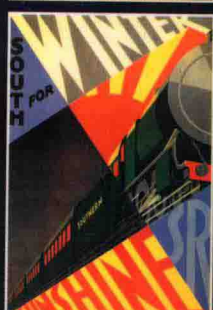
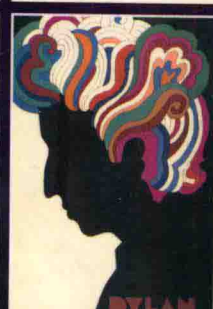
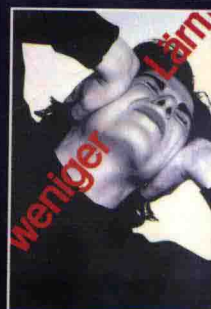
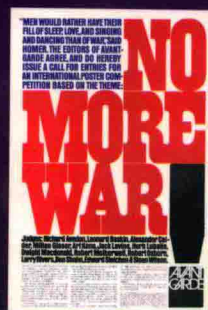


Steven Heller Mirko Ilić

# Icons of Graphic Design



Thames & Hudson



# **Icons of Graphic Design**

Steven Heller and Mirko Ilić

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Steven Heller and Mirko Ilić

To my wife Nicky  
—MI

To my wife Louise  
—SH



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## Dedication

To my wife Nicky  
—MI

To my wife Louise  
—SH

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# Introduction: On the Shoulders of Genius (et al.)

“There is nothing new under the sun”—how often we hear that saying, uttered perhaps to console those who have no gift for discovery, or more likely to discourage the search for truths that might upset our complacency. —Herbert Read, *The Origins of Form in Art*, 1965

Pure art may be immaculately conceived; graphic design is not. Pure art inhabits almost any form and defines the forms that it takes. Graphic design is proscribed, communicating within delineated realms. While the sky is not the limit in graphic design, there are many ways to work within its confines. The history of graphic design is the legacy of attempts to expand the universe of visual communication.

**This book is about the expanding universe.** It is also about the consequent relationships between art and design, culture and design, and design and design. It is, therefore, about the interplay between fine and applied artists and how their collective innovations and derivations have influenced graphic design since the field took shape in the late nineteenth century. It is, in turn, about the impact of one hundred years of aesthetics, form and content on the look, feel and function of graphic communications, and how our antecedents shaped graphic design into an interdependent art form. Ultimately, it is about finding clues that reveal how the design language has evolved over time.

**Through a survey of known and lesser-known affinities, this book follows the roots and routes of graphic design.** Graphic design can either be ahead of or behind major artistic developments depending, of course, on the individual designers practicing at any particular time. Occasionally, pure art embraces commercial art as a means to an end. Such was the case with the early twentieth-century movements of Futurism and de Stijl, as well as the 1960s Fluxus group, where both pure and applied art forms were advanced simultaneously and complementarily. But on the whole, graphic design's progress ultimately depends on a client's tolerance for and the market's acceptance of original ideas. Furthermore, the clients (or patrons) are influenced by unpredictable social and economic conditions that may affect how designers address the problems they are asked to solve.

Yet it takes only one rogue to start a stampede. One designer with vision can inextricably change the direction of graphic design. Committees do not create innovative work, they strangle untested promise with consensus. Singular efforts make the difference. Sure, the casual audience may view graphic design (if they see it at all) as the ebbs and flows of discernable stylistic waves, but in truth even the most dominant styles are *mélanges* of idiosyncratic attributes.

In the final analysis, however, each of the constituent pieces comprises a whole. Individuals deposit ideas into a bank, yet every designer can make withdrawals. The original creator invariably bequeaths her discovery to everyone. Once it enters the public domain,

few characteristics of one's unique design, even the most proprietary, remain the sole ownership of an individual for long. Popularity is the great equalizer. Imitation is the ultimate response. Assimilation is the final outcome.

**Graphic design, like all art, is built on the shoulders of genius and perpetuated by many others.** The origin of the world's major graphic design styles, mannerisms and fashions, therefore, cannot always be pinpointed with precise accuracy. Innovations that develop here can turn up there without proper attribution simply because the elements that comprise graphic design are filtered and refined as the number of proponents increases. Early twentieth-century Modernism, for example, was not solely based on the uniform visual traits that today characterize its distinctive look (like black and red bars and sans serif gothic type). It began as an amalgam of various shared design decisions (i.e., preferences for mechanical instead of hand-drawn art, asymmetrical instead of symmetrical composition, etc.) that were initiated by individuals but were absorbed into an overall aesthetic and political philosophy. Likewise, mid-1980s Post-Modernism was not typified by layered, kinetic typography alone, but rather by the repetition of various design substyles that together forged an overall period style.

