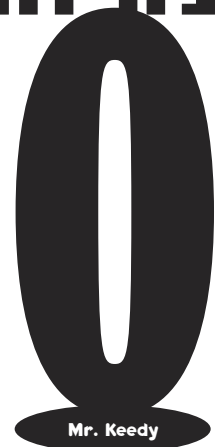


# GREASING THE WHEELS OF CAPITALISM WITH STYLE AND TASTE OR THE “PROFESSIONALIZATION” OF AMERICAN GRAPHIC DESIGN



THE ROLE that commerce has played in American graphic design, and how it has determined what is valued in design practice, is one of the most interesting and least discussed topics. Questions of an ethical nature seldom arise in design discourse because designers are used to deferring responsibility to their clients, who are ultimately accountable for what is produced. Designers are for the most part subordinate to the client, obedient to society, and patronizing to each other. The ethics of design are largely informed by a simplistic “politically correct” morality on one hand and a “bottom line” efficiency on the other, making for an easy value system for practice. It’s a value system in which design is implicitly understood as a benign service, in which it is the designer’s responsibility to anticipate and satisfy the expectations of the client and audience.

THE PROBLEM with this arrangement is that the audience is for the most part a silent, indifferent, and undifferentiated entity, thus necessitating a surrogate (usually self-appointed) “expert” to become the spokesperson for the audience. This surrogate audience expert is usually the client, or worse, a marketing consultant hired by the client. This eliminates the possibility of the audience’s desires contradicting the client’s goals. On the other hand, the graphic designer as representative of the audience is just as likely to act with a fair dose of self interest. Neither the client armed with a team of marketing experts, nor the designer with the best of intentions, is a credible representative of the audience.

BUT WHAT IS THE ALTERNATIVE? The designer’s and client’s confidence that “we know what’s best for you” is based on the fact that they do know and care a lot more about design than the audience does. The fact that the audience is often unwilling to concede this point is proof of the ignorance and contempt they have for any specialized knowledge and expertise in design. Perhaps that’s why designers don’t use the word “audience” very much anymore; now they call them “users.” The term “user” is recognition of the fact that design and designers are supposed to be used up by the users.

# JUST SHOW ME THE MONEY



IN SPITE OF the general indifference most people have toward design, designers are hardly indifferent toward their users; in fact, they can’t get enough of them. Who would have guessed that post-industrial capitalism would lead to so much selfless service to others’ desires? But the “others,” that designers are now so eager to please are not just some others, or most others; now we want to please all the others. Because nowadays, it often seems there is no point in recording music, making a movie, or publishing a book without the guarantee of a huge audience, or maximum usability.

MOTIVATED BY GREED AND LAZINESS, this crowd-pleasing attitude has infected design. Now exposure has become more important than what’s being exposed. The number of hits your web site gets, the number of fonts you sell, the number of design awards and magazine articles you can rack up, and how big your clients are, are what designers value most. Now bigger is better, particularly in regard to clients and users. Getting more users means getting younger users. Just like music, film, clothing, and tobacco companies, now design companies are aiming lower for higher returns. It is without any sense of irony that designers now consider clients like Nike, Burton, and MTV the most desirable. AIGA design annuals that were once filled with great books, exhibition designs, and public signage systems, now look more like sporting goods catalogs for preteens.

JUST BECAUSE pop culture is ruled by adolescent taste, does that mean design culture has to follow the money? Since a designer’s clients can never be too big, nor their audience too young, it would be logical to conclude that the really important design work of the future will be done for baby food and diapers, and the most desirable clients will be Gerber and Playskool.

IN DESIGN CIRCLES you often hear designers use the expression “selling out,” but what does that mean in a practice in which the selling always precedes the production? And what exactly is being sold out? The designer’s integrity and standards? What are those based on? Is design that doesn’t attempt to make money somehow better than that which does? There has certainly never been a shortage of really crappy free design. The designer who believes that “selling out” is somehow easier than sticking to presumably higher principles has obviously never really sold out. Selling out is as much work and probably more aggravating than abiding by one’s own self-fulfilling principles.

