A Design Report & Analysis
by Deepa Rao

2014
Graphic Design Analysis
Steam Ships & Oceanic Travel

In the early 20th century (1920s-1930s), the development of steam-powered ships facilitated transoceanic travel on a large scale. As a result of this technological advancement, shipping companies started building commercial ocean liners for passenger travel. Over time, the technology and design of the ocean liners improved and competition between the companies increased. Advertisement was essential to support businesses. In particular, travel posters were used to promote the luxurious ocean liners and the novel prospect of traveling around the world.¹

Masters of poster art, such as Adolphe Mouron (A.M.) Cassandre, created commercial posters that used modern graphic design influences and a balance of text and imagery to effectively advertise travel. Cassandre’s L’Atlantique is an iconic example of travel poster art from the 1930s that simultaneously showcased the grand ocean liner, transoceanic travel, and the company and travel route. Cassandre’s style integrated Art Deco and Cubism, that together gave this and his other posters a distinctively modern aesthetic.² The modern style of Cassandre’s L’Atlantique echoes the modern “machine age” design of oceanic liners and technology’s new affordance of commercial transoceanic travel.³
A.M. Cassandre

A.M. Cassandre (1901-1968) was a French-Ukrainian commercial poster artist, painter, and typeface designer, whose poster design style greatly influenced advertising art. His progressive poster designs were deeply influenced by Cubism and Art Deco. His striking posters contained highly stylized, reduced, geometric imagery, which he created through “simplifying natural forms into almost pictographic silhouettes.” Cassandre considered himself foremost a poster designer. He believed that,

“THE ARTIST EXPRESSES HIMSELF, BUT
THE DESIGNER DOES NOT--HIS JOB IS
TO COMMUNICATE MESSAGES.”

Cubism & Art Deco

In Cassandre’s ocean liner posters, Art Deco and Cubism combine to highlight both the novel prospect of transoceanic travel and the advanced steamship technology.

Cubism is an artistic style that aims to represent three-dimensional objects as two-dimensional abstractions. It reduces rounded forms to more hard-edged geometric shapes and often integrates multiple views of a single object through its spatial organization of shapes. In Cubism, the composition of bold lines and planes combine to create a dynamic image.

Art Deco is a style that represented the luxury and modern technological progress of the 1920s and 1930s. It is characterized by bold colors and precise geometric shapes. As historian Bevis Hillier defined Art Deco as, “an assertively modern style [that] ran to symmetry rather than asymmetry, and to the rectilinear rather than the curvilinear; it responded to the demands of the machine and of the new material [and] the requirements of mass production.”

Along with his bold, simple, geometric images, Cassandre’s work is notable for its unified composition of text and imagery. Cassandre was a letterform enthusiast. He developed several typefaces, including Bifur, Peignot, Acier Noir, Cassandre, and Touraine. In his work, type and image complemented each other; bold, sans-serif fonts enhanced the strong, crisp lines of his images. His interest in typography extended into his poster designs, giving his posters an unique aesthetic impact and ability to concisely convey a message.
L’Atlantique

*L’Atlantique* is an exemplar of Cassandre’s talent for graphic design and effective advertisement. *L’Atlantique* was the largest and most luxurious ocean liner to travel the Europe to South America transit. Owned by the Compagnie de Navigation Sud Atlantique (the South Atlantic Navigation Company), this ocean liner was massive but delicately decorated with an ornate Art Deco interior. A design analysis of Cassandre’s *L’Atlantique* illuminates how design enhances the impact of this poster to entice the public to revel in the grandeur of this ocean liner and perhaps spur their interest to embark on a voyage.

