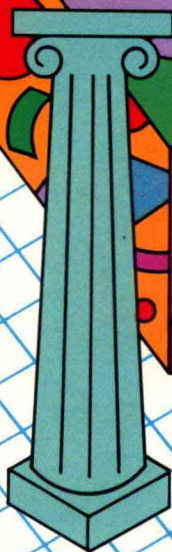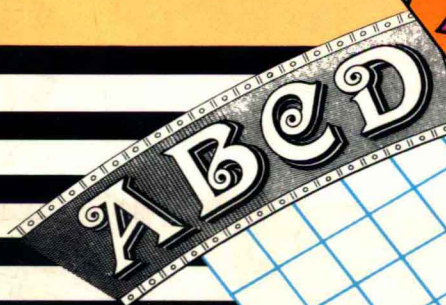STEVEN HELLER &
SEYMOUR CHWAST

Graphic Styles

FROM VICTORIAN
TO POST-MODERN

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Wall Street crash initiates a world economic crisis (1929)

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Adolf Hitler is first appointed German chancellor (1933), then Führer (1934)
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Dada

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Vorticism

Constructivism

New Typography

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Japanese Modern

De Stijl

Streamline

Basel

Psychedelia

Post-Modern

Punk

Wiener Werkstätte

Expressionism

Plakatstil

Futurism

Memphis

7

Graphic

STEVEN HELLER &
SEYMOUR CHWAST

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TO POST-MODERN

HARRY N. ABRAMS, INC.,
PUBLISHERS, NEW YORK

For Louise and Paula

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All art is at once surface and symbol.
Oscar Wilde, *The Picture of Dorian Gray,* 1891

The humblest as well as the most exalted ornaments may one day become elements in that revealing whole, the decorative style of an epoch.

Emile Gallé, Nancy, France, 1900

Style is the signal of a civilization. Historians can date any artifact by its style, be it Egyptian, Grecian, Gothic, Renaissance, Colonial, American or Art Nouveau. It is impossible for man to produce objects without reflecting the society of which he is a part and the moment in history when the product concept developed in his mind.... In this sense everything produced by man has style.

Sir Micha Black,
The Tiffany/Wharton Lectures, 1975

Style, in its most general sense, is a specific or characteristic manner of expression, design, construction, or execution. As it relates to graphic design, style suggests the dominant visual aesthetic of a particular time and place. The word has also been used to refer to a specific graphic designer's signature: his or her preference for a certain typeface or family of faces, for a characteristic color palette, and for either a decorative or a functional approach. Style is further defined by the material being designed and the audience for whom it is being produced: corporate style differs from editorial, news style from advertising, polemical style from commercial, and so on.

The graphic designer is basically organizing and communicating messages—to establish the nature of a product or idea, to set the appropriate stage on which to present its virtues, and to announce and publicize such information in the most effective way. Within this process, style is a transmission code, a means of signaling that a certain message is intended for a specific audience. By manipulating visual forms into an appro-

priate style, the designer can attract the right audience for a product or idea. In 1969 strategists in the reelection campaign of New York Mayor John Lindsay commissioned Peter Max, then guru of the commercial youth style, to design a psychedelic poster to attract the newly enfranchised baby-boomers. Likewise, in 1972, the promoters of George McGovern's presidential campaign used a Larry Rivers poster to lure a similar group; in the opposing camp, Nixon's publicity men came up with their own version of a youthful-looking poster. While the two presidential candidates proffered distinctly different points of view, their posters thus had similar graphic styles.

Simply defined, *graphic style* is the surface manifestation or the "look" of graphic design. This book is concerned with how that look has evolved and been reapplied since commercial art had its beginnings as a result of the revolutions in industry and commerce during the nineteenth century. Yet, even with such a narrow focus, a linear examination of style is still complicated by the fact that artists and designers do not always dutifully follow the arbiters of taste in their respective periods. What we call the Victorian style, for example, covers a period of seventy-five years and has countless nuances and variations; Art Deco, the decorative arts movement dominant between the two world wars, also is an amalgam of distinctly different methodologies. Upon close examination, however, there are enough visual charac-

teristics common to most products of each period to justify the use of the *Victorian* or *Deco* umbrella.

In studying and analyzing style through the ages, historians have developed a system of classification that commonly focuses on painting, sculpture, architecture, furniture, and clothing and pays only scant attention to graphic design. Nevertheless, the advertising, posters, packages, and typefaces of a period, as well as its illustrations and cartoons, are equally, if not more, indicative of the society in which they were produced. As mass communication, commercial art is often a synthesis of other arts and technologies, demystified and made accessible to a broad audience. In fact, a vernacular graphic style usually indicates popular acceptance of visual philosophies that were once inaccessible, avant-garde, or elitist.