WHEN IT COMES TO the relationship between design and money, no one-to-one equation of value survives. Except maybe for the one that states: the bigger jerk the client is, the higher the charge. Or from the client’s perspective: the bigger jerk the designer is, the higher the fee. But why would a client spend more money to work with a bigger jerk? It’s like psychotherapy; if you don’t pay for it, it doesn’t work – no pain, no gain. “Just look at this fancy office, and all those employees and design awards, it’s got to be worth the price. Right?”

# ECLECTICISM AND MODERNISM



IN THE EARLY DAYS, the commercial artist’s aesthetic ideology was formed largely by the demands of the market place – whatever sold the best and was cost effective and expedient. That market-driven aesthetic was slightly tempered by the designer’s personal experience that varied from print shops, sign painting, copy writing, and illustration. The aesthetic ideology of the commercial artist was a vernacular hodgepodge that had no preference for either high or low cultural style. Good or bad was only a matter of how well something was done. The only thing that was deemed unethical was to do amateurish and inept work for professional wages. Well crafted, or slickly

produced work, was highly regarded no matter whom it was for. It would be a gross generalization to say that the situation is exactly the opposite now, but things are certainly a lot more complicated today.

NOT ONLY was the commercial artist's approach to style iconoclastic, but their relationship to commerce was equally individualized. Not regarded as professionals, it was up to each individual to establish their own place between art and commerce. This democratic approach to style and practice, typical of the unschooled commercial artist, is now generally referred to as "eclectic" in the design community. The ethical standards of the eclectic designer were equally eclectic in that they varied according to whom the designer worked for - it was every man for himself (since they were mostly all men). They tended to be independent designers working on smaller scale projects and they were often close acquaintances of their clients.

BECAUSE THERE WAS NO prevailing aesthetic or ethical ideology, American designers were receptive to new ideas. The consumer-based economy was also receptive to new ideas, as long as they could be commodified, or added value to existing products. That was the fertile American soil that the seeds of modernism, blown from across the Atlantic ocean, were to root in. And that was also the beginning of the decline of American eclecticism in design.

TODAY, American graphic design is generally thought of as consisting of two basic currents of practice: eclecticism and modernism. The eclectic designer is a descendant of the commercial artist who learned on the job or in a trade school. The eclectic's work runs the gamut of stylistic vernaculars from classicism to contemporary. But today, the most pervasive model of practice is the modern professional designer, whose work is based on the ideas of European émigrés who were educated by artists in art schools. The modernist designer's work is defined by the designer's understanding and interpretation of modernism.

THESE TWO CURRENTS OF IDEOLOGY, eclecticism and modernism, have been widely accepted as the basic paradigm for the development of graphic design in America. The old eclectic and the new modern serve as a kind of historical continuum that concludes with the triumph of corporate modernism. However, the past decade has added a new third paradigm: post-modernism, a reaction to, or, as some would say, a confused disillusionment with, the first two.

SINCE MOST DESIGNERS today are college-educated and have at least a rudimentary understanding of design history, the eclectic approach to design today is mostly an affectation of willful ignorance. Although greater claims are sometimes made by the designers, the overall effect of today's eclectic designer is mostly one of nostalgia and kitsch. Which is, as such, a very lucrative style. It is a lot easier to sell your clients on something familiar than to convince them to take a chance with something new. Although pandering to the tastes of the lowest common denominator is eclecticism's greatest commercial asset, it has also become the greatest aesthetic and conceptual liability, the American designer's albatross. There is something inherently cynical about exhibiting a naivete that is not genuine, but as the saying goes, "No one ever went broke underestimating the taste of the American public."

THE DIFFERENCE between the new eclecticism and the old is that the new eclectic designer has higher production values (due to new technology), and the old eclectic designer had better craftsmanship and formal skills (also due to new technology). Today eclecticism in design is viewed as the flip side of modernism; it is that catch-all phrase for everything outside of modernism's majestic reach. The main function of eclecticism is to be everything but modern; it is the pre-modern as opposed to the postmodern. Little is known about the old eclectic designers; they are not considered important or interesting enough to warrant study. The commercial artists

# WINNERS AND LOSERS

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were supposed to be anonymous, while modernist designers are always autonomous. The old eclectic designers of America's past are a cipher on which we project everything we think we have lost, and everything we think we might like to lose.

