# FOUR SIX THREE

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LONDON CALLING

## GOING UNDERGROUND: HARRY BECK AND THE ICONIC TUBE MAP

## GIACOMETTI AT THE TATE: AFTER 50 YEARS, THE PRODIGAL SON RE-TURNS

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## HARRY BECK AND LONDON'S ICONIC TUBE MAP

BY DAN CARRIER

The tube map almost never made it out of its creator's notebook. The designer was Harry Beck, a young draughtsman who drew electrical circuits for the Underground. Beck's biographer, Ken Garland, befriended him in the 1950s, and before the designer's death in 1974 he uncovered the story behind the creation of what Beck called "the diagram".

"As a native of a small village in Devon and moving to London to study art, I found the metropolis impossible to navigate," Garland recalls. "I would get on the tube and see Harry's diagram. London suddenly made sense, and so I asked people at the college if they knew who the designer was."


Garland was told that HC Beck could be found at the London College of Printing, where he taught part-time, and he paid him a visit. They soon became friends.

Beck first drew his diagram in 1931 – a difficult time to be working for the newly established London Transport Passenger Board. With money tight, the board's employees could be laid off at short notice. Beck, then 29, had been employed as a "temporary" since he first started in 1925. While at work drawing an electrical circuit diagram, he had an idea: a new map that would raise the profile of the tube and attract much-needed new passengers, and that would make the system seem modern, quick, efficient – and, above all, easier to navigate.


At the time, the maps of the network showed individual lines run by different railway companies. It was geographically correct, but impossible to read. The lines snaked all over the place. The first map, published in 1908, betrayed the fact that different operators were competing with each other and could not agree where the Underground ended.

Harry laid out London's Underground routes as he would a circuit board, and took it to the publicity department. He told Garland: "Looking at the old map of the railways, it occurred to me that it might be possible to tidy it up by straightening the lines, experimenting with diagonals and evening out the distances between stations."

"He was modest," recalls Garland. "He'd quietly taken the diagram to them and said: 'You may be interested in this.' The publicity chiefs replied: "You can't do it like this – the public will be really confused by the idea, no one will understand it.' "

His idea was dismissed as ridiculous – people couldn't understand why it wasn't


geographically accurate – and later he was laid off. Beck's dismissal made him suspicious of London Underground. He chose to sell the idea to them as a freelancer (for just ten guineas), giving him control over the future integrity of his design. But as work in his old office began to pick up, his former colleagues remembered him: they had appreciated his help in the tube workers' orchestra and, in 1933, he was back on board and pitching his idea again.

Garland continues: "Beck would not take no for an answer. He went back with a revised copy, and finally they agreed to produce a small print run of 1,000 fold-out versions, put them in central London train stations and ask passengers for comments. One of the publicity team went to Piccadilly Circus and asked staff if anyone had been interested in the diagram. The maps had gone within an hour. Beck had been proved correct, and the publicity department arranged for a print run of 750,000."

Harry Beck was good news for the tube. Passenger numbers had leveled off, and they needed a bright idea to sell the Underground. "Beck's map was the catalyst," says Garland.

More than a million were in circulation within six months of being commissioned. Wall maps were next: Beck was paid a further five guineas to produce one. But for something that is so recognizable as a piece of "trademark" art, Harry Beck was not, according to Garland, part of the modernist movement that was sweeping through the pysche of painters, sculptors, other designers and filmmakers of the period. "He was not influenced by contemporary art," says Garland. "He knew little or nothing about it."

"The diagram", as Beck insisted it was called, was a lifelong obsession. As new routes were added, Beck would tinker with his design. He was constantly seeking to improve its clarity, and when the publicity department realized they had a hit on their hands, he had to fend off "helpful" suggestions from tube bosses.

"For the best part of 30 years, his home was turned over to the map," recalls Garland. "There were sketches all over the place. The front room would often have a massive copy spread out on the floor for Harry to pore over. His wife Nora would find, when making

## POSTER PARADE

After World War I, striking modern posters began to trans¬form the stations of London's underground railway system into public art galleries. The posters, now part of an exhibit at the Museum of Modern Art, were the crucial face of a pioneering public transport campaign for coherence and efficiency that also included station architecture, train interiors — and Harry Beck's map.