

Abram Games

Graphic Designer, 1914 - 1996

Abram Games was born in Whitechapel in the East End of London on the day that World War I began in 1914. He belonged to the golden age of British graphic design when the commercial artist produced hand crafted concepts in the days before corporate design agencies took away the individuality and freedom of the graphic designer. As a freelance commercial artist he produced posters for an astonishing list of clients that included Shell, London Transport, BEA, BOAC, Guinness, The Royal Shakespeare Company, London Zoo, The Metropolitan Police, The Times and The Financial Times.



'Talk May Kill', 1942.
Abram Games.

In 1942, Games became an official War Artist. The War Office started the 'CARELESS TALK COSTS LIVES' campaign aimed at servicemen on leave during World War 2. Abram Games' 'Talk May Kill' poster uses a variety of visual and psychological devices to create one of the most powerful images of the campaign.

The idea was to deter soldiers from casually discussing their official activities, as intelligence about the movement of troops could be gathered by spies with tragic consequences.

A spiral, signifying circulating gossip travels from the mouth of a soldier, changing its colour and shape into a blood-red bayonet, upon which three identical dying soldiers are impaled.

The viewer makes the obvious connection. Games uses a tonal background to balance both elements of the message: the gossiping soldier is light against a dark background while the dying soldiers are dark against the light.

Games employs his red-yellow-black set of psychological warning colours, and he also creates a symbolic colour link between the text and the action. The word 'YOUR' is the same colour of red as the bayonet, linking the blame for the tragic consequences to your actions.

The words 'YOUR COMRADES' are the same yellow as the colour surrounding the soldiers. This not only reinforces your personal relationship with them but also suggests another alarming possibility - mustard gas - whose terrible effects still resonated in the memory of those who lived through World War 1.

The words 'TALK MAY KILL' are coloured white to separate what is the simple essence of the slogan. This phrase is also split to maximise its contrast with the background.

The eyes of the soldier are deliberately shaded to prevent any distraction from the spiral of speech coming from his mouth; and to give him a general identity.



Use Spades - Not Ships, 1942.
Abram Games.

'Use Spades - Not Ships' was part of the 'Dig for Victory' campaign during World War 2.

This poster was designed to encourage British soldiers to cultivate the land that surrounded their quarters. The aim of the campaign was to make the country as self sufficient as possible as merchant ships were being sunk with a great loss of life.

The combination of these spade and the ship created an icon that met both sides of the message: the spade and land on one side, the ship and sea on the other. The waves of the sea are cleverly balanced against the ploughed furrows of the land while the shadow of the ship at the bottom of the poster is echoed in the shape of the clouds at the top.

The spade/ship icon doubles as an arrow that points to the message, 'GROW YOUR OWN FOOD'. Games breaks up this message with colour which performs two functions - to emphasise 'YOUR OWN' and to create a colour link with the spade handle thereby balancing the top and bottom of the design.



This Child Found a 'Blind', 1943
War Office Poster.
Abram Games.

During World War Two and for a while after, children were often attracted to the sites that had been used by soldiers for weapons practice. Tragically some were killed and many were injured in accidents when playing with 'blinds' - live ammunition that had been carelessly left behind after practice. 'This child found a blind' is a public information poster that tackles this sensitive Subject.

Games' poster cleverly addresses both halves of the target audience: those responsible (the military) and their potential victims (the public).

First, Games uses a few images to relate the story on a conscious level. A young girl lies dead in a red coffin, her head visible through a cloud shaped window in the lid. Her coffin is gradually transformed into an arrow that points to the cause of her death - a 'blind' - in this case a grenade. In the background, an explosion illustrates the tragic consequence of her misadventure. A line of text that is stamped at an angle across the image states, 'This child found a blind' and completes the composition by leading your eye back to the coffin.

Finally the entire design is underlined with two lines of bold text: one issuing a warning, 'Accidents occur daily with blinds left on ranges' and the other offering a solution, 'Report all blinds for destruction at the end of the day's work.'

Next, Games uses the basic shapes and colours of the images to communicate the message on a subconscious level.

When seen from a distance, the combination of the shapes of the coffin/arrow with the grenade registers as a large exclamation mark - ! - a punctuation symbol designed to emphasise the message.

Games always considered the effect of his designs when viewed from a distance. He began the development of each poster with tiny sketches and once observed: "I never work large because.... posters seen from a distance are small. If ideas do not work when they are an inch high, they are never going to work."

Games choice of colours, red, yellow and black for both images and text are also designed to sound the alarm as they are natural warning colours. Red is a universal symbol of danger, while the combination of yellow and black, both in nature and design, indicates a potential hazard.

Finally, Games uses a counterchange between the tones of the images and the graduated tones of their background to contrast and balance each component part of the poster.

When you first look at an Abram Games poster it is deceptively simple, but every element is carefully calculated to communicate the message on a variety of levels to a wide target audience.

Games' designs have become iconic images that evoke the social history of their time.

Games' style is easily recognisable: simple, bold and colourful images that express his sharp intelligence and perceptive wit.

Games summarised his approach as "maximum meaning, minimum means".

Games philosophy of "maximum meaning, minimum means" is a forerunner of the modern design statement, 'Less is More'.

Information from:
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