A Synopsis of The Art of the Banner Talk

for the Making the Future/ Linen Hall Library project
with Lesley Cherry on 16 February 2021
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This accompanied a slide show. (The images can be easily sourced on the internet but because of copyright policies will not be part of this synopsis.) The second part of the workshop included participants making their own banners/protest art on topical themes under my guidance.

In my presentation, I looked at the background of banners and protest art through the last 150 years in Europe and the USA, examining the artistic process as well as historical, contextual and design process and the evolution of motifs and symbols.

Our journey started with the British Suffragette movement, the use of the iconic colours of lavender, green and white of the Suffragette movement and the classic design of banners of that period. We looked at examples from the original protests lead by Emily Pankhurst in Manchester in 1908, the Huddersfield Suffragette Society banner of 1911 and a contemporary banner from 2011 from Somerset Art Works called Make More Noise.

Examining the use of collective imput in banner making, we looked at a banner made by local refugee women in Glasgow with artist Paria Goodarzi and the Scottish Refugee Council and the Glasgow Women's Library, noting the use of vibrant colours, women's figures and multiple hand outlines, in a colourful banner with strong visual impact created in a group situation.

We moved on to the Trade Union movement in the UK, Ireland and later in the USA. With a long history of banners starting in the medieval times, Guilds and trade union banners utilized symbols of the trades, as well as 'banners within banners' to convey the message. Many were created by professional banner makers and often followed a set pattern with the use of neo-classical forms, imagery of tools and trades. In addition, the movement to rally women workers show where the suffragette movement and the trade union movement intersected in common cause.

Created in Dublin in 2013, the Lockdown Tapestry was created to commemorate the over 100,000 workers who went on general strike in Dublin in 1913. Thirty two panels were designed by artists Robert Ballagh and Cathy Henderson. They were stitched by over 100 participants including prisoners and school children. The Lockdown Tapestry is a wonderful example of great, easy to understand graphics and colour use, exploring a complex social and historical movement.

Following on, we looked at a pair of classic trade union banners, the first featuring Jim Larkin, Irish Labour leader and one from The Durham Miners Union. Both feature the use of a single iconic figure, arms outstretched, 'banners within banners' with messages on them and gilded scrolls, as well as dramatic and iconic, eye-catching colours.

We moved into the Orange Order Banners, from Northern Ireland. Looking a multiple banners we noted the use of King William of Orange, usually seen riding on his white horse Sorrell. These banners are still widely used in parades and events in Northern Ireland. The symbol of the white horse became a identifier of Protestant households because of its widespread use in the Orange Order banners.

In the Loyal Orange Order Banners from the Republic of Ireland, we can see the addition of the Irish language, which reflected the population of Ulster that spoke Irish. The symbolism of the Irish harp, shamrocks and the ubiquitous use of scrolls, and internal messages were also noted in these banners which were widely used in marches and rallies.

We looked at banners from the Irish National Land League from the era around 1885 from Galway which featured portraits of Charles Stewart Parnell and Michael Davitt, noting the emblems of the harp, Irish wolfhound and each Irish province coats of arms. Some of these banners were used in the US civil war by Irish troops.

Moving on into contemporary banners, we examined the use of the rainbow, as colours and imagery to represent the LGBTQ communities, to celebrate inclusion. Created originally by artist/activist Gilbert Baker in 1978, after the Stonewall Riots for Gay Rights in New York City. The rainbow flag has been included in several current issues, and is internationally recognised as a symbol of Gay Pride and inclusiveness.

In the AIDS awareness posters by artist collective Gran Fury in 1986, we can see an example of a stark, pared down graphic, with a strong visual impact, on a black background and the message Silence=Death. This was part of a landmark civil disobedience action in Washington D.C. to highlight awareness of the AIDS epidemic. Another example of the artwork created to highlight the AIDS crisis was by Patrick O'Connell, in New York City. He founded the group Visual Aids for AIDS. The iconic red ribbon (red for blood) became a symbol for AIDS awareness and was taken up as a cause celeb by artists, film makers and actors.

In 1967, artist Lorraine Schneider created a poster that was circulated world wide (War is not healthy for Children and other Living Things) after her son was drafted into the Vietnam war. This became a logo for Another Mother for Peace, a movement which sought to educate women to take an active role in peace demonstrations. Another major peace movement banner of this time was 'Not One More Dead!' which was carried in many anti-war protests in the late 1960-70's.

In Britain the CND, Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament was founded in 1957. It was at the forefront of the peace movement in Europe. Groups marched from Aldermaston Nuclear Weapons Depot to London during Easter week over several years, from 1958-1960. Two of the symbols which were often portrayed on the CND banners were the 'Peace Symbol' and the Broken Rocket. The Peace Symbol evolved from the semaphore graphic using the initials, N and D, for nuclear disarmament, combined together.

The use of another conglomerate symbol of the closed fist was used extensively in the women's liberation movement, inside of the gender symbol for female or Venus. The use of the clenched fist was associated first with the labour movement in 1910, later becoming known as the 'anti-fascist salute', as opposed to the fascist salute, with an arm extended with an open hand. The closed fist later evolved into the Black Panther/ Black Lives Matter logo.

Greenham Common was the location of a RAF military base for nuclear missiles in England. In September 1981 the peace group, Women for Life on Earth marched from Cardiff, Wales to Greenham Common. They chained themselves to the fences and soon a large campsite was created which endured several waves of evictions and ongoing local opposition.

Their banners incorporate both the peace symbol, the closed fist in the Venus symbol, and colourful images of the peace camp.

We moved on to the Repeal the 8th (8th amendment prohibiting abortion). The example was a large banner made by the artists Alice Maher and Rachel Fallon. A larger than life size figure of a madonna which echoed religious banners, was covered in symbols of eyes, to represent the surveillance of the state authorities. The eyes also represent protection. The 'REPEAL' logo which was frequently used in stickers, posters and in street art was created by Irish street artist MASER, and popped up in public spaces all over Ireland. Another group called Performance Art to Repeal the 8th created aprons, worn in protest marches. When the aprons were lifted up by the wearers they had the symbol of a large eye and the messages like 'fortitude overcomes all difficulties' 'under the law, freedom' and 'I remember'.

The Solidarity Movement in Poland in the 1980's was an anti-bureaucratic, socialist movement, initiated by the ship building and dock workers in Gdansk,on the seacoast of Poland. The movement encountered massive government opposition,which lead to country-wide strikes. The governmental response was to declare martial law, which failed. The strikes lead to free and independent unions and freedom of religious and political expression. The Solidarity movement logo, designed by J. and K. Janiszewski, has rich associations with Polish history, using the symbol of an anchor into a morphed cross, to represent the shipbuilders and dock workers and the red and white colours of previous Polish rebellions.

The Greenpeace logo also evolved from a narrative. The green and white handwritten font, according to its creators, represents vigour and devotion, signifying a love of life, spiritual prosperity and kindness and health.

Climate change activists (XL, Extinction Rebellion movement) use a highly recognisable logo of a circle with an hourglass enclosed within. Created by the artist known as ESP in 2011, the hourglass represents the time running out to off-set climate change. This logo is now known world wide and used in many 'mass extinction' events and protests, as well as the Red Rebel movement to protest climate change.

Recent banners have been created to protest against low or no pay for junior doctors during the pandemic. Strong graphics, high contrast and striking colours, and easy to read graphics give a nod to heritage banners.

To summarise, banners and protest art have great cultural and historical significance, as well as being a shorthand for political and social movements world wide. Their themes, colours, symbols and structure ensure their place in history as part of culture and society.
They have become iconic in their own right, pieces of social art and solidarity.

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