

AIRLINE MAPS: A CENTURY OF ART AND DESIGN

By Mark Ovenden and Maxwell Roberts

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Airline Maps: A Century of Art and Design by Mark Ovenden and Maxwell Roberts examines design trends of airline maps from 1919 to the present. The book is composed mostly of maps, with short bits of contextual information, to allow readers to comprehend how the look of airline maps has changed over time. As a whole, the book is visually striking and will be of interest to many cartographers and graphic designers. However, it is disappointing that the authors provide such a limited historical context to supplement the visuals, because art and design trends do not exist in isolation. The index and bibliography are also both very limited, and a reading list pointing to further information about air travel and the maps associated with it would be a great opportunity for further learning.

The book is divided into seven chapters, each representing a ten to twenty year period in the history of airline maps. The text provides a brief description of air travel in each era, highlighting the improved flight range of airplanes, the growing affordability of flights for average people, and the evolving interrelations between the airline industry and other forms of travel like boats and trains. These changing conditions are reflected in the maps; for example, the scale of early airline maps typically showed flights within a single country or region because flights could not yet travel worldwide distances.

Historically, airline maps have been meant not for navigation, but instead to encourage the public to use air

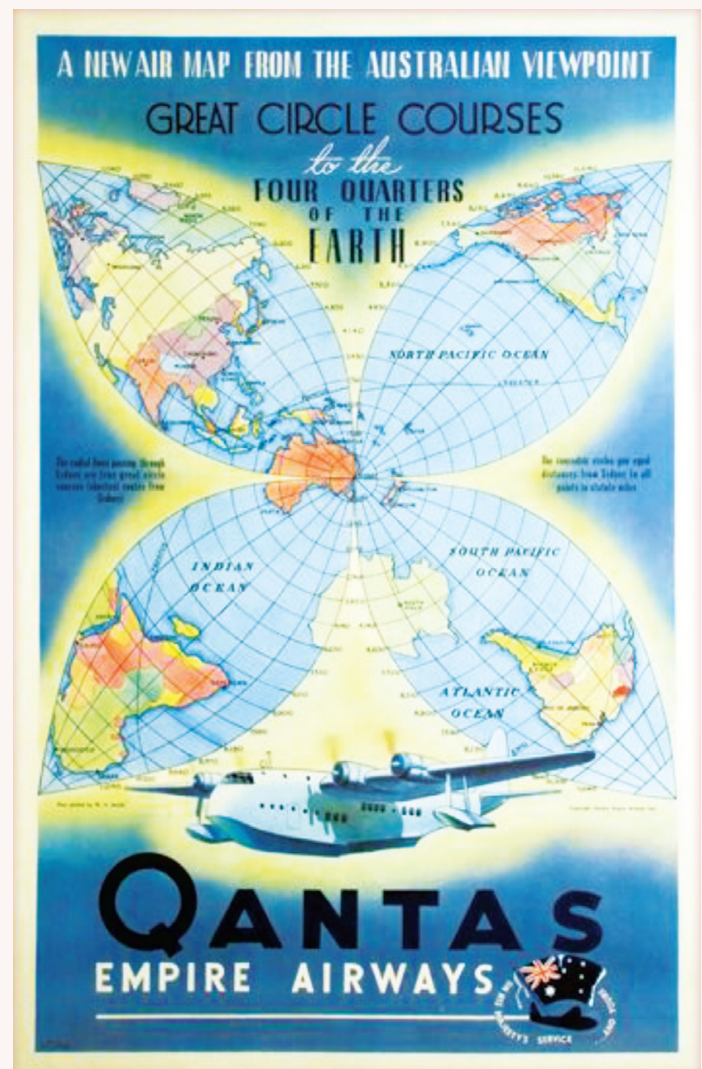


Figure 1. Qantas map from the 1940s (47).

travel by providing a sense of speed, security, and ease—and sometimes of foreign exoticism. In the early days of air travel, mapmakers were given freedom to experiment, and thus, both between and within airlines, map designs show little consistency. The approaches that were adopted were based in both science and artistry, with many creators drawing on well-established cartographic practices—using real projections, for example. Some designers chose to use novel projections (Figure 1) or unique orientations (Figure 2) that are rarer today, choices that might be confusing in other contexts, but are potentially enticing when the maps do not have to be practical navigation tools. Other creators adopted data visualizations, much like transit maps, prioritizing simplicity. For a few maps, especially some of the earliest ones, the maps are exercises in modernist graphic design, artistically highlighting a single destination. As a whole, visual appeal was prioritized over wayfinding.

The authors do not try to downplay the problematic history of many airlines, noting the imperialist nature of many early flight routes, a fact hidden by neither the airlines nor the maps. Air France, for example, flew to Africa, but only its own colonies. The British-based Imperial Airways colored Britain and its colonial possessions red, using another color for everywhere else (Figure 3). The earliest worldwide airline maps often included pictorial elements of foreign destinations, with figures engaged in activities or dressed in ways that promoted exoticizing, racist stereotypes. As the authors note, “By twenty-first-century standards, some [of these depictions] might be deemed inappropriate, but they are of their time and would not have been intended as offensive” (13). The majority of airlines, especially early on, were Western based, and the collection in *Airline Maps* reflects this. Some maps from non-Western airlines are included as well, though are not the focus of this book.

