

The Enchanting Years – A Donation from the Kwan Family

Introduction

Early advertising posters took the form of meticulously painted pictures printed with a calendar; hence the term “calendar posters”. The majority of calendar posters of the 1920s and 30s were dominated by the image of a beautiful lady, with the product, the trade mark and the catchy phrase relegated to less conspicuous places. This lady, well proportioned and of graceful bearing, was carefully made up and dressed in the height of fashion. She embodied the ideal of feminine beauty of the time, which prized allure and glamour – a radical departure from the ideal of sedate beauty of earlier times. Calendar posters were printed by the colour lithography process. They preserve the painters’ meticulous draftsmanship, reveal aesthetic tastes, as well as record the goods which were popular at the time. They can be enjoyed as visual artefacts, or used as indicators of fashion and economic well-being.

Since 1997, the Hong Kong Heritage Museum has been collecting Hong Kong’s old advertising posters with a view to developing a systematic and representative collection for research, education and exhibition purposes. Up till now, several hundred advertising posters, hand-drawn originals and products labels have been acquired.

Renowned as “The King of Calendar Poster”, Kwan Wai-nung was the most important poster artist in Hong Kong in the 1920s and 1930s. Focusing on how he developed his artwork as well as on his artistic style, this article also introduced the history of the Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press that established by Kwan and the lithographic printing technique prevalent at the time.



Poster of Bakilly Cosmetics Co. Ltd.
 Hong Kong
 1920s – 1930s
 89.5(L) 51(W) cm



Poster of Kwong Sang Hong Ltd.
 Hong Kong
 1933
 71.5(L) 49(W) cm

Images of beautiful ladies were the common features found in the commercial posters of the 1920s and 1930s.

1999.82.15

2001.32.13

Kwan Wai-nung

Kwan Wai-nung (1880-1956) was a native of Xiqiao, Nanhai county, Guangdong province. He learnt to paint in both the Chinese and the western manner from an early age. During a residence of nearly fifty years in Hong Kong, he worked as a commercial artist, designing and printing advertising material. His achievement was recognized in the accolade “King of the Calendar Poster”.

Kwan moved to Hong Kong around 1905. In the beginning he was employed by Man Yu Tong Bookstore. With the publication in 1909 of “*Twin Beauties Embroidering a Flag*” painted with watercolours in western style, Kwan came to public awareness. In 1911 he was hired by the *South China Morning Post* as art director, concurrently responsible for the lithographic press. When Gao Jianfu (1879-1951) founded the magazine *Truth Pictorial* in Shanghai in 1912, he used two of Kwan’s watercolours on the cover of the inaugural and the second numbers. Such high-profile publicity brought Kwan to the notice of the Shanghai art circle. From the time he founded Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press in 1915, Kwan not only immersed himself in designing and printing advertisements. He still managed to find time to paint in the Chinese style for his own amusement. Unfortunately only very few of these have been preserved. In the mid 1930s, Kwan accepted an invitation to hold an exhibition in Guangzhou. In 1940 he published the *Chinese Water-colour Painting*, for which he selected his best works. In old age he handed Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press over to his son, and devoted his energy to painting.

In amalgamating western and Chinese techniques, Kwan created a unique style for commercial art. Having been taught from an early age to paint in the western manner by his elder brother Kwan Kin-hing, Kwan Wai-nung mastered the techniques of chiaroscuro and perspective, and used them in his paintings for calendar posters. The brothers had inherited an artistic legacy from their great-grandfather, Kwan Tso-lam



Portrait of Kwan Wai-nung

(active 1830-1850). Generally known by the name Lamqua, he was a celebrated 19th Century Guangzhou painter of pictures for export, and the pupil of the English artist George Chinnery who lived for a time in Guangzhou. Apart from the family heritage in western painting, Kwan Wai-nung also studied traditional Chinese painting from Ju Lian, whose innovative ways of handling water and pigments he greatly admired. Among his fellow pupils were Gao Jianfu, Wu Yizhuang and Chen Shuren.

