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The Influence of Modernism on American Graphic Designers of the 1940s

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Introduction

In my thesis I will discuss the influence of modernism on American designers of the 1940s. It is often thought that European emigrant designers were responsible for the "look" of modern American design. Even though the emigres did influence American design to a certain degree, I have argued against them being a major source of inspiration. Therefore I have also chosen to examine the significance of modern art and its impact on American graphic designers. To illustrate this effectively I have decided to look at the art work of American designers and discuss their philosophies and interests as designers and artists. I will argue that Paul Rand, Bradbury Thompson, Lester Beall and Alvin Lustig, made little distinction between the fine arts and the applied arts. I have approached my main argument by defining the concepts of Cubism, Dada, Constructivism and Surrealism, and analysing the extent of their influence.

Chapter 1 - Designer as Artist

1.1 The European Avant-Garde in America

It is sometimes argued that European avant-garde art was only explained to Americans in terms of its aesthetics, while its ideology was omitted. If this is true then what the Americans were learning was a diluted version of modernism.

But this, I feel, is not the case. Although the majority of lesser known designers did absorb its visual characteristics rather than its philosophy (as they preferred to 'look' modern), it was the more successful designers that are remembered today such as Paul Rand, Lester Beall, Alvin Lustig and Bradbury Thompson, who not only picked up on its aesthetic appeal but also learned its conceptual basis.

American designers were not totally dependant on the arrival of the emigres to inform them on various advances that were taking place in Europe. Many had already received formal training in drawing and painting, or had previously taken an interest in modern art, but at the same time, the European immigrants had a profound influence on American advertising and art.

There was great interest in how European avant-garde art could be used to express something new through abstraction and symbolism; therefore, the look of modern American graphic design became more familiar than the less apparent ideas that helped create it. Because of this American designers are often accused of having little knowledge about theory, which is untrue.

"The European modernists and the Americans found clients who were willing to put the theories into commercial use; there was neither time nor necessity for the manifesto or the ideology" (Myerson, 1996, pg 14). The majority of clients who patronised modern design were doing so because of the modern look they could achieve by making the connection with modern art. The idea that American designers were unfamiliar with philosophies of modernism is untrue, rather, it was their clients.

1.2 A Designer's Influences

The way a graphic designer sees is largely shaped by what he/she sees in the environment, or what they may experience. Just as an artist may look at his/her surroundings for inspiration, a designer may do the same thing. A shop interior or a museum may inspire both a graphic designer and an artist, but how they perceive this may be entirely different. This is basically because both have different reasons or a different purpose as a professional. It is also common for an artist or a designer to look at other artists or designers for inspiration or study their creative process. The idea of a process or a way of thinking is the key to a successful design or painting.

The American designers of the '40s were pushing the boundaries of design and claiming that the creative processes of both designer and artist should be treated with equal respect. "The designer's work, like any good artist's is unique" (Rand, 1985, pg 13). The designer will produce one design, whether it's a poster or an advertisement. Even though the initial work will be reproduced countless times, it is essentially the same as a work of art that is reproduced in a book or a magazine. The artist will often create something that is totally new, which may also be reproduced in a magazine or a book. Then why is graphic design considered a lower form of art?

American graphic designers of the 1940s were determined to break previous conventions of graphic design by merging both the fine arts and the applied arts. By doing this it they have sometimes been considered pragmatic and lacking in theory, whereas in fact the result shows the opposite. I think the Americans were aware of ideas that emerged from the beginning of the century, but they were more concerned with expressing these ideas clearly. Americans were concerned with concepts and an open direct presentation of information. This form of expression, I believe, did not exist before. Clients were impressed by the novelty of technique and originality of concepts rather than theoretical explanations. Paul Rand more than any other American designer is remembered for initiating this approach to modern design.

Rand had a strong understanding of modern movements. He was particularly interested in the works of Klee and Kandinsky. He also admired the Cubists for their freely invented forms. He used symbolism as a visual tool to communicate. Shape, colour, space and line were also elements that he borrowed from cubism that helped in the creative process.

I will discuss how Rand and other designers incorporated ideas from modern art into their designs in the next four chapters, but for the moment I think it is important to establish which designers were attracted to various art movements and for what reasons. What did designers such as Paul Rand, Alvin Lustig, Lester Beall and Bradbury Thompson absorb from modern art movements from the early twentieth century, movements which according to Rand, "coloured our way of seeing and thinking" (Rand, 1985, pg 13).

1.3 The Art of Lester Beall

Lester Beall was Born in Kansas City on March 14, 1903. Beall's mother was an amateur artist who helped her son's drawing and painting abilities which helped to shape his approach to design. "The requirements of the the 'twenties and 'thirties created an opening for a new man: The graphic designer with an artistic gift and a habit of thinking in artistic terms" (Remington, 1996, pg 47). In the 'thirties there became a growing need for graphic designers to have an artistic approach to design, probably because of the forward and modern look that could be achieved. Lester Beall is one of the best known designers for using this approach. Most of Beall's art was expressed through drawing, painting and photography. He preferred to work with the female form as subject (fig 1), though he did work with other forms both representational and abstract. At the Chicago Art Institute he studied the work of Klee, Picasso, Braque, Matisse, Miro and Derain. Beall used painting and drawing as a way to get closer to his inner feelings. His personal art was treated very seriously, and he looked on it as a need rather than an emotional release. In *colour drawing* (fig 2), Beall



Fig 1. Nude, Lester Beall.

is obviously influenced by Miro. Beall may also have been influenced not only, by Miro's drawings and paintings but also his poster designs. Miro and Picasso designed a substantial number of posters which were mainly used for advertising their exhibitions. In *Colour Drawing* (fig 2), the simple use of colour is reminiscent of that used in Miro's poster designs. Beall did not believe in separating the applied arts from the fine arts, and the idea of an artist working as a graphic designer would have being a practice Beall admired. Beall's painting and graphic work remain apart visually but are approached with the same spirit and inventiveness. Beall once wrote that "modern typography and graphic design cannot occupy itself better than through an intensive study of modern abstract painting" (Remington, 1996, pg 48). However, Beall became troubled later on in life with other people's notions that the graphic designer is a world apart from the fine artist.

When it came to exhibiting work, Beall believed that graphic design was just as precious as painting, drawing or sculpture, so therefore it should be given the same status. In 1934 Beall had his first exhibition of graphic design at the Art Directors Club of New York. In 1937, he exhibits at the Museum of Modern Art. Five years later in 1942 he exhibits at A-D Gallery with Bayer, Carlu, Keps, Kauffer, Matter, Moholy-Nagy, Rand and Sutnar. He also exhibited in 1945, '48 and '62.

1.4 Alvin Lustig and Movements in Art

Alvin Lustig was born in February 1915, in Denver, Colorado. Lustig started designing posters to advertise his magic shows at the age of 17. He had great knowledge of modern painters. This led him to apply to his designs the new concepts of space that were found in modern art. Of his favourite artists, Miro was probably the most influential. Other favourite artists included Picasso, Matisse and Mondrian. Like Beall, Lustig also wanted to bridge the gap between the fine arts and the applied arts and he made little distinction between the two. Lustig also believed graphic designers should exhibit their work in galleries (he exhibited not only graphic design but

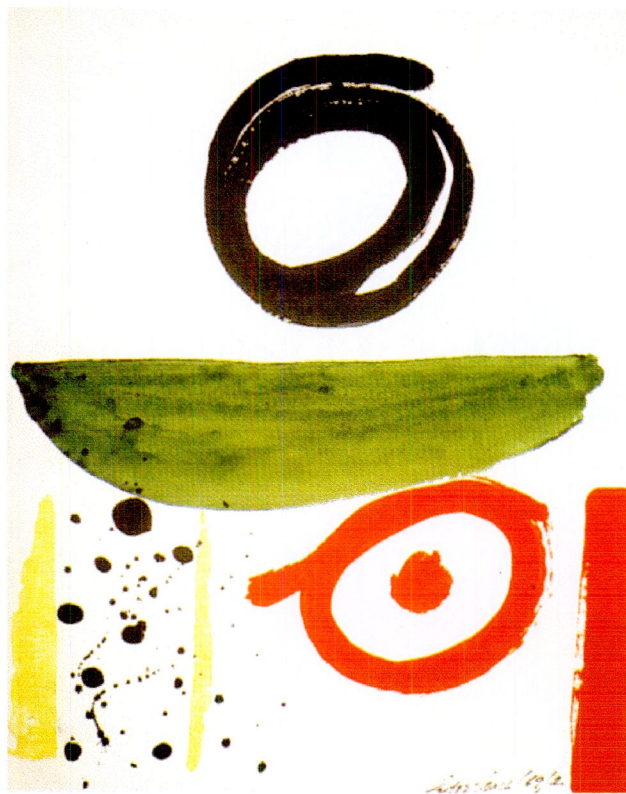


Fig 2. Colour Drawing, Lester Beall.

industrial design and architecture), and he often designed his own invitation cards.

Alvin Lustig: An exhibition of His Work (Fig 3), is an example of his love for simple, classic typography.

Known in the late '40s for introducing art-based ideas to book-jacket design and in the early '50s for imbuing the same spirit to furniture, textile and interior design, Lustig was a pioneer of the new formalism that evolved into American Modernism (Heller, 1994, pg 44).

Lustig liked to work in fields as varied as furniture and textile design and became renowned for his flexibility.

1.5 Paul Rand and Modernism

Paul Rand stated in his book *Design Form and Chaos*, "that to understand the meaning of design is to sense the common thread that weaves its way through the arts of painting, architecture, industrial and graphic design" (Rand, 1993, pg 3). Like Lustig, Rand took a common interest in most of the arts, but mostly painting. When referring to differences in design he would often compare artists such as "Rembrandt and Norman Rockwell" to express a certain quality or approach. Among Rand's favourite artists Picasso is probably the most influential. Cubism played an important role in Rand's visual language as I will discuss with greater depth in the next chapter, but for the moment I would prefer to concentrate on his personal art. *Gouache*, 1952, (fig 4) as Rand explains, "could have been a poster, mural, an illustration or a book jacket" (Rand, 1993, pg 4). This attitude to a work of art is one that is not often found among graphic designers. Unlike Beall, Rand's designs and paintings bear significant resemblance and he not only verbally but physically challenges traditional attitudes to graphic design by making this connection. One could make the same assumption about *Watercolour*, 1952, (fig 5), which could also be a poster or book cover. Again in this painting there is little distinction between his personal art work and his graphic work. In the next chapter this resemblance will become apparent.

