THE TWENTIES IN New York City Subway Posters

The New York City subway has taken its place as an icon of Americana—and for subway riders of the 1920s, the company posters displayed in the subway cars and elevated trains became iconic in themselves. Today the “Subway Sun” and the “Elevated Express” offer a unique perspective on the period 1918 to 1932, the sixteen-year span of the series.

Presented here are twenty of the 385 21x16” posters produced by the Interborough Rapid Transit Company (IRT) to encourage ridership after its first competitor, Brooklyn Rapid Transit, opened the first BRT line into Manhattan in 1917. Imagine reading the posters while riding the rumbling crowded subway in New York City in the years from the end of World War I to the beginning of the Great Depression.

☐ What major events and issues of the period were highlighted in the posters?

☐ How did the posters display prevalent attitudes of the period? How did they reflect a big-city perspective on the “modern age”? a business perspective?

☐ In what ways were the posters entertaining as well as informative or promotional?

☐ How did the graphic and text design change over the period? How did these changes reflect the period?

☐ Do you think the posters were an effective marketing device for the IRT? Why?

☐ Combine the subway posters with other single-source collections in Becoming Modern, Theme I: THE AGE, e.g., from another New York City source (New Yorker cartoons) or from another large city source (Chicago Tribune political cartoons). What unique insights can be gained by studying single-source collections from a period? What limits do they present?

Notes:

- “L”: elevated train.
- Brooklyn strike (Sept. 1920 poster): The August 1920 BRT transit workers’ strike was one of many postwar strikes for better wages and working conditions.
- Defense Test Day (Sept. 1924 poster): national radio broadcast by the federal government in 1924 and 1925 to demonstrate the nation’s defense preparedness.
- Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee [of New York] (1932 poster): city agency created to raise private donations for worker relief; initiated as part of Pres. Hoover’s campaign to stimulate volunteer aid for the unemployed.
Shuttle Service in Operation

The shuttle service from Times Square to the Grand Central Station will be placed in operation at 6 A.M., Saturday, Sept. 28th.

Whenever possible avoid changing to the shuttle.

To Prevent the Spread of Spanish Influenza

sneeze, cough or expectorate if you must in your handkerchief.

You are in no danger if everyone heeds this warning.

By order of Board of Health
ROYAL S. COPELAND, President

The direct route will save you time.

Theodore S. Hoady
President

A Job and a Welcome to Our Men

2,426 Interborough men are in Uncle Sam’s service. When they come home they will find not only a hearty welcome -- but their jobs.

And our more recent employees will also be retained. The war so reduced our forces that there will be work for men old and new, -- even more.

Thanks to the women, it has been possible to keep up this service during the war; and we shall need them even after our men return.

We believe the great riding public appreciates their service as fully as we do.

INTERBOROUGH RAPID TRANSIT COMPANY

President

September 27, 1918

November 25, 1918
**August 1920**

**From The New York World, August 2, 1920**

68 KILLED, 632 INJURED, BY AUTOS IN CITY LAST MONTH

List Compiled by Medical Examiner Shows Thirty-Nine of the Dead Were Children Under Age of Thirteen—Fatalities in June Numbered Ninety-Two.

Sixty-eight persons were killed and 462 others were injured by wreckage on the streets. In June, ninety-three persons were killed. Included in the July list were almost ninety children under the age of six. The June list included Charles Y. S., 15, killed in the East 34th Street violation.

**September 1920**

**The Subway Sun**

**Thank You!**

To The Public—The Brooklyn strike brought much discomfort and trial to our patrons, but they bore it all with patience and consideration.

To Our Men and The Police—To you the strike brought extra long hours and harder work. We wish to express our sincerest appreciation and thanks to the public, the police and our men.

Interborough Rapid Transit Company
December 1921

Going In

Elevated Express

Going Out

These two pictures were taken from opposite sides of the same gate.

Plenty of Gates at Every Station

The new feather-weight pressure gates make handling of crowds easier. At all Subway Stations now using them the crowding is less and no standing in line for tickets. Every gate is for either entry or exit.