Original Paintings by Kwan Wai-nung



Original painting of poster –
Beauty with lychees

Hong Kong

1920s – 1930s

20(L) 12(W) cm

1999.82.65



Original painting of calendar poster –
The Beauty

Hong Kong

1920s – 1930s

76.3(L) 50.9(W) cm

1999.82.63



Original painting – The Beauty

Hong Kong

1920s – 1930s

71.8(L) 31.2(W) cm

2000.1.5

Early Advertising Poster Design

The lady who almost invariably adorns the advertising poster of the 1920s and 1930s was either a classical beauty in traditional attire or a modern beauty dressed in high fashion. Occasionally there would be a line or two of verse appropriate to the subject. The name of the company is generally at the top, the calendar and the product being promoted are placed at the bottom. The entire composition would be enframed by plain lines, floral or geometric motifs. The same beautiful lady may be used on several different posters. This is evidenced by pencil marks indication positions or signs where images of various products had been pasted. Some popular subjects, such as Mulan Joining the Army, would be used repeatedly on various calendar posters.

According to Kwan Wai-nung's son Kwan Cho-leung, Hong Kong society in the 1920s and 1930s was still conservative. The early models were actually men posing as women. Later, Kwan Wai-nung studied photographs reproduced in books in order to depict feminine forms and postures. He and his sons would regularly visit book shops in Hollywood Road to obtain books, periodicals, fashion magazines, postcards and photographs of film star. From these, they would select certain elements of a face or a figure and combine them to form a required image. As the artist was working out a pose, he would ask some of the women in the Kwan household to pose for him. Kwan Cho-leung's wife served as model in this way on more than one occasion.



Poster of Bit Tak Sing Pharmacy

Hong Kong

1920s – 1930s

76.5(L) 51(W) cm

1999.82.13



Original painting of poster –

Pretty women playing with flowers

Hong Kong

1920s – 1930s

74.1(L) 49.2(W) cm

2000.1.49

Kwan Wai-nung would ask women in his household to pose as models for him or select certain elements of a face or a figure from books, periodicals, fashion magazines, postcards and photographs for creating the images of ladies in the posters.



Original painting of poster –
Wing On Co. Ltd.
Hong Kong
1920s – 1930s
20(L) (W)12 cm

1998.172.13



Original painting of poster –
Bakilly Cosmetics Co. Ltd.
Hong Kong
1920s – 1930s
74.8(L) 49.5(W) cm

2000.1.18



Calendar poster of J.S. Fry & Sons. Ltd.

Hong Kong

1931

76.5(L) 51.5(W) cm

1999.82.26



Calendar poster of The Tokio Marine and Fire Insurance Co. Ltd.

Hong Kong

1924

77(L) 51(W) cm

1999.82.32

Establishment of Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press

When Kwan Wai-nung founded Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press in 1915, he took personal charge of the planning and management of poster design and printing. He personally painted the principal pictorial images, the trade marks, the floral and geometric borders, and did the lettering. He also arranged the individual elements within the picture area. Finally, when the design was finished, he supervised the printing at Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press. Here was the opportunity to exploit to the full knowledge and skill he gained in lithography during his days in Man Yu Tong Bookstore and the *South China Morning Post*. From 1915 to the early 1930s, the company's business expanded rapidly and Kwan won almost total market share of the calendar poster business.

The earliest plant of Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press was in the Sai Ying Pun district: later it relocated to Causeway bay. In the late 1930s it occupied a three-storey building at 390 King's Road, complete with new lithographic presses, dark room and plate-making room. In addition to its base in Hong Kong, Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press had business in Guangzhou, Shanghai, Singapore and elsewhere in Southeast Asia.

Under the leadership of Kwan Wai-nung, Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press was not only a printing firm, but also served as a commercial art and design studio, creating designs for advertising posters, trade marks, slogans, and packaging papers. After designing trade marks, it would go one step further and assist clients to process their registration with the government. The white parrot of Shui Cheung Pharmacy, the Twin Beauties of Kwong Sang Hong, and the camel of The National Lacquer & Paint Products Co. Ltd. - all were designed by Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press. After registration, these became bona fide trade marks and were henceforth used on all advertisements.