The farther one backtracks in history, the more singularly representative of its epoch a style appears to be (partly, of course, because lack of documentation tends to force generalization). Our relatively recent past is notable for a myriad of styles that occupy comparatively brief, concurrent periods and come and go with such speed that a kind of cultural detonation results when one collides with another. The question that now concerns graphic style is whether today's new technologies, like those of the Industrial Revolution, will change the substance, and not merely the surface, of graphic communications. While designers hope for a more

1. Will Bradley. *The Masqueraders.* Poster, c. 1894.
The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Gift of Fern Bradley Dufner

coherent future, the buzzword that best sums up contemporary graphic style is "life-style." Design itself has become a commodity: more than ever before, decorative graphic design is assigned the task of seducing the customer into buying products.

From the Victorian era to the present, graphic design has had to serve various economic and cultural masters, and thus there have been numerous ways in which graphic styles have evolved. Certain styles were developed for aesthetic reasons (Art Nouveau), while others were politically motivated (Dada). There are those based on the need for corporate identity (Swiss International), on commercial requisites (Post-Modern), and on moral and philosophical foundations (the Bauhaus). Some were influenced by the fine arts (Art Deco), others by industry (Plakatstil). Some national styles became international movements (Futurism). A few styles enjoyed long duration—two or three (Constructivism, Expressionism, Surrealism) exert influence even today—though most were comparatively short-lived. And many historical styles have been revived, reinterpreted, and misused by succeeding generations.

Graphic designers today freely rummage through a big closet of historical styles looking for ones that are adaptable for their purposes. Sometimes, as they reprise a vintage graphic style, it will be an appropriate and graceful use—the product image is enhanced by being linked to another place and time. More often, designers without distinctive visual characters of their own attempt to adopt a once viable style without regard for the factors that brought it about in the first place.

As early as 1856, in an essay titled "The True and False in the Decorative Arts," Owen Jones condemned the contemporary practice of trying to make "the art which faithfully represents the wants, the faculties and the feelings of one people represent those of another people under totally different conditions." In the sixties a revival of French Art Deco gave rise to a hybrid decorative manner in American design. While creative practitioners took

2. Vassily Komardenkov. *Storm Cavalry*. Cubo/Futurist design for a book of poems, 1920. Courtesy Ex Libris, New York

the time to understand Deco's formal aspects, to make them unique and even expressive, most designers carelessly mimicked Deco's lightning bolts, raybands, and display typefaces. At best they produced a nostalgic conceit that said little about the time in which it was produced and less about the product or idea being newly presented. More recently, the radical form language of Russian Constructivism endured a similar "reappreciation." Instead of using the style to influence and shape a new vision—in the way Constructivism inspired the Swiss rationalist design of the forties and fifties —contemporary designers employed Constructivism's dynamic asymmetry and primary colors as casual toys, copying the surface qualities without regard for original intent. This tendency, however lamentable, may be regarded in one way as a logical and inevitable response. Although style divorced from its *raison d'être* by time and circumstance is just an empty shell, some designers may see it as a tempting refuge when faced with the necessity for original thinking.

Of course, this kind of appropriation is not unknown in art history, which is marked by periods of innovation and

then—years, decades, even centuries later—of reappreciation or revival. Along with the revivals that are merely shallow borrowings and those that honestly attempt to reestablish forgotten standards, there are still others that prove to be gateways to new discovery. The Pre-Raphaelite Brotherhood of English painters, for example, sought in the nineteenth century to emulate the purity of Italian religious painting during the Early Renaissance. To a period of predominantly realist art, the Brotherhood brought back the important and virtually neglected element of the imagination and thus was able to make a meaningful historical contribution. About the Pre-Raphaelites' direct influence on Surrealism, Marcel Duchamp said that they "lit a small flame which is still burning despite everything." Hermann Broch, on the other hand, argues that a preponderance of neo-this and neo-that in any period of art really signifies that the false or fraudulent is pervasive. Broch applies such a judgment to the Neo-Gothic and Neo-Baroque of the late nineteenth century, despite their impact on architecture, fashion, and applied arts. Such stylistic contrivances, he says, are nonstyles, because they do not truthfully represent their time and place.

Although Art Nouveau was, in fact, the first true modern international style, the term *Modernist* is commonly reserved for the antibourgeois, utopian art movements of the early twentieth century. The design innovations of the Modernist movement were the ones most obviously woven from whole cloth rather than patched together from imitations of the past. The unprecedented Cubist experiments of Picasso and Braque from 1908 to 1913 stimulated painters, fashion designers, and graphic artists for decades to follow. For designers the Cubist letter/image collages, in which word fragments were made by juxtaposing unrelated letter forms, suggested an original and expressive method of typographical communication. Employed for poetry, manifestoes, and exhibition announcements, these types were essentially advertising tools, their ultimate purpose the propagation of a new vision. Their marriage of word and image even-

tually helped bridge the gap between the fine and applied arts that had grown ever since the early days of printing.

