

# STEPHEN ONGPIN FINE ART



**Rex WHISTLER (Eltham 1905 - nr. Giberville 1944)**

## **Design for a 1936 Post Office Telegram**

Watercolour, ink and pencil, with framing lines in green and brown ink, on paper laid down on board.

Inscribed POST OFFICE in pencil and Greetings Telegram in red ink in a cartouche at the top.

Annotated Delete interior rules in pencil towards the upper centre of the sheet.

Inscribed The official P. O. Crown / & Post Office in Roman print / all in the deep rose / colour in pencil in the upper right margin.

Illegibly inscribed R. [Whistler?] in pencil in the upper left margin.

Inscribed A dull(?) gray for the Telegram paper(?) / or a[?] a jade(?) green (all crossed out) in pencil in the lower left margin.

Inscribed with dimensions 8 1/2" in pencil in the lower margin.

170 x 220 mm. (6 3/4 x 8 5/8 in.) [image]

211 x 257 mm. (8 3/8 x 10 1/8 in.) [sheet]

As a recent monograph on the artist has noted, 'As far as commercial art was concerned, Rex [Whistler] was fortunate in emerging as a thriving artist in the late 1920s, the golden age of advertising... Rex seldom spent long on commercial assignments, fitting them between more pressing commissions. He signed very few but retained most copyrights.' Whistler produced posters for the London Underground, catalogues for Fortnum and Mason in Piccadilly, leaflets for Imperial Airways, posters for the Shell oil company and many other advertising campaigns.

This design for a Post Office Telegram form is second of two that were commissioned from Rex Whistler in 1936 by the General Post Office, and followed his successful design for the 1936 Valentine's Day telegram – the first to be printed in several colours – which enabled people to send a nine-word message for just nine pence. While this was three pence more expensive than sending a standard telegram, it meant that the message would arrive on a specially-designed form. As the artist's biographers Hugh and Mirabel Cecil have noted, 'Stephen Tallents, the General Post Office's enterprising first Public Relations Officer... [employed] gifted artists, including Rex. Illustrated greetings

telegrams were new to Britain when Tallents introduced them in July 1935. In cheerful contrast to their past tragic associations in wartime, they were immediately successful. Rex's Post Office Valentine Telegram soon became a collector's item. An admirer of Rex's art, George de Fraine, told Laurence Whistler that 'in order to obtain a copy of the Valentine Telegram I had to send one to myself, and I have it with the words "Rex Whistler is a fine artist" on it, instead of a message.' Whistler's design for a telegram form proved very successful, and 50,000 of his Valentine's Day telegrams were sent on that day alone in 1936.

The present sheet is the original design for the second of Whistler's two telegram forms, used between June and December 1936. The printed colour lithograph measures 165 x 215 mm.

### **Exhibitions**

London, Victoria and Albert Museum, and elsewhere, Rex Whistler 1905-1944: A Memorial Exhibition, 1960-1961, no.65 (lent by Her Majesty's Postmaster General); Possibly Leicester, Leicester College of Art and Design, Rex Whistler: An Exhibition of His Graphic Work, 1967, no.19 ('Two designs for Post Office Greetings Telegrams 1935 and 1936. The first of their kind.')

### **Artist description:**

Rex Whistler showed considerable promise as a draughtsman from a very early age, winning prizes at the Royal Drawing Society while still a child. In 1922, at the age of sixteen, he entered the Slade School of Art in London, studying under Henry Tonks, and remained there until 1926. The following year, at Tonks's recommendation, Lord Duveen commissioned Whistler, aged just twenty-three, to paint the mural decoration (entitled by the artist *In Pursuit of Rare Meats*) for the restaurant at the Tate Gallery on Millbank, which remains in situ today. The success of this very public work established the young artist's reputation, and led to numerous commissions. He also won a brief scholarship to the British School in Rome. As well as a further two dozen or so large mural commissions, mainly for private country homes such as Port Lympne in Kent, commissioned by Sir Phillip Sassoon, Plas Newydd on Anglesey and Mottisfort Abbey in Hampshire, Whistler provided illustrations and dust jackets for around ninety books and stage designs and costumes for around twenty-five plays, ballets and operas, as well as a steady stream of designs for bookplates, advertisements, calendars, programmes and stationery. In 1940 Whistler was commissioned into the Welsh Guards. During the first few years of the Second World War, which he spent training as a tank commander in England, the charming poetry and elegant mannerism of his earlier work gave way to a bolder, more impressionistic style. Sent to Normandy as part of the Allied invasion, Whistler died soon after D-Day, on his first day of combat action, at the age of thirty-nine.