



Photograph by J. Adam Fenster, University of Rochester

## ***"Once a Collector, Always a Collector"***

One of the world's largest collections of AIDS posters can be found at the University of Rochester. It contains more than 6,200 posters from over 100 countries in over 60 languages, and can be viewed at <http://aep.lib.rochester.edu>. The posters were donated by Dr. Edward Atwater, an emeritus professor of medicine at the University of Rochester. Atwater collected most of the posters between around 1990 and 2005. Andreas von Bubnoff asked him how the collection came together.

### How many posters have you collected?

I think there were about 6,500. The University has put 6,200 online but there are some duplicates among them and there are others not yet digitized. Also, I'll soon add another 800 I got from trading duplicates.

### Why did you do it?

I am a collector by nature. I started to collect the posters as medical history documents but very soon realized that they were much more important as social history.

### When did you get your first poster?

It was probably about 1990. I was riding the Red Line of the Boston subway. I looked up where there are posters in the top of the cars advertising various things. There was a poster with a couple of disembodied hands opening a condom wrapper, and it said, "use one." I was struck by this, because when I went to medical school in Boston 40 years earlier, one could hardly mention contraception or condoms. When we had a lecture on contraception one day, they closed the doors as if the police were about to break in. So I was struck by what an enormous social change had occurred in Boston, which used to be very much more influenced by the Roman Catholic Church. When I came home that day, I called the Public Health Department and asked if they could send me some of those posters. That was the beginning.

### So that was quite some time after AIDS was initially reported, wasn't it?

Yes. AIDS was beginning to be recognized in 1981, and it was 1986 that Dr. Koop, the Surgeon General, issued his report on AIDS. That was one of the first times he'd been allowed to discuss it. The Reagan administration had ignored it for five years. The report said you have to either abstain or use condoms. That totally changed the ball game as far as the educational part of using posters and other materials was concerned. It was the Surgeon General's report that blew the lid off things, and you started to see condom posters all over the place. This wasn't just the United States, this was all over the world, even Italy and Spain and countries like that had posters promoting condom use.

### When did you collect the posters?

From about 1990 or so, until 2005, or thereabouts. About fifteen years. Today this country



US, 1994. Minnesota AIDS Project. Poster from the AIDS Education Poster Collection of the University of Rochester; poster reproduction by Michael Hager, Museum Photographics.

is no longer producing many posters, I suppose because most people know about AIDS. I won't say there are no posters, but there certainly are many fewer posters. But in other countries they are still published.

### I noticed that sometimes the posters don't have the year they were made. Was it hard to find out exactly when they were produced sometimes?

Well, that's one of my great regrets, that I didn't write the date on each poster when I got it, at



Russia, 1990. *Russian: AIDS – casual (sexual) encounters.* Poster from the AIDS Education Poster Collection of the University of Rochester; poster reproduction by Michael Hager, Museum Photographics.

least in the beginning. That wouldn't have been necessarily the date they were made, but it would mean at least that they had been made by that date. Since the subject matter gradually changes, it makes a wonderful historical record; it gives an idea of our evolving understanding of the disease and the attempts to control it. Some of the posters do have dates on them, and I believe the people who are curating the collection at the University of Rochester are planning to add those dates to the online images.

**So when do you think most posters were actually made worldwide, and what kind of trends did you see over time?**

Between 1986 to 1996, probably. Initially, they started out promoting abstinence, but that didn't sell too well. They also reassured people that they wouldn't get AIDS by sitting on a public toilet seat or eating food in a restaurant. Then, as they discovered what caused AIDS and that there was a test, they started promoting the test. The test made

it possible to reduce the transfusion of hemophiliacs with infected blood. Addicts were taught not to share needles, and to "wash their works." Then it was realized that the proper use of condoms gave some degree of protection and there was—and still is—an enormous output of "use condom" posters. Later, as useful drugs appeared, they were promoted, and with the coming of antiretroviral drugs came a whole new type of poster. There were also posters urging people not to treat people with AIDS or who were HIV positive as pariahs.

**How did you get the posters, especially from so many different locations?**

I wrote to places and visited organizations, probably 50/50. I started out collecting only US posters, but then I branched out to Canada and then to Europe, because my wife and I went to Europe and we found tons of posters in England, France, Germany, and other countries; Holland put out a lot too. One time we were in East Berlin and we went to an AIDS place there. It was a huge warehouse

just filled with posters—Germany produced a great many posters—and they said ‘Oh, just help yourself!’ So we could just barely get back on the airplane, I had so many tubes of posters. As for the very exotic ones like Bangladesh, the Seychelles, or Africa, friends brought them to me who went there. I also got posters from places like the Center for Communication Programs at Johns Hopkins, or the Canadian Public Health Association, as well as by trading with private individual collectors.

**So what countries are least represented in the collection?**

While there are a lot of posters from India, Australia and New Zealand, the other countries in Asia and Oceania are relatively rare I think. Asian countries generally, Chinese and Muslim, are the most difficult to come by, Muslim especially. I don’t speak any of those languages, and writing letters to people in Afghanistan or some place like that is not a very practical thing, even if you knew where to write, which I didn’t.

**So the kinds of places you got them from were governmental or non governmental organizations that had something to do with HIV messaging, right?**

Yes.

