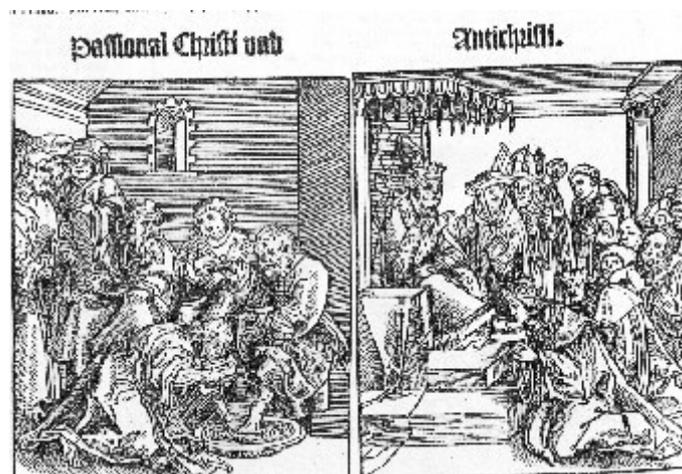


**E. H. Gombrich, Art and Propaganda, The Listener, 7 December, 1939, pp.1118-20 [Trapp no.1939B.1]**

Of late the word “propaganda” has acquired so shrill an overtone that one almost hesitates to couple it with art. But if we forget for a moment that sinister modern technique, which gradually converts human beings into something like mental robots, and take the word in its original meaning as the “propagation” of ideas or values, then it is not difficult to see that art and propaganda have at least one common frontier. Aesthetics of bygone days could even name the realm where poetry and propaganda meet : rhetoric, the art of verbal persuasion. Persuasion through the eye, pictorial propaganda, was far from holding a similar rank in theory, but in practice its possibilities have always been exploited.

A little known incident, related by the Czech chronicler Václav Hájek (1541), may serve to illustrate its effect in far remote days. In the year 1404 two English students of theology Jacobus and Conradus from “Kandelburg” (Canterbury) came to the University of Prague. They proved to be so fond of discussion and of raising unorthodox questions concerning the Pope and his spiritual powers that they were suspected of Wyclifite heresies and were finally warned to guard their tongues lest they came to grief. The threat silenced them but could not make them surrender. They asked the innkeeper of the *Black Scythe* where they had taken lodgings, a certain Lucas Wlensky, to allow them to have one of his rooms decorated. When he gladly consented to such an unexpected offer, they ordered a painter to represent on one side of the hall the life and passion of Christ in all its humble simplicity, and on the wall opposite the life and conduct of the Pope in all its contrasting pomp and glory. No comment was needed. We may well imagine the sensation which these pictures caused at Prague. Jan Hus, then a young priest, approved of them publicly in his sermons, and incidentally the *Black Scythe* must have prospered.

The subject, inspired by the two Englishmen, was long to survive the occasion of its origin. Illuminated manuscripts kept the tradition alive through the storm and devastation of the Husite wars till it was taken up, after more than a century, by Martin Luther. Luther had no longer to rely on the publicity of the pub. When he ordered his friend, Lucas Cranach, to print a series of woodcuts, which exploited the same contrast with coarse but pungent emphasis (Fig. 1, 2), he initiated a violent and ruthless pamphlet war against papal authority which persisted with varying intensity throughout the religious strifes in Germany and France.



Since these days the output of political imagery has steadily increased. In the seventeenth century the Dutch Netherlands were a political storm centre which showered propaganda prints all over Europe. During the reign of the Georges the lead shifted to England, and there was soon no major or minor crisis in this country which was not reflected in an outburst of pictorial satire. In the year 1784 alone, for instance, with its excitements over the hotly contested Westminster election between Fox and the adherents of Pitt, no fewer than 325 political prints were produced. Pitt seems to have been particularly alive to the potentialities of this weapon. On his persistent fight against the French Revolution and its sequel, Napoleon, he was powerfully assisted by propagandists of the rank of Gillray and Rowlandson. The nineteenth century has canalised and rationalised pictorial propaganda in the satirical weeklies, while at the same time the penetration of political cartoons into the daily press and the political poster has given it a new and effective platform.

This frequency and intensity of visual propaganda throughout the ages need not surprise us. The picture has a kind of appeal which can never be achieved by the word alone, however great its power. To hear about a fact is one thing, to see it before one's eyes another. No modern publicity expert could put it better than Horace, cleverly Englished in a seventeenth-century broadside:

The Mind is slower wrought on by the Ear  
Than by the Eye, which makes things plain appear.