Modernism may be celebrated today as a revolutionary blow against antiquated, “old guard” methods, but in fact, it was born in fits and starts over a period of time. Similarly, Post-Modernism may seem to have sprung up overnight as a reaction against Modernism, but other alternative approaches (some with very similar decorative graphic attributes) had been percolating for years prior to the introduction of Post-Modernism as a full-blown international style.

**As you can see, our roots and routes can be confusing.** Yet it is necessary to address this confusion. And one way is to study past methods. Vintage graphic design tends to be classified in broad generalizations because stylistic or thematic generalizations are easier to comprehend than detailed taxonomies that address formal or theoretical complexity. But in fact, most designers only want a tertiary overview of design history. They are understandably more concerned with how their work will be judged by clients who pay the bills than by what phenomena came before them. In daily practice, knowing the origin of certain components of graphic design is usually of little consequence to a successful end-product.

And yet graphic design history *is* consequential because it separates the graphic designer's art and craft from mere client-driven service. And



with historical awareness, designers are a little less likely to regurgitate proscribed formulae that result in mediocre templates. "Graphic design is a language," wrote Philip Thompson in *The Dictionary of Visual Language* (Bergstrom & Boyle Books Limited, 1980). "Like other languages it has a vocabulary, grammar, syntax, rhetoric. It also has its cliché, but this is where the analogy ends."

**The key to graphic design is knowing what to apply and how to revivify what is familiar.** History provides insight for using the basic formal and stylistic tools. Yet this book is not a definitive history of form or style like Philip B. Meggs's *A History of Graphic Design* or Richard Hollis's *Graphic Design: A Concise History*. Since these historians track integral movements and individuals, repeating their respective findings would be redundant. So in this book, the standard chronology of accomplishments and litany of personae are replaced by an admittedly idiosyncratic visual survey of common recurring themes (such as ugliness, beauty, fantasy, etc.) and mechanisms (such as layering, blurring, hand-writing, etc.).

Unearthing these traits (and relics) is something of an archeological dig. The slew of paper artifacts presented here reveal major, minor and speculative influences on the overall practice of graphic design. Showing that, over periods of time, many concepts and tools were reprised helps shed light on the evolution of our visual language. And it is fascinating to learn that various visual notions that might be considered unique to a particular time frame actually existed much earlier than previously accepted. For example, the use of the demonstrative pointing finger in patriotic political posters (see pages 38–39) was employed decades before the most familiar World War I-era American poster, "Uncle Sam Wants You." In fact, the poster artist, James Montgomery Flagg, borrowed this concept from three other nations' graphic arsenals, yet his reinvention tends to overshadow the originals. It is sobering to realize that even the most original piece of American iconography is rooted in precedent.

Patterns emerge from the aggregation of interconnected motifs and concepts that reveal both the truly unique and uniquely derivative ways that graphic designers have tackled a range of persistent problems. They highlight the continual reinvention of design elements within a finite realm. They also show the resourcefulness of designers as they attempt to unhinge the expectations of their audiences.

Examining these formal and fashionable traits—as well as the tics and quirks—of a century's worth of graphic design may sound a bit like speculating on the number of angels found on the head of a pin. You may ask: Other than the comparative girth of angels, does this exercise yield quantifiable data? What can we learn from a census of designers who used layered type, or outstretched hands or otherwise based their compositions on squares, triangles or circles? Admittedly, as an end in itself these findings are arcane. But assessing the influence

that these elements have had on design offers insight into how our shared visual language is applied over time.

Regardless of their genius (or lack thereof), graphic designers draw from the same sources of signs and symbols that date back to the turn of the century (if not antiquity). Even most of the extant typefaces are influenced by early archetypes, if not copies of the actual forms themselves. Until the onset of computer-aided design, for example, a mechanical produced in 1920 was constructed with the same materials and production methods as an editorial illustration using similar elements produced in 1980. When following old craft traditions, how can we not fail to be linked to the past?

**Let's face it, graphic designers are cliché mongers.** Yet don't be insulted (or embarrassed)—this is not as damning as it sounds. It is, however, the essential paradox. Although most designers' goal is to create work that is here and now, the majority of graphic communication is grounded in the tried and true. In *A Dictionary of Visual Language*, Philip Thompson explained that classic or "hackneyed" pieces of imagery "persist because they contain an essential truth that appeals to our collective sense of myth and form." The world understands these images at a glance. People don't necessarily relish learning a new language every time they open a magazine, read an advertisement or see a billboard. Yet neither do they want to be bored by what they read or see.

