

Lang Prize Reflective Essay

AHI 190H, *The Art of Chance*, taught me that chance and artwork are two things that almost always go hand-in-hand. Fittingly so, it was by chance that I found myself in the Special Collections at Shields Library as part of the course. It was here that I learned about the extensive amount of archive materials on campus, most notable of which for me was the collection of psychedelic rock posters. Learning about these posters led me down paths I could never have imagined I'd take, such as engaging with every level of the library's resources and going so far as to reach out to and make contact with Stanley Mouse, one of the most iconic and influential artists of the psychedelic poster movement.

While the main focus of my class trip to Special Collections was to study pieces of contemporary and Fluxus art, two of the items that had been pulled from the archives for viewing were posters by Victor Moscoso, made in 1967. I was entirely unfamiliar with the history of psychedelic rock posters and the artists that created them, but I was intrigued by the vivid colors and twisting, difficult to read fonts. I spent most of the class time in Special Collections analyzing these posters, trying to read what they said and trying to understand the reasoning behind the design choices that were made. One of the final projects for the course involved writing a research paper on an artist of our choosing, and so after talking to my professor, I began to delve deeper into the history of psychedelic rock posters in hopes of finding an artist who I could write about.

Preliminary online searches using Google led me to discovering Wes Wilson, one of the most prominent artists of the time. Having gotten a name, I began to look deeper into Wilson's history, beginning with his own personal website. There were a few blurbs from Wilson on his page but not many, and the Google searches I had done so far had not given me many solid

academic sources, with most search results being modern blog and opinion pieces, or one to two paragraph articles on museum websites. While these were useful in their own regard, providing me with ideas that I could then expand upon, they did not contain enough information for the research paper I was hoping to write. Shields Library, however, had several resources that could fulfill that need.

A search of the name “Wes Wilson” in the library database led me to an article by Scott B. Montgomery, titled *The Joint Show: High Art in the Summer of Love*. This article introduced me to the Joint Show, which was a key moment in the artistic history of psychedelic rock posters, as well as introducing me to other key artists at the time, such as Stanley Mouse.

Primary sources had thus far been hard to come by, as there was little documentation directly from the artists themselves and from the public in regards to what the initial reception of these posters were, since they were a part of counterculture and thus not as heavily written about at the time as elements of mainstream culture were. Due to the difficulties in finding primary sources, I decided to shift my direction and began to look for more academic sources, in order to see what had previously been written about psychedelic rock posters.

After a discussion with my professor, a search of the library database led me to finding the catalog from an art exhibition that had taken place at the de Young museum in 2017, *Summer of Love: Art, Fashion, and Rock and Roll*. This catalog was full of scholarly essays discussing the art that had been on display, including several essays on the subject of psychedelic rock posters. While in the library, I browsed sections on the 4th floor that related to graphic and poster design, coming across other books that included information on psychedelic rock posters, from their history and reception to their continued legacy. While all the academic sources were helpful

for finding more factual information, I was still looking for primary sources to gather more of a societal perspective.

I ended up returning to Special Collections, spending hours going through all of the psychedelic rock posters that the library had been able to pull for me from the archives. I focused on the design choices that different artists made, trying to find the similarities and differences and trying to understand why they would have made these choices. I was also able to see several posters and artists that had not been discussed in the sources I had read so far, due to being lesser known. I did my best to take note of imagery used in the posters, such as repeated themes and motifs and how those varied from artist to artist. I was able to gather a variety of notes and observations on the posters, but was not entirely sure what to do with them yet. The return trip to special collections had been helpful, but I still felt as though my lack of primary sources was holding me back.

In my hunt for primary sources, I was able to find databases of articles from the *San Francisco Chronicle*, a newspaper that had been mentioned in Montgomery's article. I searched key terms such as "Wes Wilson," "Stanley Mouse," and "The Joint Show," narrowing down the range of dates in order to filter out irrelevant results as much as possible. While I was able to find several articles that seemed promising, I was blocked by a paywall and was unable to read them. However, after reaching out to my professor to discuss my issue with him, I was informed of the fact that Shields Library had access to dozens of newspaper databases, including that of the *Chronicle*. The use of the newspaper articles was helpful, as they offered me a clear primary source and a glimpse at the mainstream culture's reaction to the counterculture movement, specifically the psychedelic rock posters themselves.

Although the articles were helpful in regards to getting a glimpse of what the public's reaction to the posters were, they did not provide much information on the artists' reasoning behind the design choices they had made and why they chose to make them. Unfortunately, many of the poster artists from the time, including Wes Wilson, have since passed. After checking each of the core five poster artists from the time, I found that only Stanley Mouse and Victor Moscoso were still living, and sent emails to both of them asking for an interview. Stanley Mouse responded, and I was able to interview him over the phone.

This interview was a catalyst for shifting my paper from being a historical overview to a paper on how the psychedelic rock posters advertised not only concerts, but the counterculture movement itself. Mouse was able to provide me with a firsthand perspective of how life in the Haight-Ashbury, the hotbed for psychedelic rock posters at the time, had been. He was also able to tell me of the motives behind the poster art he and other artists made, as well as what influenced their design decisions. In addition, Mouse mentioned some prominent Art Nouveau artists that he and his contemporaries drew influence from. Working with the information I had gotten from my interview, I returned to Shields Library, gathering some books on the history of Art Nouveau posters, looking for the meaning behind the design choices that prominent artists at that time, such as Alphonse Mucha, had made, and why psychedelic rock poster artists had chosen to build on those ideas and design work in their own posters.

The interview I conducted with Stanley Mouse was what truly helped to change my perspective on my own paper. I was not quite satisfied with the original direction I had been taking, as I found many similarities between my discussion of Wes Wilson with the discussion in the academic sources I was utilizing. However, there were not as many sources that went in depth into why the posters were designed in the way that they were. While there were mentions

of the idea of attempting to attract the target audience of psychedelic rock concerts via color schemes and fonts that brought to mind the effects of psychotropic drugs, there were few articles that discussed the use of the posters to advertise the entirety of the counterculture movement. I wanted to expand my research, as well as change the direction of it, and so returning to the library was essential. Now that I knew the thesis statement I wanted to pursue, I was able to refine and refocus my search for research materials, delving deep into primary and secondary sources, from original posters and newspaper articles from the time to reading more academic papers.

I ended up returning to Special Collections for a third time, with the intention of looking at the posters in a new light. I chose to narrow down the number of posters I looked at this time, focusing on the works of Wilson and Mouse as opposed to looking at the works of all the poster artists in the archives. With my third viewing, I did my best to keep in mind the concepts I was beginning to develop, such as the sense of belonging that people in the counterculture movement often felt with each other, as well as how the posters were seen as a protest against the advertising styles of the previous decades. With a defined topic and a smaller collection of posters to study, I was able to more closely analyze the designs, trying to put myself into the shoes of Wilson and Mouse to understand why they made the choices they had.

Having utilized a variety of resources, ranging from primary to secondary and from posters to interviews, I was able to find the information I needed in order to support and expand upon the core thesis of my research paper. The Shields Library ended up being key to my success, helping me to find new directions to go as well as providing me with information I would not have been able to access otherwise. My paper is certainly not the first to talk about the subject of psychedelic rock posters; however, I feel that it is the first to write about them from a

perspective that emphasizes their key place in counterculture and advertising history, focusing on the community that formed around these posters and around the counterculture movement and how the psychedelic rock posters were a means of advertising that community.