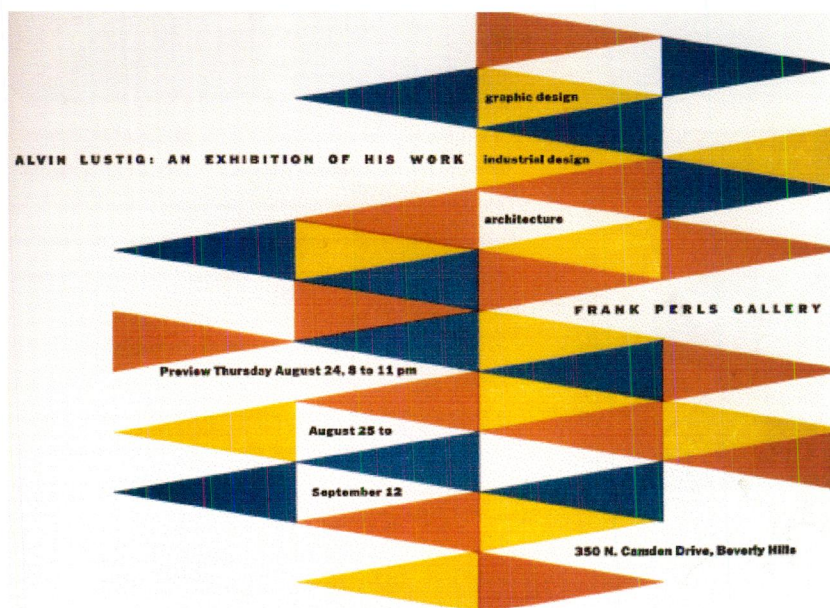


Fig 3. Alvin Lustig: An Exhibition of His Work.



Fig 4. Gouache, 1952, Paul Rand.

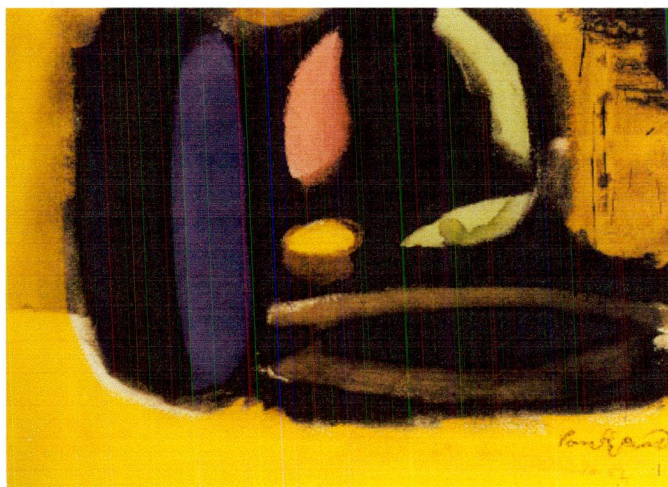


Fig 5. Watercolour, 1952, Paul Rand.

Chapter 2-Paul Rand and Cubism

2.1 Origins of Cubism

The atmosphere in which Picasso and Braque created Cubism between 1909 and 1912 was much the same as the atmosphere surrounding Cezanne in the previous century. The art critic Guillaume Apollinaire was the first writer to make any contribution to the theory of Cubism. He first coined the phrase Cubism in a review of the 1910 Salon d'Automne exhibition. Apollinaire repeatedly defined Cubism towards the end of 1912 as being made up of elements taken not from "reality of vision but from the reality of conception" (Roskill, 1985, pg 288). According to Roskill, Apollinaire defined Cubism as follows:

Dynamism: a result of such developments as the coming of the automobile and air-plane, and their effect on the consciousness.

Duration: sensations we experience with the passage of time.

Simultaneity: combines the last two sets of ideas where movement around the object allows the painter to seize from it several successive aspects which, when fused together into a single image, reconstitute in time.

The last idea of collage suited the medium of collage and the Cubists' use of objects from our daily existence, such as folded newspapers, periodicals, letters, song sheets and announcements. One of the first graphic designers to use collage was Paul Rand. The American designer once stated that "contemporary graphic design techniques, resulting from experiments and discoveries in the fields of psychology, art, and science, suggest many possibilities" (Rand, 1985, pg 85). Collage is probably one of the most significant techniques to emerge from these discoveries because it is able to use unrelated objects or ideas in a single picture.

2.2 Paul Rand and Cubism

Like the Cubists, Rand used collage from a very early stage in his career. Both Cubists Picasso and Braque used a limited subject matter. They concentrated almost exclusively on two basic categories: the half length or three quarter length figure and still life. Familiar objects were used in still life's, and figures were anybody that was available. Like the Cubists, Rand also used everyday objects in a similar way. I will discuss the work of Paul Rand and relate it to Cubism on two levels: collages with everyday objects and simultaneous collages.

2.3 Collages with Everyday Objects

Rand designed a number of magazine covers for *Direction*, which allowed him probably the most creative freedom he was ever to experience throughout his career.

Direction, (1941) (fig 6), uses an illustrative type of collage. In this cover Rand uses an everyday object, in this case a newspaper. The large letter "A" is also a reference to paper where you can see folds. The juxtaposition of the three elements is clearly inspired by Cubism. Rand uses newspaper (or text from a book) with a linear drawing of a chimney, where not only the composition is inspired by Cubism but also the medium. In *Bottle and Glass*, (1912) (fig 7), Picasso used a linear drawing of a still life with newspaper. The newspaper is pasted onto a charcoal drawing of a bottle. In Rand's cover one can see the similarity in the use of medium and also in its application, but in Rand's design is not so easily apparent what the newspaper represents.

Rand's design for *Container Corporation of America* (fig 8) also uses an everyday object. A plank is used as a surface to draw on. A portrait is drawn in charcoal, but all that remains visible of the face is the bridge of the nose and eyes. A piece of paper is nailed over the mouth. On the piece of paper is a quote by Thomas Erskine about the advantage of free speech. The paper nailed to the wooden surface is a powerful message on its own but when combined with the portrait is even more powerful.

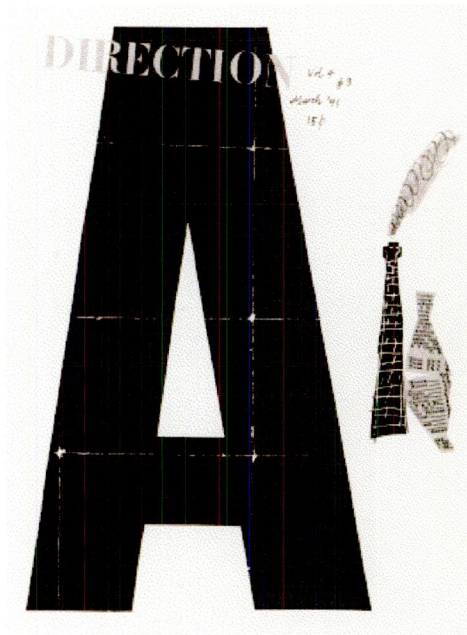


fig 6. *Direction*, 1941, Paul Rand.

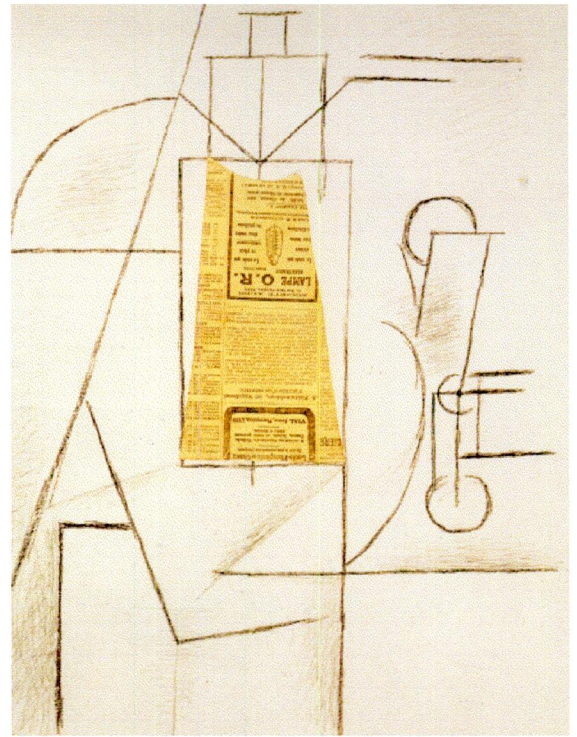


fig 7. *Bottle and Glass*, Picasso.



fig 8. *Container Corporation of America*, Paul Rand.

Rand had strong feelings when it came to how one should communicate, always maintaining that design should be efficient and clearly understood. The container corporation of America poster is a perfect example of this form of communication where he delivers a political message with powerful results. The use of wood is an element which the Cubists often employed in their work. Whether in a painting, drawing or a sculpture, they would often combine it with metal, cardboard, clay, plaster or ceramics. In Picasso's *Construction with Ceramic Tile* (fig 9), he combines all of previous media. He frames all of the composition with a wooden box that is nailed together. In Rand's design one can also see similarities in both medium and technique. Rand considered himself an artist and like any artist he signs his work, if not for personal reasons, to challenge the traditional anonymous status of the graphic designer.

The cover for *Modern Art in Your Life* (fig 10), is a perfect example of how Rand used novelty and the visual pun with everyday objects. He replaces the knife with a brush to combine art and our daily existence. Again simple and clear design with use of broad brush strokes creates planes for the text and the objects. Only with an actual understanding of modern art could one achieve a solution where modern typography is combined with everyday objects. Because of his understanding of both fields (graphic design and art), Rand was commissioned to design a number of posters for art exhibitions and various other artistic events.

The *Visual Interpretation of Maurice Denise's 1890 Definition of Neotraditionism* (fig 11), is probably one of Rand's most memorable designs where Rand's use of the visual pun can be seen again. In this case he replaces words with images. For the word 'picture' he uses a section from the painting *Guernica* by Picasso (possibly a reference to his favourite artist). For the word 'nude' he uses an actual painting of a nude by Goya. He replaces the word colours with circles of colour. Although the design does not show a Cubist influence, it does however indicate Rand's artistic preferences and how important the role of Picasso was in influencing him.

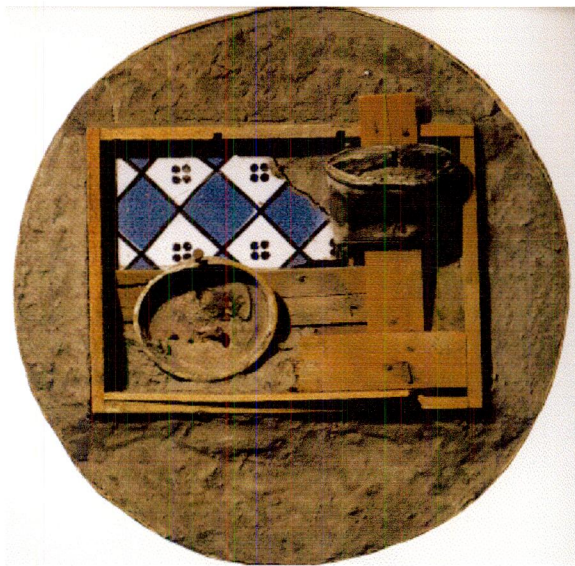


fig 9. Construction with Ceramic Tile, Picasso.

