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Syracuse Cultural Workers has made a business for 30 years selling provocative posters, cards, shirts

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By



Michelle Gabel/The Post-Standard

Dik Cool (left), of Syracuse, Karin Franklin-King (center), of Central Square, and Karen Kerney, of Jamesville, talk at an exhibit of Syracuse Cultural Workers posters at the Onondaga Historical Association Wednesday.

Dik Cool calls his [work](#) "visual subversion."

We're talking about posters that stimulate thought and comment, and are handsome, as well.

Dik is publisher and a founder of Syracuse Cultural Workers, which is 30 years old this year. Onondaga Historical Association (OHA) museum at 321 Montgomery St. is hosting an anniversary exhibit of 100 posters from the workers' inventory of more than 700.

"100 @ 30" will be at the OHA through Jan. 20.

"I think we have a unique ability to combine a strong aesthetic with a strong point of view," Dik explains. The cooperative started on a shoestring and thrives as an important Syracuse [business](#),

employing some 15 people and distributing across an international audience, through its catalog.

The Workers' posters cover of a broad range of what the publisher calls "agitational" topics: Iroquois women, Rosa Parks, Mark Twain, living green, global warming, Freedom Riders, "No War on Iraq," Matilda Joslyn Gage, Harriet Tubman and "Peace Signs."

The exhibit includes SCW's first poster, in 1982, "Disarmament Now," and the latest, for the OHA, a poster about abolitionist Frederick Douglass, "Power Concedes Nothing."

Cultural Workers grew out of a **job** Dik Cool had as a member of the staff of Syracuse Peace Council. He grew up in Liverpool, where he worked on the school newspaper and yearbook, as sports editor. He played a little basketball, a sport that served him well during the year he spent in federal prison for draft resistance in the 1960s.

"I guess I've always had ink in my blood," he explains.

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One of his [jobs](#) at the Peace Council was to produce the annual calendar. He left the council in 1981 to keep the calendar going after concluding that "distributing posters or other visual products on a national level was not the work of a local peace group."

He explained in a 2008 interview for this column that the Cultural Workers sprung from a grassroots collective that exists to this day. This happened on Avondale Place, in the Westcott neighborhood. "We came together to [support](#) each other," Dik says.

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This poster was created in 2006 poster by Shephard Fairey. The poster, and similar T-shirts, are among the Syracuse Cultural Workers most popular items.

The calendar continues to be published. The 2013 edition, "Occupy the Future," is on sale at the Workers' headquarters at 400 Lodi St., in a building that once was home to the Caroma Restaurant. It's the location of the Workers' "Tools for Change" retail store.

The key to the organization's success is its "Tools for Change" catalog, 24 pages of radical materials including posters, T-shirts, mugs, fair trade coffee, datebooks and books for children and environmentalists.

In the essay he wrote for the exhibit catalog, Dik explains he's always been "captivated by the power, the passion and the inspirational quality of posters. More often than not, I still find myself trying to address a huge range of issues through the poster medium, even when the topic is too complicated to be workable!"

He mentioned in the essay that Karen Kerney, the Workers' [art director](#), "has been my partner in visual subversion since 1977. Her aesthetic and design style are indelibly stamped on SCW's incredible body of work these past 15 years," he says. Another credit goes to Donna Tarbania, the SCW book editor, who has been part of the organization's creative team for 12 years.'

Dik says the group started out selling other peoples' posters. Now most of the line is designed inhouse by some 300 different artists and printed locally by Midstate Printing Corp, which he adds is a "union shop." On the average, each year, Cultural Workers has connections to some 75 artists "across North America and beyond."

In 2008, the Workers opened an art gallery at 505 Hawley Ave., ArtRage.

Financial survival has been a constant struggle for SCW "for most of our 30 years," Dik points out. "Posters are hard to handle, require special packaging and very few stores carry them.," he says.

Dik ends his essay by saying, "It has been my privilege these past 30 years to do work that I love and that makes a difference."

Dick Case writes Tuesday, Thursday and Sunday. Reach him at 470-2254, or by e-mail, dcase@syracuse.com.

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