In printing jargon used during the late nineteenth- and mid-twentieth centuries, a cliché was a generic stock or clip art image that could be used to fill space or add visual interest to a page. In popular vernacular, however, a cliché is an overused word, phrase, metaphor or image. Eric Partridge wrote in *A Dictionary of Clichés*, "A cliché is a stereotyped expression—a phrase 'on tap' as it were." A cliché is, therefore, a formula. To use the word cliché in a critique about a work of art or graphic design is indeed the sharpest barb.

Yet visual clichés are also mnemonics, entry points and way-finders—both necessary and invaluable. The job of the contemporary designer is to somehow manipulate clichés by recasting their archetypal meaning. Mediocre designers use clichés without alteration, but clever designers invest timeworn veneers with new levels of meaning. Since graphic design is in large part a recycling of common imagery, then designers should squeeze out uncommon solutions. In *From Cliché to Archetype*, Marshall McLuhan offers a humorous anecdote about a teacher who challenged her students to use a familiar word in a new way. He writes, "One [student] read: 'The boy returned home with a cliché on his face.' Asked to explain his phrase, he said, 'The dictionary defines cliché as a worn-out expression.'" Like this young wiseguy, designers must also transform clichés from the expected to the unexpected. This is the most useful tool a design education can impart.

New thoughts, after all, rise from discarded old ones. Every designer builds on an existing premise or problem. And the majority of

design solutions derive from worn-out expressions. At best, these expressions are made totally new; at worst, they are derivative and formulaic. Although some designers would prefer to always answer the muse within, graphic design is the art of meeting challenges from without. "Today's archetype was yesterday's art form, day before yesterday's cliché, and the day before that, it was the last word," wrote Howard Gossage, an advertising executive. Only time determines the viability of a common design solution. So understanding how designers throughout history have solved basic conceptual problems validates the rationale that graphic design is a collection of familiar visual idioms and accents made new.

The old chestnut about there being nothing new under the sun is indeed just a poor excuse for idea-challenged designers. New ideas percolate all the time. The design annuals, not to mention the real world, are filled with posters, advertisements, CD packages, magazine covers, even Web sites that genuinely startle and surprise. Nonetheless, unique solutions are invariably derived from tested experience.

**The word *new*, when applied to graphic design, does not mean "never before."**

The constraints imposed by clients, markets and technology demand that designers must invariably employ forms that the audience (or consumer) will easily comprehend. There is often little chance for total spontaneity. Of course, this does not mean that graphic designers are unable to be truly spontaneous or intuitive, but the limitations imposed by specific problems often demand predictable responses. What's more, spontaneity by itself does not ensure originality. Spontaneity often draws upon preconditioning, bringing forth semiconscious expressions of what is already known. Even the most vanguard graphic designer mediates rather than invents.

One can be a clever designer and still never once create something from whole cloth. But the clever designer knows how to marshal part or all of the extant design language to produce an unanticipated result.

Herbert Read wrote in *The Origins of Form in Art*, "We do not credit the midwife with the creation of the child she brings into the world...is there any more reason for crediting the artist with the creation of the work of art he spontaneously delivers?" The graphic designer is indeed something of a midwife who facilitates the birth of visual ideas from existing seminal forms. Moreover, just peruse the credits for any design competition or annual to find that other "midwives" were involved (art directors, typographers, illustrators, etc.). Perhaps a better synonym for *new* is *reborn*. One could argue that designers recombine the DNA of design into particular entities containing new ideas based on old forms. Graphic designers are, therefore, consummate re-creators. Yet for designers who want to create untested design, the perpetual link to the past offers a frustrating paradox.

Raymond Loewy, the industrial designer credited with significantly altering both the function and look of products and machines from the

1930s through the 1960s, recognized this paradox and developed a principle that he called "Most Advanced Yet Acceptable." In this "MAYA Principle" Loewy outlined the necessity for maintaining a balance between the unprecedented and the familiar. The pursuit of progress, he argued, must be gauged by the public's ability to understand, appreciate and ultimately accept change. In Loewy's calculus, few designs could function that did not meet this standard. Even if a prototype might be accepted at a later time and place, if it failed to work when introduced it was a failure. Originality is, therefore, linked to success, which is determined by its effect on an audience rather than on its inherent attributes. And with this premise in mind, Herbert Read questioned, "Is originality, then, merely a contrast to the typical style of any period, itself destined to sink to the level of the commonplace as it becomes acceptable to a wider public?" And answered thusly: "That might be an acceptable generalization if there were not this difference between the genius that retains its brightness, as Shakespeare's genius has done, and the genius that simply fades away."