**And you never had to pay for them?**

Oh, occasionally I paid for them. For example, most of the Russian posters I bought from a New York dealer. For those coming from private organizations there was sometimes a charge; if not, I usually made a contribution. Those coming from government organizations were free.

**In what kinds of places would the posters actually be posted?**

That’s an interesting thing you ask. I never could understand where these posters were used, because I rarely ever saw one posted. But in small communities, for example if you go to the Virgin Islands, there will be a clinic in the town and they will have an AIDS poster or two on the wall. I suppose they were put up in gay bars and bathhouses. And even though it started out—and Mr. Reagan thought of it—as a gay disease, it of course very rapidly became obvious that it was not just a gay disease, and there were posters that were addressed to the non-gay public, but I don’t know where those posters were used. I rarely saw one in use. I have asked others and they agree that they were seldom seen.

**Even in the US?**

Yes, that’s right. I did see them, but not very often.

**What are some examples as to how different countries or cultures handled the disease?**

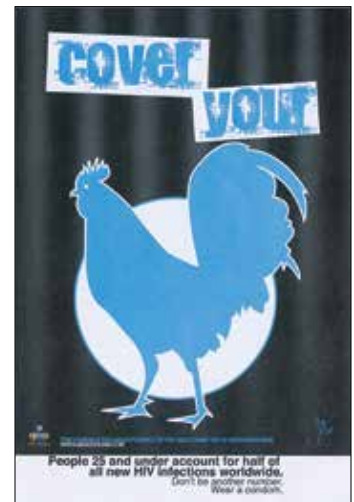
Those differences were what really kept me collecting. It was so fascinating to see how different countries addressed this problem. For example, in Iceland they produced posters that showed a lot of prominent people, the wife of the president, prominent politicians and movie stars, people like that, all doing something silly with a condom to sort of demystify it. Now I don’t think you can imagine such people doing that in this country. A small rural community in Ontario provided one of my favorite (pair of) posters: one of them shows a rooster and the other shows a cat. The one with the rooster says, simply, “cover your,” and the one with the cat says, “protect your.” A rather subtle but explicit message. My children’s favorite is a poster where one is looking through the windshield of a car, and sees a young man and a young woman kissing, and the caption is, “Vanessa was in a fatal car accident last night. Only she doesn’t know it yet.” Every country addressed the problem very differently, even different parts of a country and different groups in a country. But the humorous posters and the political posters are the ones I find most interesting.

**What is the most interesting example of cultural differences?**

Perhaps the most striking difference is found in the use of humor. France, Holland, Belgium, England, the United States, Canada, and Australia all include quite a bit of humor and double entendre. Germany and Austria, on the other hand, emphasize the explicit. The Soviets produced a lot of arty posters. In Africa, the posters tend to be graphics that illustrate an instructional story. Muslim posters, at least the ones I have seen, are very circumspect, barely mentioning the disease and certainly not condoms. The United States and France, especially, produced quite a few political posters, thanks primarily to the organization ACT UP.

**What did the posters really tell you about how people deal with disease?**

One thing it tells you is that if you are really in a bind, if you have a uniformly fatal disease, a



Posters from the AIDS Education Poster Collection of the University of Rochester.



US, 1989. ACT UP; Keith Haring poster. Poster from the AIDS Education Poster Collection of the University of Rochester; poster reproduction by Michael Hager, Museum Photographics.

disease without a known cure, then even the most conservative countries or people—in this country Protestant fundamentalists or Roman Catholics—will bow to the use of condoms and talking about sex publicly. AIDS brought sex out of the closet and into the public discourse in a way never previously possible. For example, in the *New York Times* I don't think the word "condom" had appeared more than once or twice in the 50 years prior to the late 1980s, and now you see it every day. People just talk about it as if there is nothing to it. That is a fundamental change.

**What's an example for the most conservative societies, judging by the posters in your collection?**

I would say Italy or Spain would be considered conservative with respect to talking about sex publicly, but in the AIDS "bind" they talk turkey. China sort of denied that AIDS existed in China (at least at first). South Africa completely denied that it existed. Muslim countries did put out posters but rather discreet posters that were just formal and said don't do it, be careful if you do it.

**And what countries would be the most open, judging from the posters?**

If by "open" you mean explicit, I suppose the answer is most western European countries, Eng-

land, and the United States, Canada, Australia, New Zealand, Brazil, Mexico. They were more open about sex. They talked about the facts of life. Asian countries (except India) generally less so.

**Do the posters tell you anything about design issues and how art is developing?**

There are a lot that are good art and some of the great artists of the day did posters—Keith Haring, or the Canadian, Joe Average, for example. A lot of them were done by popular modern artists.

**Are there any posters that are just not very well done at all?**

Well, the ones our federal government put out were generally not very interesting or clever (with a few exceptions), but they have to be very careful, because they can't afford to offend anyone, whereas private, small organizations can do that and get away with it.

**What are you collecting now?**

My primary collecting interest is medical history books, pamphlets and broadsides, especially those that are addressed to the public—popular medicine and health reform, but I still collect AIDS education materials as well.

**So you are still collecting!**

Yes—once a collector, always a collector. ■