

How to Read Your Poster

Collecting original movie posters is quite enjoyable and a great hobby, BUT most collectors don't realize that it is a LOT more than that. Collectors of original movie posters are also preserving information from the past, very similar to film collectors. Yes, we're historians, and that poster that you are collecting is actually a historical document recording basic information about what a studio presented to the public at a specific time.

Unfortunately, most people view a movie poster as simply an advertising tool with a pretty picture. Even some poster collectors do not see beyond the poster's artwork, which is really just a part of the wealth of information presented on that poster.

So, let's take a look and learn "How to Read Your Poster." This information is presented as if it is to someone who is just beginning and looking at a poster for the first time. If you have been collecting for a while, please understand.

Obviously, the first thing you look for as a collector is the size of the poster and the type of paper or cardstock it's printed on. This quite often identifies what type of item you have. But, since this article is on reading your poster, we will skip this area and put our attention to what is actually ON the poster. We have an International Size Chart in the reference section at the end of the book to help identify posters by their size.

Let's break your poster into these six areas:

1. Image
2. Title and Credits
3. Logo Row
4. Documentation
5. Plugs
6. Stamps, Snipes and Stickers
7. Back

Let's look at each area.

Image

Normally, the first thing everyone sees is the image on the poster. The artwork is quite often a basic summary of what the film is about, and WHY most collectors are in the hobby. Whether it is actual artwork or photography, collectors normally look for an artist or an agency who created the image. Most artists, if they are allowed to (or if the studio didn't crop the signature) will sign somewhere between the bottom left and the bottom right. Italian artists and some French artists will sign at the top, but most others are at the bottom. Agencies are normally on the side edges of the poster on the outside of the artwork and would be considered part of the documentation.

Our sample below features the artwork created by the great artist Amsel for the film *The Sting*. His signature is actually a part of the artwork.



Title and Credits

Of course the title is pretty simple, unless it is an a/k/a or a film that has been re-titled, which would then help in the dating. Some posters will have words such as “formerly entitled...” to take advantage of earlier publicity, but it also lets you know that it is a re-issue. The following sample is from the title card for the 1951 film *The Bogus Bandits*, which was originally released as *The Devil's Brother*.



The credits are normally just below the image, but they can be in all areas. The first thing to notice in the credits is who is presenting the film? Is it a combination of companies or studios? Sometimes studios will jointly produce a film and then divide up the distribution. For example, one studio may handle distribution in the United States and the other handle distribution outside of the U.S. The presenter would then help identify the distribution.

It is also very common that the original release was done by one distributor and a different distributor did a later release. Sometimes they utilize the same artwork and sometimes they don't, so notice which company handled the distribution.

Credits are "giving credit" to: who made the film; who was in the film; or, who was part of making the film. This is the part that the studio wants to present to promote the film. Always read through and look for details. There could be tips to help dating, such as a name change of an actor or actress, such as "Sir Lawrence Olivier," or a change in a married name, etc. Of course, teaser posters won't have this part, but the majority of the posters will.

To help identify the country of origin of a poster, look for the words that are found between the names of the stars. Use a simple system of looking for the word for "director" or "directed by," which is the most commonly used word on posters. By identifying that word, you can normally identify what country issued the poster. We have included our Country Identification Chart in the reference section to help you.

There are posters that have misspelled names of actors, directors, etc. Mistakes happen, but when it is done by a major studio, they usually would send a snipe to make the corrections. Where this becomes more important is when small distributors in smaller countries would actually have posters made up and change names for localized spellings.

The sample on the right is of a "localized" name change. This is the Yugoslavian film poster for the American film Cleopatra. Notice that not only has the title been changed (which is common in international market, but the main actors' names have also been changed to a more locally recognized spelling. Elizabeth Taylor is "Elizabet Tejlor"; Richard Burton is "Ricard Barton"; and Rex Harrison is "Reks Harison."



Logo Row

The logos across the bottom of the poster are very important. For older posters until the 1970's, most production studios were also the distributor, so there would only be one logo. Major distributors would only put their logos, and smaller production companies might have a remark in the credits instead of having their logos on it.

As production costs continued to escalate and co-productions became more popular, it became more common to see multiple logos.

The logos on the ends of the poster are very important. In most major countries, the logo on the bottom left corner is usually the production company and the logo on the bottom right corner is usually the distributor. This especially helps on newer posters where distribution is divided.

For example, one distributor would have a U.S. distribution and the other distributor would have the international distribution. The distributor logo on the bottom right corner usually identifies which distribution it is.

Since the 1990's, production costs have become so great that it is not usual to have numerous production companies share the expense. Logo Row has become the place for them to let their logo be seen.

Other logos that often appear across the bottom are sound systems, ratings boxes, other associated presentations like books or records, websites on newer posters, etc. Let's take a quick look at these.

- A. Sound Systems - this becomes important identifying special presentations, like roadshow presentations which utilized 65mm and 70 mm film. A special performance for a higher admission would also mean a special poster was issued.
- B. Ratings Box - U.S. posters have their ratings here. Other countries sometimes put their ratings here and sometimes they put them in other places, such as the side borders, which is common practice for French and Italian posters. The United Kingdom usually has their ratings box just below the title to the bottom right. (see stamps, snipes and stickers below)
- C. Websites - as the internet becomes a dominant part of everyday life, websites have become the most cost effective way of advertising for distributors. Placing a website address on the posters started in the 1990's and has become a mainstay for current posters. The extension of the website address is a great identifier. For example, if you have a website that ends with .de, you know that it is a German distributor. We have included a world chart of website extensions to help you identify website extensions. It's located in the reference section at the end of the book with other charts.

Sometimes just seeing logos across the bottom gives you information. For example, it immediately identifies the French bus stop poster from the regular theater issue.

Documentation

Below "Logo Row" is a great source of information. For U.S. posters, this area is normally used for the copyright year and copyright holder, National Screen Service information and style marks. Always compare the copyright date with any other date on the poster to help identify reissues.

For other countries such as the U.K., France and Italy, this area also contains printer tags, which are vital for telling reissues, censorship numbers, edition marks and several other valuable pieces of information. We get into these more under each individual country.

Plugs

Plugs can be at the top or at the bottom of the poster. This is special wording concerning the issuing of this poster. This could be awards for recognition or advance announcements like "Coming Soon" or a date at the bottom of the poster. This could also be chapters as part of a serial or presentations at film festivals.

Stamps, Snipes and Stickers

Some countries utilize censorship ratings stamps, snipes or stickers, but this is done usually when posters from other countries are used, such as Canada, New Zealand, Malta and Netherlands (see these sections for more information). Japan prints these stamps (called Eiren Marks) and ratings codes on their posters.

Back of Poster

The back of the poster is also a great place for additional information. It is quite common, especially in the U.S., for stamps of all types to be on the back. These would usually be NSS stamps or distribution stamps, but they would give additional information about where the poster had been.

The back of the poster is also the best place to look for evidence of major restoration of the poster, unless it has been linen-backed.

There is a LOT more to a poster than just another pretty picture!! Always look at your poster very carefully to see all the information that it has for you.

**The above is an excerpt from the publication *Learn About International Movie Posters* written by Ed and Susan Poole, published by the Learn About Network, L.L.C. in 2008. The entirety of this material is copyrighted and may not be reproduced in any form without the consent of the authors, who may be contacted through the following website:
www.LearnAboutMoviePosters.com**