What the authors of this book call the "genius dichotomy" is central to the pursuit of originality in graphic design. On one hand are form-giver-geniuses, who have contributed to the language of design by developing archetypes; on the other are stylist-geniuses, who exert momentary influence on the surface of form. Sometimes these traits are found in the same individual. Yet true form-givers are rarer than stylists, because new form is obviously rarer than transient surface modes. Our culture values the true inventor, but celebrates the decorator who alters surface while retaining familiar form.

Contemporary consumer society loves "new and improved"-ness. In the 1930s, advertising executive Earnest Elmo Calkins promoted a principle called "styling the goods" that evolved into "forced obsolescence" or the planned discontinuation of styles. The premise was that with changing veneers, consumers would desire new products even if the old ones still functioned. This consuming pressure made people yearn to be surprised—to expect the unexpected—but not to be shocked off their keesters. And this is true today. Consumers want novel, not radical. In the first half of the twentieth century, the principal shifts in graphic design took place within insular art movements and were filtered back into the commercial arena by interpreters and entrepreneurs. Although artists belonging to de Stijl, Dada and Futurism, for example, vociferously advocated the marriage of art and design, the mainstream manifestation of this union was popularized only after the sharp edges were dulled just enough to be acceptable to mass-market standards. Which is not to suggest that, say, *The New Typography* (and the other Modern design idioms of the 1920s that influenced commercial art) were not convention-busting. It does, however, suggest that by the time that mass-market advertising agencies began applying Modern motifs to magazine and billboard ads, the results were not so advanced that they were unacceptable.



**Graphic designers have three primary responsibilities—to frame, to attract and to impart—from which emanates all other creative activity.** Design must viably frame messages for optimum allure to attract the eye. Then it must impart an idea or deposit a “mental cookie” so that the audience receives and retains the message. Of course, there are many ways to accomplish these goals. Regardless of what forms are used, however, composition is paramount. How a work is composed and what elements are used ultimately determines whether meaning will be sent from the sender to the receiver without interference. It is in this context that the clichés we have been talking about are the brick and mortar of design. Once the structure is built, then all kinds of decoration, ornamentation, and style can be added.

**So, in addition to its other claims, this book is also a building materials catalog.** Each example herein has its own integrity and most are indeed valued for having contributed to the language of graphic design, as well as for impacting the social, political, or cultural environment. But when viewed as a catalog—of methods, manners, ideas—the works are component parts stored in a massive warehouse. Designers can reference them in the same way that one orders construction or plumbing supplies. Once installed, they can be used in designs with as many or few alterations as needed. As in an industrial catalog, these materials are grouped together according to shared formal references—i.e., structural, decorative, functional, contextual—as well as unconventional sets of criteria that address motivation and aesthetics.

The theory behind this book is simple: to examine as efficiently as possible the shared visual language, its various dialects and the many contributions that have been made to it over the past century. In order to accomplish this in an illuminating way we have designated one hundred single works, each representing one year of the twentieth century as a centerpiece around which other examples, which either influenced it or were influenced by it, revolve. Additionally, each of these main pieces represents a specific stylistic, thematic or conceptual genre or component of the language. Selection of the principal work was made based on its relative importance to other work produced at the same time in the same genre.

The selection is arguably arbitrary, for in some years multiple archetypes were clustered, while in others there were very few examples to choose from. We do not presume to have made a definitive historical decision and admit to using subjective criteria. This is not a book about the one hundred most significant graphic designs of the twentieth century (although some might be so considered). Admittedly, the chronological principal is simply an organizing tool that helps us arrive at our primary concern: to sample a variety of interrelationships.

In addition to the principal work, each year (each spread) includes at least four other works. Two were created before the principal and two afterward. The rationale for this juxtaposition is to show both precedence

and influence, or how the principal work both drew upon existing ideas and impacted subsequent ones. Again, we are not definitively claiming that the featured piece is the Rosetta Stone or Holy Grail, but in our estimation it is a viable touchstone of a particular approach.

For the 1906 spread exploring flatness, for example, we selected Lucian Bernhard's *Priester Match* poster because it represents a major shift in design methodology from fussy and detailed to simplified or “objectified” execution. By using this example, we are able to illustrate how Bernhard was influenced by work that preceded his own, and how his work influenced others at the same time and decades later. Similarly, for the 1949 spread on title page constructions we selected Merle Armitage's book title spread for *Igor Stravinsky* because it exemplifies the practice of building typographic architecture over two pages. This example enables us to show the development of this key aspect of book design from the 1920s to the more recent past. For the 1940 spread on dimensional letters, we selected Norman Bel Geddes's book jacket for *Magic Motorways*, a treatise on “streamline” design, as the hub around which we show how other designers used mass, volume and shadow to give the illusion of three-dimensional letterforms on a two-dimensional surface.

