



Our National Games

“Strangely familiar” is how one visitor described the ‘maximum meaning, minimum means’ exhibition at the Ruskin Gallery – the space that is at the heart of the Cambridge School of Art, situated within the Ruskin Building. If you are not aware of the name Abram Games (1914-1996) then you’ll know his graphic artwork instantly – as quintessential and highly evocative of the middle decades of the 20th Century.

His posters have been the ephemeral item of choice seen in the background sets of many TV and Film wartime dramas over the years. Indeed his illustration for the ATS Girls recruitment poster is still lovingly referred to as the ‘Blonde Bombshell’ due to the controversy it produced at the time for being too glam’ and provocative. ‘She’ represents a determined and resourceful nation and acts as a visual symbol of the ‘home Front’ during the Second World War. Today, his poster designs have become a valuable national treasure - that can be fully appreciated within this stunning travelling exhibition, which traces a prolific career that spanned more than 60 years.

It is his WWII career period that first placed Abram Games firmly into the public’s consciousness when he was appointed as the Official War Poster Artist by the War Office with the express intention to counteract propaganda and inform on public safety. Many still remember, often with nostalgic fondness, the immediacy of his profound and iconic imagery.

For me, it is his unforgettable commercial work of the 50’s: the Blackpool ‘sands’ poster, the Financial Times pin-stripe trouser legs, the tiger tracks to the London Zoo; and the work for clients such as BOAC, Guinness and of course the visual identity for the Festival of Britain - that make him one of our most important British graphic designers.

As a graphic designer myself, this collection of many original ‘thumbnail’ sketches, preliminary designs and ‘camera ready’ finished pieces gives a particular insight into his working methods. His son Daniel Games informs me that he was a “stickler for detail – there were no shades of grey”; if the poster’s message was misinterpreted in any way, then he started from scratch. It was only when it was perfect did he commit the full point to his signature that was ready placed in the corner of each artwork.

A cabinet in the centre of the exhibition housed some of Abram’s original art equipment, including his airbrush that, when he was feeling particularly confident with his work, he used to sign his cheques. Contrastingly I remember slinging such tools across the studio when it clogged and ‘splattered’ over the final stages of a job – and always on one with an immanent deadline.

Daniel Games explained why his father’s posters were so strong “...a clarity of thought, and a continuous practice of reduce, and reduce again to a minimum – this allowed the poster to speak for itself, to achieve maximum meaning with minimum means”.

Jon Melton Snr. Lecturer Graphic Design, CSA, Anglia Ruskin University