“Women . . . played a major part in early aviation,” (13) so it is unsurprising that they often featured in airline maps and other advertisements—for example, one 1923 postcard from the Belgian airline

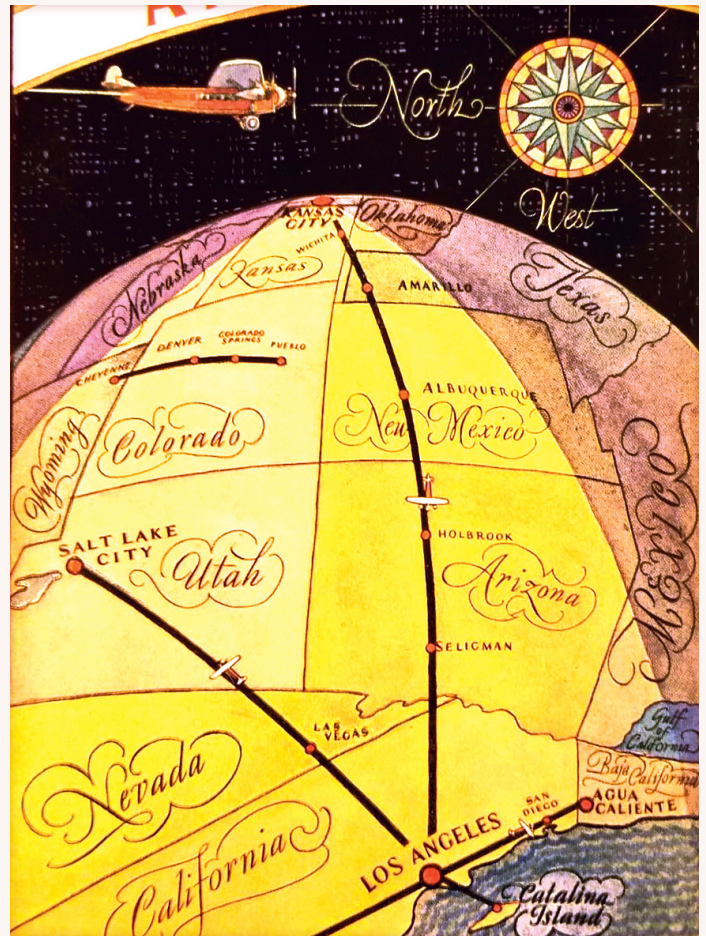


Figure 2. Western Air Express Map from 1929.

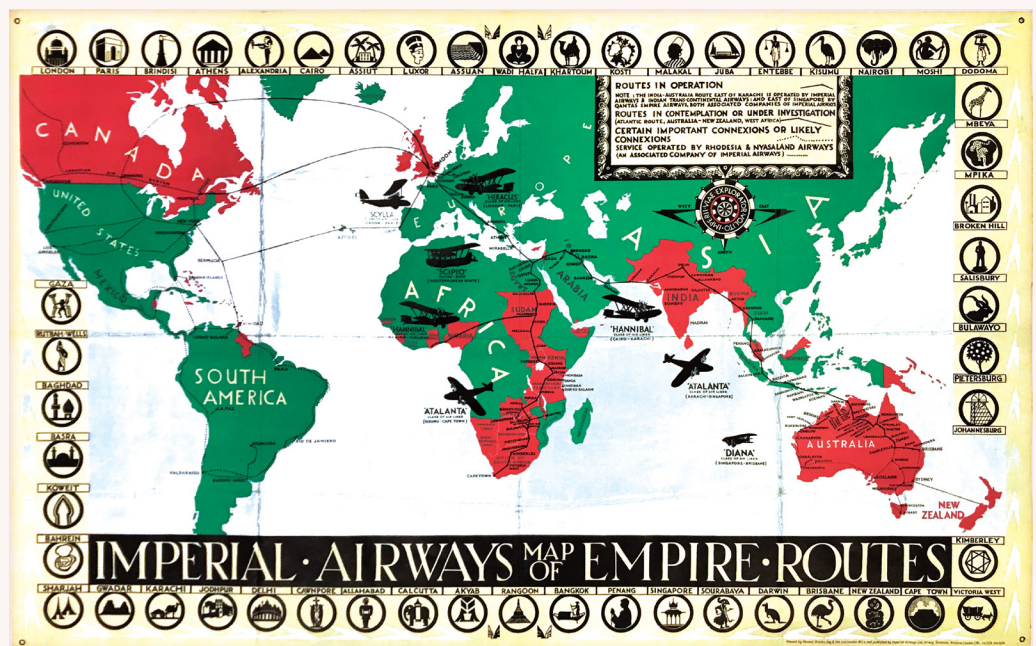


Figure 3. Imperial Airways map from 1935 (34).