Every spread in this book is designed to give the reader a visual overview of both direct and indirect influences in specific realms of application. We do not claim (and cannot prove) that in each case the designer actually referenced the earlier material. We acknowledge that comparable ideas are often in the air, or that the inherent function dictates a similar execution. Yet we do assert that the visual relationships are not entirely coincidental. The repetition of forms and themes underscores the communal nature of graphic design. And even the most original approaches employ and rely on elements from distant and recent pasts.

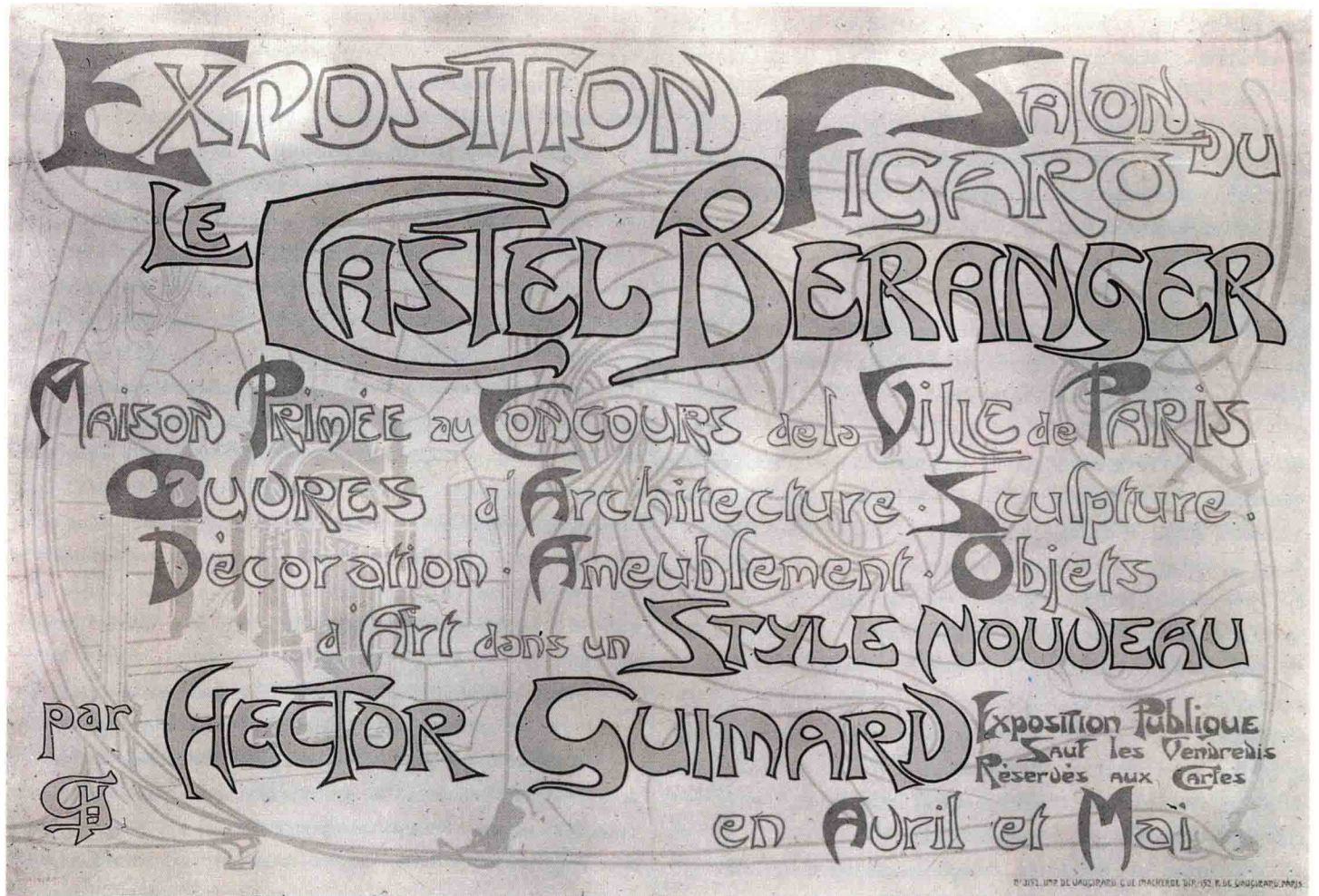
Graphic design routinely regenerates itself to meet the stylistic and conceptual needs of the market and the individual creator. Because it is rooted in a universal language, its innovators are often judged by a lesser standard than fine artists. Nonetheless, in the universe of mass culture, graphic designers push accepted norms and alter popular perceptions. Pure art may stimulate overall cultural change, often in unpredictable ways, but graphic design popularizes and quantifies these and other shifts in the visual environment on a popular stage. Graphic design filters the shocking into the acceptable, it transforms the cutting edge into the vernacular. But it also helps establish levels of acceptance that raise visual literacy. In conveying ordinary messages to the general public, designers often make unique ideas into visual clichés. But it takes a genius to make the prototype that, ultimately, everybody understands.



