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Atelier Populaire posters, 1968

Who made it? When was it made?

In 1968, discontent was brewing in French society during President Charles de Gaulle's government. The spark that lit the fire of massive protests was the students-administration stand-off in the University of Nanterre over the opposition to the Vietnam War. The protests gained momentum and the art students expressed their solidarity with the protestors, venting the general frustration of the society about the oppression (Vogl 2007). The movement was later joined by workers demanding better wages and conditions. Nearly 10 million people, i.e. one-sixth of the French population, went on strike in May 1968 (Josephson 2011). *Atelier Populaire posters*, 1968 refer to the posters created by *Atelier Populaire* during the May 1968 protests in Paris (Baggett 2014). The *Atelier Populaire* was a student-run organization (Kimbrow 2000), and evolved into a student-worker coalition (McNamara 2010). The literal translation of *Atelier Populaire* is the popular workshop. The *Atelier Populaire* members used the posters as a means to participate in the movement (Deaton 2013). Consequently, the relevance of the posters cannot be seen in isolation of the protests (Baggett 2014).

Atelier Populaire was open to all, and provided a window to join the movement. The posters were created from the art department that the students had occupied during the protests. The designs were decided upon collectively (McNamara 2010). *Atelier Populaire* submitted the posters to a democratic vote so that individualistic style was eliminated. The objective was to portray a collective desire for change through the posters. The touch was definitely leftist. (Kunzru 2013) The posters created by them were not sold (Kimbrow 2000). The posters were pasted around the city. Around 700 posters were created (McNamara 2010). Police action stopped the production of the posters in June 1968. (Kimbrow 2000).

What is the work?

Atelier Populaire was a place where ordinary people could express themselves democratically through stark, graphical and visual posters pasted throughout Paris and the occupied factories. (Vermees 2011). The anonymous artists who created the posters were encouraged to produce the posters with their hand (Kunzru 2013). The first poster, with the slogan 'Usines, Universités, Union' ('Factories, Universities, Union'), exuded the desire to create a collective movement. Further, 'L'art au service du peuple' ('Art at the service of the people') indicated a desire to leverage the power of art to catalyse the movement. The striking newspapers and printing companies provided the paper and the paint material for the posters (Vermees 2011)

The slogans had slogans from the 'Situationism' philosophy which aimed for applying an adapted version of Marxism to the capitalist society. Freedom from oppression and a demand for a more inclusive political system was also evident from the posters. Emancipation of art from elitism was also a theme in the slogans (Baggett 2014).

The posters of the May 1968 uprising was not only strongly verbal, but also starkly visual. The political cartoonists expressed themselves in the posters and the artwork represented street art of the times as well. Several artworks equated the existing government to Nazis and Nazism. Politicians were also depicted in poor light by symbolism (Baggett 2014).

The posters can be divided into two categories, First category includes those depicting ironic interruption to challenge the government and the French society. The second group includes dialectical images drawing from revolutionary posters from the past. (Deaton 2013). Artistic images of social alternatives was also a theme (McNamara 2010)

The use of posters was also symbolic of the dissent against consumerism which promoted the use of advanced methods of communication. (McNamara 2010).

Simplicity and humour were also used to increase the effectiveness. (Bostwick 2012).

The demonstration posters were essentially combined elements of telling documents and fine art, pregnant with the objective of social change and subversion. (Josephson 2011).

Replete with bold colours, the posters contained symbols of dissent such as clenched fists. The depiction of the State was negatively toned with images such as brutal policemen. The posters were also passed around as pamphlets. (Josephson 2011).

The slogan of the art studio was 'Atelier Populaire Oui, Atelier Bourgeois Non' ('Popular Workshop Yes, Bourgeois Workshop No'), indicating that it was a democratic movement. (Josephson 2011).

The designs of the posters evolved in complexity, symbolising the increase in momentum of the protests. Even single page newspapers were published by the Atelier (Josephson 2011).

Why was it important at the time?

Equal pay for equal work, unity between immigrants and French workers, and student-worker unity were some of the prominent themes. The movement definitely helped the cause of the immigrant workers over the next few years (Stangler 2013).

The movement brought the issues of immigrants to the forefront. The anguish of the immigrants was evident as the posters depicted (McNamara 2010).

The touch was definitely leftist. (Kunzru 2013)

The Atelier's protested against the class-based university system and teaching practices that avoided teaching the socio-economic realities. (McNamara 2010).

Posters were an effective tool to spread the message because of the democratic means of production and the extensive outreach. They also united the immigrants (McNamara 2010)

The posters served as a medium for social relationships between the discontented French people (Vogl 2007).

The Atelier works represented the class struggle and took art away from shackles of the high class and to the streets. It further politicised the role of art in the society (Vogl 2007).

The process of creation of the art was as important as the final posters because the process unified people (Vogl 2007).

Artwork of Atelier depicted the strife within French political and economic system (Kimbrow 2000)

What relevance does it have for us today?

The protests had long-term impact on the politics and culture of France, and the posters are considered symbols of revolution and riots. The May 68 protests are still referred to by contemporary populace and politicians, and considered a landmark in the French society. The recent newspaper articles regarding same-sex marriage in 2013 also referred to the May 68 upheaval (Baggett 2014).

The Occupy Wall Street movement and other protestors also take inspiration from the 1968 movement and use posters. (Bostwick 2012).

The symbolic antiauthoritarian phrases used in the posters are still used. The posters have been used to understand the demands of the students and the impact of the protests on the French society. (Baggett 2014).

The 1968 movement has not been forgotten and the underlying spirit is still evident in contemporary activism of the Left and the Church in support of undocumented immigrants. (Stangler 2013).

May '68 also influences revolutions of our times, including the Arab Spring. (Deaton 2013).

The posters have become a symbol of strikes. (McNamara 2010).

Immigration is still an issue in France and posters are also used by some organisations. (McNamara 2010).

The spirit is still relevant, but technological advancement has surely changed how people express themselves e.g. through social media (Vermes 2011).

The posters provided a window for feeling the spirit of the movement (Deaton 2013).



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