The Museum of Modern Art No. 40A

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MILTON GLASER

(Wall Label Text)

In the early 60s, America took over the mantle of graphic leadership from Europe, especially Switzerland. With the isolated exception of Tadanori Yokoo in Japan*, only America developed what can be described as, if not a school, at least a distinct attitude toward graphic design. Everything from "psychedelic" posters to "pop" creations flourished in this period.** Outstanding among the different trends was the work of Push-Pin Studio, a graphic group founded by Seymour Chwast and Milton Glaser. Many of America's most promising graphic designers passed through it, attracted by its sense of graphic invention and excitement. Its youth oriented iconography and irreverent attitude toward graphic design helped shape the image of America in the 60s. When he left the Studio in the early 70s, Milton Glaser had become the nearest thing to a cultural hero America's graphic design had produced in many years.

Glaser's graphic commitment is not to any single style, but rather to assimilating them all, using each pragmatically according to the graphic needs of the problems at hand. What is uniquely American in his work is precisely this uninhibited agility for synthesizing images "borrowed" from many different cultures, sparing himself any ideological anguish about their original contexts. Such an attitude implies, in Glaser's case, no indifference for the original sources, but rather a broad acceptance of man's graphic past as an available resource.

* The Museum of Modern Art presented Yokoo's work in the 1972 exhibition, "Graphics by Yokoo."

** For further reference, please see Word and Image, a publication accompanying the show of the same name which took place at The Museum of Modern Art in 1966.

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Glaser's diverse graphic phases and discoveries have to be analyzed in terms of both artistic choices and the professional environment where a designer acts. After studying at New York's Cooper Union, he went to Bologna to study with Morandi, the great etching master and painter. Glaser's fascination with the line and the range of its possibilities has remained a recurring motif of many of his designs. In one of the styles most closely associated with Glaser, thin, flowing black lines are utilized to define broad, flat colored shapes (see, for example, the album covers designed for the Jazz Odyssey records). This style was a blend of Matisse's drawing technique and planar colors, Persian miniature painting, Japanese prints, and American comics. But, most of all, as Glaser states, "The technique arose from the economic need to discover ways of working as an illustrator three or four times faster, without sacrificing either control or quality." This was made possible by the presence on the market of transparent color film that could be cut out and rubbed down to adhere to a drawing. By drawing the outline, and then indicating what color each area was to receive, a designer could, with the help of an assistant, greatly multiply his output. (Such attempts at dividing labor assignments to increase production are not unique to our time. Eighteenth-century Japan had print shops with rudimentary assembly lines where one assistant was in charge of painting eyes, another of coloring hands, yet another of drawing kimono decorations, and a final one of stamping the artist's name.) Another timesaving technique utilized by Glaser which rendered novel visual qualities was to have the original work done in black and white, accompanied by a color study to guide the engraver who added the colors through photomechanical means. All color adjustments, therefore, occur in the press. The resultant color is essentially flat, and in

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order to modulate the surface, the original drawing is cross-hatched (see, for example, the treatment of the coffee pot illustrating the "Grounds for Delight" article).

Glaser utilizes visual cliches as fundamental sources of information, the new meanings often emerging from juxtaposing one cliche against another (see, for example "Palette and Rainbow" poster for the School of Visual Arts). He also removes the image from its original context and provides it with a contradictory or incongruous referent (see, for example, the poster advertising a new Olivetti typewriter). As in the case of the Olivetti posters, when Glaser uses graphic material rescued from the history of art, his purpose is not allegorical reference but simply to utilize it as a visual ready-made, although sometimes the results are witty art historical puns. Such is the case in Glaser's famous Dylan poster, inspired by a cut silhouette self-portrait by Marcel Duchamp, the inventor of the ready-mades. In this poster, the most striking graphic effect, Dylan's hair, takes its linear technique and color treatment from Islamic painting. Glaser here speculates on the fact that the viewer may read it, or rather hear it, as an expanding balloon flowing out of a cartoon character's head. Glaser has also been inspired by comics in his use of sequential images, often on different pages of a publication, so that flipping through a book or magazine becomes somewhat like watching a film (see, for example, the illustrations for an article on amphetamine abuse for New York Magazine).

Whether re-utilizing images or inventing new processes, there is in Glaser's work the joy of assemblage and re-adaptation. He has created a delightful graphic garden where Piero della Francesca talks to Matisse, and Marie Cassatt nods to Hokusai. In a seemingly effortless manner, he

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has reconciled Islam's graphic tradition to the visual symbols of Christendom. It is a most urbane paradise, with Milton as its gardener, pruning and transplanting, always developing new hybrids, a rake in one hand and in the other a watering can filled to the brim with inks of many colors.

Emilio Ambasz, Curator of Design