribution in graphic products, including books, newspapers and magazines, and many other things, belongs in this category.

We all think of America as a land of screaming advertising, of loud boasting, of tasteless exaggeration; and yet one would do well to limit these terms a little, to familiarize oneself with the thought that even in the land of amazing tricks, of eccentric bluffs, the pleasure in them and thus their effectiveness is

diminishing from year to year, that they are beginning to miss their purpose among a people who reckon only with the gray reality of life, only with real, sober things. Yet they do not become aware of the unaesthetic side of this kind of advertising, for where it disappears, boredom and monotony take its place. One no longer encounters at every turn the announcements and posters of immeasurable dimensions, on which we are informed in the loudest manner where to find the “most outstanding doctor,” the “best boot polish,” the “only waterproof leather jackets.” It really isn’t that bad anymore, and I don’t think it ever really was; what one heard about it was probably always a bit exaggerated; in the six months that I spent in New York, Boston, Chicago, Baltimore, and Washington, I never saw a traffic jam, not even a large gathering of people, such as they are supposed to have gathered in front of shop windows, “mammoth-size posters,” and so on.

Almost twenty years ago, when the art of posters was introduced everywhere from England and France, the understanding seemed to take hold even in America that under certain circumstances it could be more effective to address only a certain circle of interested parties with a beautiful or artistically designed advertisement than with a blatant one addressed to the whole masses who admire or marvel at such advertisements and open their mouths and ears wide but who hardly come into consideration as buyers of the things in question. [...]

The few graphic posters that still appear today are cloying and kitschy, mostly vaudeville and circus posters that even surpass our German circus posters in tastelessness, which is saying something.

[...]

From all that has been said so far, it is clear that the number of practicing artists in the field of graphic art and graphic design is also very small. [...]

Source of original German text: Hans Sachs, “Von graphischer Kunst in Amerika,” *Archiv für Buchgewerbe* vol. 48, no. 6 June 1911; reprinted in *Mitteilungen des Vereins Deutscher Reklamefachleute* No. 33 (1912).

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