



## More Than Writing on the Wall

By Wendy Lehman

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*Art is not a mirror, held up to reality, but rather a hammer with which to shape it.*

**Bertold Brecht**

When Dan Walsh was a Peace Corps volunteer in Morocco in the mid-1970s he came across a number of wall posters at a bus stop in Rabat which he began to translate. One poster was "especially powerful," he said, "unlike anything I had ever seen before." He got stuck on a word, though, that "was totally unfamiliar." The word was Palestine. The experience triggered an interest in Palestinian political posters that has led to his collection today of 2,500 Palestinian posters from many different countries -- almost certainly the largest such collection in the world. Walsh felt that these posters were "a unique and powerful art form... one that would be invaluable in terms of educating Americans about the cultural and political realities of the modern Middle East."



In fact, the posters began by educating him. Although his impression prior to seeing these posters followed

the stereotype that Palestinians were "terrorists," he "was really amazed to learn that Palestinians had this romantic, poetic, and lyrical interpretation of their struggle." After a PLO representative in Morocco offered him the posters of his choice, he began to collect them systematically. By the time Walsh left Morocco, he had over 300 Palestinian solidarity posters.

He returned to the US, continued to collect posters, and started a business called Liberation Graphics. Meanwhile, he did "awkward presentations" at different colleges, universities, solidarity groups, and so forth by simply taping up posters as he explained them. Eventually, Hisham Sharabi learned of his project. The organisation Sharabi chaired, the American Palestine Education Foundation (APEF), offered a grant to Walsh that allowed him to organise his posters into a slide show. In 1983 the APEF became The Jerusalem Fund for Education and Community Development. Twenty-three years later, The Jerusalem Fund's educational branch, the Centre for Policy Analysis on Palestine (CPAP), invited Walsh, who is writing a book on the subject, to speak at a lecture.

In 1983, some time after receiving the APEF grant, Walsh got a call from the PLO office in Washington DC. They wanted to print a poster for a women's conference they were hosting and they selected one of Walsh's collection -- a poster by a Swiss artist named Marc Rudin. Rudin worked for 12 years in Palestinian refugee camps in Syria as an artist for the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP). The Rudin poster the PLO selected shows a Palestinian woman wearing a kaffiyeh while breaking the chains that bind her wrists. Above this image, the poster states "General Union of Palestinian Women."

When the poster was ready, Walsh went to the printing house in at four o'clock in the morning to oversee the printing. When he arrived, the wife of the owner approached him, saying she wanted to talk to him before he left. Concerned that he was about to be lectured, he tried to leave from another exit but couldn't locate one.

To his surprise, when he met with her she was very supportive and nearly in tears. Because of this poster, she said, she realised that "I have millions of Arab, Muslim, and Palestinians sisters about whom I know next to nothing." She added that she considered herself



an "outspoken, active feminist, yet I never even once recognised anti-Arab propaganda as intrinsically anti-woman... I feel as though I have betrayed ... my sisters." With his permission, she printed an additional 3,000 posters at her own expense that she gave out to people all over the US.

This experience confirmed Walsh's belief that the posters were a "powerful teaching resource that could reach people and challenge stereotypes." This conviction became even stronger some time later in an experience that Walsh viewed as a "ringing endorsement" of his work.

During the 1970s and 1980s, Liberation Graphics had 300-400 international political poster titles for sale at Common Concerns bookstore in Washington DC (now closed). One day, he went in and saw two men looking at one of Liberation Graphics' posters ("Return to Sender" by Jacek Kowalski, a Polish artist). The poster depicts an airmail envelope addressed to Palestine, which is rubber-stamped "return to sender" and "no such address."

After discovering that Walsh was the owner of Liberation Graphics, one of the men told him that they worked for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), the powerful pro-Israel lobby. "I want you to know that you and your posters have utterly destroyed 35 years of really sophisticated anti-Palestinian propaganda work on our part," said one of the AIPAC employees who, along with his colleague, purchased copies of the poster.

Over the years Walsh has been able to use these posters to communicate to people in more pointed ways as well, as he explains to different audiences what the artwork means. At the CPAP lecture, for example, he discussed the history and themes present in these works -- from the different approaches artists have depending on their geographical location to the most common imagery used.

The type of poster created by a Swiss artist like Rudin, or a Cuban artist, or a Palestinian living in the Occupied Territories differs, said Walsh: "In contrast to many posters from the Diaspora, poster artists in the occupied territories face many additional risks and limitations in creating their work." Posters created in the West Bank or Gaza, because the artists live under Israeli military occupation, have "palettes [that] are



much more muted; there are few captions, [there is] little militancy, [there are] no weapons, and only the subtlest references to the Palestinian national colours," said Walsh.

However, added Walsh, "for artists both within and without the Diaspora there are some repetitive graphic themes, such as homelessness or alienation." One poster, by Sliman Mansour, features three Palestinian children sitting on a wall. In the background, the artist drew "children from many different countries: Japan, Belgium, Holland, the United States and others," said Walsh. The children are "all playing ... and Palestinian kids are sitting on a wall and not taking part in any of the things kids normally do." The poster by Polish artist Kowalski, "Return to Sender," also echoes the theme of homelessness. In fact, it won first prize in *Palestine: A Homeland Denied*, an international poster competition held in 1979, in the UK.

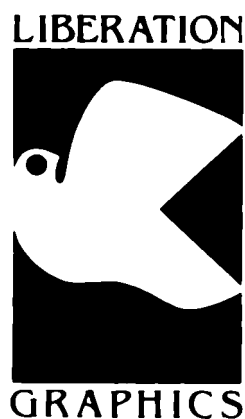
Walsh has also noticed similarities in images between Israeli and Palestinian poster art.

"Jerusalem is a big theme for both Palestinians and Israelis," says Walsh, adding that about 75 posters in his larger collection have Jerusalem imagery. Both groups have also made martyr posters with images of soldiers or guerrillas dying. According to Walsh, "Palestinians and Israelis have similar histories, at least graphically, in terms of using posters to draw attention to these issues."

Interestingly, some of the earliest posters done in solidarity with the Palestinians were created with Jewish support. Walsh said that the "first American-produced poster that ever called for stopping US aid to Israel" was created by Doug Minkler and was commissioned by a mostly Jewish labor group called the Emergency Committee for Palestine. Minkler, Walsh indicated, has paid for his politics: "He has had several exhibits of his work cancelled or curtailed because he refuses to remove his Palestine posters from his retrospectives."

The reason these poster artists have faced challenges is because they are "addressing taboos," said Walsh. Through these posters, "the viewer is presented with a totally new textual and visual vocabulary" that has the potential to "actually change people's ideas and opinions." That, Walsh added, "frightens the powers that-be. Like it or not, these works are all hammers."

*A rotating exhibit of Palestine posters may be viewed at: [www.liberationgraphics.com](http://www.liberationgraphics.com)*



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