## Expressive Hands

Expressive letterforms have long been a staple of graphic design. The pen and brush have always been as mighty as the printing press, camera and computer mouse. Throughout history, designers have developed idiosyncratic alphabets to serve as both illustration and decoration.

1900



1900

Hector Guimard

Exposition Salon du Figaro le Castel Beranger

Lithograph, 35" x 49 1/2"

Collection, The Museum of Modern Art New York. Gift of Lillian Nassau.



Before



1851  
Artist unknown  
"Ring de Banjo"  
Sheet music cover

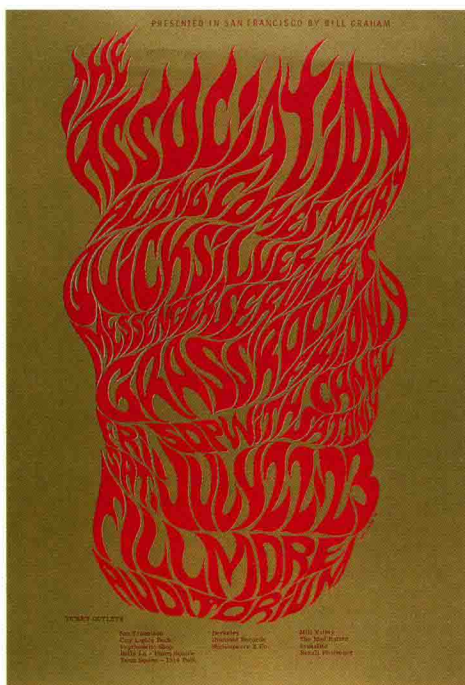


1855  
Artist unknown  
Exposition Universelle  
Book title page

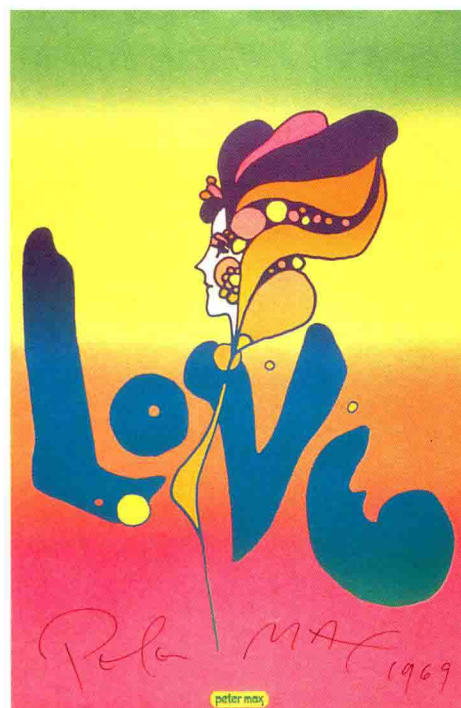


1892  
Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec  
Reine de Joie  
Poster  
Poster Photo Archives, Posters Please, Inc., New York City

