

At the final count

The Gerard Herbst Poster Collection

Steve Martin

Gerard Herbst was a tireless advocate for the power of the poster. He loved the synthesis of design principles found in the medium of poster art, and this appreciation compelled him to find a permanent home for his extensive collection of 20th-century international posters. Herbst donated his entire collection to the Ian Potter Museum of Art in 1996, where it would be named the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection and become part of the University of Melbourne Art Collection. This was a gift that both parties believed to be significant, important to exhibit, and a valuable resource for teaching and learning. Herbst wrote:

Poster art should become a cultural nucleus in between the powerful marketplace and this significant house of intellect THE UNIVERSITY OF MELBOURNE.

Ongoing exhibitions of this internationally practiced art will contribute to the comprehension of techniques, codes and cultures employed in the science of visual communication, psychology and architectural *Formgestaltung*.¹

Born in Dresden in 1911, Gerard Herbst emigrated to Australia in 1939 and settled in Melbourne.

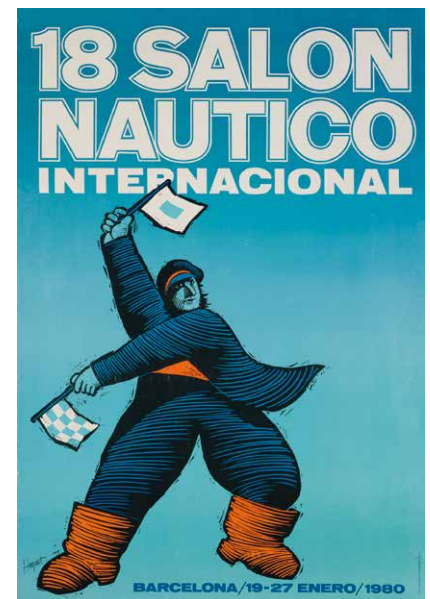
His formative years of education in Europe and success as a designer in the Australian textile industry equipped him with the skills to be a successful teacher. His dedication won him design awards and cemented his 16-year appointment as head lecturer of industrial design at the Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (now RMIT University), retiring in 1976.

Herbst connected with people through a shared passion to create, shape and form. He often used the German term *Formgestaltung* in his correspondence to speak of an international practice, which he also applied in his own work in industrial design: the creation of form 'not only physically but also intellectually, structurally'.² In French he translated it as *esthétique industrielle*.

Herbst liked to write his letters by hand, both in English and German, and built solid international relationships through correspondence and regular travel abroad. He sought creative alliances and ignited the enthusiastic discussion of ideas. His correspondence and international travel from the 1960s to the late 1980s was instrumental in the process of acquiring each item in the poster collection.