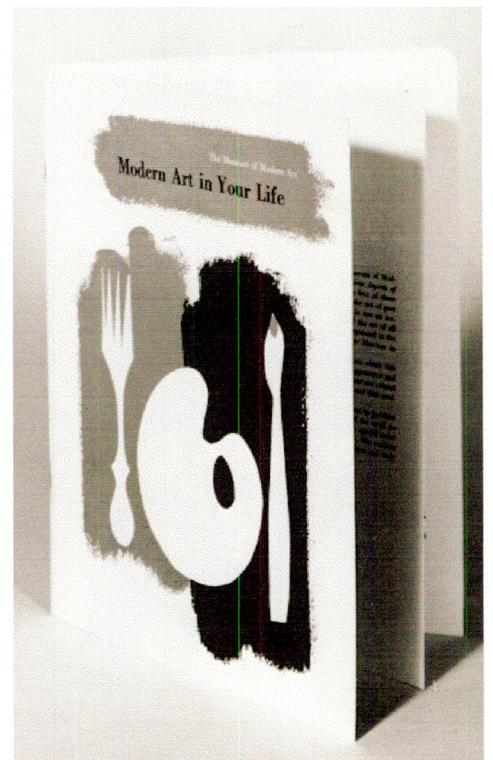


fig 10. Modern Art in Your Life, Paul Rand.

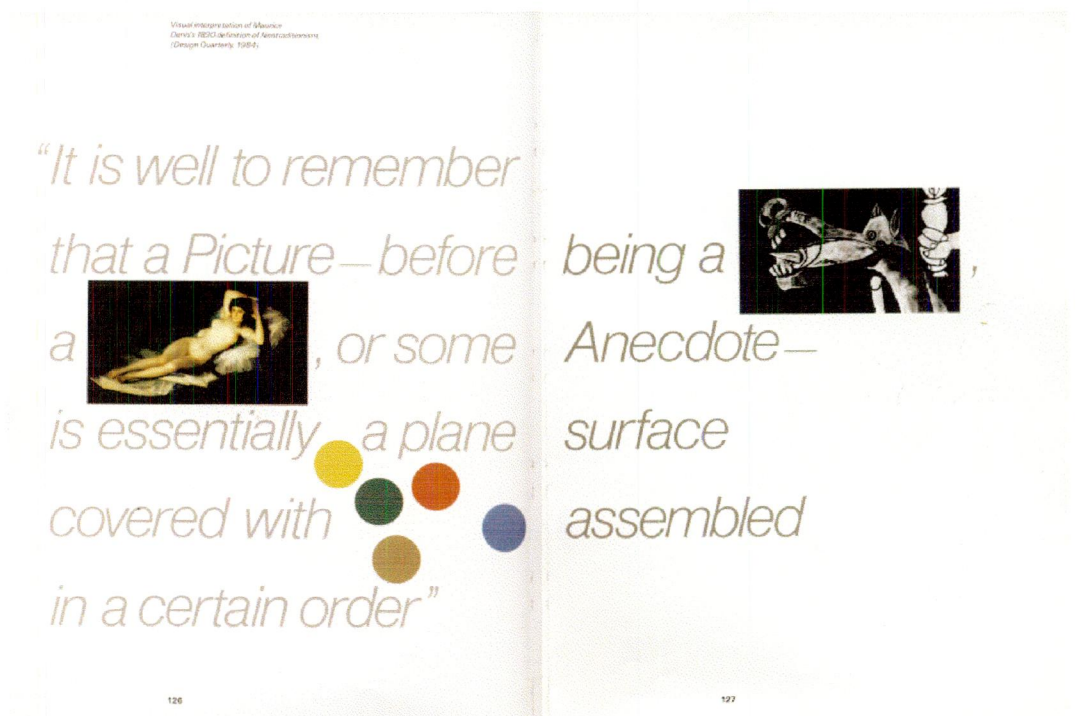


fig 11. Visual Interpretation of Maurice Denise's 1890 Definition of Neotraditionism, Paul Rand.

2.4 Duration and the Simultaneous Collage

Of one of the single most important theories of Cubism, duration is probably the most significant. "Duration: sensations we experience with the passage of time" (Roskill, 1985, pg 24). Rand often used duration in his collages where different images within a single composition are combined so as to 'experience the passage of time'.

In the cover for *Direction* (1947) (fig 12), Rand uses this technique to great effect. The cover is a mix of graphic cut outs that tell a tale of a romance. Firstly the main photograph is torn down the centre. Placed on top of this is four paper cut outs, which suggest a different story. The cut out of the bird is often associated with love. The heart shape which is torn down the middle is a symbol of heart break, and the gun a symbol of war. When grouped together one can come to the conclusion that the man on the stairs is a soldier, who may be leaving for war in the unforeseeable future.

Carafe, Compote and Candlestick (1909) (fig 13), by Picasso is an example of duration and simultaneity where a pear is painted with different views. Picasso paints the pear on a single canvas but instead of Rand's collage of different images, Picasso uses a single object as the image. In the case of *Carafe, Compote and Candlestick*, the element of time is expressed with the use of a single object, whereas Rand ignores the concept of simultaneity (seizing different views from a single object) and instead concentrates on duration.

An advertisement for *Penn/Brite papers* (1964) (fig 14), Rand uses a similar collage technique as in *Direction* (fig 12). In this advertisement he uses brush strokes with cut and torn paper. Again, in the black and white cut image one can see Rand's use of newspaper. This cover is actually a contradiction of Rand's design philosophy because the projected message is confusing. He uses strong colours over white space possibly suggesting the crisp strong colours you will get if you print on *Penn/Brite paper*. In this poster Rand used the image of a bird again, and he also uses it in other



fig 12. *Direction*, 1947, Paul Rand.

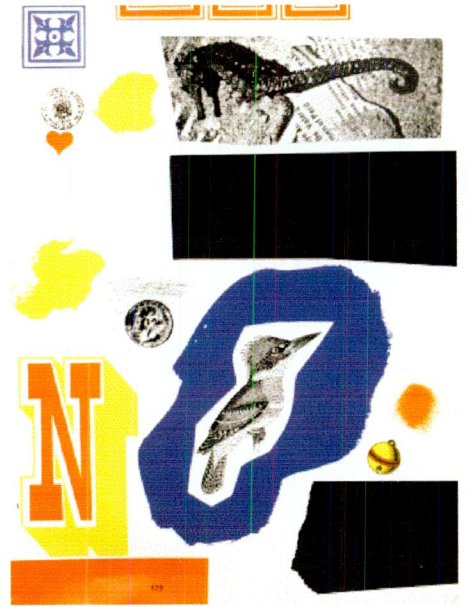


fig 14. *Penn/Brite Papers*, 1964, Paul Rand.

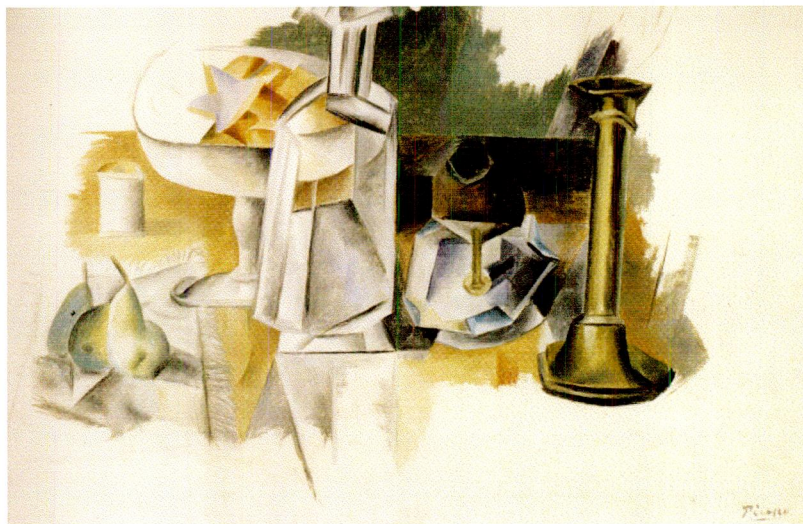


fig 13. *Carfe, Compote and Candlestick*, Picasso.

and covers. This could suggest that the bird may symbolise something or simply mean he has a particular preference to this form of subject, as the Cubists did when using everyday objects (Braque and Picasso often used the guitar in their paintings and collages).

In *Direction* (1943) (fig 15), one can see the recurrence of subject matter. In this case the collage is made up of two images, with the chimney top used again (fig 6). This preference may also be for the same reasons as discussed in *Penn/Brite Papers* (fig 14). The use of simultaneity through photomontage expresses two situations cleverly. Although Roskill defined simultaneity as "*movement around an object which allows the painter to seize from it several successive aspects* (Roskill, 1985, pg 288)," it is the concept of juxtaposition and combining images in an unusual manner which intrigued Rand. Rand uses the technique of simultaneity for this cover expressed through a collage made up of cropped images with pen and brush strokes. The pen creates a squiggle and the chimney top does also but in a broad brush stroke to represent smoke.

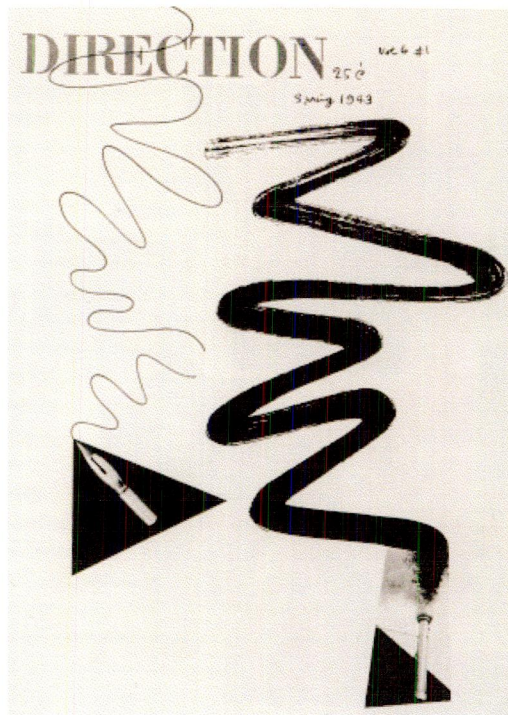


fig 15. Direction, 1943, Paul Rand.

Chapter 3 - The Influence of Dada

3.1 Origins of Dada

The Dada movement grew out of a literary movement after the poet Hugo Ball opened the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich, Switzerland. This became a gathering place for young poets, painters, and musicians. A young Hungarian poet, Tristan Tzara, edited the periodical *Dada* and was its founder member. It rejected all tradition and sought complete freedom. The movement was named by opening a French dictionary and randomly choosing the word Dada, which was a child's hobby horse. They rebelled against the world war, European society, technological progress and religion. Typography was used by poets and writers as a means of expressing their contempt for society.

After pushing its negative activities to the limit and with its members being faced with the new ideas of Surrealism, Dada eventually ceased to exist by the end of 1912. Although Dada did have an influence on American graphic design, its philosophies did not have such a major impact compared with Cubism, Constructivism and Surrealism. At no stage did any American designer fully adopt its ideas but rather one can find that various elements were borrowed by numerous designers.

