

The New York Times, October 23, 1955

**THE ROLE OF GRAPHIC DESIGNER by Aline B. Saarinen
Museum of Modern Art Shows Diverse Work By Two Moderns**

The current excitement about whether Johnny can or cannot read seems incidental to the ultimate fact that all the Johnnies end up reading. We are one of the "readingest" nations in the world. We read avidly. The subway-rider reads his own newspaper or cranes at his neighbor's or scans the car-cards. The automobile driver reads the very signs he curses for scarring our roadscapes. We grab at any reading matter rather than sit in contemplative idleness. Who of us, for instance, has not at one time or another found himself reading the small print of bottle labels or the text of an ad as much out of the habit of reading as from temporary boredom?

This insatiable habit puts the graphic designer in a peculiarly powerful position. For most of his work-whether in posters, book-covers, record-covers, stationery, packaging, mailing pieces or signs-involves typography. And because of this lettering - this word communication - his art is more widely looked at than that of industrial designer, architect, painter or sculptor.

The graphic designer, however, must achieve three kinds of communication: One, communication of truth (or, less loftily, fact or information); two, communication of visual pleasure (or, in the literal sense, attractiveness); three, communication of spirit or character.

Unity of Aim

In the best graphic design, the printed word per se is not enough. It is made more expressive and memorable by the appropriateness of its type-face. Conversely, all the other elements of design-line, color, form, layout-reinforce the word. Together, all these elements give a unified expression of individual character.

Two graphic designers who well fulfill these ends - Alvin Lustig and Bruno Munari - are currently being shown on the first floor of the Museum of Modern Art.

Lustig is American; Munari is Italian. These are facts which are of significance in the design profession and virtually define the style of each man. For Lustig stems from the North European tradition of cubism, De Stijl and the Bauhaus, while Munari is the obvious descendant of the Mediterranean land which produced the splendor of Byzantine mosaic, the lacy arcades of the Doges' Palace and Renaissance majolica and jewelry.

When Lustig, according to Graphis magazine, was called a "formalist", he replied, "I know: what else should one be?" His work makes manifest the strength of his esthetic conviction. He brings to each problem intelligence and imagination. Thus, a phonograph record cover for Vivaldi, both in color and form, suggests the powerful counterpoint of the music, while the design for Mozart cover is appropriately a taut, scintillating structure. The repetitive road-signs for a sight-seer's meteor crater suggests the hurtling of the object in space, while a rental brochure for Seagram's Park Avenue reflects the chaste beauty and prestige-value of Mies van der Rohe's architecture. But underlying these - and numerous other diverse and individual solutions - is a completely disciplined, formal, structural design.

Contrasted Work

Munari's work, in contrast, is freer, more playful, more touched by fantasy. Often he uses tiny, tiny type in big emptiness; he likes crushed paper, torn paper, strange colors.

Lustig's messages are direct and forthright: Munari's are oblique and evocative. He likes surprises, transparencies, mystery. The exhibition emphasizes these qualities by concentrating on Lustig's produced, commercial work and on Munari's personal explorations, such as his "Libros illeggibles" (books without words which unfold a developing sequence of visual experiences) and his projected abstract slides, each, of course, a unique work. But the same style dominates his mass-produced work as well. (More similar material would have made the contrast between the styles of Lustig and Munari more telling.)

We said earlier that we are a nation which reads. But we are not very noteworthy as a nation which sees. Our eyes are little trained; our visual awareness is undeveloped. Perhaps we will sometime

train Johnny to see as well as to read. Meanwhile, our visual awareness grows slowly – a coral-like accretion of a multiplicity of visual experiences which somehow have thrust themselves upon our retinas despite our esthetic astigmatism.

Advance Through Industry

Happily, industry in America is coming of age and turning over to such graphic designers as Lustig, Paul Rand, Leo Lionni, William Golden, George Krikorian, Herbert Bayer, Will Burtin, Bradbury Thompson and a dozen or so others the job of designing that very material which is so widely noticed. Thus the graphic designer significantly is opening our esthetic eyes.

But he does more. He makes the fine art to which his art is related more acceptable. For instance, besides making his whole design a visual symbol, he makes specific symbols, which, because they are called “trade-marks,” are visual abstractions accepted by the public without balking. For example, the marvelous, isolated eye which William Golden invented for CBS-TV seems so perfectly comprehensible that ultimately Miro's similar and presaging visual shorthand may be “legible” to everyone, too. And, similarly, though Munari is essentially gay and Burri primarily gloomy, the Italian designer makes acceptable, with his designs of crushed paper, the Italian fine artist's curious collages of old, torn materials. And so on. Thus, ultimately, the graphic designer helps significantly to shape public taste for fine art.

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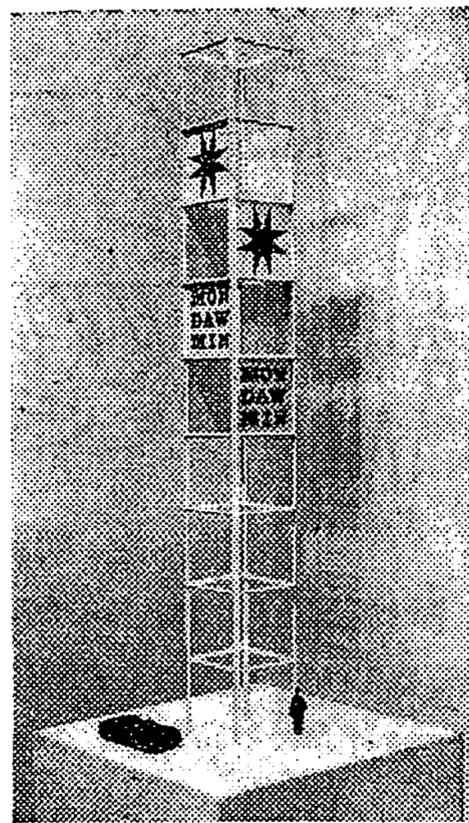
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"Mondawmin Tower," by Alvin Lustig, at the Museum of Modern Art.

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