

# Meshed histories: The two revivals of screen printing as a social movement medium

Lincoln Cushing, 4/24/2009, originally published online in *AIGA Voice*

Just like clothes or cars, media can come in and out of fashion. Screenprinting, or serigraphy as it's called in finer art circles, has been a standard commercial process for over a century. As a reproduction technique, it has many wonderful qualities. It requires very little in terms of equipment, and even that can be easily made by hand; it is easy to teach and to learn; and it's very well suited to very short runs of large format objects. It seems like an obvious choice when looking for ways to create prints for the public. Yet there have been at least two periods in history when screenprinting was "discovered" by artists – the first in the United States during the mid-1930s under the Federal Arts Project of the Works Progress Administration (FAP/WPA), and the second time during the 1960s.

## When public art ruled

Between 1935 and 1943 the FAP/WPA was the first, and so far, the last, great effort to put public funding into the arts. It was primarily designed to provide jobs for unemployed artists – at the beginning, 90% of the artists had to come from the relief rolls. As an important secondary impact it brought art and artists to the breadth of America. Teaching how to make art was a national priority, and printmaking was an obvious approach. However, conventional art techniques such as lithography or engraving posed pedagogical and technical challenges, and screenprinting quickly emerged as a productive choice.



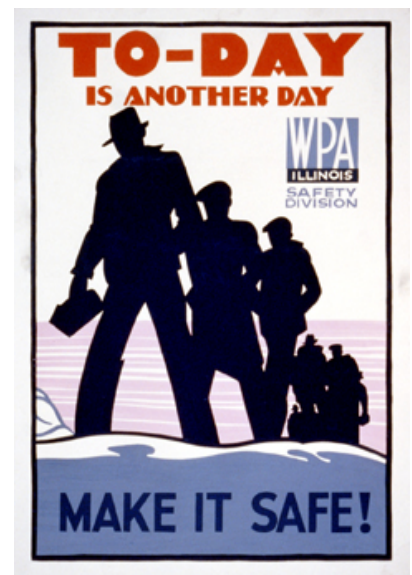
The Silk Screen Unit of WPA/FAP was created 1939 to promote public interest in this new medium. Among the major artists involved were Elizabeth Olds, Harry Gottlieb, and Riva Helfond. Their job was much more than a place to work in difficult times; it became a forum for proselytizing about printmaking as a tool for social democracy. Olds, an advocate for screenprinting, laid out the situation thusly:

"Since Currier and Ives there has been no comparable development...The mass production capacity of these multiple original works of art in color, with their unique artistic qualities as pictures... requires a new exhibition and distribution program in order that this Democratic Art may be made available to a large audience and buying public."

-Quoted in *Radical Art – Printmaking and the Left in 1930s New York*, by Helen Langa, University of California Press, 2004, p.221.

The 1942 technical manual *Silk Screen Stenciling as a Fine Art* featured a Rockwell Kent introduction that enthused about this powerful medium:

"The stencil process is an ancient one, as the authors of this book reveal. The silk-screen stencil, which is the particular subject of the book, is a modern and, it is claimed, American development of this process that is of revolutionary importance. It removes from the craft of stenciling its serious technical limitations, endows it with the freedom of the artist's brush or pencil and makes it a medium for the expression of those subtle values that distinguish what we term Fine Art from its cruder relative, commercial art. It would be of disservice to my country not, at this time, to deplore our own national neglect of our own silk-screen stencil process in this day when nation-wide visual, educational propaganda is a matter of such desperate necessity."



# The 1960s

## Paris, 1968

Forward thirty years. The United States has been engaged in a world war which propelled it to superpower status. The cold war, and its domestic counterpart, McCarthyism, has forced political activists into hiding. But the civil rights movement in the South is a harbinger of things to come, and after the Free Speech Movement in 1964 the gloves are off. All sorts of social change movements come out of hibernation – antiwar, anti imperialist, labor, women, you name it. And their activism requires media. Once again, art students in schools around the world find that they are not taught a printmaking medium that meets their needs.

Perhaps the iconic representation of 1960s postermaking was the output from various workshops in Paris during the worker-student strike during the spring of 1968. Art students from several colleges barricaded themselves in and created hundreds of graphics which spewed through the streets. But their well-meaning efforts to turn training to practice fell with a resounding thud.

Poster scholar Gene-Marie Tempest interviewed several of the key participants, and learned that the first poster, “Usines - Universités - Union” (“Factories – Universities - Union”) was a lithograph and it took all afternoon to make 30 copies. This clearly wouldn’t do, and they turned to an “American technique” – silk screening. By the mid 1960s only a handful of French galleries were using it to reproduce artworks. Artist/activist Guy de Rougemont, who had been a client of one of these galleries, brought colleague Eric Seydoux who was familiar with silk-screening to the Beaux-Arts school.



“The *atelier* members,” recalls Rougemont, “were in their general assembly, and I stood up and said, ‘Listen, I have recently discovered a much faster printing process that is possible with fewer materials. It’s called silk-screening.’ So they all turned towards me and said, ‘Very well, you will be responsible for setting up a silk-screening workshop.’ And so I said ‘yes,’ but I was thinking ‘What a responsibility!’ After all, I only had an amateur’s knowledge of the process. So I left the school, and I just happened to run into Eric. I said this just happened, I agreed to set up a silk-screening workshop for our painter friends. The next day Eric and I went to see his boss [at Paris Arts] and he gave us large screens and some inks. And so with Eric, who knew the technique very well, [...] we arrived at the Beaux-Arts.