3.2 Lester Beall and Dada

Lester Beall was born in Kansas City, in 1905. Although Beall was influenced more so by Constructivism (as I will discuss in the next chapter), he also liked to incorporate elements from Dada into his designs. Among the elements Beall liked to use were pointing fists and arrows. A spread from *Modern Pioneers in Peoria* (fig16), demonstrates how he used this technique. The pointing fists and arrows force you from the left side of the spread to the right. Beall was excellent at organising spreads to read properly using the techniques discussed. *Dada* (1921) (fig 17) by Raul Hausmann is an example of how he incorporated the pointing fist into a collage. There is not

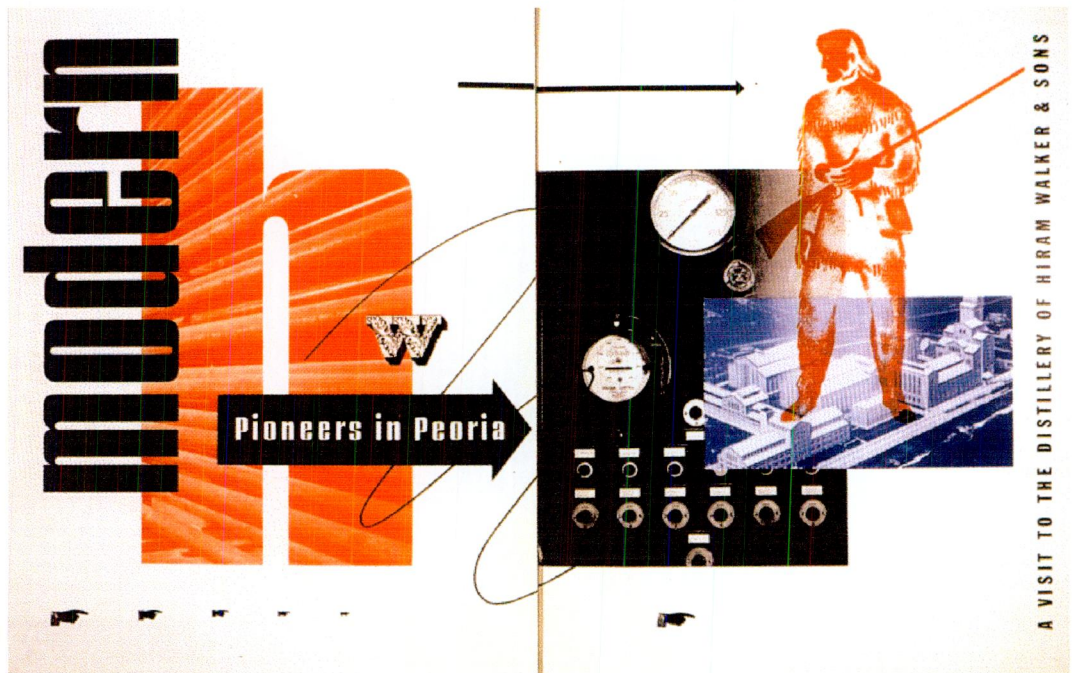


fig 16. *Modern Pioneers in Peoria*, Lester Beall.



fig 17. *Dada*, Raul Hausmann.

much difference between Hausmann's use and Beall's use of the fist. They both used it as an integral part of typography. In Hausmann's collage the title "Dada" appears directly over the hand. Similarly, Beall uses the pointing fist to read the text on the right hand side of the spread which reads: "A Visit to the Distillery of Hiram & Sons."

Beall's *Self-Promotional Brochure* (1945) (fig 18) is another one of his Dada influenced works. This design is reminiscent of several Dada pieces, where type and the figure were used together in unusual juxtapositions. George Grosz's playful montage for *Circa*, 1919 (fig 19), is probably the closest example to Beall's design for his *Self-Promotional Brochure*. In both designs one can see an apparent relationship. In Grosz's montage he replaces the figure's head with the word Dada, repeated in a line. The same playful idea can be seen in Beall's design, where he replaces the figure's head with the letter "B". Beall's design is slightly more restrained, whereas Grosz continues to replace not only the head but also the feet with text. Another similarity is the use of line. Both artists were interested in geometry and this is often absorbed into their work. Grosz and Beall use hair line rules, but again Beall is more restrained. Grosz's lines are spontaneous and expressive, while Beall's are functional.

3.3 Bradbury Thompson and Dada

Bradbury Thompson was born in Kansas, on March 25, 1911. In 1938, at the age of twenty eight he was asked to design the magazine *Westvaco Inspirations*. Thompson designed sixty one issues of the graphic arts publication. The objective of the magazine was to show typography, photography, and other art work. Early issues showed Thompson's interest in publication and advertising art, whereas the later ones emphasise the fine arts. Like the Dadist's he liked to use found images, combining them in playful collages. Although these collages were controlled and functional they still possess a large amount of creativity. Thompson used typography as his major form of expression. Like the Dadist's he placed letter-forms randomly around the

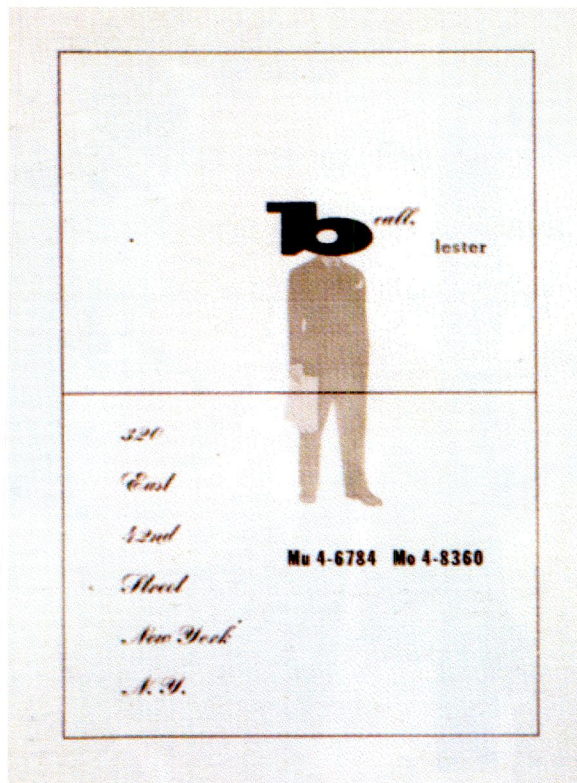


fig 18. Beall Brochure.

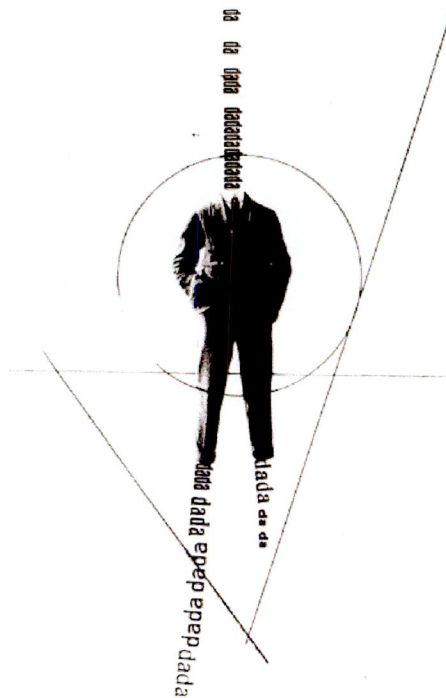


fig 19. Circa, 1919.

page until he was satisfied with the result.

During this period Thompson designed a number of spreads with a similar approach, where large letter-forms from a single word are placed carefully to create a random impression. The spread for *Westvaco Inspirations*, vol. 156, 1945 (fig20), demonstrates this form of expression. In this case the letters of the word "liberty" are fragmented across the whole spread. Thompson controls the letters by placing them in the corners of each page and takes advantage of the fact that a magazine is traditionally a two page spread where one can turn pages.

Another spread for *Westvaco Inspirations*, vol. 177, 1949 (fig 21), fragments the word "dance" throughout both pages. Thompson had particular colour preferences and he often used cyan and magenta. In this case he uses both colours in the text. The letters d, n and c are coloured with magenta, whereas e and a are coloured with cyan. The letters are placed at the sides of the magazine as though the edges are a baseline. Thompson may actual be criticised for being to functional and pragmatic in his approach, but he is probably one of the only American designers that had the courage to look at the Dada movement for inspiration and ignore the fact that he might come under attack.

Chapter 4 - Lester Beall and Constructivism

4.1 Origins of Constructivism and Suprematism

The Russian artist Valadmir Tatlin was the person who supposedly invented Constructivism. Tatlin was building corner constructions from 1914 from where the name developed. In most cases Constructivism was non-representational, and has been regarded as one of the first non-objective art movements. But this idea of an art that was non-objective was not a new one, and a number of artists were simultaneously considering this concept in the previous century.

The Russian artist Malevich was also trying to revise the conventional way of thinking about representation and also push Constructivism into new territory. Malevich decided to do this in the form of geometric shapes. He worked with simple forms such as the triangle, the cross, and the square. Malevich's new art form was to be called Suprematism.

According to Rickey (1968, pg 24) Malevich defined Suprematism as follows:

The Suprematist straight line (dynamic in character).

The Suprematisation of the plane.

Malevich also defined Suprematism under other headings, but I am only including the definitions relevant to this chapter. Malevich's definitions are slightly vague, but what he meant by them was that by the use of line and planes alone he could achieve aesthetically the supreme art form.

4.2 Lester Beall: Straight Lines and Planes.

Early in his career Beall discovered the work of the avant-garde artists El Lissitzky, Rodchenko and Malevich. But when Malevich described Suprematism little did he realise how important it would be in shaping the work of Lester Beall. Throughout his career the use of straight lines and planes were an essential part of his design process. Beall's new visual language involved the use of:

1. Plane Design.
2. Strong Graphic Elements (lines and grided forms).
3. Spatial Structures (foreground and background relationships)

4.3 Plane design

Of the most important and most commonly recurring graphic elements in Beall's designs was the use of planes. Beall mainly used planes as a back-drop for overlaid information which was usually grouped together. Elements such as photomontage or antique engravings were combined with typography. Grouping these elements also played an important role in communicating any of Beall's designs. Beall felt that graphic arts and typography, like modern painting was mainly concerned with surface or plane design, and organisation. Beall once wrote:

properly related planes make a design work, while improperly related planes create confusion and a sense of busyness that contributes markedly to the inefficiency of the design and therefore to the projected message (Remington, 1989, pg 88).

Beall was obsessed with the idea of communicating efficiently, and the elimination of all unnecessary details. Beall produced a number of magazine spreads and covers for the magazine *Photo Engraving* from 1938 to 1939 which are considered classics and to this day still remain fresh and new. The use of line is a key part in the designs, joining elements together.

In the cover for *Photo Engraving*, No. 3, (1938) (fig 22) Beall uses a hand symbol as the central part of the composition. The hand which is the only representational object is also a flat plane of white space and is only defined by its outline. Beall limits his palette of two colours. The hand overlaps onto both the black plane and the orange plane. The flat plane also adds an extra dimension creating an interesting balance between simple typography and geometric shapes. With the use of clean line, there is an apparent influence of Malevich and Lissitzky. Malevich's *Suprematist Composition of Two Squares*, 1913 (fig 23) uses clean lines and geometric shapes, but instead creates a chess board format.

Beall's cover for *Photo Engraving*, No. 1, (1938) (fig 24) employs the same technique as seen in Malevich's *Suprematist Composition of Two Squares*. Again, the horizontal edge makes a cut at the lower part of the composition, but this is not the prominent feature in this design. The large footprint is what appears at first, with the title *Photo Engraving* beneath, then the heavy line joins both to the smaller printed foot. In this case one can actually see the footprint whereas in fig 22, the hand is only described by its outline. The larger plane has a horizontal blend that gets darker as it recedes into the background creating an extra dimension. This simple design also makes good use of typography through the use of colour. The red that is seen in the footprint is echoed in both the title of the magazine and the edition.