After the Second World War, Kwan Wai-nung handed over the running of the business to his sons Kwan Cho-mau and Kwan Cho-leung. By then, printing technology had progressed from lithography to offset. In the 1970s, the plant in King's Road was demolished to make way for the AIE Building, and Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press moved to Tung Cheung Building a little further east on the King's Road. With the retirement of Kwan Cho-leung in the late 1980s, Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press suspended operation temporarily. The plant reopened in Chai Wan in 1990 when Kwan Cho-leung's nephew Kwan Ping-kong returned from overseas. Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press finally ceased to operate in 1998.



Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press located at King's Road, North Point in around 1950s.



Original painting of calendar poster –
 Pretty women holding a fan
 Hong Kong
 c. 1910s
 74.8(L) 49.6(W) cm

The first original painting of calendar poster of the Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press.
 2000.1.50



Calendar poster of the Asiatic
 Lithographic Printing Press
 Hong Kong
 1926 – 1927
 91.5(L) 51 (W) cm

It was the printed matter for customers of the Asiatic Lithographic Printing Press. Advertisements at the corner briefly described the services rendered by the company such as printing of map, book and share certificate as well as design of trade mark.
 1999.82.40



Poster of Shui Cheung Pharmacy
 Hong Kong
 1920s – 1930s
 91.5(L) 51(W) cm

Shui Cheung Pharmacy registered the white parrot as its trade mark which represented its product – Parrot Medicine.
 1999.82.16



Poster of Kwong Sang Hong Ltd.
 Hong Kong
 1932
 74.5(L) 51(W) cm

“Twin Beauties” was the symbolic icon for the cosmetics products from Kwong Sang Hong.
 2001.32.12



Calendar posters of The National Lacquer & Paint Products Co. Ltd. (Section)
 Hong Kong
 1951
 53.5(L) 38(W) cm (Each)

The calendar posters were the souvenirs presented to customers of the company. The posters used the Chinese folklore “24 Stories of Filial Piety” (*Er Shi Si Xiao*) as the main theme and decorated with the product logo “Camel Paint”. They not only could be used in daily life but also promoted the products.

2001.32.25.a / 2001.32.25.b



Calendar poster of Ka Wah Bank Co. Ltd.
 Hong Kong
 1920s – 1930s
 76.5(L) 52(W) cm

The bank used the calendar poster to promote its service of saving account.
 1999.82.56



Calendar poster of The Kwong Sun Co. Ltd.
 Hong Kong
 1924 – 1925
 76.7(L) 51(W) cm
 1999.82.20



Calendar poster of Australian-Oriental Line Ltd.
 Hong Kong
 1939
 61(L) 41(W) cm
 This poster was decorated with a military lady in ancient times. The ship schedules between Hong Kong and Australia were printed at the bottom for customers' reference.
 1999.82.33

Lithographic Printing Technique

The technique was invented by a German, Aloys Senefelder in 1796 and it was firstly introduced to China after the Opium War. Foreign merchants and printing companies later purchased the printing machines from overseas, and then made mass production of lithographic prints and calendar posters in Shanghai and Guangzhou.

The process of production was complex. The stone was abraded with carborundum mixed with water in order to make a finely pitted surface. The area intended to be blank would be applied with oil to make it repellent to ink and colour, while the image would be receptive to colour impressions. For each colour it was necessary to prepare a separate stone plate, and some designs required as many as ten or more plates. For this reason only large firms could afford the cost of a calendar poster of customized design.

When the offset printing was not commonly used in the early 1920s, calendar posters were mainly printed by lithographic printing technique. By this process of reproduction, the posters were colourful and appealing, retaining the flavour of the original paintings with little loss of freshness or colour intensity. For these reasons, the lithographic calendar posters were popular souvenirs for both merchants and consumers.

Other Design Products



Product label of Lin Heung Cake Shop
Hong Kong

1960s

19.3(L) 26.9(W) cm

1999.82.129



Product label of Tak Wan Cake Shop
Hong Kong

1960s

15.5(L) 25.5(W) cm

1999.82.108



Poster of Hong Kong Beer
Hong Kong

1920s – 1930s

81.5(L) 57(W) cm

1999.82.24



Coaster of Watson's soft drink
Hong Kong

1920s – 1930s

9 (dia) cm

1999.82.131