

Classic Posters - Psychedelic Lettering of the Sixties

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By Michael Erlewine

Another issue that I wondered about is where did all that crazy lettering come from? We know that Wes Wilson was the first to develop it, and it spread like wildfire after that. But where did he come across it? Wes Wilson is quick to point out how he happened on it.

In November of 1965, the University of California at Berkeley had a show on German Expressionist graphics, titled "Jugendstil and Expressionism." As we pointed out earlier, "Jugendstil" was the German equivalent of Art Nouveau. In that show was an artist and stage designer by the name of Alfred Roller, perhaps best known for his wonderful opera and theater set designs. Wilson, who attended the exhibit, came across some lettering on a poster by Alfred Roller that sparked his imagination.



Poster by Alfred Roller

Here is another sample of Roller's type:



Poster by Alfred Roller

Wes Wilson incorporated it into his poster work and soon took it to new and wonderful heights.



Poster by Wes Wilson

This lettering, which has come to be called 'psychedelic' lettering has even inspired a number of type fonts that feature this general style.

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**WAS WILSON WAS FASCINATED
BY THE LETTERING OF ALFRED ROLLER,
AND THE JUGENDSTYL MOVEMENT IN GERMANY,
FROM AROUND THE TURN OF THE CENTURY.
PSYCHEDELIC LETTERING WAS BORN!**

'Mojo' Adobe Typeface

There are a number other psychedelic-style type faces on the market, but Adobe's is probably the best of them.

There are many other early influences that are fun to look at and must have brought ideas of one kind or another to the Bay Area artists. A couple of cool artists to check out include Gustav Klimt and A.M. Cassandre, both with very different styles. Here are a couple of samples.



M.A. Cassandre Poster



Gustav Klimt Poster

The above comments are restricted for the most part to outlining some of the direct influences from earlier artists on the sixties artists. Of course, they brought a whole lot of their own -- of our own -- times to their work. The influence of consciousness-expanding drugs on the sixties and their art cannot be underestimated. Drugs like peyote and LSD, not only interrupted the linear sense of life that extended from the 1950's, but it brought with it a wide range of ideas, in particular of a spiritual, if not downright religious (whatever that is) nature. This opening in consciousness, these radical views of reality, really was the glue that held all of the images -- past and present -- together and made the posters effective. Through the sixties poster art, we were able to share and communicate a vision and draw together similar minds from all walks of life. Those posters were a signal of a common experience, not just an announcement for a music event.

Searching through art books or on the web for the above-names artists, some of the early influences of psychedelic art is satisfying and helps to put the whole sixties era into perspective, bringing a

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sense of continuity to what appears to
some of us almost as a singularity.

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