To make things "plain appear" simply and silently has sometimes been the most powerful effect of great propaganda artists. Among Daumier's 4,000 odd lithographs there is perhaps none more stirring than the one that portrays with grim objective realism the interior of a proletarian home at Rue Transnonain after the ruthless quelling of revolt under Louis Philippe (Fig 3).



But pictorial art can do more. It can give visual reality to the wishes and desires of the masses. It can show the menacing opponent as humiliated and defeated, pilloried, hanging on the gallows or tortured in hell. The persistent popularity of this device among the more robust strata of society calls for a psychological explanation: to paint an opponent under the gibbet is obviously not far removed from hanging him in effigy, and this in turn is an unconscious expression of the magical belief that the harm done to the dummy will exert its effect on the hated adversary. To this primitive gratification, art has

later added the more subtle pleasure of seeing the enemy distorted and epitomised in the magic mirror of caricature.

So marked is indeed the superiority of the picture's appeal that propaganda art has never ceased trying to translate the most complex constellations of the political chessboard into visual terms. Since the fourteenth century when Cola di Rienzi supported his oratory by exhibiting pictures on the market place, showing Roma as a desolate woman or the ship of state in peril, the methods and patterns of this symbolism have changed but little. They are often those of primitive picture-writing, because to emulate the elasticity of speech, words, not facts, have sometimes to be translated into pictorial form. From time immemorial the figures of speech have lent themselves particularly well to such transformation. Great and small have represented the "torch of enlightenment", the "balance of power" or the "screw of taxation", great and small have depicted the Russian bear, the Gallic cock or the Napoleonic eagle. And what to many became the pitfall of overcrowded "Hieroglyphicks" – as the eighteenth century used to call this type of "cartoon" – can acquire the grandeur of a phantastic vision under the hands of a giant like Goya (Fig. 4).



Fig. 4. Goya. The Napoleonic Eagle, strangled and thrown out of Spain.

And yet if we look back on this arsenal of political imagery we cannot help feeling that its appeal is pictorial rather than artistic. In other words, a broadside may be excellent propaganda without being art at all. Most of it was created for the day and has deservedly vanished with it. But is propaganda really only to be found in these ephemeral productions? Had it never a say in the creation of great art? Surely it had. Wherever art was employed by might it had somehow to serve its aim. From this point of view Raphael's glorification of the church, in his frescoes at the Vatican, are no less propaganda than Cranach's abuse of that very same power. But experience shows that when the arts are too tightly bound to the triumphal car of a victorious power the effect can be rather disastrous. The trumpet of fame is not a musical instrument. If there are works of art among the pompous glorifications of the "Roi Soleil" or of Napoleon's victories, they are works of art in spite of their being propaganda, not because of it. It may give rise to curious reflections that generally speaking opposition has more chance of finding genuine and even artistic expression than official adulation. Hatred may be a vice, but it is a passion in whose intensity we are ready to believe. Loyalty is undoubtedly a virtue but its expression in art is more often than not priggish or boring. Propaganda "anti" has the weapon of wit always at hand, propaganda "pro" must move the heart, and if it fails to do so it becomes stale and philistine. What hopeless results had not Diderot's exhortations to his friend the painter J. B. Greuze, that he should depict the alluring qualities of bourgeois life and glorify the charm of happy family with as many children as possible! It gives a kind of foretaste of the results of a similar effort, magnified through totalitarian efficiency, in the official art – and there is no other – of the Third Reich.

But in spite of so much evidence to the contrary, power *can* succeed in making art its spokesman. If it is only broadminded enough to foster its growth without interfering, art in itself, art pure and simple, becomes the most powerful, the most lasting propaganda. It appeals to a quality mankind as a whole does not lack, whatever pessimists may say – to its gratitude. Conscientious historians may produce documentary proof that Lorenzo de' Medici was really a financial gambler and political failure, that he brought his house near to bankruptcy, and that his schemings were partly responsible both for the Turkish raids on South Italy and for the French invasion – to us he will remain "Il Magnifico" because he caused Botticelli to paint the "Primavera" and the "Birth of Venus" and because a young sculptor worked in his garden and sat at his table whose name was Michelangelo Buonarroti.