4.4 Strong Graphic Elements (lines and grided forms)

Beall used line as a typographic device to lead a piece of text to another. The reason he did this was to create drama, and he often used it with photo-montage or illustrations. If Beall did not use line with text then he used it simply as a device to lead the eye around the composition. Beall utilised this idea for the two page spread of *Photo Engraving*, No. 3, 1938 (fig 25). Beall demonstrates photographic printing on metal, with this beautiful and legible layout in what would sometimes be a difficult subject to understand at first. The line or bar in this layout demonstrates the idea of

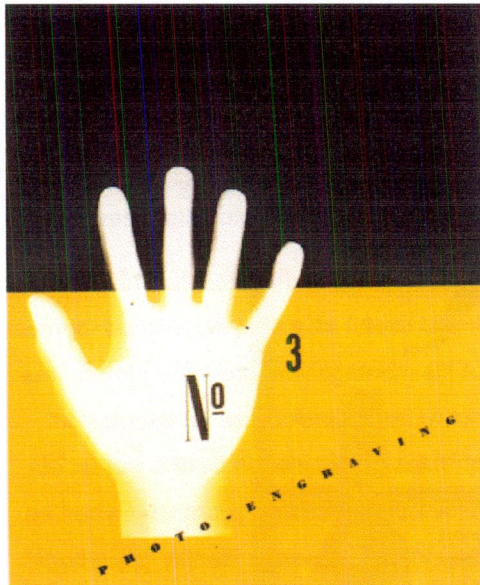


fig 22. Photo Engraving cover, No. 3, 1938, Lester Beall.

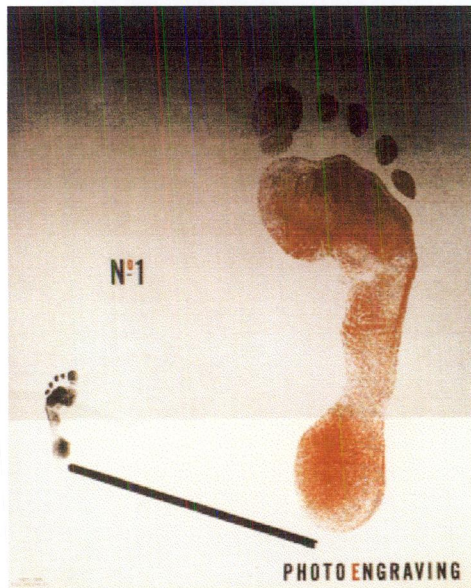


fig 24. Photo Engraving Cover, No. 1, 1938, Lester Beall.

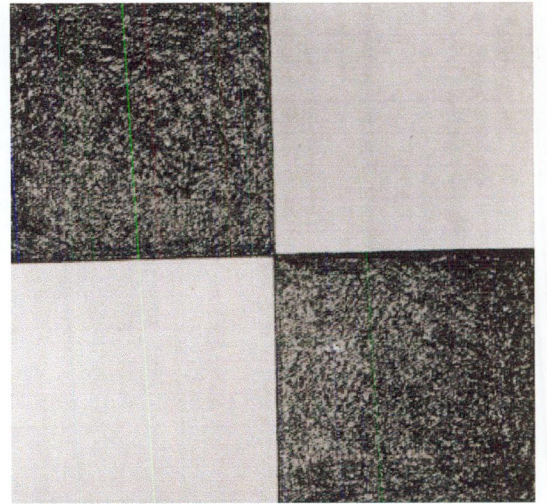


fig 23. Suprematist Composition of Two Squares, 1913, Malevich.

leading one piece of text to another. Beall utilises the opened width of the magazine, and the bar stretches almost directly across the spread, joining the text on the left to the numbers of the page on the right. The bar is also used with the cropped image of the hand as it reaches onto the plate. The use of cropped images with geometric shapes and lines is also found to be common practice in Constructivist design. The placement of the numbers on the page is also quite exciting for this period in American design where one can find that the left and right hand pages are numbered flush against the side of the page.

Photo Engraving No. 5 (fig 28) and No. 6 (Fig 27), 1939, are the most successful of this period while he worked with the magazine. These designs are his most experimental to date and he carefully selects images superimposed with text, grouping them together with line. These covers recall the work of El Lissitzky, more specifically his *Suprematist Story of Two Squares and Six Constructoins* (fig 26), 1923. Beall was inspired by El Lissitzky's use of typography and his effort in his personal art to merge the two together. On page 1-2 of *Suprematist Story of Two Squares and Six Constructions*, Beall draws inspiration from El Lissitzky's use of dramatic line for his composition of *Photo Engraving*, No. 6, 1939 (fig 27). Although the linear composition is different, he hopes to achieve the same effect. The angular line in El Lissitzky's work reads from the top left to the right and then diagonally down to the bottom left, where it fragments into a diagram format of text. In Beall's cover for *Photo Engraving* he uses line for the same purpose. Both artists use this technique to create drama and bring life to typography.

The cover for *Photo Engraving*, No 5, 1939 (fig 28) bares a significant resemblance to fig 27 through use of line but also combines Beall's personal intrest in grouping elements. Beall uses three main images: a female nude engraving, a table, and biomorphic shapes. Although biomorphic shapes would be associated with Surrealism, Beall groups these unrelated objects in an unusual juxtaposition. Typography is expressed using three faces, one script, another serif and the other sans serif. A diagonal line

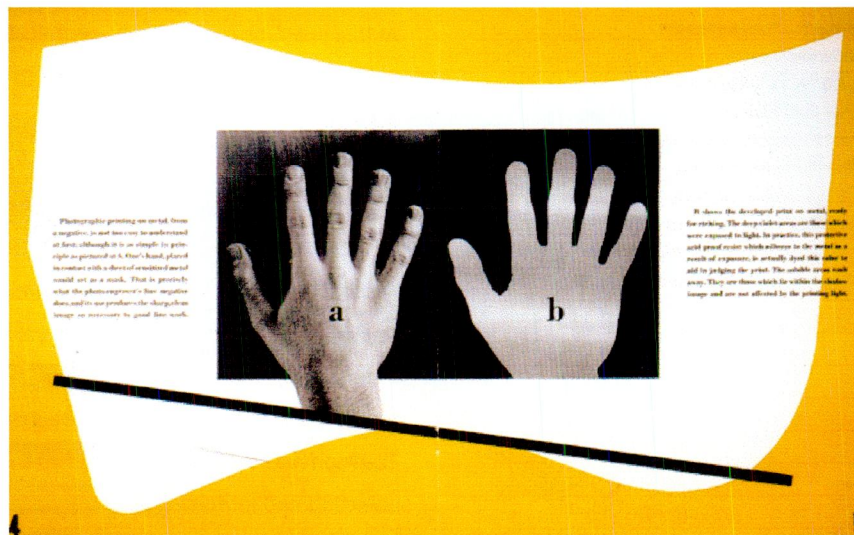


fig 25. Photo Engraving Spread, No. 3, 1938, Lester Beall.

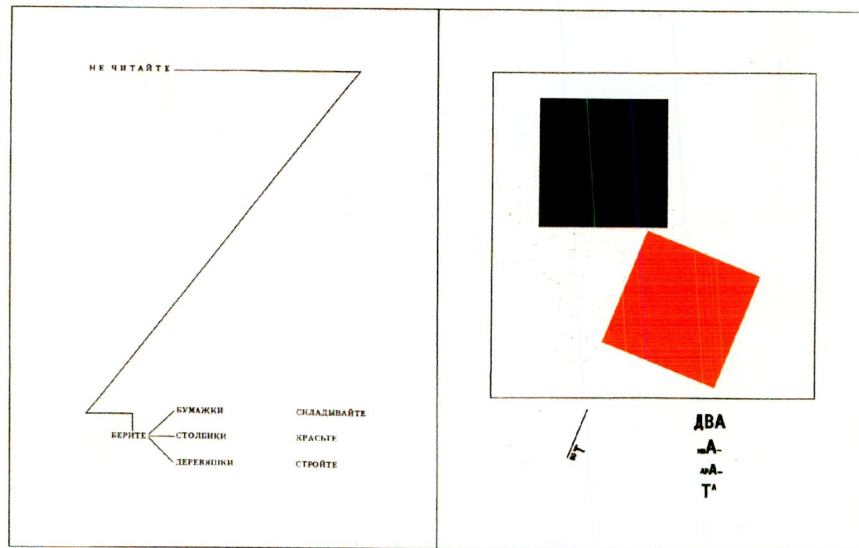


fig 26. Pages 1-2, Suprematist Story of Two Squares and Six Constructions, 1923, El Lissitzky.

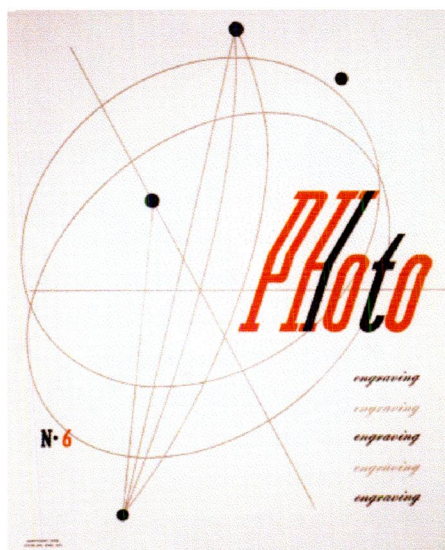


fig 27. Photo Engraving, No. 6, 1939, Lester Beall.

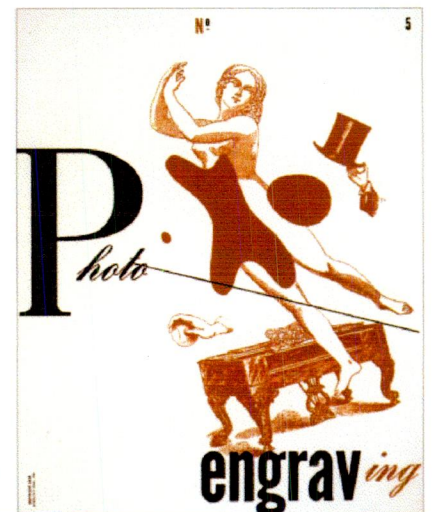


fig 28. Photo Engraving, No. 5, 1939, Lester Beall.

joins both text and image.

4.5 Spatial structures (foreground and background relationships)

Using receding perspective Beall created strong foreground and background relationships. He often referred to this as thrust and counter-thrust, a simple technique of creating spatial structure using lines that added direction. In the promotional booklet for *Crowell-Collier Publishing*, 1937, (fig 29), he practices this for the first time. The booklet is a collection of the best cartoons that appeared in the *Corwell-Collier* magazine. Beall uses thrust and counter-thrust as if it were the field of vision. The actual cover is a self portrait of him looking in the direction to the right. The perspective lines add play between foreground and background, while reinforcing the direction he is staring in. The lines also create drama with the typography by forcing us to read the title "funny business" first, and secondly "collier's collects its wits".