IN *HISTORY OF GRAPHIC DESIGN*,<sup>1</sup> the *de facto* textbook for design history in America, William Addison Dwiggins, one of the most important American graphic designers, barely rated one paragraph in the Arts and Crafts chapter, with absolutely none of his work reproduced. In the most recent edition, he has been upgraded with an additional four sentences in The Modern Movement in America chapter, which lists three of his typefaces, reproduces a title page he designed, and identifies him as a "transitional" designer.

BY CONTRAST, Herbert Bayer fills four pages (two in the second edition) with numerous reproductions of his work and all of his experimental alphabets reproduced. All this despite the fact that Bayer's typefaces were never used much, were not as influential to type design as Dwiggins's, and he was less prolific. However, Bayer's work is obviously considered substantially more important to the development of graphic design than Dwiggins's. Why? Because even though Dwiggins was a modern designer with modern values, he wasn't a modernist designer like those "Bauhaus boys" he used to make fun of, so he is relegated to oblivion. Obviously, when you do a history book, you can't include everyone and everything. Oz Cooper, for example, doesn't even warrant a mention. History is written by and for the winners. But how did designers as talented and important as Dwiggins and Cooper get to be the losers?

DESIGNERS LIKE DWIGGINS and Cooper were every bit as talented and arguably more innovative and original in their work than their canonized modernist counterparts. Although their design was based on the values of craftsmanship and tradition, they were committed to producing new work for the Machine Age. Their work was idiosyncratic because it was shaped by the force of their personal convictions. Perhaps they lost out because these "bumpkins from the Midwest" were difficult to categorize and were usually lumped together under the generic heading of eclecticism.

HOWEVER, the real reason the eclectics were the losers in design history isn't just because they were ideologically diverse and more difficult to assimilate (copy); it also has to do with their values or why and who they were working for. Although Dwiggins wrote one of the first good how-to books on design, *Layout in Advertising* (1929), he was very skeptical of advertising. So when he learned that he had diabetes, he decided to drop advertising work for good. "I am a happy invalid and it has revolutionized my whole attack. My back is turned on the more banal kind of advertising, and I have canceled all commissions and am resolutely set on starving. I shall undertake only the simple childish little things that call for compromise with the universal twelve-year-old mind of the purchasing public and I will produce art on paper and wood after my own heart with no heed to any market. Revolution, stark and brutal."<sup>2</sup>

DWIGGINS ALSO wrote rather critical essays about the poor quality of books, badly designed typefaces, and a satirical spoof of systematic theoretical approaches to design. He designed typefaces that were highly speculative and unique, and many considered his use of color bizarre. Dwiggins, perhaps one of the most underrated graphic designers of the twentieth century, represents an alternative model for design practice to that of all the overrated corporate tools, whose financial and self-promotional success have eclipsed all other concerns.

# 4 CORPORATE AND OBLIVION

GREASING THE WHEELS OF CAPITALISM WITH STYLE AND TASTE OR THE "PROFESSIONALIZATION" OF AMERICAN GRAPHIC DESIGN

THE OLD ECLECTIC DESIGNERS were so absorbed in their work that they didn't bother sucking up to big business and they weren't afraid to bite the hand that fed them if the integrity of their design was at stake. Hardly the kind of calculated crowd-pleasing gestures typical of designers today - it's no wonder they are considered a bunch of losers.

UNLIKE THE LOCAL YOKELS, the debonair émigrés from Europe marched in the ideological lock-step of modernism. Compared to the home-grown aesthetic that evolved in a piecemeal fashion from the American "eclectics," the modernist ideology was much easier to grasp. You didn't need to know any history and you could get it in a few choice sound bites. The designers who were in the know knew that "less is more" and "form follows function," so that "the more uninteresting the letter, the more useful it is to the typographer," to create "the new typography." Wasn't that easy? Now just put on some black clothes, cop an attitude, and you're a modernist designer.

THE MODERNIST IDEOLOGY was perfect for schools because it was formulated in schools. Now all the new design programs that started springing up to meet the increasing demands of the market place had clear guidelines and an easy list of do's and don'ts to follow. They weren't overburdened with too much conflicting history; it all started with the Bauhaus and ended with Paul Rand.

IN STARK CONTRAST to the old eclectic designer, the modernist designer worked on large scale projects in big studios for big corporations making big profits. Clearly they were the big winners. However, even though the modernists were cloaked in their own pseudo-scientific visual language, it was obvious to the outdated old eclectics that the new emperors would eventually be left out in the cold, in their underpants.