Interborough Rapid Transit Co.

June 1922

The Elevated Express

OUTINGS IN NEW YORK NO 1

Why Country Boys are Strong

Nearly all our great men were country boys. Sunshine and open air gave them strength.

Every New York child can get a bit of real country life for the next five months in our great parks.

Build up the Babies! No need to spend large sums for railroad fare. The Interborough lines take you to any one of five of the largest and most beautiful Parks in the World for a nickel.

Interborough Rapid Transit Co.
**Boost Her Police**

They deserve it. They protect us day and night.

They make about 27,000 arrests yearly. But that is only a small part of their work.

For example, they regulate daily traffic for nearly half a million motor vehicles.

Interborough Rapid Transit Co.

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**A Word from President Coolidge**

“Nearly every city is making large appropriations for parks and play grounds.

“Get the children out of the alleys and off the streets into open places.

“Teach them true sportsmanship, right living and the love of being square.”

—President Coolidge, in an address before the National Conference on Outdoor Life at Washington, May 21, 1924.

Any Interborough Line Will Take You To The Parks and Other Outing Spots
To Every Boy and Girl

This picture is especially for you. It is a Fourth of July story of Americanism.

Boys and girls can make holiday travel safer and more comfortable by not shoving or rushing.

INTERBROUGHT RAPID TRANSIT COMPANY

ca. July 1924

DEFENSE TEST DAY

Friday, September 12th.

A peace time test and demonstration of the organizations and resources that may be brought to the protection of our country.

Meetings of Citizens in all parts of New York. See Newspapers for Time and Place

All conveniently reached by Subway or Elevated

September 1924
ca. 1924

Our Men Know Their Jobs

The Subway Sun

Safest Railroad In the World

Where to Park? Where to Park?

Not in the theatre district—that's certain! You'll reach the theatre more quickly and more safely by using the Open Air “L” or Subway—and you'll have no parking worries.

ca. 1925

Keep Cool and Keep Still

Our Men Know Their Jobs

The Subway Sun

Safest Railroad In the World

From The New York Evening Graphic

This car is built of steel and cannot burn. In case of an electrical blowout or short circuit keep your seat and quiet your neighbor. Fear and panic are your only danger.
Why I Use the Interborough

—From the Secretary, the National Association
for the Advancement of Colored People

I USE the Interborough because it enables me to spend fifteen minutes longer over my breakfast table uptown and fifteen minutes longer at my desk downtown, without being late going or coming.

JAMES WELDON JOHNSON

ca. 1925

The Season’s Greetings to all our Patrons

INTERBOROUGH RAPID TRANSIT COMPANY

ca. December 1925
HORSE CARS VS. RAPID TRANSIT

If the fare was 5 and 6 cents in the old days, IS SEVEN CENTS TOO MUCH NOW?

In New York City street car fares advanced from 5 to 6 cents after the Civil War. Except in New York City they have gone up similarly since the World War.

WHY SHOULD NEW YORK’S TRANSIT DEVELOPMENT BE STIFLED BY AN INADEQUATE FARE?

The "L" Is Your Air Line

It has

Regularity
Speed
Dependability

Out In the Open—Away From the Heat Of the Crowded Streets
1931

Let’s Do What We Can for...
A Merry Christmas and
Happy New Year

INTERBOROUGH RAPID TRANSIT COMPANY

1932

Every employed New Yorker is urged to share, promptly and liberally, to provide relief to the thousands in distress... heads of families, lone women, single men, our neighbors... facing the winter with no work and no funds. The need is far greater than a year ago.

Emergency Unemployment Relief Committee

MANHATTAN: 70 Pine Street, Dilgby 4-9800
BROOKLYN: 215 Montague Street, Triangle 5-6377
BRONX: 304 East 149th Street
QUEENS: 29-27 41st Avenue, Long Island City
RICHMOND: 30 Bay Street, St. George, S. I.
HARLEM DIV: 129 West 135th Street

well see it through!

SHARING... doesn’t hurt like suffering