

Protest! A History of Social and Political Graphics [book review]

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Murphy, M. Protest! A history of social and political graphics [book review]. *ARLIS/NA Reviews*. March 2020. <https://www.arlisna.org/publications/reviews/2014-protest-a-history-of-social-and-political-graphics>

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Abstract:

Protest! A History of Social and Political Graphics is the latest book by Liz McQuiston, whose earlier works, including *Graphic Agitation: Social and Political Graphics Since the Sixties* (Phaidon, 1995) and *Visual Impact: Creative Dissent in the 21st Century* (Phaidon, 2015), tread similar grounds. *Protest!* charts the history of the use of graphics in political and social protest as a timeline of illustrated highlights, from the earliest reproducible images criticizing the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, to slick graphics protesting issues such as police brutality, climate inaction, and corporate greed in the present day.

Keywords: book review | art criticism | graphic art

Article:

*****Note: Full text of article below**

Protest! A History of Social and Political Graphics

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by Liz McQuiston. Princeton University Press, October 2019. 288 p. ill. ISBN 9780691198330 (h/c). \$39.95.

Reviewed March 2020

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Protest! A History of Social and Political Graphics is the latest book by Liz McQuiston, whose earlier works, including *Graphic Agitation: Social and Political Graphics Since the Sixties* (Phaidon, 1995) and *Visual Impact: Creative Dissent in the 21st Century* (Phaidon, 2015), tread similar grounds. *Protest!* charts the history of the use of graphics in political and social protest as a timeline of illustrated highlights, from the earliest reproducible images criticizing the Catholic Church in the sixteenth century, to slick graphics protesting issues such as police brutality, climate inaction, and corporate greed in the present day.

Following a brief introduction, McQuiston divides this timeline into six sections of chronological units that become progressively shorter in scope (but not detail); the first section covers four hundred years, from 1500 to 1900, while the final section covers roughly 2001 to present. Each section includes an essay summarizing the social and political events and movements of the era, noting innovations in graphic technique and production. However, the strength of this work is its more than 400 high-quality color illustrations of engravings, posters, comics, cartoons, murals, graffiti, and other graphic forms representative of specific protests in each time period. McQuiston, a graphic designer and independent scholar who previously served as the head of Graphic Art and Design at the Royal College of Art, captions each image with a critical annotation discussing its creation, dissemination, and impact as a protest artifact.



One place where the work potentially falters is McQuiston's lack of attention to the rising prominence of internet memes in social and political protest. As a largely graphic medium, memes are visibly influencing the aesthetic and content of signs and banners brandished by protesters at a range of demonstrations. Memes also serve as digital protest graphics in their own right. McQuiston mentions the word "meme" only once within the pages of *Protest!*, in reference to stenciled images spray painted throughout Istanbul in 2013—without defining the term or contextualizing its use in relation to street art.

Unfortunately, the omission of a more serious discussion of the role of memes in social and political protest graphics may prematurely date this volume. Nonetheless, *Protest!* succeeds as a catalog of fine art, propaganda, satirical illustration, professional graphic design, and informal visuals in the global history of resistance and rebellion. It belongs in the collection of every art and design library, and will be of great interest to students, scholars, and casual readers alike.