"but, above all, I want to be aware that art and business must converge and co-operate in the new visual experience towards total integration."

- herbert bayer, *magazine of art*, 18, 1951

THE NEW MODERNIST ÉMIGRÉS from Europe were not interested in improving and developing American design traditions; they wanted to put an end to the past and start over as the patriarchs of their own domain. But they couldn't build this brave new world alone, because basically they were just a bunch of starving artists with an attitude. What they needed was cash. Fortunately for them, the emerging corporate culture in America would provide cash in exchange for a look of respectability and sophistication - so it would look like they deserved the money they were making. Thus began the tawdry affair that presumably legitimized and professionalized the design trade in America.

THE POPULAR MASS MARKET acceptance of anything is always contingent on its ability to be easily assimilated. The more useful and desirable something is, the better it will sell. American designers bought modernism from Europe lock, stock, and barrel, and re-sold it to American corporations for a quick profit. Starting in 1951, all the way to the present, the Aspen International Design Conference's primary objective has been to sell modern design to corporate America by celebrating the success of corporate design, a theme that was to preoccupy most American design organizations for the next forty years.

THE ASPEN DESIGN CONFERENCE set the stage for the successful design stars of the competitive, money grubbing, golden years of the 80s, when corporate design was at its zenith. As an idealistic young designer at the time, the corporate design stars who I was supposed to emulate looked like a bunch of hustlers, tripping over each other to kiss corporate America's ass, hoping

for a few farts of fortune and fame. In hindsight, I have more empathy for what some of them were doing, but not much respect.

IS IT ANY WONDER designers starting out today are trying to make it on their own and define design practice on their own terms? We can only hope they make more progress in establishing design as a meaningful endeavor for the next generation instead of just grabbing as much of the American pie as they can stuff in their mouth. However, if the next generation only does its own thing, it will ultimately be even more short-sighted than the last. Design will be defined as anything and everything, and will ultimately amount to nothing.

BY CONSTANTLY PROMOTING the utility and the ubiquity of design, designers have unwittingly decreased their cultural cache. The average person has more respect and admiration for someone who can decorate a pair of boxer shorts than they do for a designer who can make the mass transit system of a big city intelligible and appealing. The more convincing the case that designers make for themselves, the more invisible they become. Once corporate America had modernism, what did it need designers for?

THIS IS ACTUALLY a very old problem, one that designers may never reconcile because the marginalization of design has been an essential component in the advancement of western culture. In the beginning, everyone was a designer because everything was designed or made by hand. Later, in the Middle Ages, the "specialists in making things" gained rank and were called "artisans." With increased urbanization and technological advancements, the artisans diversified and regulated their work through Medieval guilds, which instigated commerce or trade with others, then "The Renaissance introduced an intellectual separation of practical craft and fine art. Art came to be held in higher esteem. The transition took a long time, but slowly the word 'artisan' was coopted to distinguish the skilled manual worker from the intellectual, imaginative, or creative artist, and artists emerged as a very special category of cultural workers, producing a rare marginal commodity: works of art. Meanwhile artisans often organized their labors to the point where their workshops became factory-like."<sup>3</sup>

BY THE TIME the Industrial Revolution started, the subservient rank and diminished value of low end cultural workers, (i.e. designers) was firmly inscribed in the culture. Today, the use of the word "designer," as in "designer jeans," often designates something superficial and of dubious merit, while the use of the word "art" or "artist" always connotes high quality and prestige.

THIS CULTURAL LEGACY, combined with the designer's own aggressive boosterism, has led corporate America to view design as a cheap, endlessly renewable, natural resource. If you think that is an exaggeration, then ask yourself, "What has corporate America done to sustain and develop its design resources?" Corporate support of design usually amounts to little more than thinly veiled recruitment and self-promotion efforts, like awards given for the best use of their products, or the sponsorship of creative solutions to problems they can capitalize on.

ONE NOTABLE EXCEPTION is the Chrysler Award for Design Innovation, now in its fifth year of celebrating innovation in design. But what about other corporations that rely on design for their continued success? Most corporations spend millions in support of the fine arts, not the design arts. After all, if the creator or designer is invisible, then nothing stands between the continuous feed loop between the consumer and the company; it's just you and it. "Just do. . ." "Just be. . ." it.

