



Archive Fact Sheet: Gilroy and Animals



Zookeeper artwork GPR/MK06.01/08.0005

John Gilroy

John Gilroy, MA, ARCA, FRSA, (1898-1985) was one of the 20th century's most versatile, gifted and imaginative artists. He is best known for producing some of the most memorable and attractive images in British advertising, but was also a respected and successful landscape and portrait painter of royalty and celebrities.

After producing several successful poster designs, Gilroy was recruited in 1925 by the advertising agency S.H.Benson's who handled the accounts of many well-known national brands including Wills Gold Flake, Coleman's mustard, Macleans toothpaste and Bovril. In 1928 Benson's began work on the first advertising campaign for GUINNESS® beer and from then until the early 1960s Gilroy was above all associated with advertising GUINNESS®.

Gilroy is particularly associated with two campaigns for GUINNESS®, which ran simultaneously for nearly thirty years from the 1930s. The first involved the slogan "Guinness for strength" showing people performing incredible feats of strength empowered by GUINNESS®. The most popular posters in this series were the "Girder"(1934) depicting a

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workman effortlessly carrying a massive girder on his head and the horse and cart with the farmer pulling the cart (1949).

The second campaign, featured zoo-animals. At the time Benson's had been trying unsuccessfully to develop a human "Guinness family" for its advertising. The idea of using animals to advertise GUINNESS® occurred to Gilroy after visiting the circus. While watching a performing sea-lion he entertained the curious thought that the animal would be smart enough to balance a glass of GUINNESS® on its nose! It became the concept for one of the world's longest running advertising campaigns "My Goodness, MY GUINNESS". The hapless zookeeper, a caricature of Gilroy himself, watched over the family of animals which included an ostrich swallowing a GUINNESS®, glass and all, a pelican with a beak full of bottles, a tortoise, a lion, bear, crocodile, kangaroo, giraffe, polar bear, gnu, kinkajou, penguin (particularly associated with Draught GUINNESS® to emphasise its coolness) and, of course, most famous of all, the toucan. All of the zoo animals appeared together for the first time in 1953 with a poster designed to commemorate Queen Elizabeth II's coronation.

In the 1930s Guinness "adopted" the characters from Lewis Carroll's "Alice" books and Gilroy illustrated several parodies of the Mad Hatter's teaparty, the Walrus and the Carpenter, Tweedledum and Tweedledee, etc. These were used as Underground posters, as magazine ads and in a series of illustrated booklets of nonsense rhymes Guinness sent out to its friends in the medical profession each Christmas (hence their name "doctors' books").

During the Second World War Gilroy continued working on advertisements for GUINNESS®. Posters depicted a sealion offering a GUINNESS® to a zookeeper in battledress and a sailor escaping with his comrade's GUINNESS® aboard a torpedo. Due to the paper shortage, some posters were printed on the back of existing ones - this is why a Gilroy kangaroo poster in 1943 had a very dark background.

The last major Gilroy poster was 1961 showing the animals at the seaside. Besides various different sized posters, they had graced hundreds of press ads and advertising miscellanea including ceramic models and table lamps in the late 1950s-early 1960s. Mid 1950s cinema commercials involved puppet animations of Gilroy's posters while the earliest television commercials for GUINNESS® used live or cartoon versions in the same way.

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Besides advertising Gilroy also produced for Guinness some of the early covers of the Guinness company magazine, painted a series of pictures of brewery scenes and portraits of members of the Guinness family. Gilroy actually described himself as a portrait painter, rather than a commercial artist, and throughout his career was in great demand. He painted all the main members of the Royal Family, Sir Winston Churchill, Edward Heath, Lords Mountbatten and Alexander of Tunis, Pope John XXIII, Sir John Gielgud and many other celebrities. A most prolific artist, Gilroy also produced a vast number of sketches, landscapes and whimsical designs for Royle's greetings cards.

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Gilroy Animals

Toucan/ Pelican

1935 The toucan (which actually started out as a pelican) was the first of the 'Guinness Menagerie' to appear in poster form. The theme of the ad was "Guinness -a- day", and it showed a pelican with seven pints of GUINNESS® balanced on its beak. It carried the rhyme: "A Wonderful bird is the Pelican, Its bill can hold more than its belly can, It can hold in its beak, Enough for a Week, I simply don't know how the hell he can"

This became altered by Dorothy L. Sayers who changed the bird (to a toucan) and the number of glasses of beer (to two) so that the actual ad which appeared was as follows: "If he can say as you can, Guinness is Good for You, How grand to be a Toucan, Just think what Toucan do"

Sealion

1935. Gilroy claimed he got the idea for the sealion, the first of his animal designs, from seeing a sealion doing tricks at Bertram Mills' circus. Twenty years later, on the first night of commercial television in Britain (22 September 1955) the first beer commercial shown was one for GUINNESS® featuring a real live sealion waddling off with its keeper's GUINNESS® - Gilroy's poster had come to life!

Ostrich

1936. This poster provoked a flood of letters from the public claiming the ostrich had swallowed the keeper's GUINNESS® glass the wrong way up. Gilroy put forward the ingenious explanation that the ostrich had been imitating the sealion and balancing the glass on its beak before flicking it into the air to swallow it. A later appearance of the ostrich in a press ad of 1952 was accompanied by the following poem: "The ostrich, travellers recall, enjoys his Guinness, glass and all. How sad the Guinness takes so long To get to where it makes him strong!"

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Tortoise

1936. The first poster showed a speeding tortoise bearing a GUINNESS®. The caption - "Have a Guinness when you're tired" - echoes the restorative and tonic values traditionally associated with GUINNESS® in early advertising as encapsulated in the original slogan - "Guinness is good for you". In the humorous illustrated booklet, which Guinness produced for Christmas 1937, the tortoise appeared with the following poem containing a characteristic rhyming pun: " "It's Christmas," said the tortoise, "Have something good for you." So Guinness he has brought us, And Tortoise what to do."

Zookeeper

The harassed little zoo-keeper was actually a self-caricature of Gilroy himself. To support the animals advertising theme for many years Guinness sponsored real life circus and zoo-animals similar to those in their posters.

Crocodile

1957. The original sketch for the poster shows the crocodile weeping "crocodile tears", however in by the time the finished poster appeared the crocodile had become less tender hearted!. In the case of this poster the crocodile's mouth got progressively larger in each poster version, especially the extra long bus-side version!

Penguin

The Penguin became the symbol for Draught GUINNESS® when it was first introduced to the British market. The penguin was chosen to emphasise the coolness of the new Draught GUINNESS® and appeared on bar mounts and pub memorabilia.

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