Buraglio confirms that “few people knew the process,” but this was not a problem because according to Seydoux “it was very simple. I mean, everyone could learn the technique in a little more than a few minutes.”

Silk-screening was key in both workshops’ impressive poster output. Instead of thirty lithographs a day, the Beaux-Arts silk screening produced 100 to 200 posters per rig per hour, several thousand per night, depending on how many screens were in use. The Arts-Déco’s production was more modest: also 100 to 200 posters per hour, but only two to three hours of printing per night.”

“Anti-Nazism and the Ateliers Populaires: The Memory of Nazi Collaboration in the Posters of Mai ’68,” unpublished essay by Gene Marie Tempest;  
<[http://www.docspopuli.org/articles/Paris1968\\_Tempest/AfficheParis1968\\_Tempest.html](http://www.docspopuli.org/articles/Paris1968_Tempest/AfficheParis1968_Tempest.html)>

## Harvard, Berkeley, and beyond - 1969

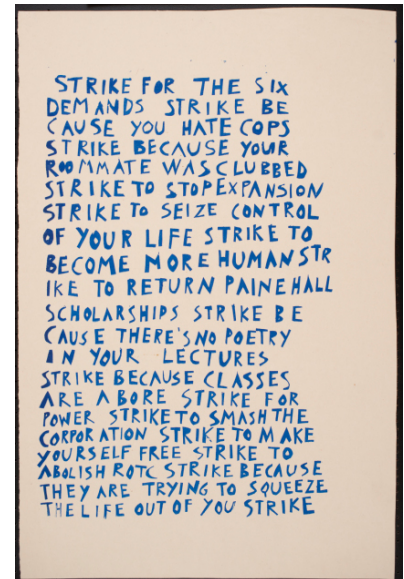
Almost exactly this same scenario played out as the Harvard campus erupted over conflicts with the campus administration. One of them was Harvey Hacker, a student at the Graduate School of Design, who found himself

drawn into a movement where his skill set was much needed for publicity work. However, the school still taught classical art media, and screenprinting was not one of them. When pressed to crank out some strike posters, including a local version of the iconic clenched fist, the owner of a local art supply store – a sympathizer from Europe – gladly gave silkscreen supplies to the ad-hoc crew. These posters and t-shirts quickly made national news, and movement history.



By now, the wonders of this miracle medium were out of the bag, and activists embraced it with vigor. Here is a testimonial found in *Every soldier a shitworker and every shitworker a soldier* – *Organizational Skills Handbook*, by the International Liberation School, Berkeley October 1969:

The primary advantage of silk screening over offset printing lies in its inexpensiveness for short runs. Runs of over 1000 are more trouble than they're worth with the makeshift equipment that's available to us. Also, in a crisis situation (just let your revolutionary fantasies run wild) such as a blackout, power failure or press ripoff, it will be necessary to be able to print information, slogans, etc. manually. Since the process is relatively easy to learn, and the equipment easy to assemble and much easier to maintain than an offset it is to our advantage to familiarize as many people as possible with silk screening (revolutionary art springing from the people) Also, in our attempts to destroy fragmentation and alienation in work, we can see that a handscreened poster is really a product of unalienated labor--there is a tremendous amount of satisfaction to be gotten from turning out beautiful, hand-done screened political posters.



Everywhere there was something going on – Mexico City, Boston, Berlin – tiny workshops cranked out untold numbers of posters and street graphics. Striking students at San Francisco State College, People's Park demonstrators in Berkeley, the film institute in Cuba – all participated in one of the mass unorchestrated effusions of independent popular visual culture ever seen. And it wasn't slowing down.

## The legacy

Political art history repeated itself in 1970. The May 4 National Guard killing of four student demonstrators at Kent State, as well as two students at Jackson State College (Mississippi) and the U.S. invasion of Cambodia, resulted in massive community response. Art students all over the country directed their energy to producing social change posters, and they knew what to do. The workshop at U.C. Berkeley was perhaps the most prolific, creating over 400 works on such diverse issues as gay liberation, people's health care, opposition to the Viet Nam war, support for political prisoners, demand for alternative educational models, and community control of police. Even though by then some sympathetic offset printshops were there to do larger runs, the advantages of silk screen printing were well-known, and the

medium of choice for countless activist artists. Community-based workshops sprang up in the mid 1970s, such as San Francisco's La Raza Silkscreen and Kearny Street Workshop. The rise of movement-friendly offset printshops, along with migration to other media, eventually dimmed the parade of posters coming out of these small talleres. But even today screen printed posters are still created at workshops in San Francisco, Chicago, Portland, and Minneapolis. Much of the work is still collaborative and community-based. This current example is by Oakland's Jesus Barraza and Melanie Cervantes.



Silk screening may never die, but if history is any guide, it will probably be forgotten. Here's to the next renaissance.