

[ABSTRACT](#)

This article explores the impact of art historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's transnational background—as a German-born Russian Jew who was exiled in Britain—on his interest in and appreciation of graphic design in England. It argues that the uneasy fascistic-nationalistic atmosphere of German society under the reign of terror by the Nazis during the early 1930s galvanized Pevsner, a 'transnational' historian, into believing that it is the designer's social responsibility to pursue functional design for the good of society. In other words, Pevsner believed that design could be instrumental both in developing artistic faculties within the individual and in imparting instructive meaning through the work to a general populace, whose aesthetic sense and political awareness may have been limited. As for the role of the art historian, Pevsner was thoroughly convinced that art historians, through their use of historical knowledge, could and should make accessible to both designers and lay people the knowledge of how past artists and designers confronted contemporary needs and courageously worked for the good of society. The question of the aesthetically educational, socially instrumental function of design, according to Pevsner, was one that could be explored through study of important works in the English tradition of graphic design. The present study will focus on Pevsner's interest in the history of English graphic design as a thread of educational and functional art for a mass audience, from eighteenth-century engravings of didactic subjects by William Hogarth to posters for the London Underground and the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB) designed by such twentieth-century graphic designers as Fred Taylor and Edward McKnight Kauffer.

Key Words: Sir Nikolaus Pevsner, the Third Reich, William Hogarth, posters for London Passenger Transport Board, The Englishness of English Art

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Pevsner's transnational identity

A German-born Russian Jew who was baptized in the Lutheran church and later exiled in Britain during World War II, Sir Nikolaus Pevsner (Figure 1), one of the leading architectural, art and design historians of the twentieth century, was naturally, if not completely, transnational. Pevsner's academic life, in its early stages in particular, was affected by the nationalistic, political and social preferences of the society to which he then belonged. From the winter of 1929–30 he had been a "Privatdozent" at Göttingen University, and it is said that his reputation



Figure 1

as a young academic had contributed to Göttingen's institutional reputation for art history. But Pevsner lost his academic position at Göttingen as a result of the newly passed Civil Servants' law that was aimed at non-Aryans, officially known as the "Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service". Not being allowed to pursue a career in academia in his native land, Pevsner departed for Britain.

Exiled in Britain, Pevsner was highly conscious of and insecure about being an "outsider". During the spring of 1934, when he decided to apply for a newly vacant chair in the history of art and architecture at the University of Edinburgh, Pevsner felt that he would likely encounter prejudice against foreigners. Susie Harries, the author of the latest and most comprehensive Pevsner biography, quotes Pevsner's words at that time, presupposing a possible question that he would be asked in the interview: "If a German why this one?" (Harries, 2011:150). Although Pevsner's application for the position was unsuccessful, and such a question was never asked of him during his interview, his anxiety expressed the insecurity he felt at that time. In 1939, when Pevsner was preparing an article for *The Architectural Review*, he was feeling even more uncomfortable about being an "alien" inside Britain. J. M. Richards, then Assistant Editor of the magazine, wrote to reassure him on 9 October of that year: "The other point you [Pevsner] mentioned in your [previous] letter was your position as an alien, but I need hardly say that that does not affect us in the least. I only hope that by now you are not being made too uncomfortable by it" [1]. Before long, however, Pevsner was proved to have good reason for feeling insecure: he was detained as an enemy alien in mid-1940.

Back in Germany, Pevsner's former supervisor, Wilhelm Pinder, who in 1927 had suggested to Pevsner that he take up the position at Göttingen, was lately perceived to be a Nazi supporter. It must have been quite a shock for Pevsner to realise that his one-time supervisor had become a pro-Nazi academic who had made radio broadcasts for the anti-humane nationalist regime, and who, on the occasion of Hitler's 50th birthday in 1939, deliberately maintained that "the departure of Jewish art historians from Germany had got rid of 'over-theoretical thinking'" (Harries, 2011:258). Pevsner must have had, therefore, mixed feelings when he dedicated his *Academies of Art*, published by Cambridge University Press in both Britain and the United States in May 1940, to his former teacher with the plaintive words: "To W.P. in grateful and faithful remembrance of the past."

Having had both his academic career and his personal life affected by perfidious politics, racism and ostracism, Pevsner, as a transnational art historian, was naturally directed, if not compelled, to the question of whether his subject of study—the history of art, architecture and design—could have an instrumental function in the reformation of society and the defeat of a nationalistic autocracy.