The collection travelled to the Potter in hundreds of cardboard

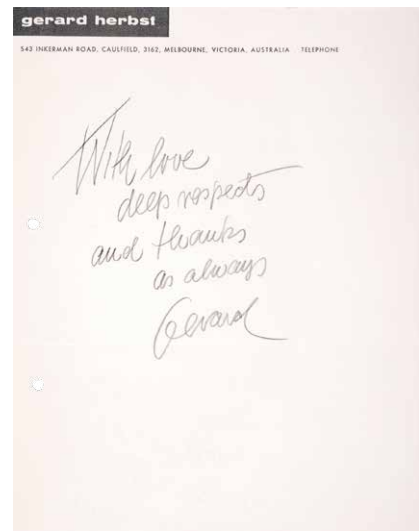
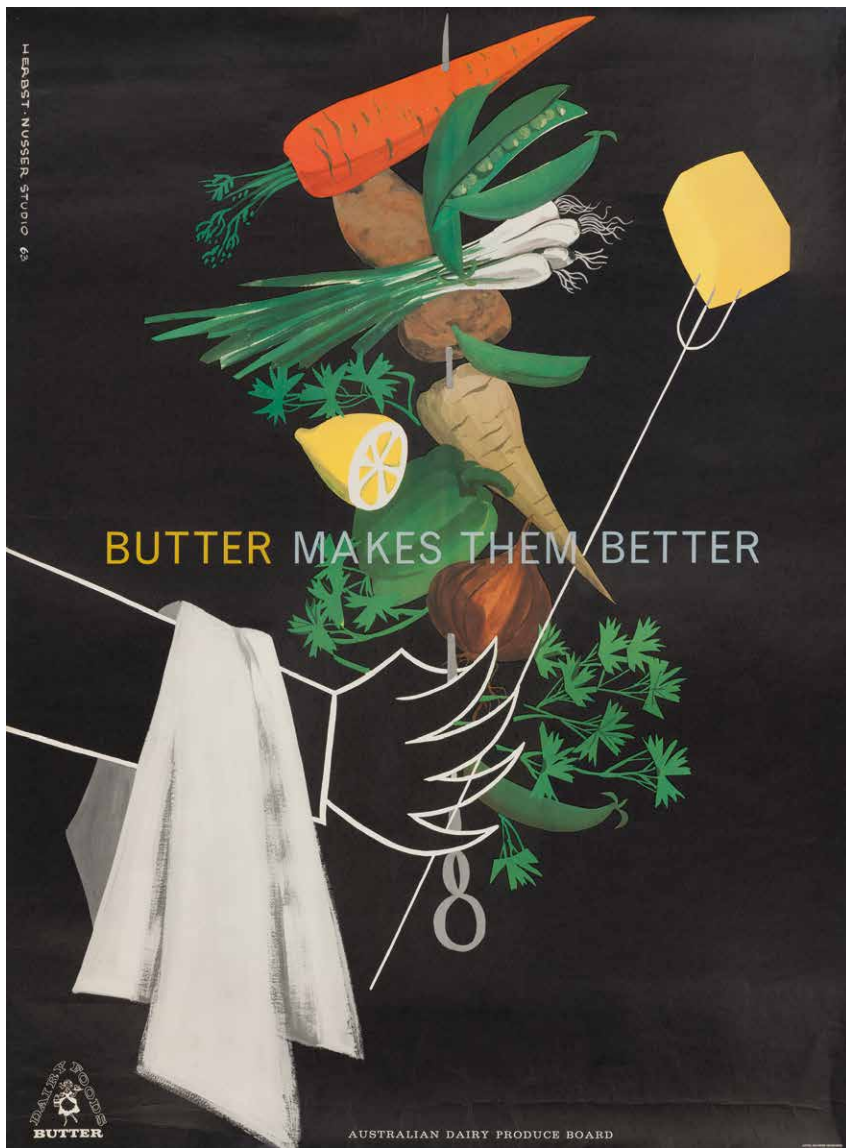
cylinders, accompanied by boxes of ancillary material: correspondence, essays and catalogues. The cylinders are postage-stamped from international locations and labelled by hand, each inscription pointing to the origin of the posters and signposting Herbst's collecting path. The Potter invited University of Melbourne students to assist with the work of unwrapping the sizeable gift. For over a decade, dozens of students completed placements in which they gained professional knowledge of museum preservation and cataloguing techniques by working hands-on



Previous page and front cover: Enric Huguet (artist and designer); Barcelona International Boat Show (publisher); *18 Salon Nautico Internacional, Barcelona* (18th International Boat Show, Barcelona), 1979, colour offset lithograph, sheet: 98.5 × 68.0 cm. Reg. no. 1996.3889, gift of Gerard Herbst 1996, University of Melbourne Art Collection. © Reproduced courtesy of the artist.

Below: Gerard Herbst (artist and designer) for Nusser Studio; McLaren & Co. (printer) for the Australian Dairy Produce Board (publisher); *Butter makes them better*, 1963, colour offset lithograph, sheet: 97.0 × 73.0 cm. Reg. no. 1996.3738, gift of Gerard Herbst 1996, University of Melbourne Art Collection. © Reproduced courtesy of the estate of Gerard Herbst and the Australian Dairy Produce Board.

