

## Power to the Paper: An Interview with Carol Wells

**Written by** Steven Heller

**Published on** June 13, 2006.

Filed in *Voice: Journal of Design* in *Off the cuff*.

Are political posters meant to educate or to proselytize? Carol Wells, director of the Center for the Study of Political Graphics, talks about storing posters under the bed, getting the message out in three seconds, and why all posters are not created equal.

### **Heller: Why did you start the Center for the Study of Political Graphics? Was it to document the art or send political messages?**

Wells: These are probably the questions I get asked most frequently, and the answer includes some of my own history. I've been protesting injustice since high school. First opposing segregation and supporting the Civil Rights Movement, then opposing the Vietnam War. My other passion was and is art, but they were not overtly connected.

I was a history major as an undergraduate and an art history major in graduate school (a medievalist, studying 12th century French architecture). When I began teaching art history at California State University, Fullerton, I taught about the art of the rich and the powerful. I would go to demonstrations and hold posters, but was not interested in posters from an historical or aesthetic perspective. I used them but didn't "see" them.

I didn't understand their importance until 1981, when I visited Nicaragua for the first time. I had been working in solidarity with the Nicaraguan Revolution since 1979, but the 1981 visit totally changed my life. The Sandinista Revolution was young—just two years old—and there were posters everywhere. They supported the literacy crusade, healthcare, women's rights, and opposed U.S. intervention. The Nicaraguan society was very polarized, not everyone supported the Sandinistas. I saw how posters could grab someone's attention when they weren't expecting it, and made them look at the issue from a perspective different from their own. They didn't necessarily agree with the perspective, but they were confronted with the fact that there are multiple ways of looking at the world. That's when I suddenly recognized the importance of the poster as an educational, organizing, and consciousness-raising tool—my activist side. My art history side understood the power of art and the politics of culture.

**Heller: I remember the Reagan administration’s all-out propaganda war against the Nicaraguan Revolution. These posters then served as a counter-weight.**

Wells: I began collecting as many Nicaraguan posters as I could, to bring them back to the U.S. for an exhibition that would use the Nicaraguan posters to refute Reagan’s lies. For example, he’d call them “Godless Communists” but there were posters of priests in the government. That first exhibition started traveling across the U.S., all through word of mouth, from solidarity committee to solidarity committee. Everywhere I went, I collected posters.

**Heller: This led to a broader interest in posters, but you were also becoming a guardian of a certain faith.**

Wells: Using the, by that point, several thousand posters I had collected, I produced a women’s rights exhibition and a Liberation Theology exhibition. By then I was thoroughly committed to the power and importance of the poster. But I also began recognizing the responsibility as people began giving me their posters—pieces of their history. I was just storing them under my bed and in the hallway. I did some research and discovered that there was no existing institution in the United States that would both collect and exhibit them within the peace and justice context that they were originally created. So I started the Center for the Study of Political Graphics (CSPG) in 1988, and received a nonprofit designation in 1989. The rest is history.

**Heller: But again, was this to present, document or proselytize?**

Wells: In retrospect, the initial focus was primarily political. The collection started as part of my solidarity work, and I used it as an educational and organizing tool. But as I continued to create diverse exhibitions—and I had no training as a curator—I became increasingly aware of the role of aesthetics, its importance and power. All posters are not created equal. As the collection grew, and my understanding of the posters as an art form grew, the focus broadened. Now the mission of the Center is as much to document the art as it is to educate about the political message.

Wells: People started bringing them to the exhibitions or my lectures, and dropping them off, sometimes anonymously. Once the Center was founded, and had a more public presence and non-profit status, more and more donations came from collectors and activists. People who had worked with the Farm Workers, had been moving their posters from place to place, often losing some each time, saw the Center as the best place for their history because they would be cared for, circulated and made accessible to future generations. There are other poster repositories, but public access is difficult at best. CSPG is committed to maximizing public access. At first this was only through the traveling exhibitions. To date, they’ve traveled to nearly 300 venues throughout the United States and abroad, an extraordinary record for a large institution (and we are small, just three to four full-time staff, one to two part-time). No other poster archive in the world does this. This doesn’t count the posters we have loaned to other institutions for their exhibitions. That’s a lot of traveling exhibitions. We’ve now expanded public access through online exhibitions. Students have come from as far away as Australia to study and intern with us.

The collection has dramatically grown to more than 50,000 posters and the Center has the largest collection of post WWII political posters in the U.S., and one of the largest in the world.