The transnationality of design for the good of society

Pevsner maintained that one of the merits of history was that it revealed to people the ways in which great men have acted under certain circumstances in the past. Pevsner never minimized the role that knowledge of the past could play in developments within contemporary society. The history of art was no exception for Pevsner, who never underestimated the capability and power of art history to connect and to engender a profound understanding of both the past and present.

When Pevsner referred to “the designer”, he meant “a man who invents and draws objects for use” (Pevsner, 1948:91); and the purpose behind the use of these objects was, in one way or another, to fulfil contemporary needs. From the time that he was a student in Germany, Pevsner had always resisted the creed of “art for art’s sake” that motivated many of his contemporaries. Pevsner believed that art should be functional, imparting meaning to the people for whom it had been created, just as it had during the Middle Ages when art had conveyed religious ideas and norms.

In Pevsner’s view, the historian should always be aware of contemporary needs and developments in society, and should connect scholarship with contemporary needs (Naylor, 2004:179). The same was true of the art historian. Pevsner was convinced that, while designers are expected to engage in solving contemporary stylistic/artistic problems, art historians, through their studies of “the visual expression of the history of man’s mind” (Pevsner, 2003:162) [2], should make accessible to designers and contemporary society at large the knowledge of how past artists and designers confronted their contemporary needs and courageously worked for the good of society. Pevsner believed that the art historians who were merely looking at masterpieces in the history of art and design and examining and describing their significance in historical and aesthetic contexts were not doing enough. By tracing intellectual, ideological and functional threads through the history of art and design, the better art historian took on the obligation to play an active part in the development or reformation of society. Pevsner continued to assert this position even during post-war times.

Interested in traces of intellectual, ideological and functional threads within the history of art and design, Pevsner was undeterred by boundaries between nations. Pevsner’s conception of design historiography showed that the compass of an ideological movement in art could not always be solely defined geographically. Undisturbed by national boundaries, Pevsner came to see a strongly transnational connection between the art and design of different nations. Based on this perception, his first major publication about modern design was *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* (1936). Within this volume, by focusing on the minds of artists and designers within a consumer society, Pevsner was able to perceive a chain of strong moral beliefs that pervaded the spirit of the age, challenging the contemporary utilitarian aspiration for secular fame and honour. This chain stretched from the early nineteenth century into the twentieth century, and included J.F. Overbeck and Franz Pfaff of the Nazarenes, a religious-oriented, anti-academic group of German, Swiss and Austrian painters who dedicated their works to the Christian

faith; William Morris, the utopian socialist who led the Arts and Crafts Movement; and Walter Gropius of the Bauhaus school, the high priest, as it were, of the Modernist movement. Whether they were artists or designers, these individuals were all working for the good of society rather than towards their own secular self-interests. Specifically, Pevsner identified the link between the German-speaking Nazarenes, who were based in Rome, and the contemporary design and education movement led by Gropius, a German-born Jew who was later based in the U.S., as a transnational conduit.

English graphic design as functional art

Pevsner believed that designers must be critical of the ways in which art and design could be employed to satisfy a political preference or a national policy in order to invoke patriotism and thereby mould the spirit of the age. During the 1930s, Pevsner himself witnessed the seemingly immutable, monumental, yet trite architecture that the Third Reich erected to stir and satisfy popular sentiment through the invocation of national and racial pride. For Pevsner, these supra-monumental Nazi designs were visual proof of a grave error, for the fascist regime demonstrated that design had come to be a mere tool that could be disgracefully employed to lead a naïve and unaware majority astray.

The educational, instrumental function of art and design, according to Pevsner, found its best representation within the English tradition of the graphic arts, and it was William Hogarth who interested Pevsner most. Hogarth was arguably a graphic designer in his own time because of his masterful handling of text and image and his ability to present and communicate ideas and information, some from a moral perspective, to an aesthetically and ethically naïve audience. During the 1720s, Hogarth is said to have been very enthusiastic about selling his copperplate engravings to booksellers and print-sellers (Paulson, 1989:17). Indeed, throughout his whole career, he was busily engaged in various print-based projects, including the design of book illustrations, a headpiece for a journal, or publication frontispieces. As a graphic artist, Hogarth's purpose was to tell stories and convey messages convincingly to ordinary people through a depiction of everyday incidents using common iconography. Pevsner explained the essence of Hogarth's art by writing: "...to him the story mattered more than the art. The purpose of painting is not painting, but the telling of stories with all the incidents which any observant eye can discover any day" (Pevsner, 1964:35).