Below: Gerard Herbst, donation correspondence with the Ian Potter Museum of Art, August 1996. Administration file, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne. © Reproduced courtesy of the estate of Gerard Herbst.



with the poster collection. In fact, the large majority of the collection was accessioned, flattened and safely housed thanks to the work of these students, the final count of 2,581 posters being completed in 2013.

The process of accessioning the gift identified seven posters designed by Herbst (see example left) and a suite of 54 posters designed by Čestmír Pechr (b. 1926), a Czechoslovakian poster artist favoured by Herbst. The collection holds works by internationally recognised artists such as Leonard Cusden (see example opposite), Guy Georget, Michalis Katzourakis, Milton Glaser, Heinz Edelmann

Right: Gerard Herbst. Photograph by Eamon Gallagher. Supplied by Fairfax Media.

Below: Leonard Cusden (artist and designer); Loxley Bros (printer) for Royal Society for the Prevention of Accidents (publisher); *Good stacks don't fall*, c. 1941, colour (split-duct) offset lithograph, sheet: 74.5 × 49.0 cm. Reg. no. 1996.3025, gift of Gerard Herbst, 1996, University of Melbourne Art Collection. © Reproduced courtesy of RoSPA.



and Kazumasa Nagai. Significant items in the collection are posters created by Poland's seminal poster artists: Tadeusz Trepkowski, Henryk Tomaszewski and Eryk Lipiński.

Herbst believed the collection could serve as a rich resource for teaching, and this was one of his motivations for making the gift, saying: 'My intention that the ART based poster should form part of the studies of visual communication here in Australia is nothing more than that which is practiced internationally'.⁴ Most recently, the Potter's Academic Programs unit hosted students from the Department of Political Science in the Faculty of Arts, who were undertaking the newly introduced subject Latin America



in the World. The students viewed an Argentinean poster to prompt discussion about the historical and cultural contexts of Latin America that underpin contemporary political and economic issues, while developing skills in visual observation and verbal communication. This is just one example among a program of tutorials where academics have used the poster collection to assist with teaching.

From the outset, Herbst recognised the local and international interest in the collection and the potential to create donor relationships with poster museums in Europe, the United States and Japan. New donors were petitioned to follow Herbst's lead and soon the prominent poster museum in Warsaw, Wilanów Muzeum Plakatu, donated to the Potter 13 posters complementing those already held in the collection.

In 2013, Melbourne-based collector and curator Geoff Wallis gave to the Potter 140 significant Polish posters from his personal collection. Wallis donated the posters after participating—with Alain Le Querrec (France) and Mark Gowing (Australia)—in the discussion panel *Plakat Polski* (Polish posters), held at the Potter for the international design forum, *agidea*. *Plakat Polski* coincided with the Potter's exhibition *Polish posters 1952–1985*, which featured

65 significant Polish posters from the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection.

Life's experience armed Herbst with a keen eye, along with the sensibility, motivation and intellect necessary to amass a significant collection. Herbst died in 2011 but his collection of poster art is now appreciated by the staff of the Potter, University of Melbourne academics and students, and the wider community.

Steve Martin is collections and exhibitions officer at the Ian Potter Museum of Art. He has worked with University of Melbourne students on the Gerard Herbst Poster Collection since 2007. He has a Bachelor of Arts (fine art) from Curtin University and a Graduate Certificate of Museum Studies from Deakin University.

The Gerard Herbst Poster Collection is part of the **University of Melbourne Art Collection**, housed at the Ian Potter Museum of Art: www.art-museum.unimelb.edu.au.

- 1 Gerard Herbst, exhibition correspondence to the Ian Potter Museum of Art, May 1996. Administration file, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
- 2 Helen Arnoldi (revised and corrected by Gerard Herbst), transcript of oral history interview, Gerard Herbst in conversation with Gaby Eisen, 9 December 2003. Administration file, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.
- 3 Arnoldi, transcript.
- 4 Gerard Herbst, donation correspondence to the Ian Potter Museum of Art, 31 July 1996. Administration file, Ian Potter Museum of Art, University of Melbourne.