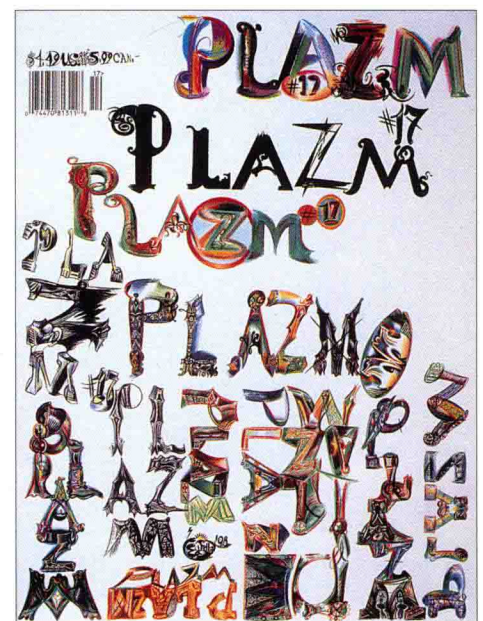
After



1966  
Wes Wilson  
The Association  
Poster



1969  
Peter Max  
Love  
Poster  
© Peter Max



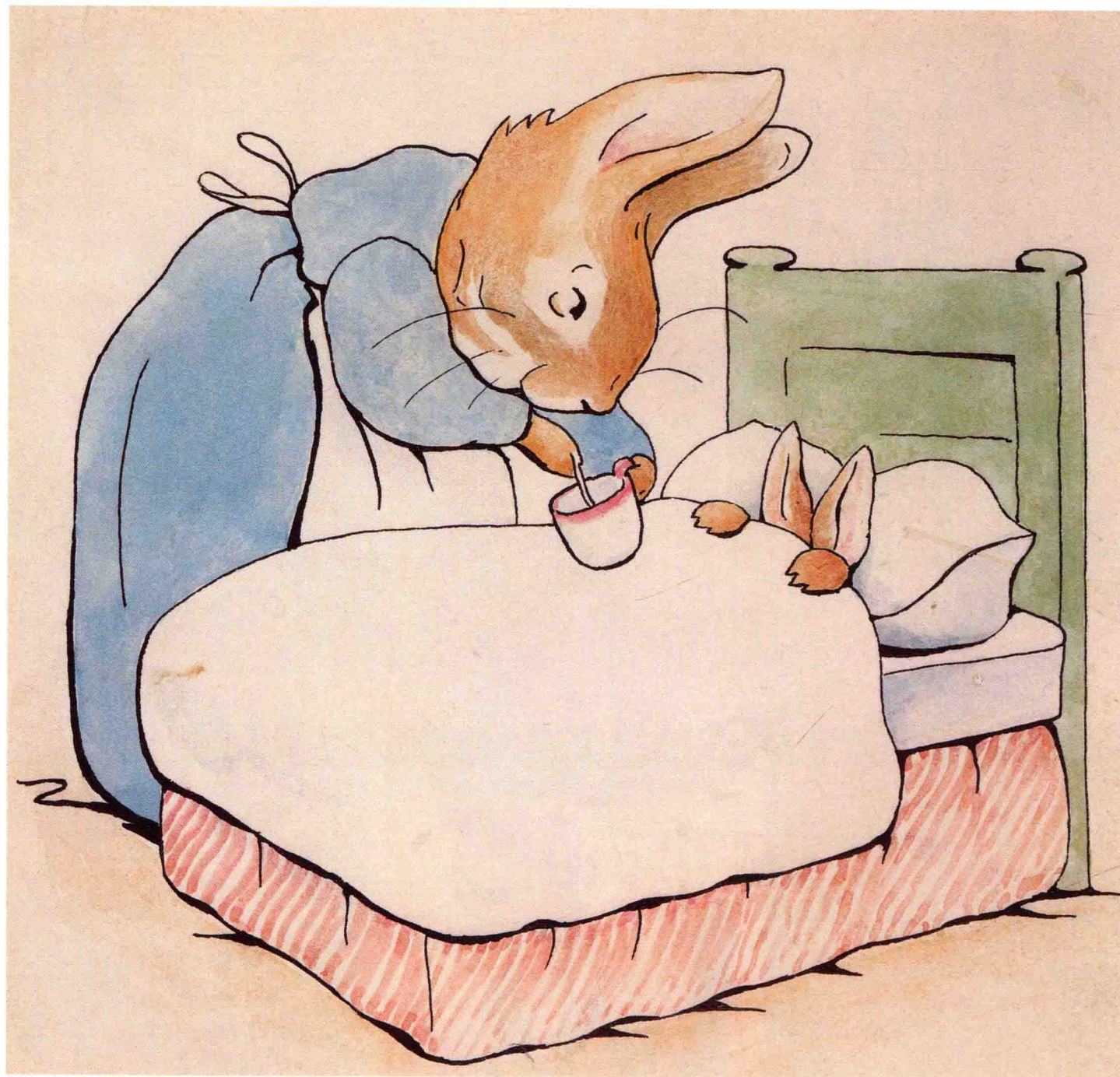
1998  
Edward Fella, letterer  
Josh Berger, art director  
Plazm  
Magazine cover



## Kids' Stories

Children's book illustration defies the categories of Modernism, Postmodernism, et al. Children do not care a whit about *-isms*; for them the story reigns supreme. And narrative pictorial storytelling, wherein the images complement and supplement text, is as fundamental to this genre as the figure is to art.

1901



1901

Beatrix Potter

**"First he ate some lettuces"**

(from *The Adventures of Peter Rabbit*)

Watercolor illustration

© Frederick Warne & Co., 1902, 1987

Reproduced by kind permission of Frederick Warne & Co.