Hogarth wanted his prints to be readily and widely distributed, hoping to educate the masses by suggesting moral improvement. "Printmaking of the kind practiced by Hogarth was...the quintessential bourgeois art form", and was "by definition urban and commercial, depending upon the creation of a repeatable commodity which could attract a public to itself" (Bindman, 1997:29).

What captured Pevsner's attention about Hogarth was the fact that this "brilliant painter, [one of the] naturally most highly endowed painters of eighteenth-century England" (Pevsner, 1964:35) attached the greatest importance to the educational, socially instrumental function of his work

as a means of moral teaching to improve the minds of ordinary people through subjects which could easily be observed during their daily lives. Hogarth himself stressed this: “In these compositions, those subjects that will both entertain and improve the mind, bid fair to be of the greatest public utility, and must therefore be entitled to rank in the highest class” (Nichols & Steevens, 1817:xiv).

The simple yet didactic series of prints *Industry and Idleness* (1747), *Four Stages of Cruelty* (1751) and many others show that, for Hogarth, art was a “medium for preaching”. Hogarth was well aware of the effectiveness of “the recounting of what the observant eye sees around” it in order to achieve his object. *Four Stages of Cruelty*, a set of four prints (Figures 2-5) taken up by Pevsner as an example of Hogarth’s art of moral storytelling in his famed book, *The Englishness of English Art*, is one of the best known of Hogarth’s engravings of modern morality subjects. It tells, as a good visual guidance of how not to behave, the story of how cruelty is diabolically strengthened through the torturing of animals, a daily affair in ruthless Georgian London, until it leads to a calamitous murder.



Figure 2



Figure 3



Figure 4



Figure 5

The intention to speak directly to people in this way through the arts by telling stories was something Pevsner viewed as an entirely English tendency. It was not only Hogarth who was keen to exhibit this tendency through graphic expression. Pevsner observed a similar manifestation in the political caricatures of James Gillray, many of which were published circa 1800. This was followed in turn by crucial contributions to English poster and lettering design such as those by William Morris and the English illustrator Emery Walker, who worked within the Arts and Crafts Movement, and the Scottish graphic designer James Pryde and his kindred spirit, the Englishman William Nicholson, who, working together, are better known today as “the Beggarstaff Brothers”.

English story-telling posters

Smitten by this particular English tendency in graphic art, that is, the art of storytelling, Pevsner turned his attention to the striking development of the English poster during the first half of the twentieth century. Pevsner was especially interested in Frank Pick, who worked as a Traffic Development Officer of Underground Electric Railways from 1909, later became the first Chief Executive of London Transport, and also commissioned many of the more notable examples within the genre.

In 1942, Pevsner wrote an article for *The Architectural Review* about Pick (Pevsner, 1942:31-48) [3], whom Pevsner knew personally. The two men were close friends: it was Pick who spared no trouble in urging the Ministry of Labour and the Home Office to give Pevsner a permit to work in Britain and, a few years later, even helped him to find a place to live in Hampstead. When Pevsner was placed in the Huyton internment camp in 1940, it was Pick who made efforts to obtain his release, along with Josiah Wedgwood of Josiah Wedgwood & Sons Ltd. and Kenneth Clark, then Director of the National Gallery, among others. The personal correspondence between Pevsner and Pick, now held by the Pevsner archive in the special collections at the Getty Research Institute, suggests that the two men were in continual contact with one another and exchanged views on art-related issues. Pick commissioned posters for the London Underground from such designers as Fred Taylor, Gregory Brown, and Edward McKnight Kauffer. Pevsner emphasised the impact of the work of these graphic designers on the daily lives of working Londoners and saw Frank Pick, with his extended knowledge of art history and refined taste, as a great secular patron of the fine arts; a “modern Medici” (Green, 2008:39), so to speak.