Beall also uses this technique to great effect in another promotional booklet for *Crowell-Collier Publishing Company*, 1937 (fig 30). In *a friend in court* he creates contrast by the juxtaposition of a photographic image with a linear drawing of a building. Instead of using lines themselves to create thrust and counter-thrust, the building itself acts as a device of spatial structuring. Firstly, the photographic image of the man standing on the steps draws our eye to the centre of the composition and, secondly, the linear drawing forces you to the end of the steps at the horizon line where the title *a friend in court* can be read.

In 1939 Beall was commissioned to design a poster for *The Freedom Pavillion* (fig 31). Through his use of thrust and counter-thrust he hoped to create tension. The Statue of Liberty is grided off with white lines, and she also balances at an angle. This not only creates tension but the statue is also significantly larger in scale to the girl who is saluting with her right hand in a similar pose. Again, Beall may have been heavily influenced in his spatial structures by El Lissitzky and, more significantly, by his photography. El Lissitzky often employed grids to create a spatial effect which would be

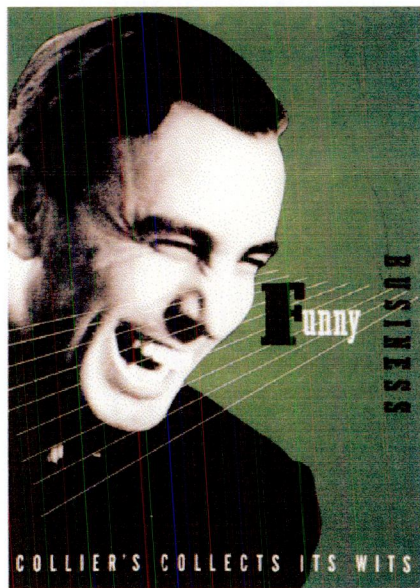


fig 29. Promotional booklet for Crowell - Collier Publishing, 1937, Lester Beall.

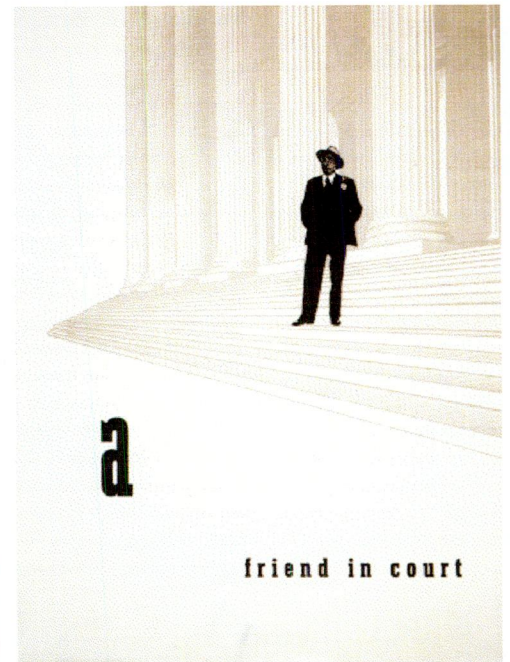


fig 30. Promotional booklet for Crowell-Collier Publishing, *A Friend in Court*, 1937, Lester Beall.

similar to that achieved by Beall for the *Freedom Pavillion*. In the Photograph *Pressa* 1928 (fig 32), by El Lissitzky, one can see an apparent influence. The thrust and counter-thrust, as Beall so liked to call it, may have found its roots in this photograph or ones of a similar nature by El Lissitzky.

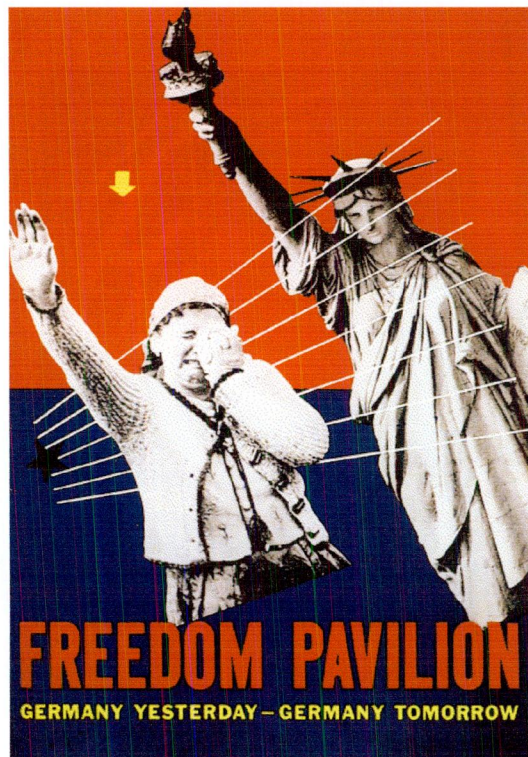


fig 31. *The Freedom Pavillion*, 1939, Lester Beall.



fig 32. *Pressa*, 1928, El Lissitzky.

Chapter 5 - Alvin Lustig and Surrealism

5.1 Origins of Surrealism

Dada and Surrealism co-existed in the early 1920s, but when writers and artists became tired and dissatisfied with the limitations of Dada it was time to move on. Among the most influential artists to emerge from Surrealism were Andre Masson, Joan Miro, Salvador Dali and Rene Magritte.

The writer Andre Breton had a group of writers and artists who followed his periodical "literature". He used experiments known as "season of sleeps" to investigate the unconscious, out of which Surrealism was born. The written images which emerged from these trances is called automatic writing.

Andre Masson was very successful in that he was able to draw in an abstracted state of mind. Masson produced marks influenced by the experience of automatic writing, and extended this idea by dropping threads at random onto paper and drawing the results (fig 33).

Another writer who would provide Breton and Surrealism with a context to further investigate automatic writing and image making was Sigmund Freud. Freud realised the dream could be used as a means of studying the unconscious mind of an individual. Surrealist automatic writing used the methods Freud used to get a patient to tell him their dreams. The Surrealists wanted to find a way of painting the unconscious in their pictures and to find a pictorial equivalent to automatic poetry. In a sense the American graphic designer Alvin Lustig adopted a lot of Surrealist elements, namely the practical side of automatic poetry (childish doodling and thread-like drawing). He also used the juxtaposition of realistic objects, inspired by such artists as Magritte and Salvador Dali, as I will discuss later on in the chapter.

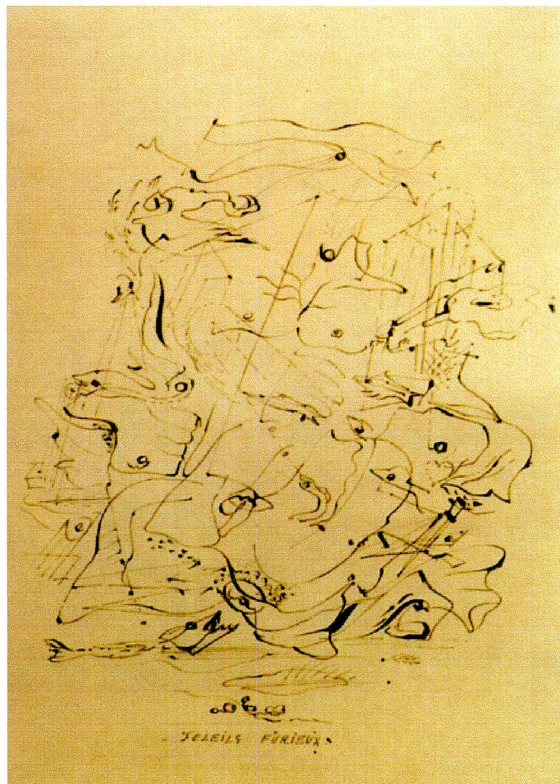


fig 33. Furious Suns, 1925, Andre Masson.

5.2 Alvin Lustig

Alvin Lustig was born on February 8, 1915, in Denver, Colorado. During his senior year in high school, Lustig's art teacher showed him the posters of E. McKnight Kauffer and A.M. Cassandre, who transformed his way of seeing. Although the influence of these poster designers does play an important role in Lustig's work, more significant is the role of modern art. In his own education, Lustig struggled with the concept of separating the applied arts from the fine arts and believed that they should be brought together as one.

I think Lustig did this through the influence of Surrealism. Lustig was employed in the early 1940s to experiment with covers for the *New Directions* non-mainstream list. Lustig's abstractions owe a lot to the renderings of his favourite artists, Paul Klee and Joan Miro. I will discuss the influence of Surrealism on Lustig's book designs for *New Directions* under the headings of illustrative and photographic covers.

5.3 Illustrative covers

Lustig was not afraid to admit that he borrowed liberally from painters he admired, and the illustrative book covers for *New Directions* are a mix of expressionistic forms and a surreal childlike interpretations. I discussed earlier how Andre Masson used automatic writing to unlock the unconscious and various techniques he used to interpret this. I feel Lustig may have used the practical side of this technique in designing his covers for *New Directions*. Instead of using automatic poetry to examine the unconscious, he preferred to use the playful element of moving forms and lines to interpret, rather than to narrate the novels, plays, or poetry contained within. "Lustig was a visual poet whose work was rooted as much in emotion as in form" (eye, 1993, pg 33). Lustig was concerned with emotion rather than narrative and he used surreal elements in his book covers to create emotional tension or express the spirit of the contents of each book.

The cover for *Flowers of Evil* (1947) (fig 34), is a perfect example of how Lustig could have used Masson's idea of dropping pieces of thread onto paper and drawing the results. Although they are not dropped at random they do have that thread-like style. The cover contains a group of three dead flowers, or what could be interpreted as that. The dead flowers fight with each other, but the flower with *of evil* written in its centre seems to be the most dominant. The biomorphic shape in its centre is purple, and its spindly organic arms are cream. The two other flowers have cream centres, one with *flowers* written on it, and the other with the author's name. There are apparent influences of Surrealism in this cover, but the single most important element that creates this is how the flowers float ambiguously. They have no stems, and it seems as if they have a life of their own. Lustig's use of tension in the illustration for *Flowers of Evil* suggests that the content of the book is a thriller and, if so, he expresses this cleverly.

In the cover for the *Longest Journey* (1947) (fig 35), Lustig again may have borrowed the technique of dropping pieces of thread onto paper, but this time in a more controlled manner. He creates a maze from rectangular bars by adding denser coloured bars. The cover almost tells the story of piece of thread that is lost. Firstly it enters from the centre left of the cover and makes its way up the top of the maze only to find a dead end. It then turns around overlapping the previous direction, and down the right hand side of the maze. Again there is another dead end, so it returns to find the proper way out. This cover and others may also have been inspired by Miro's work. *Blue 111*, 1932 (fig 36) by Miro uses the same type of thread-like drawing of line, using similar colours.

The *Man Who Died*, (1946) (fig 37), is probably one of Lustig's most successful covers where he combines abstract images with modern typography. The cover basically captures the idea of a soul leaving its body. The abstract biomorphic shape at the bottom represents a dead body. Although the figure is almost completely abstract, it does give the impression of death, with a flat black plane of colour and overlapping

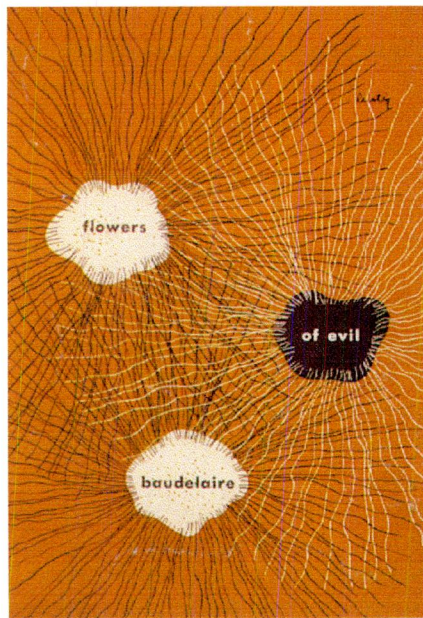


fig 34. *The Flowers of Evil*, 1947, Alvin Lustig.

