

***Why Graphic Design Should Be Considered a Fine Art:  
How Paul Rand Established Aesthetics and Form in Visual Communications***

by Rock Morris

During the 20th century, when graphic design became an industry, there were purists on both sides of the debate, which held that fine art and graphic design were two separate fields. However, by observing and understanding the aesthetic value in good design, the same elements and design principles can be seen to apply to the field of graphic design as well as fine art. The same elements, principles, dynamics, and discipline are present for both the designer and the artist who must understand the problem, define the problem, and solve the problem in a creative and memorable way. Paul Rand has been called both fine artist and graphic designer, and he has said himself that they are one and the same. His contributions to the visual communication industry, his influences, inspiration and genius helped shape our culture. When one understands aesthetics, it is clear that art can be linked to daily work, that graphic design can be given more soul through the addition of human, organic qualities. So why has graphic design been excluded as a fine art generally?

Frederick Hartt, a well-known authority, teacher, and author of numerous comprehensive art books writes in *Art: A History of Painting, Sculpture, Architecture*, that for around five hundred years, the term art implied 'aesthetic appreciation', meaning "enjoyment through what are considered the nobler senses of sight and hearing". (13) More recently we generally refer to art as the visual arts, or by sight alone. Most people are exposed to thousands of images every day that we wouldn't regard as art or aesthetically pleasing, but sometimes even the most modest subject matter can appear beautiful and memorable. An aesthetic experience doesn't have to happen in a museum where certain works of art are considered fine. Rand reflects on simple form and shape in his book, *From Lascaux to Brooklyn*, on a more humanistic definition that 'grace, dignity, passion, and pleasure signal the presence and suffuse the atmosphere of anything worthy of the accolade art... like a... a beautifully designed advertisement, poster, or piece of printed ephemera, assuming that is both utilitarian and aesthetically satisfying, is as much a part of the genus art as is a painting or sculpture. In fact, as I see it, if a printed piece focuses only on the aesthetic, ignoring the practical, it does not qualify as art.' If there is inherent quality that we 'see' in something we may regard as perhaps beautiful, then it has value and we recognize it as good. (22)

As we evolve in our diverse cultures and societies, we accumulate experiences and commit them to memory. We balance what we see in our mind's eye as we view, receive the visual message, and then make sense of it. It's a process that involves semiotics, symbols, and gestalt, and it's a natural thing we as humans do. Aesthetic experiences are somewhat controlled by our past endeavors with balancing the beautiful and the ugly in our sometimes-all-too-visual-world. "The comparison of works of art... can be a rewarding intellectual occupation, from which we emerge with sharpened perceptions and enlarged mental horizons. The experience of the vision of artists... can draw our attention to aspects of our surroundings that we had previously overlooked, and can greatly enhance our awareness of beauty (and ugliness) in daily life, everywhere." (Hartt14) Artists are important in our daily life, and they influence it whether we like it or not – they are us, and because of the creative nature of art, our experience changes and so do our perspectives. In our daily lives, graphic designers are very influential, and in their quest to produce graphic design that has character and soul, they educate themselves, adhering to the highest forms of discipline, employing universal design elements and principles. When we remember the "comparison of works of art" in relationship to the communication arts, or visual communication, it means we have choices and make decisions as to what is "good" and what will be memorable. (Hartt14)

Paul Rand was the very pinnacle of the inspired forefathers who drew his inspiration from the boldest European artists of the times who were great because they broke traditions with the past and were fiercely independent. (Heller 8) Rand saw this European Modernist approach as refreshing at a time in America after World War I when times were changing, and marketing design needed to change with the times, or in Rand's case, changed the times with his design. Americans were "... thirsting for a new grace and clarity..."

(9) He introduced European Modernism to America, focusing on Avant-Garde artists such as painter Paul Klee, designer El Lissitzki, architect Le Corbusier, Cubist-inspired graphic designers A.M. Caasandre and E. McKnight Kauffer for inspiration. (Heller16) “Through their abstract and symbolic compositions...he could see the intersection of functionality and imagination...” , and through these experiences learned that it was understood that in Europe art was not hidden from view, entombed, as we have discussed earlier...but rather was part of ordinary life. (Heller16) The year was 1929 when Rand ‘s epiphany was when he realized “art and design were unified”, that principles embraced form, content and humor for use in every day life. What that contribution has meant to the visual communications industry in general, and how his genius helped shape our culture can be summed up in a quote from Bauhaus legend Laszlo Mahol-Nagy: “Among these young Americans it seems to be that Paul Rand is one of the best and most capable [ . . . ] He is a painter, lecturer, industrial designer, [and] advertising artist who draws his knowledge and creativeness from the resources of this country. He is an idealist and a realist, using the language of the poet and businessman. He thinks in terms of need and function. He is able to analyze his problems but his fantasy is boundless.” (iconofgraphics)

