Posters by E. McKnight Kauffer
With notes by E. McKnight Kauffer and a foreword
by Aldous Huxley

Author
Kauffer, E. McKnight (Edward McKnight), 1890-1954

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POSTERS

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NEW YORK

THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

1937
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Ernestine M. Fantl, Director of the exhibition

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FOREWORD

Most advertising artists spend their time elaborating symbols that stand for something different from the commodity they are advertising. Soap and refrigerators, scent and automobiles, stockings, holiday resorts, sanitary plumbing and a thousand other articles are advertised by means of representations of young females disporting themselves in opulent surroundings. Sex and money—these would seem to be the two main interests of civilized human beings. That is why even aperients and engineering jobs have to be advertised in terms of some symbol of wealth or eroticism. The interests of the uncivilized are not the same as ours. To these benighted people, religion seems more important than sex or money. In Central America, for example, and among the pious peasantry of the Balkans, patent medicines are advertised by means of pictures, not of girls in evening dress or underclothes, but of the Holy Trinity and the Communion of Saints. The manifestations are different: but the underlying principle is the same. The symbols used by most advertising artists are symbols that stand for something which, whether sex or sanctity, Mammon or God, is quite different from the wares that are being advertised.

McKnight Kauffer is also a symbolist; but the symbols with which he deals are not symbols of something else; they stand for the particular things which are at the moment under consideration. The reference, in his case, is never to extraneous matters. To advertise, say, a motor car by an appeal to snobbery or sexuality is easy. McKnight Kauffer prefers the more difficult task of advertising products in terms of forms that are symbolic only of these particular products. Thus, forms symbolical of mechanical power are used to advertise powerful machines; forms symbolical of space, loneliness and distance to advertise a holiday resort where prospects are wide and houses few. And so on.

In this matter McKnight Kauffer reveals his affinity with all artists who have ever aimed at expressiveness through simplification, distortion and transposi-
tion, and especially with the Post-Impressionists and Cubists. It is a pity that this exhibition contains no specimens of his work outside the sphere of advertising. In his landscapes of Provence, in his illustrations to The Anatomy of Melancholy and Don Quixote, we can see the application to other artistic problems of those principles which underlie his practice as an advertising artist. Everywhere 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. The aim is common to many of the most interesting and significant of contemporary artists. It is McKnight Kauffer's distinction that he was among the first, as he still remains among the best, of the interesting and significant contemporary artists to apply these principles to the design of advertisements.

ALDOUS HUXLEY
E. MCKNIGHT KAUFFER: BRIEF BIOGRAPHY

My mother is of Swedish descent, born in the United States. My father is a mixture, born in Evansville, Indiana and at one time a trap-drummer on one of the show boats on the Ohio River. Later he became a violinist in theatre orchestras. My paternal grandfather fought in the Civil War. I was born in Great Falls, Montana, December, 1890. Childhood spent in Evansville, Indiana. Earliest years spent in working in factories, drug stores, breweries, etc. Education only at a public school, not beyond the eighth grade. After that joined a travelling theatre stock company as assistant scene painter. At seventeen migrated to California with Frank Bacon and worked on ranch. After that in Paul Elder's bookshop in San Francisco for over two years—first contact with classicism in painting and literature. Night school at the Mark Hopkin's Institute. Was to have been sent abroad by Miss Phoebe Hearst, but plan abandoned—on her part, probably advised that I had insufficient talent. Was sent abroad in 1912 for eighteen months by Professor in the University of Utah. Stopped on way to Europe for six months at Chicago Art Institute. Rebelled against the system of Art education as given there. Sided with the Post-Impressionists, which was the first show from Armory in New York, shown in Chicago. Left Chicago and went to Munich. Stayed few months and then proceeded to Paris and worked in museums, one small Academy and the afternoon Sketch Schools. Outbreak of war—came to England on way to America. Liked the look of England and decided to stay. Tried to enlist in English Army and on technical citizenship reasons refused. About 1915 first effort towards advertising rewarded by a commission from Frank Pick of the Underground Railways. Had arrived in London as a painter and my work enthusiastically received. Continued as a painter until 1921—in the meantime my poster work beginning to make way. Gradually I saw the futility of trying to paint and do advertising at the same time. I wished also to keep my integrity as a painter free from depending on
social hypocrisy and the necessity to paint pictures that would sell. I decided to turn my whole attention to advertising and to give up painting entirely.

My success in England has been generally acknowledged, as the most recent distinction given to me has been by the Royal Society of Arts as Hon. D.I. I am a member of the Council for Art in Industry under the auspices of the Board of Trade and a member of the Advisory Council for the Victoria and Albert Museum and my work has been honoured by an Exhibition held at the Ashmolean Museum in Oxford (one man show).