**Heller: Do you purchase the work or are they donated?**

Wells: The vast majority of our posters are donated. We have one board member, David Kunzle, who donated his 8,000-piece collection to us, then purchased a 9,000 piece European collection and donated that. But most come in singly or a few dozen at a time. Whenever we produce a new exhibition, we put out a call for posters dealing with that theme, and often a couple of hundred posters, both old and new, will come in. I still collect them off the ground and out of trashcans at demonstrations. A growing number of artists from throughout the United States and internationally, regularly send us their work. Increasingly, graphic design teachers will assign their students one of our exhibitions as a real-life project that is an alternative to commercial design. Because the Center doesn't have a budget for purchasing posters, I will sometimes personally buy something from eBay or vendors if it fits a hole in the collection that should be filled.

**Heller: Your shows tackle human rights here and abroad—prison issues, war and peace—and you've dealt with history and contemporary images. What has been the most controversial of your shows, and what were the consequences?**

Wells: The primary consequence has been varying forms of censorship. Our venues are diverse, including museums, galleries and community centers.

The most controversial—and the biggest attendance—were the two anti-war shows. The first, “The Price of Interventions from Korea to the Persian Gulf” was produced just prior to the first Persian Gulf War, and the opening took place a few days after Bush the First started bombing in January 1991. We received more publicity than we'd ever received at that point. The gallery also received a bomb threat, but we opened as planned. One viewer wrote a letter threatening to sue us because she was so disturbed by the exhibition that she almost rear-ended someone after leaving the show, but we never heard from her again. Exactly 11 years later, I revised and updated the exhibition prior to the current Iraq War, and called it “The Anti-War Show—from Korea to Iraq.” This received even more publicity, and Christopher Knight, the LA Times art critic who praised the show received so much flak that the editorial board issued an unprecedented disclaimer on page two of the first section, saying that the review should never have been printed.

While on display at California State University, Sacramento, a Black Panther Party poster of Eldridge Cleaver was stabbed, and at Iowa State University in Ames, a Nicaraguan poster in solidarity with El Salvador was stolen. The Nicaraguan poster inverted the iconic Marines in Iwo Jima photo to demonstrate that the United States was vulnerable and could be defeated. The exhibition had been installed before I arrived. When I saw that the poster had been hung upside down—the Marines were upright, but all the words were upside down—I turned it around. I didn't know until later that there was a Marine training center at the university. Until that point, I didn't think much about the security of the posters. I had received them for free, and they were always hanging in public, so I was just continuing the tradition of postering, but in a less permanent and more contextual way.

After that poster was stolen. I started requiring more security. People take posters because they love them or hate them.

**Heller: I suspect that 9/11 had an influence on what you exhibit. How has this affected you?**

Wells: Five months after September 11, 2001, we produced “SHOW:The Flag,” a multimedia exhibition that showed how the U.S. flag had been used in art and posters since the 1960s to oppose U.S. foreign policy. I had been invited onto a local cable show months prior to 9/11 to talk about the Center. After 9/11, I wanted to talk about how the Center’s resources could relate to what was going on. I told the producer of the show what I wanted to do, and was told that was great. Two hours before the taping was scheduled, I was told that the images were too strong for the country and that my appearance was cancelled. Only after—and because of—an article on the cancellation came out in the LA Weekly, was I invited back.

**Heller: What are the criteria of collection. Is it more “the medium is the message” or “aesthetics is the standard?” How do you determine what is worthy? Or is any expression of dissent or advocacy, no matter how it is designed, right for you?**

Wells: The Center’s primary focus is the political poster, but we also collect political buttons, postcards and bumper stickers. We will collect any of the above with an overt political content that was produced in multiples. We include works done in offset, silkscreen, lithograph, stencil, woodcut, linocut, photocopy and inkjet or other forms of computer printout. With occasional exceptions—such as when Shirley Chisholm ran for president—we do not collect electoral posters. We do not reject posters based on their aesthetic quality, political message or condition. We actually have a few dozen white supremacist graphics and some graphics that the FBI created to promote tension between the Black Panther Party and a rival black separatist group. Researchers, artists, activists, students and so on should be able to see posters that represent as diverse a selection as possible for a certain point in time.

The medium is definitely the message. The aesthetic criterion enters into the curatorial process, not the collecting process. This said, people who have visited our archives frequently remark on the surprisingly high aesthetic quality of the collection as a whole. I think this is because much of our collection has come from collectors and artists who made their own aesthetic choices when putting their collections together.

**Heller: What is the most effective political graphic? And by contrast what constitutes a failed message?**

Wells: A failed message is one that is unclear. Ambiguity and subtlety are great for the fine arts, but not for a political graphic. Posters need to grab a viewer’s attention amidst the visual overload we live in, and get the message out in three seconds. The most effective graphic will be one that stays with you, that you can’t get out of your head. It might provoke an emotion—makes you mad, makes you laugh or makes you cry—or it hits you between the eyes, provoking an insight.