Sabena features “an entirely female crew and passengers” (13, illustration 12 top left). Women also, as the authors note, made at least some airline maps. Ruth T. White, for example, authored the three Western Air Express maps shown on page 13—from 1925, 1928, and 1929—although only the 1928 map is directly credited to her. The inclusion of women in airline maps was not always positive, though, and often women were used as seductive marketing features, such as in Pan American maps from the 1930s. The Pan Am maps, targeted at a “rich vacation-minded clientele” (30, illustration 30 top left and bottom middle), exhibit similar problematic tropes to maps which exoticized non-Western individuals.

As the century progressed, airline maps began to have somewhat more consistent styles. World maps become much more common, many using curved lines to indicate flights between destination cities. However, many of these maps continued to employ both racist and sexist tropes. By the 1950s and 1960s, planes were faster and fares were cheaper, while middle class affluence was growing. With increased demand for flights, more airlines opened, resulting in greater competition. In response, airlines advertised to Western male consumers by highlighting both the “exotic” destination cultures and the friendly, attractive, female flight attendants staffing the planes.

A shift in consumption led to a shift in maps, beginning around the 1970s. Chapter 5 begins with the comment: “as planes got bigger and faster, maps seemed to get less attention” (102). While some maps remained beautiful and abstract, others became much more schematic and practical. This style change leads to a tone shift in the book: the authors have a clear preference for the older maps in this collection, and can be quite dismissive about ones for which they care less. They are especially snide about the 1968 and 1971 BOAC (British Overseas Airways Corporation) maps on page 104, noting that “neither of [them] work especially well,” and that the earlier of the two “appears as if the designer may have swallowed some of the psychoactive substances in circulation in the late 1960s” (105). In a book meant to assess the changing styles of airline maps, these comments feel inappropriate, especially since the authors have sought to portray their book as a mostly visual product, with very little textual content. At the very least, the presence of opinions is inconsistent, since none of the previous chapters had such negative comments.

The authors’ opinions on more recent airline maps are reflected in the reduced space dedicated to the final three

chapters. The first four chapters, spanning 48 years of early aviation, are given 95 pages, while the last three chapters, spanning the most recent 51 years of aviation, are given only 41 pages. In a book with the subtitle *A Century of Art and Design*, it is disappointing that half the century receives reduced attention. During this later period, more airlines opened, existing airlines were expanding, jet engines made longer distance flights possible, and more types of maps could be produced (such as digital ones)—suggesting there are many interesting options to compile. One author opens the book by remarking, “there [was] no shortage of material to include” (5), so while it is possible that archives of earlier years were simply more complete, the authors do not provide an explanation for the difference in chapter sizes. The authors’ passion clearly lies in these early eras, and the remaining chapters are both more vague and more opinionated, and fall disappointingly flat.

Another shortcoming of the text is that there is no discussion of, or even much indication of, the context in which each map originally appeared. They could have been for small or large audiences, printed at any size, or distributed at any number of locations. The extent to which the public saw any of the maps included in any of the chapters is difficult to discern, and that makes the comment about maps getting less attention in the 1960s and 1970s difficult to verify. Additionally, the authors did not provide an index of individual maps—only photo credits—and even the table of contents seems to be missing a few entries. The citations that *are* included name only the collection that the map comes from, with no useful information about the map itself, such as its title in the collection. Thus, re-finding any particular map one remembers seeing requires tedious page flipping.

Readers of *Airline Maps: A Century of Art and Design* must recall the title when picking up the book and understand that its contents are a venture into art and design, not history. The authors catalog a number of airline artifacts which may provide design inspiration, but offer limited historical context, which some readers might wish for to supplement and contextualize the maps. The review copy of this book was provided to me digitally (as a PDF), but, to my mind, a physical copy would have been preferable, given the focus on design. Some of the maps extend across two pages, and these would likely look better in print. Additionally, because the book is dominated by maps, some of the text is cut off mid-sentence and is not continued for up to ten pages. For example, the text at the bottom of page 83 ends with: “. . . the French-designed

Sud-Est Aviation Caravelle, introduced in 1959, showed that,” and then picks up again on page 93 with, “jets for short-haul flights could also be economic.” While a small silhouette of an airplane displays a number indicating which page the sentence continues on, navigating all over the book like this is much more difficult in a PDF than in a physical volume.

Overall, I am of two minds on recommending this book. Audiences broadly interested in the visual changes of airline maps over the past century or who are looking for unique cartographic inspiration may enjoy this book.

However, for audiences who, like me, are deeply fascinated by the subject of airline maps, this book may leave them wanting more, as it did for me. While such a brief book could never comprehensively cover this vast subject, I find myself frustrated by its modesty: I want to know more about who was making these maps, where they were displayed, who was seeing them, and where I can go to see some of them myself. This book will spark your curiosity, and while the short trip may be plentiful for many readers, I find myself wishing I could take a longer look out this window into the past.

