
Connoisseurship and its Consequences: An Interview with Mark Resnick

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Mark Resnick, executive vice-president, business affairs for Twentieth Century Fox, and his wife, Maura, have assembled one of the foremost private collections of American posters spanning the 1890s to present. Seventy-five selections from the Resnick collection comprised the recent exhibition at Rochester Institute of Technology entitled, "The American Image: U.S. Posters from the 19th to the 21st Century." Resnick co-authored the exhibition's companion book with Professor R. Roger Remington and has edited *The Critical Vision: A History of Social and Political Art in the United States*. In this interview, Resnick talks about connoisseurship and its consequences.

Steve Heller: You are an executive at Twentieth Century Fox. What made you become a collector of American posters?

Mark Resnick: Actually, there's more of a connection between my day job and my poster collecting than one might think. Both involve a mixture I've been fascinated by for a long time—art, commerce and popular culture. Beyond that, my poster collecting is a logical extension of certain life-long passions. A passion for collecting itself—as a kid, I collected lots of things and definitely squirreled away some posters. A passion for looking at and making art—I used to be a pretty good painter and draughtsman. And a passion for writing—as combinations of image and text, posters have always matched my interests perfectly. When I went off to college at Yale, I started as a pre-med (influenced by my physician father) but ultimately majored in history of art. I became particularly interested in art's role in popular culture, and in art that is as significant politically, socially, and culturally as it is aesthetically. During law school, I still couldn't shake the art history "bug" and edited and contributed to a book on the history of U.S. social and political art. All of this led naturally, I think, to my focus these past 15 years on American posters and other graphic design. By the way, when I talk about "me" in this interview, I often also mean my wife, Maura, who is a wonderful partner in the collection.

Heller: It seems that lawyers are always collecting something (usually art, but also artifacts) as an “investment.” Despite the scholarly attributes of your recent exhibition and catalog (a collaboration with design historian R. Roger Remington), is this basically an “investment?”

Resnick: Well, if I were this passionate about my investments, I might be a lot better off financially! I collect posters for the love of it. Not a day goes by without my trying to expand my knowledge—for its own sake—of graphic design. That isn't to say I'm not rather businesslike about my collecting. I have to be, in order to build and manage what is now getting to be an archive. If there's a “recipe” here, I think it's to combine a sharp eye, deep knowledge of the material, and solid business skills. So that's the formula I try hard to follow.

Heller: Where do you rate yourself as a collector/connoisseur next to Merrill Berman, the Sacklers or Mitchell Wolfson? Is there a friendly competition here? Or have you charted your own territory?

Resnick: It's nice to be mentioned in the same sentence as those collectors, but the truth is I can only aspire to their level. Collectors inspire collectors and, in my field, Merrill Berman and Mitchell Wolfson are basically the muses. As to “territory” and “connoisseurship,” I do think it's fair to say that each of us has a somewhat different focus and expertise. In my case, I collect only American posters but, within that, I collect very broadly—from the 1890s to the present and including just about every kind of poster you can think of. (I'm likely the only private collector who systematically collects, preserves and documents such posters as a unit.) By the same token, Merrill Berman and Mitchell Wolfson collect internationally and tend to focus on particular segments of the 20th century, segments that correspond to Berman's emphasis on the avant garde and Wolfson's on propaganda.

Heller: Do you have restrictions? In other words, are there items you won't collect and why? Conversely, what are your standards for collecting?

Resnick: The collection's breadth means there are few restrictions. I do avoid purchasing even great posters, however, if they're excessively priced. And I'm more cautious still when it comes to “good-but-not-great” posters, posters in poor condition, or posters in a category already well represented in the collection. I know that if I don't stay focused (price-wise) on posters in good condition that truly fill a gap, then the goals I've set for the collection will never be reached.

Although I collect in the broad range I just mentioned—in an attempt to assemble an archive covering the history of American poster making—I also strive for museum quality. I look for the best examples of certain styles, content categories and designers, as well as for exceptional works created anonymously, as was often the case (and still is) with posters. I look for posters that most reflect the country's social, political, and cultural history. If a poster otherwise meets my criteria, I will occasionally compromise on aesthetics.

Heller: Are there larger goals?

Resnick: I very much want to share the collection with the public. Hence the recent exhibition of part of the collection at Rochester Institute of Technology (RIT), and the accompanying book. The RIT project was a joy, especially as there have been almost no such surveys of the American poster. (The exhibition and book were entitled, *The American Image: U.S. Posters from the 19th to the 21st Century*.) I also want to do what I can to reverse the second-class treatment posters have received in the world of fine art. Finally, as American posters are often less celebrated than, say, European posters, I want viewers to reconsider that tendency. The book, which Roger and I believe is the first “compact history” of the American poster, is one more step in that direction. But don’t get me started on these last two topics—I could go on for far too many column inches with my theories on why posters, especially American, have been under-recognized!

Heller: Do you advocate for any particular artists who are not in the so-called canon? Or do you stick to the works that have already been deemed historically significant?

Resnick: Helping to bring high-quality-yet-little-known (or even unknown) designers and posters to the fore is one of the collection’s primary goals. In the RIT exhibition, for example, about one-quarter to one-third of the designers or posters filled that bill. Around each corner of the show was a war, WPA, show, travel or political poster that had never before been exhibited created by such unsung designers as Jay Johnson, Jim Michaelson, James Minter, Robert Muchley, Hernando Villa, Dorothy Waugh and William Welsh. That’s very gratifying, and probably impossible to achieve in an exhibition of, say, paintings of comparable quality from the same time period.

Heller: What would you define as the most “important” or even “sublime” work in your collection?

Resnick: I could truthfully say it’s impossible to identify a poster or posters as the collection’s “best.” But that would be cliché and boring! So I’ll take a flyer and say that, as a group, Lester Beall’s 18 posters for the Rural Electrification Administration are about as good as it gets in American posters. They were produced, as three series of six posters each, between 1937 and 1941. The first series alone would qualify as sublime in its translation of the European avant-garde into a distinctly American, precise modernism. But Beall didn’t stop there, if anything, out-doing himself in the second and third series.

Heller: As a movie mogul, do you include film posters in your collection?

Resnick: Only a few—they remind me of work, and collecting is supposed to be a diversion from my demanding job! Also, great movie posters these days are rare for lots of business reasons that I suspect we could spend much of an interview discussing. Having said that, there are certainly masterful vintage movie posters from those exemplifying American stone lithography to, say, those by Saul Bass and a few of his contemporaries. Such posters are not to be resisted ... and I don’t.

Heller: Once a collection is exhibited it often becomes entombed, or worse, sold off. What are your plans for the Resnick collection?

Resnick: I have never thought of “ending” the collection with this exhibition and book. If anything, my focus has been sharpened, and my desire to continue to improve the collection intensified. Also, by collector standards, I’m still young with plenty of time to keep going. So in that sense it’s premature to talk about ultimate plans for the collection. I will say, however, that Maura and I intend for there to be other exhibitions and publications. After all, this show tapped only a fraction of the collection.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).