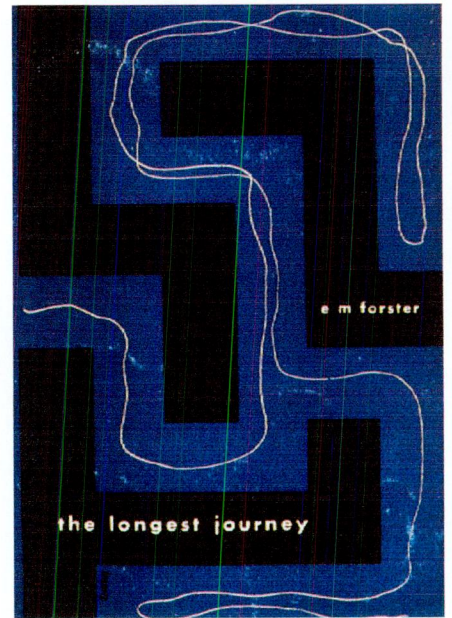


fig 35. *The longest journey*, 1947, Alvin Lustig.

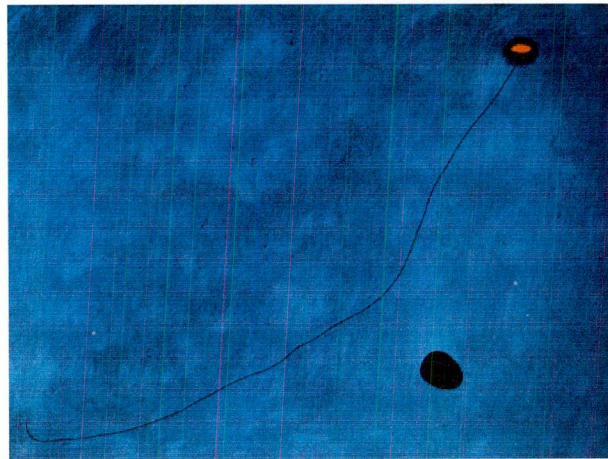


fig 36. *Blue 111*, 1932, Miro.

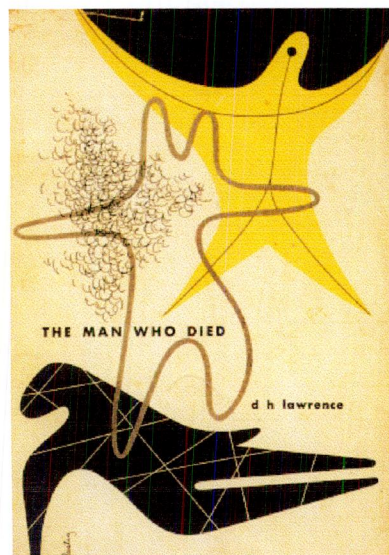


fig 37. *The Man Who Died*, 1946, Alvin Lustig.

angular lines. Lustig may have been inspired by Paul Klee during this period, because there is a close relationship between the biomorphic shapes in the man who died and that of *Exotic Sound*, (1930) (fig 38), by Paul Klee. Some of the shapes in *Exotic Sound*, have soft rounded edges contrasted by sharp angular ones. The same contrast can be seen in *The Man Who Died*, where the bottom figure has smooth consistent edges, and the top figure has sharp points where the body's arms and legs are. Again, there is also the influence of Miro. In *People In The Night*, (1950) (fig 39), Miro paints lines with circular shapes attached to the end. This practice is quite frequently seen in Miro's paintings at the time, but Lustig uses this idea to create a figure. The top figure, who seems to be the spirit that has come to life, is completed by a black circle, which could either be a head for the linear drawing, of a mouth or an eye for the yellow body.

One of the strongest elements that ties Lustig's book covers for *New Directions* together is his childlike approach. Use of naive line with handwritten titles was enough to create the impression that a child may have partly created the image. *Amerika*, (1948) (fig 40), is probably his most accomplished cover using this technique. Lustig draws an uneven childlike star divided with red stripes, to suggest the American flag. He then adds the title "Amerika" in hand-writing which is "America" spelt wrongly. The author Franz Kafka wrote the book as a criticism of American society. Lustig interprets this by drawing squiggles of smoke that emerge from the top of the star. Although this childlike approach may have been considered revolutionary at the time, it was often practiced by designers such as Paul Rand and Will Burton, with Burton a successful design with his approach for the *Up John* pharmaceutical company (1948) (fig 41).

Lustig often used abstract symbols to express the spirit of the book covers he designed, which found their roots in the surrealist biomorphic shapes of Miro and Paul Klee. The cover for *Nightwood*, (1947) (fig 42), is primarily four abstract shapes and two lines. Again, the novel may have been a thriller judging by the tension. The

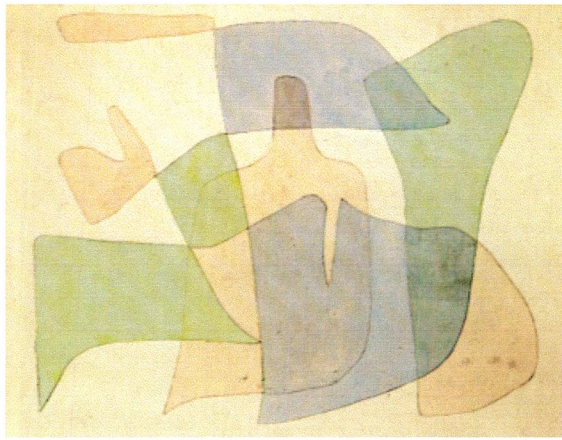


fig 38. *Exotic Sounds*, 1930, Paul Klee.



fig 39. *People In The Night*, 1950, Miro.



fig 40. *Amerika*, 1948, Alvin Lustig.

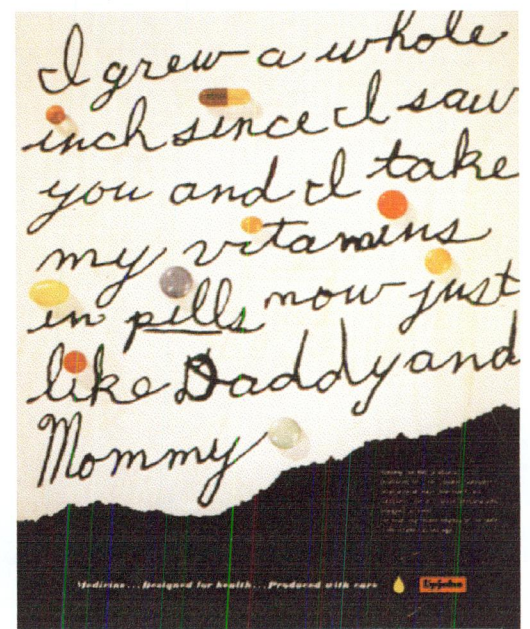


fig 41. *Up John*, 1948, Will Burton.

eerie white symbol creates tension, while the black childlike organic shapes float awkwardly. Colour is very important in Lustig's work, and was used not out of personal taste, but rather as a means of individually expressing the mood of each novel. Not more than two to three colours is ever used, and he would always use these with black or white. In the case of *Nightwood*, Lustig uses organic shapes with black and white over a deep purple back-ground to create a surreal tension.

In *Three Tales* (1946) (fig 43), Lustig also uses black and white with a single colour. In this cover there is a minor influence of Cubism. However, the geometric shapes are in contrast with scribbles and marks. This cover is probably one of his less surreal covers, but one of his more childlike experiments. Obviously there are three abstract portraits, but how each is depicted is quite different. The face on the top left is very technical, with sharp lines, circles and ellipses. The face on the middle right is a man whose beard and hair are filled in with scribbles. He also has an amusing expression on his face, which is in contrast with the other two more serious expressions. The title *Three Tales* is written in large handwriting text. The title may also be a reference to three people which the novel is based around, hence three portraits. The staring eyes are probably the single most noticeable thing about the upper portrait. They are reminiscent of William Golden's design for the CBS logo (fig 44).

5.4 Photographic covers

Of Lustig's most expressive photographic book covers, *Lorca: 3 Tragedies* (fig 45) "combines symbolic acuity, compositional strength and typographic ingenuity" (eye 10/93 pg 26). The black and white cover is a grid of five symbolic photographs, in which simultaneous stories are told. Lustig carefully places each photograph creating an almost rhythmic balance. The title "Lorca" which is written on sand, is a powerful image alone whereas "3: Tragedies" emerges from a piece of squashed paper, containing an equally powerful image. Again, a playful element engages the viewer, by encouraging them to cover photographs within the composition to create a different

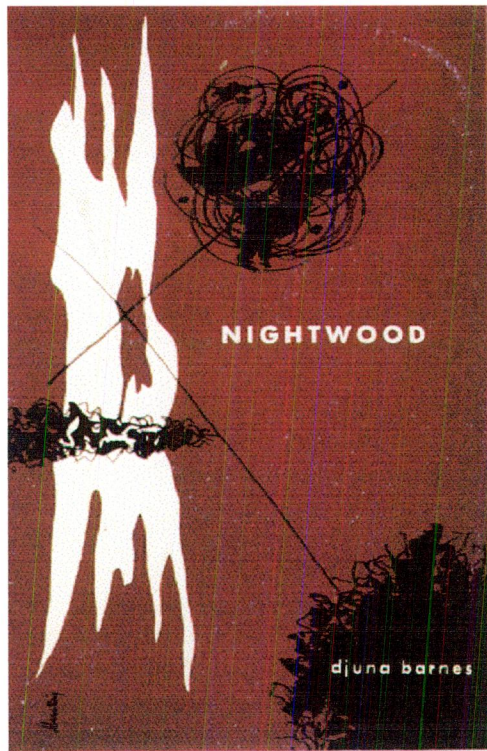


fig 42. *Nightwood*, 1947, Alvin Lustig.