FOR ALL THE HARD WORK designers have invested in making crappy products and stupid ideas look interesting, they have been repaid by being marginalized into oblivion. "And everything that is *designed* will melt into air." I wish

# INDEPENDENT

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# VALUES

# 5

I could remove every bit of graphic design from the planet for a couple of hours. Great ideas would still be communicated, but the sensibilities that connect us to them, and make them real, would be gone.

MONEY AND STATUS are inextricably linked - nothing elevates one's status as quickly and effectively as money; unless of course, you happen to be a designer. As commercial artists, designers are presumably "in it for the money" anyway, and as skilled manual workers they are held in lower esteem than the fine artist. So designers will never elevate their cultural status no matter how much money they make. And the monetary worth of design will always be low in accordance to its perceived cultural value. Designers will always be damned for being commercial when they make money, and failures when they don't. It will be a long time before this cultural bias changes, if ever.

WHEN IT COMES TO INFLUENCE, contribution, success, and recognition in the cultural arena, or the commercial world, designers are screwed. Like Rodney Dangerfield, "they don't get no respect." Instead of banging our heads against a cultural and commercial glass ceiling, perhaps it's time to look elsewhere for acknowledgment. Maybe designers should stop looking for public adoration and start working on mutual respect.

UP TO THIS POINT, I have discussed design as a primarily passive and reactive service - reacting to clients, the economy, and pop culture. Earlier, I asked if design culture must always follow pop culture, and I think the answer is "yes." Because of the ephemeral nature of graphic design, it will always be linked to pop culture. That, in no way, implies that design can't develop a culture of its own; a proactive design culture that determines its own values in its own best interest. If design is defined as a generative proactive activity, instead of a secondary reactive service, the arbiter of value is the individual creator, not the user. As such, the creator is responsible for developing and assessing values that are consistent with the best ideals of their time. But this may be more responsibility than most designers are willing to accept, particularly in light of the fact that designers have historically deferred credit and responsibility to their clients.

IS IT WRONG for designers to determine for themselves what constitutes quality work outside of economic realities? Or to set standards that exceed the expectations of the pragmatic ephemeral realities of day-to-day practice? Is it a waste of time to transcend imagined possibilities and continuously rewrite history as an endless source of inspiration? Is there nothing to gain from being reflective and critical of our theories and practices? If we have no conception of excellence without compromise, then how do we know when we are getting closer to excellence?

FALLING SHORT OF EXCELLENCE is not failure; not trying for it is. Designers' values today have been eroded by a commercialized pop-culture simulation of success that is too easily obtained. Does it really matter how many clients, design awards, web site hits, fonts, faxes, Ferraris, or fish, a designer has accumulated? At the end of the day, and the end of your career, all that really matters is your body of work, your intellectual and aesthetic contribution, your skill, craftsmanship, and humanity.

1. Philip B. Meggs, *History of Graphic Design*, Van Nostrand Reinhold Company, 1983, second edition 1992.
2. W. A. Dwiggins, W.A. Dwiggins to Carl P. Rollins, *Rollins Papers*, June 6, 1923.
3. Malcolm McCullough, *Abstracting Craft, The Practiced Digital Hand*, MIT Press, 1966.

Text set in Base Monospace Wide Bold 7.5/11 point.  
HEADLINES SET IN BASE MONOSPACE NARROW BOLD 10, 48 AND 200 POINT

**"I AM A HAPPY INVALID AND IT HAS REVOLUTIONIZED MY WHOLE ATTACK. MY BACK IS TURNED ON THE MORE BANAL KIND OF ADVERTISING, AND I HAVE CANCELED ALL COMMISSIONS AND AM RESOLUTELY SET ON STARVING. I SHALL UNDERTAKE ONLY THE SIMPLE CHILDISH LITTLE THINGS THAT CALL FOR COMPROMISE WITH THE UNIVERSAL TWELVE-YEAR-OLD MIND OF THE PURCHASING PUBLIC AND I WILL PRODUCE ART ON PAPER AND WOOD AFTER MY OWN HEART WITH NO HEED TO ANY MARKET. REVOLUTION, STARK AND BRUTAL."** - W.A. DWIGGINS

TEXT SET IN BASE MONOSPACE NARROW BOLD 40 AND 24 POINT