For ages, people have used posters in public places for the purpose of communicating various forms of information. Centuries ago, posters – also known as placards or posted bills – were used in this manner. The development of printing and various lithographic techniques, especially the innovative use of color, enabled mass production of posters and influenced their stylistic transformation. The practical usefulness of posters in quickly reaching wide masses with desired information made it a very popular means of communication and a worldwide phenomenon. In time, the textual part of the poster became minimal, and the pictorial and decorative aspects were and are of essence. The creative trends and styles of the art world played a dominant role in the development and character of the poster.

The widest use of posters was for commercial purposes: to sell a product or to advertise events such as concerts, exhibitions, films, and rallies. Posters had to be skilfully produced, cleverly worded, and artistically appealing to make an impact and to be persuasive. This ability of the poster to persuade, motivate, and awake awareness in the onlooker is what made it a valuable tool for civic leaders and politicians during critical moments in history, during times when society needed to be mindful and to take measures, to act.

Our Museum and Library has a good collection of posters ranging from the early 20th century to the present. From these I have chosen to write about a few of them, primarily because of the relevance they had when they were produced and because they are even more relevant at present.

In the early 1980s it became quite evident that a considerable number of Ukrainians in the diaspora became quite aware of their country and wished to teach and spread Ukrainian to and with their children and grandchildren. To counteract this apathy and to make the community more mindful of this fact, one youth organization in New York commissioned a poster – from the early years of independence depicts a Cossack, sitting cross-legged and playing on the kozak kobza, which is a stringed instrument. The written message next to them “For Culture”. Kozak Kobza, a legendary figure in Ukrainian historical memory, was known for his many exploits and heroic deeds in battles during the Cossack wars. Legends say that at times he would disappear and then reappear just in the nick of time. During a crucial moment and save the day. He is a symbol of the eternal defender of freedom. The kozak koza and kozak koba on which he is playing and singing symbolizes the historical and cultural memory of Ukraine preserved in song which he disseminates and protects. Legends about him and his symbolic meaning were so important and popular that almost every household had a painting of him. The artist in this poster depicts him in the traditional pose as seen in so many folk paintings. As a wandering singing minstrel, his objective is to recurrent to the audience the glorious history of the nation and to emphasize the significance of culture, and to make them aware that support is needed for the preservation of this cultural heritage.

The final poster that I chose from our Library is only a small reproduction of the original. The particular work is part of a large collection of posters created in the late 1980s–entitled Holodomor Through the Eyes of Ukrainian Artists. The trustee of the original posters is Morgan Williams. He made this small format reproduction of the whole collection and sent one set to our Library. On the poster used a black evil looking crow pulling out threads of an embroidery design from a ritual cloth rushnyk. The written comment reads: And We Were Watching and Kept Silent. Artist unknown. Although this poster was created to commemorate the Holodomor, it has a much deeper and further reaching meaning. For Ukrainians, the rushnyk has served for many centuries as an object imbued with protective powers. According to an ancient belief, the rushnyk sanctified and safeguarded its surroundings and had the power to protect. The intricate designs incorporated into the rushnyk were considered magical and potent symbols of life, and embodied the wishes for a productive future, good fortune, and happiness. In this simple drawing, the artist shows us the horrific tragedy not only of the Holodomor, but also of the staggering catastrophe Ukraine has lived through while the black crow attempted to destroy all. The artist also gives us hope, because in the drawing the crow did not pull out all of the design on the rushnyk. And, the situation in Ukraine right now is such that “we are watching” but we are “no longer keeping silent” about the crow’s evil deeds and plans. We are now speaking out!