Writing about the London Transport, Pevsner believed that it had become “a powerhouse of ‘civilised urbanity and humane common sense... the most efficacious centre of visual education in England’” (Green, 2008:40). By the mid-1910s, according to Pevsner, “the English poster as well as English lettering had achieved a remarkably high level” (Pevsner, 1942:32). Interest in publishing periodicals, books and tracts was widely shared among Victorians with an academic interest in art, and this interest helped to elevate the standards for press-related graphic art; that is, for lettering design and poster design. Pevsner stated:

“Since the Beggarstaff brothers had created their style of bold, flat surfaces and simple clear colours in the mid-nineties, and since Morris’s Kelmscott Press and Emery Walker’s Doves Press, the posters and presswork of England had been accepted as leading by the other European nations.” (Pevsner, 1942:32)

Discussing the distinguished artists who made posters for the London Underground Electric Railways during the decade leading up to World War I, Pevsner mentioned in particular Fred Taylor and Gregory Brown:

“Among the artists who designed posters for the Underground between 1908 and World War I, Fred Taylor and Gregory Brown are

the most notable. Their work, especially that illustrating the London countryside, is of an excellent standard, sound, forcibly telling its story, and no doubt convincing to the man in the street.” (Pevsner, 1968:193)

Among the many posters that illustrated the beauty and tranquillity of the London countryside and suburban lives were Gregory Brown’s Hatfield (1916) (Figure 6) and Fred Taylor’s Your Next Move and Your Best is on to Underground (1914) (Figure 7). The latter poster, with its straightforward slogan “Houses to suit all classes”, was designed to promote the idea of relocating to the suburbs by suggesting that the price of housing along Underground lines was perfectly affordable for everyone.

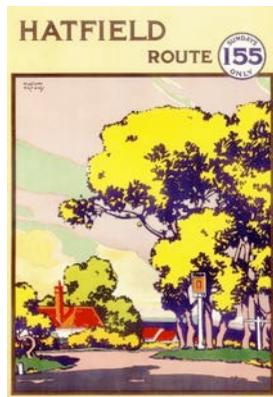


Figure 6

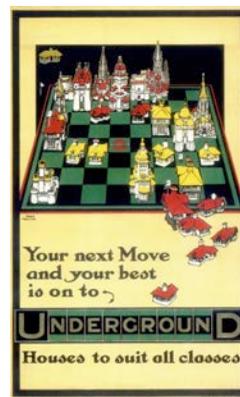


Figure 7

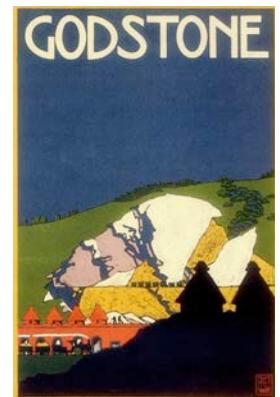


Figure 8

Even after the arrival of American graphic designer Edward McKnight Kauffer on the London art scene in 1915, and his introduction of bolder, sweeping stylization and abstract forms, the art of storytelling that Pevsner had observed in Hogarth remained constant. Between 1915 and 1916, Kauffer produced a set of such posters for the London Underground, including North Downs (1915) and Godstone (1916) (Figure 8). In the 1920s, Kauffer designed an even more distinctively narrative poster, Edgware and Hampstead Extension of London Electric Railway (1923) (Figure 9). This poster presented a photographic panel that publicly proclaimed steady progress in the extension of railway lines, a visual expression that reminded the knowledgeable viewer of the men working in Ford Madox Brown’s famous painting *The Works* (1852-63) (Figure 10), a pictorial celebration of the Puritan work ethic.

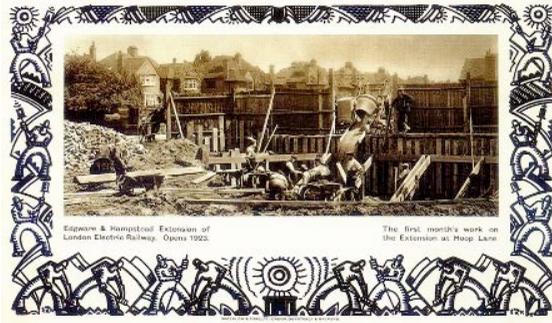


Figure 9



Figure 10

What Pevsner repeatedly stressed was that art should be functional and that it should have a wide effect on popular taste, imparting instructive meaning to the people for whom it was created. For Pevsner, the posters produced for the London public transportation system, the Underground in particular, were strong examples of such functional and invaluable art. Pevsner also rated highly the aesthetic value of these London transportation posters, which were accessible every day to ordinary people who seldom or never went to art museums. Looking back from the year 1942, Pevsner recognized the contributions that the posters designed in the 1930s for the London Passenger Transport Board (LPTB), the public supervising body of the London tram, bus and underground network formed in 1933, made to the aesthetic education of the public:

“... it can safely be said that no exhibition of modern painting, no lecturing, no school teaching can have had anything like so wide an effect on the educatable masses as the unceasing production and display of L.P.T.B. posters over the years 1930–1940.” (Pevsner, 1968:193)

Pevsner’s transnational identity and the national character of design

Although Pevsner seems to have detached himself intentionally from any specific ethnic identification, choosing instead to live as a transnational citizen, when he took up the narrative and educational function of the English graphic art tradition for one of his BBC Reith Lectures, broadcast in November 1955, he explained his view that this tradition evinces a national character, an “Englishness of English art”.

While such an observation seemingly complicates Pevsner’s position regarding transnationality, it was in fact the transnational nature of Pevsner’s formative years that brought about his belief in the “Englishness of English art”. While adapting diversified approaches throughout his academic life, Pevsner was always interested in the idea of national character in art, starting in Leipzig in the 1920s when he was an art history student and continuing until 1983 as a British national and renowned historian of Western architecture, art and design. By the time Pevsner began his studies in art history, the idea of the national character of a given country’s art had already been well established in Germany, where it was being studied exhaustively. Various mentors had introduced

Pevsner to this idea during his formative years, and one of these teachers was Wilhelm Pinder. However, in Germany, the interest in the national character of art throughout history had already been spurred by racist pride long before his student days. Witnessing how art and design had come to be disparaged and employed by the nationalist autocracy as a tool of propaganda to whip up the nation's racial spirit, and, out of dismay at what his homeland's personality had become, Pevsner directed his attention to, and became very sensitive about, national character as disclosed in works of art, whether in the form of painting, industrial products, architecture or graphic design.

In fact, in Pevsner's view, it was his own transnational identity and his own transnational historiography of design, detached from national prejudice, that made him such a keen and qualified observer of the national character of art. As he himself claimed in the foreword to *The Englishness of English Art*, first published in 1956:

“...my antecedents might be accepted as specially useful for the task. For one thing the very fact of having come into a country with fresh eyes at some stage, and then of having settled down gradually to become part of it, may constitute a great advantage.” (Pevsner, 1964:9)

Pevsner never felt a strong sense of being an Englishman. He undoubtedly desired a transnational existence, free of political oppression, so that he could devote himself whole-heartedly to the history of art and architecture. He was compelled to become an outsider in a foreign nation, a “stranger in a strange land”, a status which led him to the question of what in fact constituted the national character of any art, whatever the nation.

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Contents Notes

[1] Letter from J. M. Richards to Pevsner on 9 October 1939, now held in the special collections at the Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles, CA, USA.

[2] Pevsner defined the art historian's subject of interest as "the visual expression of the history of man's mind" in one of his radio talks, "Reflections on not teaching art history", broadcast on 19 October 1952 by the Third Programme, a BBC radio station launched in 1946.

[3] This article on Frank Pick is reprinted in the second volume of Pevsner's *Studies in Art, Architecture and Design*, published in 1968.

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About the author

Ariyuki Kondo, born in Tokyo, Japan in 1971, read architectural design at the School of Art and Design of the University of Tsukuba, Japan, before pursuing a postgraduate study in architectural history at the University of Edinburgh, Scotland. He completed his Doctor of Philosophy in 2001, and after taking up several academic posts in Japan, he has, since 2012, been Professor of History of British Art and Architecture at Ferris University, Yokohama, Japan, where he teaches the history of eighteenth- to twentieth-century British art, architecture and design. He is the author of several books on the subjects of 1) the interrelation between eighteenth- to twentieth-century British architecture and the *Zeitgeist*; 2) contemporary church architecture; and 3) the images of Christ as depicted by the members of the Pre-Raphaelite brotherhood and contemporary British painters. His recent publications in English include *Robert and James Adam, Architects of the Age of Enlightenment* (2012), which came out as part of the series *The Enlightenment World*, published by Pickering & Chatto in London. His recent research mainly focuses on the principles of Sir Nikolaus Pevsner's histories of art and culture, from Pevsner's emphasis on the role of the *Zeitgeist* in the development of Western art and design to the impact of his multi-cultural, transnational upbringing and education on the extensively diversified approaches he employed in his study of the history of Western, mainly British, art, architecture and design.