From the Modernist tree grew many branches, each more or less supported by a formal design language and a philosophical underpinning disseminated through an official periodical. Though Theo van Doesburg's unadorned De Stijl typography differs visually from Solomon Telingater's Constructivist lettering, both adhered to the basic tenets of reductionism: ornament was a sin (as Viennese architect Adolf Loos declared); simple linear and geometric forms were virtues; and asymmetry was everywhere dominant. In Germany, Paul Renner's geometric sans-serif type, Futura, offered an exciting alternative to the antiquated and fussy blackletter Fraktur; in Russia, typographers

3. El Lissitzky. *Die Kunstismen.* Book cover, 1924. Courtesy Ex Libris, New York

used dynamic type arrangements to powerfully symbolize the Productivist age.

Such innovations were not without their critics. In speeches before design organizations in the twenties, Thomas Maitland Cleland, a renowned American typographer and advertising designer in the classical tradition, zealously decried the New Typography. Its "alluring shortcuts and seductive philosophies—a disturbing Babel of undigested ideas and indigestible objectives" were, Cleland

stated, the result of "the relentless craving for something new.... Typography is a servant of thought and language to which it gives visible existence. When there are new ways of thinking and a new language, it will be time enough for a new typography." Such critics refused to believe that a new way of designing, free from the shackles of formality, could be effective for conventional advertising purposes or that their classical approach, though beautiful in the right hands, represented past, not present, achievements. The New Typography, like most Modernist innovations, wasn't simply a matter of style for its own sake but rather style resulting from necessity.

Among those answering such charges was the German Jan Tschichold, who codified the Constructivist-influenced, asymmetrical typographic approach into a form language in his "Elementare Typographie" of 1925. Tschichold declared, "The rules of the old typography contradict the principles of fitness for purpose in design. Unsymmetrical arrangements are more flexible and better suited to the practical and aesthetic needs of today." Championing these forces of graphic innovation and criticizing those who copied past styles, Wassily Kandinsky said, "Such imitation resembles the antics of apes."

Of course, the virtues of any style, like those of any typography, are determined by how and to what purpose it is applied. In the wrong hands an otherwise beautiful stylistic mannerism can be made trivial and ugly. For example, the elegant typefaces developed in the eighteenth century by François Ambroise Didot and Giambattista Bodini were bastardized two centuries later by tasteless Victorian commercial job printers. While a few serious typographers tried at the time to maintain standards, they were undercut by the increased need for fast and economical commercial printing and by the proliferation of craftsmen without aesthetic training. Thus, graceful classical forms were made to serve the cluttered visual look of the age.

Even in its own time, the widespread use of a style by untutored practitioners

usually degrades the style, although it may increase its visibility and public acceptance. To fill his famous retail store with expensive inventory, Arthur L. Liberty shamelessly stole and altered original Art Nouveau designs. He did create an unprecedented market for the style but also contributed to its demise through overexposure. A few decades later the Bauhaus encountered a similar problem. Displeased with the irresponsible execution of Bauhaus-like wares by commercial firms, the school's director, Walter Gropius, railed against "imitators who prostituted our fundamental precepts into modish trivialities."

Yet it is inevitable that the moment a unique creation becomes a style, the great leavener called fashion comes into play. Some of the styles discussed here began as honest individual efforts with distinct purposes that ultimately became officially or universally adopted. In some cases, the individuals originally responsible for the styles were willing participants in their popularization; in others, they believed that to be true to their ideals required abandoning the popularized styles for purer forms.

Vanguard art has often been transmuted into commercial style, despite the best intentions of artistic pioneers to keep it out of the mainstream. German Expressionism was avowedly radical—in its aesthetic before World War I and in its pacifist polemic during the war. For years, its artists were criticized and rejected by the art establishment. Eventually, however, Expressionist works came to be perceived and honored as Germany's first contributions to Modernism; after the war Expressionism virtually became Germany's national style. Its emblematic hard-edged woodcuts formed the basis for much of the stylization in modern advertising and printing, a fact that quickly led to its obsolescence as an avant-garde form.

Even Dada—which in Germany rejected the artistic pretensions and emotional excesses of Expressionism and asserted an antiart position—could not escape being usurped by stylists. Through its distribution of mass-produced advertisements, periodicals, books, and posters, 11