

Design review: Tom Eckersley's RoSPA Safety posters

by Riley Wolfe

Before the explosion of mass media, the poster was the main visual medium for releasing advertisements and other messages upon the public. Shortly before the start of World War II, a young Tom Eckersley from Lancaster, England made a name for himself with his efficient poster design. Recognized at a young age for his artistic skills, Eckersley moved to London to work as a freelance commercial poster designer. He partnered with Eric Lombers and the two were relatively successful in their craft. Both in their mid twenties, they would often lecture at the Westminster School of Art on the subject of poster design.

Eckersley took a somewhat minimalistic approach to poster design. Using flat colors and little value gradation, many of Eckersley's figures had a construction paper cutout look to them. His drawings, though, were not so abstracted as to be unrecognizable. His layouts were actually very to the point but also fun to look at because of his clever figure placement and use of type. This turned out to be a very efficient design approach and it showed as Eckersley became a prominent designer.

When World War II began, the demand for commercial poster design declined. The only advertising related work available was in government programs. Eckersley began working for the Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents, better known as RoSPA. He designed safety posters intended to be read by factory workers and those alike. These posters were designed to simply remind the worker of common easily preventable workplace accidents.

All of Tom Eckersley's RoSPA posters are easily recognizable as a set. He has a similar approach to each one by using a blunt statement in an all capital sans-serif font along with a centrally focused image to directly convey the overall safety related message. That is not to say that little thought was put into anyone of these. They are not simply products of a design formula. The amount of thought devoted to the use of type, picture, and color placement is evident.

His most simple poster design is one that instructs the viewer to always inspect his hammer so that a loose hammer head does not fly off and injure somebody during use. The image shown is the top part of a hammer with the head separated from the handle, tilted to the right. Text stating "PREVENT LOOSE HEADS" runs almost perpendicular to the hammer

ending directly to the left of the gap between the head and the handle. Behind the gap is a faded orange that circles and draws attention to the gap. “HEADS” falls within this faded orange circle. On the other side of the hammer handle, just below the orange circle, the text “INSPECT DAILY” is displayed running at the same angle as the other text. This text is about twice as large as the other text and is about equal in length. The two word sentence is separated by a change in color as the first word is a medium grey and the second is black. The front of the hammer points to the top-left corner of the page while the claw curls down pointing to the “INSPECT DAILY” text. The handle points to the bottom-left corner and is cropped before it can extend past the “PREVENT LOOSE HEADS” text.



The overall form can be contained in a small square leaving blank areas on the top and bottom of the poster. The poster’s message can be conveyed to even the quickest glance of a viewer. By having the only use of color placed at the gap of the two hammer parts which happens to be directly at the center of the poster, the viewer focuses on the most important part right away. No matter where one’s eyes move from there, the message will be read. The eye will typically move up and focus on the powerful dark figure of the hammer head and then move down to where the text reads “INSPECT DAILY” with emphasis on the highlighted “INSPECT.” The smaller sentence becomes somewhat part of the image by having “HEADS” within the orange circle that also contains a small part of the two hammer pieces. It is stating what the picture is displaying: a “loose head.” Overall the poster is amazingly simple yet amazingly clear.

Eckersley remains consistent with his limited use of color throughout the other posters in this set. For most of the posters, the accident that it wants you to prevent is within or surrounded by the color. The colors that he uses range from a rich brown to a dull blue. He seems to use color as a linking tool and an obvious focal point. One of his posters states “BROKEN RUNGS CAUSE BROKEN LIMBS ... EXAMINE LADDERS BEFORE USE.” A brown ladder is shown with a broken step and within that broken step is a simple figure on crutches and a blue background. The words “BROKEN LIMBS” are colored blue and “BEFORE USE” are colored

brown. Both phrases are at the ends of their respected sentences so reading them leads you back to the places in the image that share the color of the type. His design is empowered with its use of color yet retains a necessary simplicity. Only one of the nine posters is without an apparent use of color.

The subjects of his designs range from clear foreshadowing to an accident in progress to the end result of one. One poster shows a hammer and two nails placed on a board within the top of an upside-down tear drop shape. At the bottom of this shape is a man oblivious to the tools above him that could fall at any moment. The poster reads “STOW TOOLS SAFELY ... THINK OF THE MAN BELOW.” The man’s shadow points at the space before the dark grey text of “THE MAN BELOW.” This piece has an interesting way of bringing you down through the design. After reading the first line, the handle of the hammer, being the same color as the negative space, brings you into the center of the image. The head of the hammer points to the edge of the board that is drawn almost identical to the handle. You are lead to the negative space you turn again and focus on the man and his shadow. This design was definitely carefully planned and skillfully executed.

Tom Eckersley’s work was efficient and to the point but also held an aesthetic quality that was easy on the eyes. He had an uncanny ability to clearly and simply convey a message on the poster medium. His designs may seem simple at first glance, but the amount of thought put into them is evident. Any present day poster designer (or any designer for that matter) should look at his work and take note of the result of his methods.