In his 1996 publication, *From Lascaux to Brooklyn*, Rand believes that “what determines the status of art is not genre but quality”. He uses the cave paintings of Lascaux as a lesson to illustrate his belief, “that art is an intuitive, autonomous, and timeless activity”, by comparing it to numerous works of art throughout history. All of which were aesthetically pleasing in their time, as well as in the present time because of the perfect balance of design elements, principles, and the exact means of communication each work conveys. The main point is that with an underlining of aesthetics, art can be linked to daily work. He says, ‘... a work of art is a dialogue, a picture filtered through the mind and then transformed.’ (Lascaux26) The designer’s role is to understand people’s needs and create the vehicle to reach those people through each designer’s unique talent; that graphic design is about visual relationships, and providing meaning to unrelated needs, ideas, words, and pictures. To deliver by understanding the problem, and coming to a conclusion by making decisions based on a clear path of problem solving. (Heller234) Paul Rand taught in his later career the same fundamental principles he developed and worked with and wrote about. There was no formal education for commercial art when he started teaching at Yale and then later in Brissago, Switzerland, where he taught the doctrines of Modernism, which included basics like structure, discipline and fundamental reasoning. (228) There he worked individually with students with art in general and design in particular, teaching practical-theoretical balance. He was skeptical of technology and insisted that his students work traditionally on basic elements and principles as a “Journey Into the Interior” as colleague Armin Hofmann said in the forward of Steven Hellers’, *Paul Rand*. (7)

*Paul Rand: A Designer’s Art* preface: ‘My interest has always been in restating the validity of those ideas which, by and large, have guided artists since the time of Polyclitus. I believe that it is only in the application of those timeless principles that one can even to begin to achieve a semblance of quality in one’s work. It is the continuing relevance of these ideals that I mean to emphasize, especially to those who have grown up in a world of punk and graffiti.’ (Heller 222) His teaching method was about form and content, synthesis and a commitment to semiotics and symbol-signs, solving problems in the simplest possible way through analysis and dedication to craft. One of Rand’s favorite philosophers, G.W.F. Hegel, in his *Introductory Lecture on Aesthetics*, says “The content of art is the idea, and its form lies in the plastic use of images accessible to sense.’ This is humanism— “... without aesthetics, design is just repetition, familiar clichés or novelty... that without aesthetic the computer is... effects without substance, form without relevant content, or content without meaningful form”. (Lascaux40) Rand’s technical resistance was not so much generational as it was more toward his Modernist tendencies. He believed that all processes – mechanical, technical or otherwise – should be as neutral as possible. In other words, keep it natural in the mind and in the hand. Rand: “The quality issuing from any process, mechanical or otherwise, is a reflection of that particular process, and the visual effect (style) is closely related to it... the more neutral the technique, the simpler the solution – unencumbered by eccentricities or sentimental associations.’ (Heller 238)

So it seems as though the humanistic approach to graphic design has withstood the storm of recent technology if we are to understand and relate to the work and life of an artist who “created an absolutely supreme standard... for the rest of our lives.”(Introduction: George Lois<sup>5</sup>) The man who introduced Modernism to America – the channel through which European modern art and design (Russian Constructivism, Dutch De Stijl and the German Bauhaus) was introduced to American commercial art – who most people know as the designer of the IBM, ABC, UPS, and Westinghouse logos, profoundly changed our culture by the way we see and perceive graphic design because it was infused with art. His first book, *Thoughts on Design*, published in 1946 when he was thirty-two, was the bible of Modernism, and was as relevant in 1996 when he was asked to teach at the Media Lab. Heller: “Few designers...have written as eloquently and accessibly about theory and practice. Rand’s design taught designers about the virtues of precision, economy and wit. Rand’s writing continues to chart the routes of graphic design.”

We are bombarded with images with the intent of getting and holding our attention every day; so what makes each image unique and why should we bother to look? This is what the graphic designer must ask when solving the problem of turning an idea into a visual message—only the imagery with inherent value will survive. Many of these images are stunning in their genre, (for this purpose print material), even though they are utilitarian and practical, the quality of their value will make them unique and memorable. These designers will make use of the same universal elements and principles, with skills, drive and passion that painters have, and their work should be considered equal in status as carefully crafted, and fine art. Understanding elements and principles, use of the critique, freedom to use whatever tools make the most sense, verbalization to present design and defend it, rethinking the design and reworking it, all produce higher quality work and individual pride in accomplishment. Passion and desire from understanding the combination of design elements, fundamental knowledge of organizational systems like the grid and the path, and a constant push to implement the design process becomes a solid work method from idea to completion. The ‘art’ in graphic design is from each personality, from reaching inside and defining the problem with untiring dedication, and the end products show individuality.

#### Works Cited

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