In 1921 I came to New York in the hope of staying. Mr. Robert Parker arranged an exhibition of my work under the auspices of Art and Decoration but in spite of a moderate but enthusiastic press I did not go down and after a few months returned to England. I am very proud of the position I have in England and I wish to emphasise the part that the Underground Railways, Eastman & Sons Ltd., Shell Mex and B. P. Ltd., Lund Humphries Ltd. and many others have had in helping me by sympathetic understanding to do the work which I have done. In most cases it has not been possible to give me full freedom, and my clients have gone step by step rather than by leaps, but by this slow process we have argued and discussed each advance, until our opposite points of view have reached a synthesis, and it is because of this mutual understanding that I confidently expect England to progress to international distinction, not because of myself but through the new talent that is making way in many directions.

E. McKnight Kauffer
A NOTE ON TECHNIQUE

(Excerpt from a letter)

"... I have used all kinds of instruments common to most contemporary painters, such as tooth brushes, cheese cloth, wire netting, etc.—in fact anything that suggests interesting textures. The air-brush I seldom use now, but when I did use it a few years ago I realized that it was a tricky instrument and that its use required an exceedingly disciplined technique. At the moment I prefer methods less exacting and with more direct contact between my idea and the medium. Lithography still tends to be commercially practical for reproduction and most of my posters are done by an old firm still using in many cases actual lithograph stones.

When I began advertising design in England in 1916, the outstanding work then was of the Munich realistic school, more pictorial than poster. My enthusiasm, to counteract that influence, was at first by violent methods, but such designs as I did were confined to exhibition posters for the then modern group of painters known as the London group, of which I was secretary.

In 1919 I produced the first and only Cubist poster design in England—a flight of birds (see No. 2), which was sold to an advertising agent for fifty dollars. It eventually appeared without my lay-out or lettering and for the Labour Paper, the Daily Herald. This design was so much noticed that Mr. Winston Churchill, then at the War Office, asked to see me with the idea of designing a new flag for the Royal Air Force. Mr. Churchill's appreciation of this "modernistic" design was flattering, but nothing further happened. I think at this moment a new direction in poster designing was created, but I realized that more persuasive methods would have to be employed. Rightly or wrongly, the progress of poster designing as done by myself has been slowly won, mostly by discussion, argument and a good deal of fighting. But English clients, once they are convinced, are prepared to go full steam ahead.
The cover design for the catalog is the most recent experiment I have made and it is an endeavour to dramatize shapes in space, to give an excitement to the mind with the use of non-naturalistic symbols and to suggest to the person who sees it a conflict of which he is a solitary witness. I am working more on these experiments, about which I shall write you later . . . 

E. McK. K.
CATALOG OF THE EXHIBITION

1. Derry and Toms, 1917
2. The Early Bird (for the Daily Herald), 1918
3. The London Group, 1918
4. Winter Sale at Derry and Toms, 1919
5. Summer Sale at Derry and Toms, 1919
6. Vigil, the Pure Silk, 1919
7. Shop Between 10 and 4 (London Underground), 1921
8. Winter Sales (London Underground), 1921
9. London Museum of Practical Geology, 1921
10. London History at the London Museum, 1922
11. "The Rocket" (Museum of Science), 1922
12. The Vindictive Howitzer (Imperial War Museum), 1924
13. Near Waltham Cross by Tram, 1924
14. Bushey Park by Tram, 1924
15. Hadley Wood by Tram, 1924 (7)
16. Eno's Fruit Salts, 1924
17. Winter Sales (London Underground), 1924
18. Wigsunside Pleasures (London Underground), 1925
19. The Wallace Collection, 1925
20. The Indian Museum, 1925
21. The London Group, 1925
22. The Labour Woman, 1925
23. The Flea (Natural History Museum), 1926
24. Socrates at the British Museum (London Underground), 1926
25. The Lodger, original gouache, 1926
26. Metropolis, original gouache, c. 1926
27. Eastman & Son, 1926
28. Eastman & Son, 1927
29. From Winter's Gloom to Summer's Joy (London Underground), 1927
30. Exhibition of Native Art from British Columbia (Imperial Institute), 1929
31. For All Theatres Travel Underground (London Underground), 1930
32. Shop Between 10 and 4 (London Underground), 1930
33. For Pull Use Summer Shell, 1930
34. You Can Be Sure of Shell, 1931
35. Faraday Centenary Exhibition, 1931
36. Power: The Nerve Center of London's Underground, 1931
37. Piccadilly Extension Opening (London Underground), 1932