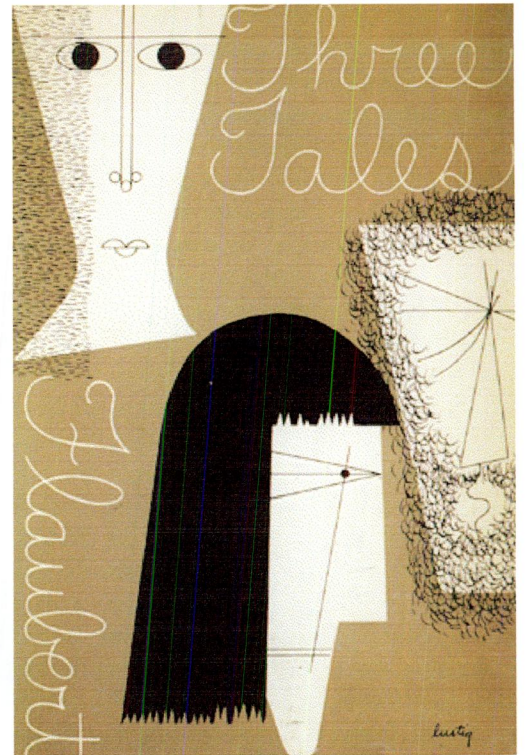


fig 43. *Three Tales*, 1946, Alvin Lustig.



fig 44. CBS logo, William Golden.

mood. Although Surrealism was mainly painterly, they sometimes used everyday objects and the landscape to generate their ideas. In Rene Magritte's painting *The Reckless Sleeper* (1928) (fig 46), a symbolic story is told with everyday objects placed on a headstone over a sky. If compared with Lustig's *Lorca: 3 Tragedies*, the same use of everyday objects and landscape can be found.

The *Confessions of Zeno*, 1947 (fig 47), also uses the photograph as a tool of abstraction, and Surrealism. Lustig uses his own self portrait to represent a face engulfed in flames. The composition is cut in half by two blocks of black and white. In the black plane he uses an elegant script typeface. In the white plane, an image of a coffin and a doll are placed in the centre. The lid of the coffin is slipped over and cigarette butts are contained. The doll seems to be used as some kind of pin cushion: this is probably an association with witchcraft. The letter Z is enscribed on top of the lid which is a reference to the name in the title. Over all, *Confessions of Zeno* with its juxtaposition of imagery and scale creates a Surrealist mood that is unmatched by any of his other book covers from that period.



fig 45. Lorca: 3 Tragedies, Alvin Lustig.

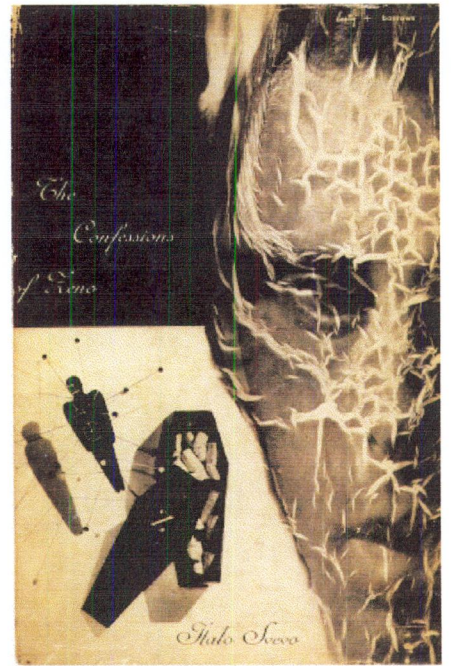


fig 47. The Confessions of Zeno, 1947, Alvin Lustig.



fig 46. The Reckless Sleeper, 1928, Magritte.

Chapter 6 - A Current Revival

6.1 Style and Trends

Today there is a growing concern among the older generation of graphic designers that contemporary design has lost all previous knowledge of the basic principals of graphic design. In Paul Rand's book *Design Form and Chaos*, Rand attacks the current state of Graphic design by suggesting that today the "emphasis on style over content in much of what is alleged to be graphic design and communication is, at best, puzzling" (Rand, 1993, pg 207). At the time of the publication of *Design Form and Chaos*, it was extremely controversial and came under attack from many contemporary designers. Was Rand correct, or was he just afraid to embrace new technology, which could "create whatever special effects desired".

A lot of contemporary designers look to the past for inspiration as artists have done for thousands of years. Although this may seem like the proper way to educate oneself it can also be the wrong way depending on how a person may perceive education. Real ideas such as the Bauhaus are often mistaken as a "style," whereas its ideology is often omitted. Today with our level of communication concepts and ideas are very short lived because people are generally more visually sensitive and become bored very easily. A concept may be good today, but when it is employed relentlessly it becomes a mere cliché tomorrow. It is also the case that to be "new" and "trendy" is sought after more than to actually approach the real problem. Today this preoccupation itself becomes more of a problem than the brief a client may set out.

As with music and fashion, style has become an important aspect of today's graphic design. To mark your name and become recognised is of the utmost importance. Most designers will do this by creating an individual style, but more than often this style is only a concoction of various "styles" that existed previously. If one ignores history there is a danger that it will repeat itself. This idea is not seen as a threat in graphic design, as it is often the case that particular periods are deliberately repeated.

6.2 A Re-Birth in Past Tradition

At the moment 1940s style has re-emerged and can be seen in great abundance. how long this trend will last one cannot be sure but much of the techniques that were often used by American designers can be seen in almost any bookshop, record store or newsagent. The difference between today's design and '40s American design is that contemporary design thrives on trendiness, whereas '40s design was concerned with real concepts. American designers approached a problem with the vision of providing a clear understandable solution, that used particular techniques in expressing that solution. Novelty and wit were their main concern, not seducing the eye with a pointless image that has no function but to confuse.

Collage is a technique that has existed since the beginning of this century. The practice of cutting paper and placing it in a certain order was developed by designers such as Paul Rand. The cover for the *REM* cd *UP* (fig 48), is an example of this technique in use today. The cover is a mix of flat blocks of colour, in a grid like format. The blocks are unequal in size and placed in a random fashion; a design technique practiced by some American designers to create the impression of spontaneity. The designer (unknown) is also careful to use colours that would normally be associated with the '40s era. The blocks of green, yellow and pale blue are particularly reminiscent to Alvin Lustig's use of colour. Lustig preferred to use slightly garish colours that were normally thought to be ugly or distasteful. The choice of green for the *REM* cover would fit this description and is often found in Lustig's work. The design does possess a certain amount of "40s" clarity which is expressed through its simple layout and use of white space, but the desired message is unclear if there is any. If you consider Rand's argument that designers today are more concerned with style over content, then in this case he may be correct. Clearly in the *REM* design the blocks of colour hold no function but to be decorative; if there is a concept then it is very puzzling.



fig 48, REM, UP, 1998.

Another example of design inspired by the '40s era in America, was last year's title screen and on-screen graphics for the *MTV Europe Music Awards 1998* (fig 49). The ceremony which took place in Milan on the 12 November 1998, uses a collage technique that is inspired by '40s and '50s cartoons. Although this may be the case a lot of its roots are found in American design. Maurizio, the designer, may have been inspired by Paul Rand or even Saul Bass (who I have not mentioned so far).

Maurizio approached the design with direct simplicity, concentrating on the use of five seductive flat colours. The Americans were known for their limited use of colour, but this was all in their effort for a direct and clear solution. Maurizio may have been aware of this concept because he his design displays great clarity. If one looks closely at the typography, one can come to the conclusion that this is also inspired by '40s American design. The computer generated font that spells "Album," is inspired by handwriting. Hand written text was often used by Alvin Lustig and Paul Rand as an integral part of a design solution. Because the hand writing in the *MTV* sequence is a computer generated font, it loses the accidental quality that can only be achieved by the human hand. Over all the design is seductive, but lacks freedom and is slightly constrained.

The cover for *IBM's* magazine *Think* (fig 50) is approached with the minimum of effort or at least it gives that impression. Charm and wit were an important feature in American design of the '40s. In the *IBM* magazine cover one can assume the designer (pentagram) had a similar appreciation for this form of expression. As one can see the cover is an image of a child clinging to her parents finger. The designer is particularly sensitive to the technique of cropping. Again designers such as Lester Beall and Paul Rand are unmatched by attempts in this area (fig 9). As I have previously discussed, colour was given a lot of consideration by the American designers. In the case of Pentagram's design the number of colours used is reduced to a minimum, and reinforces its clarity. The cover uses the same technique as in fig 48 and 49, where the composition is made up with a collage of simple geometric shapes and flat areas of colour. Basically the image is made up of three areas; the large hand, the



fig 49, MTV Europe Music Awards, 1998, Maurizio.

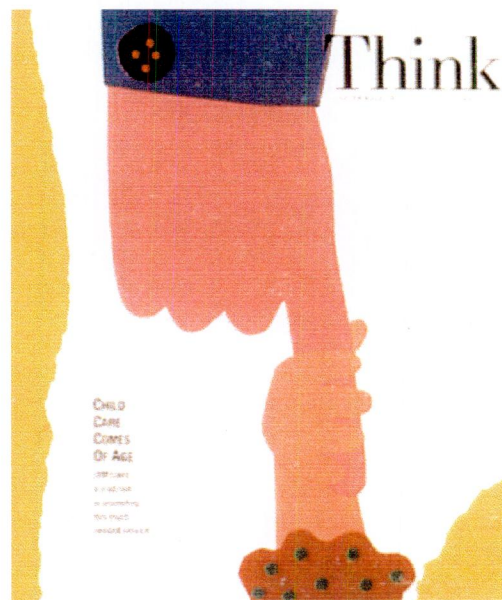


fig 50. IBM, Think, Pentagram.

child and the vertical strip down the left hand side of the cover, All of these are placed over a white plane, which acts as a background. It would be easy to think of a number of designs where this cover may have found its roots, but then again its concern with function rather than style makes it a far more acceptable solution than perhaps the *REM* cover (fig 48) or even the *MTV* sequence (fig 49).

Conclusion

American graphic designers of the 1940s proved that the graphic designer could reach the same status as the fine artist, and receive an equal level of respect. The Americans developed a certain attitude to their work that made it become more than mere graphic design. I feel, the numerous graphic art exhibitions they held in major art galleries is proof of this.

American designers looked at modern art for inspiration, and as a result they often borrowed concepts and visual ideas from it. The Cubists used humble things like everyday objects as new subject matter. Like the Cubists, Paul Rand used the concept of collage, which was a cut and paste technique that combined different images. Although collage may appear like a simple concept it did have its theories (duration and simultaneity), which were also adopted by Rand.

Lester Beall and Bradbury Thompson were a minority of designers during this period to have the courage to look to Dada for inspiration, especially when clarity and directness were so popular at the time. Yet, out of this playful and expressive movement they manage to develop a clarity in their designs that still possess the flavour of Dada.

Lester Beall was from a generation of graphic designers that used an art based approach when it came to a solution. For him Constructivism was the superior art form out of which Suprematism emerged. He used the Suprematist concepts concerning line and plane to develop them into his own ideas. He transformed line into spatial structures (thrust-counter thrust) and with it created direction and emphasis. The suprematist plane was adopted into most designs where, dramatic surfaces were used as backgrounds or blocks of flat colour.

Alvin Lustig is probably one of the better known designers for adopting such a direct approach to his art based designs. Among his favourite artists Miro and Magritte are

probably the most influential. His illustrative book covers for *New Direction* are directly influenced by Surrealism. He adopted the childlike doodling that emerged from automatic drawing to create book covers that were both abstract and surreal. His photographic book covers were inspired by the paintings of Magritte where he used everyday objects to express the surreal.

Today art based approaches can be seen almost anywhere but whether they are successful or not is another matter. Today's designers should probably look directly at art, instead of looking at designs that were inspired by art. Through my research I discovered how American graphic designers were inspired by art. This subject had not been discussed previously in most books or articles, if so it was very briefly mentioned. I felt it was necessary to discuss the influence of art on these American designers, because its influence was just as significant as European graphic designer (emigres).

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