First, a quick visual tour is best to highlight important elements of the design. Immediately, the eye follows the bold white line on the ocean liner prow curves downward, drawing the eye across the ship and towards the hazy smoke. The fluffy diagonal line of smoke connects the ships. The ships are unified through their similar colors and geometric forms, despite their extreme difference in scale. Starting at the horizon line, ocean water is represented with a gradient wash of deeper blue water at the surface that fades to a light turquoise that pulls the eye downward to the text. Lastly, the bold sans-serif font aligns with the geometric shapes of the ships. The text has a hierarchy denoted by color that simultaneously creates unity and balance with the other components in the design.
Cassandre's unique perspective, style, and ability to integrate text and imagery enabled his poster designs to convey a strong visual message. The modern style highlighted the import elements of the ocean liner, its steam power, grandeur, and prospect of travel; while the text succinctly stated the most important information. Just as his Cubist reduction of the ocean liner’s form, Cassandre’s text was reduced to the bare essentials.

For comparison, Paul Theodore Etbauer’s (1892-1975) Hamburg-Amerika Line (circa 1934) portrays a similar scene of a monolithic steamship ocean liner alongside small tugboats. The three-dimensional perspective of this poster contrasts with the highly reduced two-dimensional Cubist lines and planes of Cassandre’s *L’Atlantique*. Although these posters were created approximately three years apart (1931 vs. 1934), the modern stylistic elements of Cassandre’s design are evident when juxtaposed with the rounded forms of Etbauer’s poster. Similarly, while text is overlaid atop the smoke, ocean liner, and water in Etbauer’s posters; text in Cassandre’s poster is balanced and aligned with the geometric forms of the ocean liner.
Visual Analysis

Point, line, and plane in the poster design are emphasized through the contrast and connection of color. Cassandre printed his posters via a color lithography process, allowing him to achieve bright washes of color in the final product. L’Atlantique has an analogous color scheme of orange, yellow, green, and blue. Additionally large planes of black, white, and grey create contrast between different geometric elements of the ships. The smoke connects the yellow stacks of the ocean liner and tugboat. The fluffy smoke softens the hard geometrical lines of the ships and disrupts the grid structure, adding dynamism to the design. Furthermore, the smoke is ashy orange color that contrasts with the deep blacks and blues of the ships. The white stripe of the ocean liner is echoed in the curved white line on the prow of the tugboat, creating unity.

The Cubist and Art Deco colors, lines, and planes of the two ships help to simultaneously define a visual hierarchy and balance between the ships. The illusion of a three-dimensional, curved hull is suggested by the curved form that extends from the black rectangular plane. This is an example of how Cassandre was able to reduce a three-dimensional shape to a two-dimensional representation in a Cubist manner. The black prows of the ocean liner and tugboat are juxtaposed to reveal the drastic difference in scale. This visual comparison makes the ocean liner appear monolithic and grand. The deep black plane of the ocean liner creates a backdrop for the tugboat is almost like another sky, because the perspective of the hull is flattened. Cassandre’s play with perspective and space adds a Surrealist feel to the poster design.

A.M. Cassandre revolutionized poster art through his modern Cubist and Art Deco style combination and ability to visually unify text and imagery to succinctly communicate and advertise modern ocean liners.

L’Atlantique has a prominent grid structure that frames the placement of the ocean liner, tugboat, and text. The images and text are separated by a diving horizon line; but connected through a fading gradient wash of blue to turquoise-green water that lays behind the text. The text “Par le Paquebot” mirrors the width of the ocean liner. Color is vital part of this design as it unifies text and imagery. The bold black text emphasizes the ship’s name and visually parallels L’Atlantique’s deep, black hull and monolithic stature. The turquoise-green company name at the bottom continues the graphic illusion of water. The gradient wash of color is aligned with the grid that mostly bounds the ocean liner, and in a way acts like a reflection of the ship in water. The structured grid design of this poster aligns and unifies the image of the ocean liner and the advertising text that identifies the company and travel route (Compagnie de Navigation Sud-Atlantique).
The fonts chosen for this design analysis report were designed by A.M. Cassandre.\textsuperscript{8}

\textbf{Bifur} (1927) is the quintessential art deco font. The typeface alludes to the full form of the letters, but the eye must fill in the midding portions.

\textbf{Peignot} (1937) is an attempt to revive earlier roman alphabet. The lowercase letters are small capitals except for b, d, and f. The small H, K, and L have ascending strokes.

\begin{center}
\textbf{References}
\end{center}