37.914 40. Great Western to Cornwall, No. 14, 1932

37.915 41. Great Western to Cornwall, No. 15, 1932

37.916 42. Great Western to Devonshire, 1932

37.917 43. Great Western to Devon's Moors, 1932

37.918 44. Bodiam Castle: "Wherever you go you can be sure of Shell," c. 1932

37.919 45. Stonehenge: "See Britain first on Shell," c. 1932

37.920 46. Ask for B. P. Not Just Ethyl (Shell), 1933

37.921 47. B. P. Ethyl Controls Horsepower (Shell), 1933

37.922 48. Merchants Prefer Shell, 1933

37.924 49. Actors Prefer Shell, 1933

37.925 50. Gilbey's Invalid Port, 1933

37.926 51. Quickest by Air Mail, 1933

37.928 52. Whitsummer Holidays (London Underground), 1933

37.929 53. Explorers Prefer Shell, 1934

37.930 54. Magicians Prefer Shell, 1934

37.931 55. 7 Day Seasons (Great Western Railway), 1934

56. Orient Line to Australia, 1934

57. Come on the Telephone, 1934

58. Come on the Telephone, 1934

59. Contact with the World. Use the Telephone, 1934

60. Regent Exhibition, Dorland Hall, 1934

61. Westminster from the Thames (London Transport), 1934

62. Buckingham Palace (London Transport), 1934

63. The Tower of London (London Transport), 1934

64. Westminster Abbey (London Transport), 1934

65. Publicity Pays (London Transport), 1934

66. Train Yourself to Better Work (London Transport), 1935

67. Treat Yourself to Better Play (London Transport), 1935

68. London County Council Evening Classes (London Transport), 1935

69. The New Gas Fires (Gas Light and Coke Company), 1935

70. Quickest Way by Air Mail, 1935

71. Special Areas Exhibition (London Transport), 1936

72. See the model of the new building: Earl's Court (London Transport), 1936
**UNDATED POSTERS**

- **37.947** Group X C. 1920, unmarked.
- **37.948** Winter Shell on Sale till Next May
- **37.949** Villiers Motor Cycles
- **37.950** The London Group 1919
- **37.960** Great Locomotion to Cornwall 1932
- **37.961** The River Near Barnstable
- **37.962** Recommended for Winter Double Shell Lubricating Oil
- **37.963** Publicity Pays on the Underground 1931
- **37.964** Oriant Line Cruises
- **37.965** Victoria & Albert Museum (Underground) 1921 25 x 40
- **37.966** Chrysler Prices and Downs£ £1,100
- **37.967** Oxhey Woods 1915 £1,100
- **37.968** Study Success at the Advertising Exhibition 25 x 40
- **37.969** National Safety Week. undated
- **37.970** Official Winter: Double Shell Lubricating Oil £1.50
- **37.971** Economicize in Time, Temper, Petrol by Using Winter Shell 30 x 45
- **37.972** Road Accidents
- **37.973** Gilbey's Invalid Port £1.50
- **37.974** Gilbey's Castle Port 21 x 11
- **37.975** Gilbey's Spex Royal Scotch Whiskey £1.50
- **37.976** Gilbey's Rubicon Australian Burgundy £1.50
- **37.977** Travel in Comfort (Imperial Airways) £1.50
- **37.978** Villiers Motor Cycles
- **37.979** You Can Be Sure of Shell £1.50
- **37.980** The London Group 1919
- **37.981** Read "The Cricketer" (Manchester Guardian)
- **37.982** Winter Shell on Sale till Next May
- **37.983** Recommended for Winter Double Shell Lubricating Oil
- **37.984** Chrysler Prices and Downs £1,100
- **37.985** Study Success at the Advertising Exhibition 25 x 40
- **37.986** National Safety Week. undated
- **37.987** Official Winter: Double Shell Lubricating Oil £1.50
- **37.988** Economicize in Time, Temper, Petrol by Using Winter Shell 30 x 45
- **37.989** Road Accidents
- **37.990** Gilbey's Invalid Port £1.50
- **37.991** Gilbey's Castle Port 21 x 11
- **37.992** Gilbey's Spex Royal Scotch Whiskey £1.50
- **37.993** Gilbey's Rubicon Australian Burgundy £1.50
- **37.994** Travel in Comfort (Imperial Airways) £1.50

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*Not Exhibited, Not in Cat*:

- **37.971** Zastman + Son London Dyers+Cleaners for over 150 yrs.
- **37.972** Zastman + Son Since 1802. the London Cleaners + Dyes
- **37.973** Zastman + Son (Gloves)
By the rushy-fringed bank,
Where grows the willow and the osier dank.
YOU CAN BE SURE OF SHELL

ACTORS PREFER SHELL
QUICKEST

BY AIR MAIL
WESTMINSTER
FROM THE THAMES
TREAT
YOURSELF TO BETTER PLAY

MUSIC
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