Before

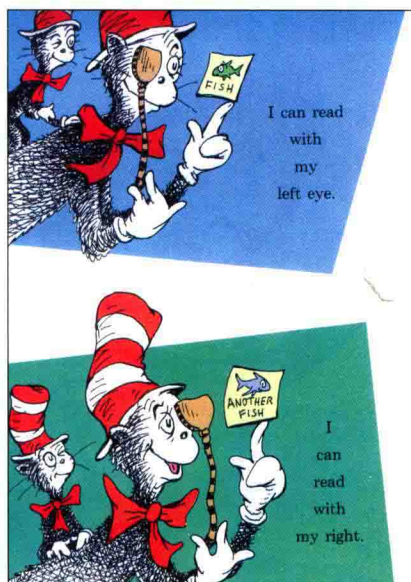


1865  
John Tenniel  
**Alice's Adventures in Wonderland**  
Line drawing



c. 1868  
Gustave Doré  
**"The Wolf Turned Shepherd"**  
(from *Fables of La Fontaine*)  
Line drawing

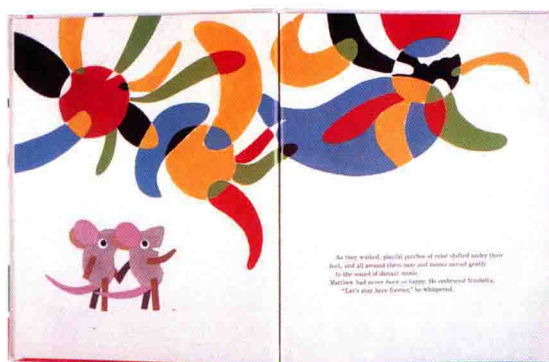
After



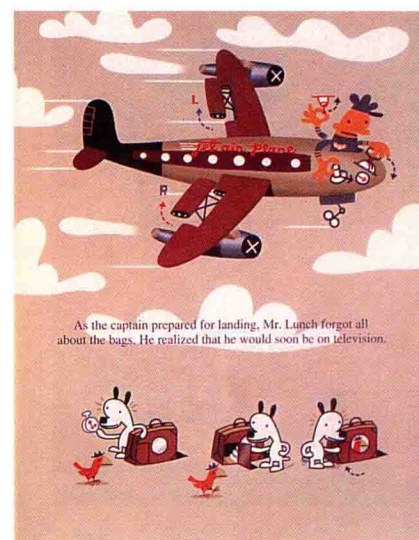
1956  
Dr. Seuss  
**I Can Read With My Eyes Shut**  
Book illustration  
© Dr. Seuss Enterprises, L.P. 1978. Reprinted by permission of Random House Children's Books, a division of Random House, Inc.



1979  
Yamawaki Yuriko  
**Guri to Gura no Ensoku**  
Book illustration



1991  
Leo Lionni  
**Matthew's Dream**  
Book illustration



1993  
J. Otto Seibold  
**Mr. Lunch Takes a Plane Ride**  
Book illustration

## Patterns Personified

Posters must instantaneously attract the viewer's eye. The means, however, vary: Stark image, pithy headline and graphic pattern are among the most common. Repeated patterns are both hooks and mnemonics that can frame or underscore the textual message.

1902



1902  
Alfred Roller  
**Secession 16**  
Poster



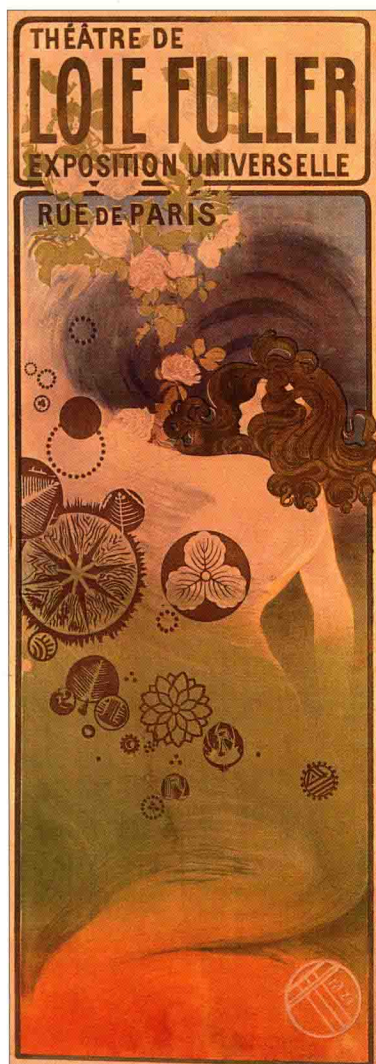


1894

Alphonse Mucha  
**Gismonda**

Poster

Poster Photo Archives, Posters Please, Inc., New York City



1900

Emmanuel Orazi  
**Théâtre de Loie Fuller, Exposition Universelle**

Poster

Poster Photo Archives, Posters Please, Inc., New York City



1908

Oskar Kokoschka  
**Kunst Schau**

Poster



1967

Wes Wilson  
**The Byrds at the Fillmore**

Poster

Courtesy of Wes Wilson