**Heller: Despite the issues raised above, there has long been debate on the effectiveness of the political poster. Does it appeal to the converted or does it convert? What is your experience? Can you actually change minds through graphics?**

Wells: If you couldn't change minds through graphics, ad agencies are wasting millions of dollars. The political poster is important to all of the above. It appeals to the converted because it reinforces their view of the world. During the first Gulf War, the corporate press was saying how everyone supported the War. CSPG's "Price of Intervention" exhibition showed the anti-war constituency that they weren't alone, that many shared their views. The subsequent "Anti-War Show" in 2003 came at a time of an unprecedented worldwide peace movement—between 10 and 40 million people demonstrating on the same day—so people already knew they weren't alone. Both exhibitions used the power of graphics to combat the pressure to close ranks behind the president during war. They were proof that dissent is patriotic.

**Heller: But is there a way to influence the unconverted?**

Wells: These exhibitions were also relevant for the unconverted. These exhibitions showed two-dozen U.S. interventions since the end of World War II. Many people cried because the posters made it impossible for them to deny that military intervention—usually started under the auspices of an "event" later revealed to have been fabricated (Gulf of Tonkin, emptied Kuwaiti incubators, Weapons of Mass destruction)—is standard U.S. foreign policy.

In 1992, when the counter-quincentennial exhibition was at a local university (it traveled to eight venues throughout the United States during 1992–93), I was to give a walkthrough to docents, so they could give tours. One of the docents complained to the gallery director that she was totally offended by the exhibition, that it was too one sided, and refused to hear my talk. The gallery director convinced her to just listen. During the talk, I put the show in context, and explained that the side presented in the exhibition was the side that is not told, and that the purpose was to give voice to a too often hidden history. The docent ended up loving the show.

**Heller: With all the new media that addresses millions in one hit, how does the poster hold up to scrutiny?**

Wells: First, not everyone has a computer, and the internet divide is largely along class lines—both domestically and internationally. The people who can't afford them are often the most exploited, so posters still have a major role to play, both in technologically advanced societies such as the United States and in developing countries. Second—and this has been reinforced by the recent outpouring of demonstrations on immigration issues—posters play a very important role on the streets and carried in demonstrations. For television and news cameras, the posters show what the protest is all about. The internet has definitely helped mobilize demonstrations, but one of the largest demonstrations in U.S. history—the million people who demonstrated in Los Angeles on March 25, 2006 for immigrant rights—was primarily organized through the radio deejays, churches and unions. The internet was important, but played a lesser role in organizing the March 2006 demonstrations than it had in organizing the February 2003 demonstrations when 15–40 million people demonstrated on the same day in over 100 cities throughout the world to oppose Bush's pending war on Iraq.

**Heller: When you consider a poster, I assume your interest is in the final result, but in a polemical environment does the artist/designer have freedom, or is it the will of the “client”?**

Wells: That’s both an important and interesting question. You are right, the final result is obviously what I use, but I also find the process fascinating, and whenever possible I try to document the process.

Artist/designers are understandably often very possessive about their work, and its aesthetic integrity. The client can be equally possessive, and if they are paying for it they can demand the changes they want. But the line between the artist and client is often blurry when it comes to political graphics. Because poster designs are usually donated to the political organizations, the client often doesn’t have as much power because they aren’t paying. When artists/designers self-publish their political graphics—which happens often—they are the client.

**Heller: Given the independent nature of the Center, who controls the content? Who determines what’s appropriate and what’s not appropriate to show and collect?**

Wells: The Center will collect any poster, done in multiples, with an overt political message, and does not reject posters based on their aesthetic quality, political message or condition. Someone researching the history of any of the social movements of the last 50 years needs to be able to get a good survey of the posters produced for that movement—not just the good, but also the bad and the ugly. The posters with mixed political messages are also very important as historical documents. The anti-racist or anti-war posters that are also very sexist tell a lot more about their historical time and who made them than people realize.

Four or five of the nearly 30 exhibitions that the Center has produced were co-curated by myself and others—sometimes other staff, faculty and/or graduate students from local universities, or activists from community based organizations. The rest of the time I have been the sole curator. The community advisory boards are advisory. I’ve co-curated several outside exhibitions, and curation-by-committee can take years. One exhibition took six or more years. The Center produces between one and three new exhibitions each year, so for better or worse, I solicit a lot of input, then make the final decision.

---

**About the Author.** Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).