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| Pick, Frank (1878-1941) |
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| Frank Pick was a design patron and early champion of modernism in Britain. As the head of London Transport, he transformed the company into the world’s most advanced public transport system and developed a corporate identity based on radical modernist aesthetics. Under his enlightened patronage, the city’s stations, posters and signage presented a unified visual style that gave London Transport an instantly recognisable brand, while helping to introduce modernism to a sceptical British public. |
| Frank Pick was a design patron and early champion of modernism in Britain. As the head of London Transport, he transformed the company into the world’s most advanced public transport system and developed a corporate identity based on radical modernist aesthetics. Under his enlightened patronage, the city’s stations, posters and signage presented a unified visual style that gave London Transport an instantly recognisable brand, while helping to introduce modernism to a sceptical British public.  File: Frank Pick.jpg  Frank Pick 1  Source: <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Frank_Pick#/media/File:Frank_Pick,_1939.jpg>  Pick was born into a Congregationalist family in Spalding, Lincolnshire. He studied law at London University and qualified as a solicitor in 1902. He joined the North Eastern Railway Company as a management trainee and became a personal assistant to the general manager Sir George Gibb. When Gibb was appointed chairman of the Underground Electric Railways Company of London in 1906 he invited his ambitious assistant to accompany him.  In 1908, Pick was appointed publicity officer to the Underground Group, which ran London’s subterranean rail network. Despite having no experience in the field, he instinctively recognised that the company’s marketing strategy was inconsistent and ineffective. Pick commissioned artists to produce colour lithographic posters to persuade Londoners to travel to resorts on its network. This increased passenger traffic by encouraging people to use the service in their leisure time. Crucially, Pick recognised that the posters would be more effective if they were designed with a unified graphic style. To maximise impact, he also standardised poster sizes, limited the number used, and controlled their placement.  In 1916, eager to improve London Underground’s wayfinding signage, Pick commissioned the calligrapher Edward Johnston (1872-1944) to develop a typeface that would belong ‘unmistakably to the 20th century’. Based on Roman fonts, yet with a strong sense of geometry, Johnston Sans was designed to optimise legibility for passengers when viewed at speed from a moving train. Impressed by his work on the new typeface, Pick asked Johnston to redesign the company’s roundel logo in 1918. The new design was based on pure geometric forms, consisting of a red circle bisected by a horizontal blue band.  File: Edward Johnston’s roundel, 1918.jpg  Edward Johnston’s roundel, 1918 1  Source: Image can be found at <https://londonparticulars.wordpress.com/2011/10/09/i-get-a-roundel/>  During the 1930s, Pick commissioned avant-garde artists to design posters for London Underground. Innovative posters by Edward McKnight Kauffer, Graham Sutherland, Hans Schleger and László Moholy-Nagy were instrumental in exposing Londoners to modern art. Most notably, the Surrealist Man Ray created a poster entitled ‘London Transport Keeps London Going’ (1939), which celebrated the modernity of Johnston’s roundel by juxtaposing it with a planet in orbit. Believing in the didactic power of art and design, Pick used the booking hall at Charing Cross station as a venue for exhibitions.  The underground system itself was a labyrinthine network of tunnels dating from the Victorian period, and the existing map was notoriously difficult to understand. As a solution, Pick commissioned draughtsman Harry Beck (1903-1974) to design a replacement (1931). Working on his dining room table, Beck expelled all inessential information in the interests of visual clarity and functionalism. Recognising that the physical location of stations was irrelevant - only their sequence within the network mattered - his design was therefore a schematic diagram rather than a map per se. Basing his design on an electrical circuit, Beck represented each line with a different colour and the routes were simplified into vertical, horizontal and diagonal lines. An example of modernism at its best, the map proved that the utopian concept of ideal design solutions was not entirely misguided. London Transport was initially sceptical of the radical design, but it proved so popular with commuters that it was swiftly adopted as the standard Underground map and has since been emulated by public transport systems around the world.  Pick’s innovative design programme was also applied to station architecture. Dozens of new tube stations were built in London, particularly along the Piccadilly Line after it was extended in 1930. Pick travelled with architect Charles Holden (1875-1960) in Germany, Denmark, Sweden and the Netherlands to seek inspiration. The new stations used geometric detailing, exposed brickwork and bold cylindrical or rectangular structures, revealing the influence of Dutch modernist Willem Dudok (1884-1974).  File: Harry Beck's Map of the London Underground.jpg  Harry Beck's map of the Underground 1  Source: Image can be found at <https://gurcanartdesignandcontext2.wordpress.com/edward-johnston-and-london-transport/>  Pick's interest in design extended beyond his own organisation. He was a founder of the Design and Industries Association in 1915 and the first chairman of the Council for Art and Industry in 1932. He wrote and lectured extensively on design and town planning, and authored the introduction to the English translation of Walter Gropius's *The New Architecture and the Bauhaus* (1935).  File: Charles Holden, Chiswick Park Station, 1931-32.jpg  Chiswick Park Station, 1931-32 1  Source: Author provided <https://www.flickr.com/photos/47071837@N02/5514650966/>; however, that appears to be a dead link.  Pick resigned from London Transport in 1940 and was appointed director of the Ministry of Information, an important post in Britain’s war effort. Disliking honours, he eschewed a knighthood and a peerage, but did accept the Soviet Union's Honorary Badge of Merit for his advice on the construction of the Moscow metro system, and was an honorary member of the Royal Institute of British Architects. Pick died in 1941, after the publication of his book, *Paths to Peace*, a personal manifesto on the theme of town planning. After his death, the architectural historian Sir Nikolaus Pevsner described Pick as ‘the greatest patron of the arts whom this century has so far produced in England and indeed the ideal patron of our age.’ List of Works (1941) *Paths to Peace: two essays in aims and methods*. London: George Routledge and Sons.  (1922) *This is the World that Man Made, or The New Creation*. Privately published pamphlet. |
| Further reading:  (Barman)  (Day and Reed) (Glover)  (Green)  (Green, Underground Art: London Transport Posters, 1908 to the Present)  (Menear)  (Orsini)  (Wolmar) |