

EXHIBITION N° 59

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

POSTERS

BY E MCKNIGHT KAUFFER



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# POSTERS AT THE MOMA

by Jennifer Seward

Kauffer helped pioneer the Modern poster with its innovative symbolic imagery and sparse copy. His work reminiscent of his French counterpart A.M. Cassandre was in an "Art Deco style of vulgarized Cubism: small areas of color, squares and triangles and segments of circles and arcs, often faded and graduated by splattering or stippling, are juxtaposed, light against dark, to imply depth." (Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design A Concise History*) [Fig 1]

In 1937, just one year after A.M. Cassandre's poster exhibition, the Museum of Modern Art in New York (under the direction of Alfred H. Barr) gave E. McKnight Kauffer a prestigious one-man show.

Though American born, Kauffer's work was most appreciated in England where he had spent more of his adult years. His work was said to elevate advertising to high art. Actually, "his graphically sophisticated designs helped to introduce modern art to the British public." (Dawn Ades, *The 20th-Century Poster Design of the Avant-Garde*)



[Fig 1] Kauffer Art Deco style poster, The Lodger, 1926

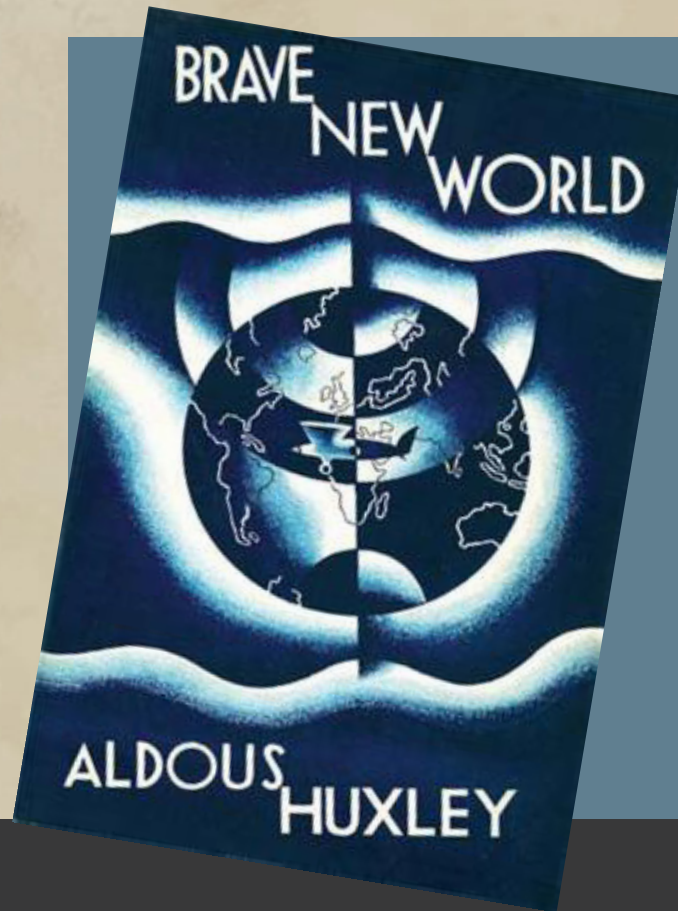
Kauffer was a prolific designer creating 250 posters and 150 book jackets between 1915 – 1940. The exhibition featured 85 of his works included posters for department stores, railways, museums, oil companies, airplanes, telephones, etc.” The fact that this imagery was put on display at the MoMA is in line with the style of exhibition that the gallery was featuring during this time. Three years after *The Machine Art* show and one year before the *Useful Objects Under \$5.00*, industrialization, nationalism and capitalism were still on display here. [Fig 2]



[Fig 2] Kauffer posters for shopping, transportation and advertising at the MoMA exhibition.

## CATALOG FOREWORD

Perhaps the most interesting thing about this exhibition was that English writer and philosopher Aldous Huxley wrote the forward for the exhibition catalog. Huxley was most known for his dystopian novel *Brave New World* about a futuristic world state. [Fig 3] Huxley’s appraisal of Kauffer’s work really brings to light the importance of his Modernist process, “Kauffer reveals his affinity with all artists who have ever aimed at expressiveness through simplification, distortion and transposition, and especially with the Post-Impressionists and Cubists. The aim is the same: to render the facts of nature in such a way that the rendering shall be, not a copy, but a simplified, formalized and more expressive symbol of the things represented.”



[Fig 3] This poster designed by Leslie Holland for the 1932 novel *Brave New World* is similar in style to Kauffer’s work.

## EXHIBITION

The exhibition appears to be fairly minimalistic, allowing the posters to stand for themselves. [Fig 2] The exhibition must have felt like one large homage to English industrialists and manufacturers. Companies and clients like Shell Oil, B.P. Ltd., The London Underground, Eastman and Sons, and Telephone advertisements were hung like high art. His Futurist styled

images were well-suited to the fast-paced urban environment in which the images originated and were experienced.

One series that feels particularly Modern to me is this series Kauffer did for Shell Oil. Provoking the viewer through the use of propaganda, these posters encourage the viewer to use Shell Oil because magicians, explorers, and actors do. [Fig 4]



[Fig 4] You Can Be Sure of Shell advertisements

Of course, the exhibition wasn't all about industry. Kauffer also lent his hand to tourism and the arts, producing poster designs for English destinations such as Stonehenge, The Tower of London and cultural exhibitions at national museums.

## INFLUENCE

Kauffer was also influenced some with photo-montage [Fig 5] like many at that time, though most of his pieces were done by hand using gouache. You can see other Modern influences in this piece here for the film Metropolis [Fig 6] Kauffer - like many American artists of his generation - first encountered European avant-garde art at the 1913 "International Exhibition of Modern Art" commonly called the Armory Show in Chicago where he said he "sided with the Post-Impressionists," states Kauffer in his catalog bio. Its effects on Kauffer were transformative. And you can see these influences, specifically Cubism, in his work.

Kauffer's work (as a whole) is most Modernist of all. His posters span many styles from Futurism and Cubism to more impressionistic pieces. His work was inspired and innovative. He paired his imagery to the most important and symbolical visual elements while incorporating forward motion and power. His one-man show in 1937 was truly representative of modern culture and design.



[Fig 5]  
Kauffer photo montage poster for the Underground, 1936

[Fig 6]  
Metropolis film poster, 1926



# MoMA

EXHIBITION CATALOG

KAUFFER COLLECTION