

John J. Graham: Behind the Peacock's Plumage

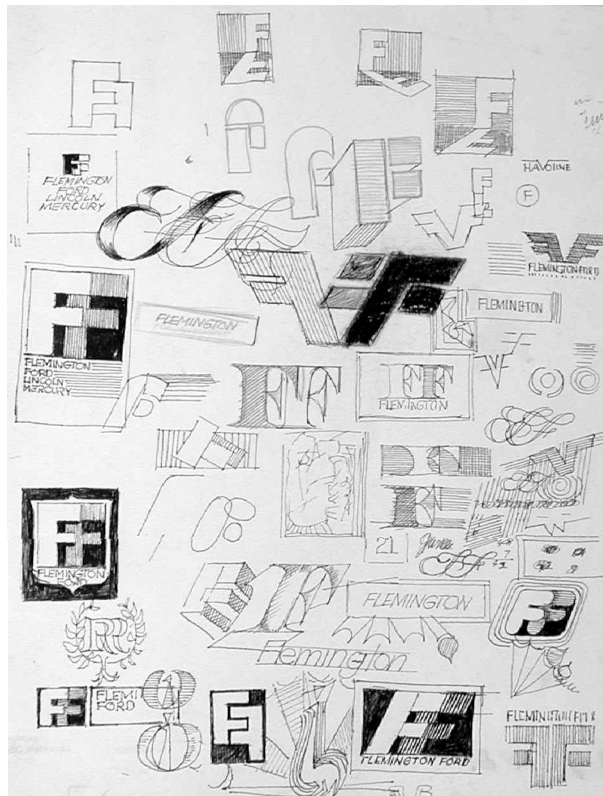
Jennifer Jue-Steuck

Artist, designer, esteemed colleague of Lou Dorfsman and Herbert Lubalin, alumnus of New York School of Industrial Art, and NBC's Art Director from 1956 to 1977, John Graham led a team of fifteen and engendered all NBC on-air promotion, promotional kits, exhibits, displays, newscast film openings, and print advertisements including magazines and newspapers. During his long and prolific career, he earned more than seventy-five design awards, yet few Americans today know of his contribution to the history of American graphic art and television.

Among his prestigious honors, the greatest success of his career has proven to be the longevity of his NBC peacock. With the advent of color television in the 1950s came the need to inform viewers that they were watching a program broadcast in color, regardless of whether or not they had color sets. Lawrence K. Grossman, a former NBC vice president, NBC News president, and PBS president recalls the questions facing the network: "What should

Figure 1

FF and Peacock Designs. All figures reprinted with the permission of Bruce A. Graham, © Copyright Estate of John J. Graham.



the color television symbol be, and how should NBC promote it?" Bruce A. Graham, John Graham's son, shares the family story of the peacock. When his father mentioned the need for a symbol for color television, his mother suggested, "Why don't you use a peacock?" The original peacock sketches created by John Graham are in the Graham archives.

Lou Dorfsman, former assistant to CBS Art Director William Golden, and later Creative Director for CBS Television and CBS Director of Design, states that the "NBC [peacock] logo was John's concept." Herbert Lubalin (1918-1981), graphic designer, photographer, typographer, creator of the typeface Avant-Garde, and a former editorial design director for the International Typeface Corporation's house organ *U & I* (Upper and lower case), assisted with the artwork. Grossman recalls that Graham "came up with the idea for the peacock...it was a brilliant solution and a beautiful piece of graphics for television... What made the peacock such a wonderful logo was the fact that it worked to define color, whether seen on black and white TV sets, which everyone had then, or on color sets which almost nobody had...[it was] very clear and stood for what it was meant for." In 1956, viewers saw the peacock for the first time "in living color," with eleven feathers in six colors. Pianist Louis A. Garisto of the Metropolitan Jazz Quartet composed the music which accompanied the "bird" from 1957 to 1962. By 1959, Graham went on to design the animated NBC snake logo. In addition to his work for television, Graham also created book designs and worked with numerous graphic artists including Andy Warhol. It has been said that he gave Warhol his first professional job. Warhol, in turn, expressed his admiration of and respect for Graham by creating the 1955 book titled *25 Cats Named Sam and One Blue Pussy* as an encomium to him. The limited edition book, published by Seymour

Figure 2
Concepts NBC Snake

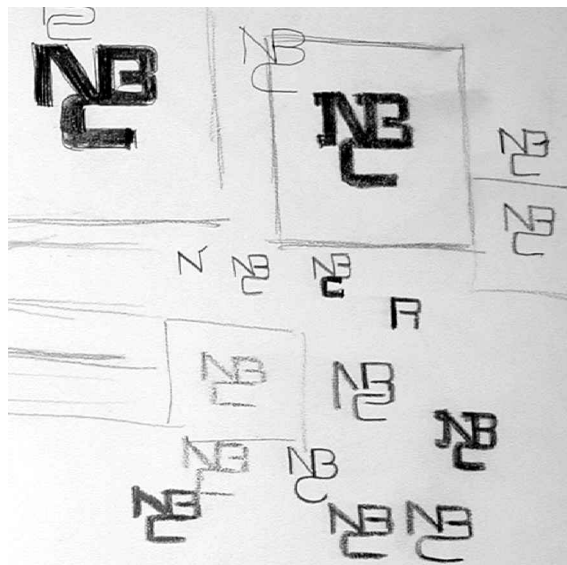
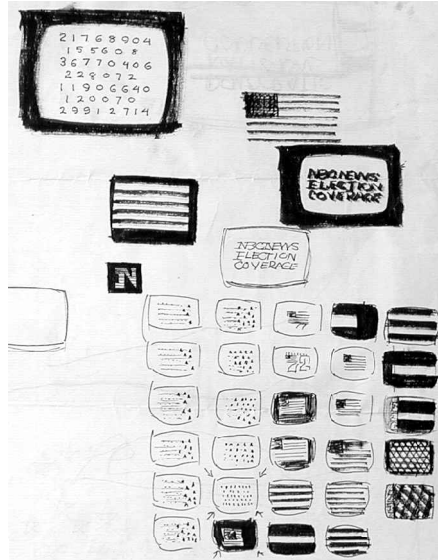


Figure 3
Concept Election Night 1972
Figure 4
Decision 74



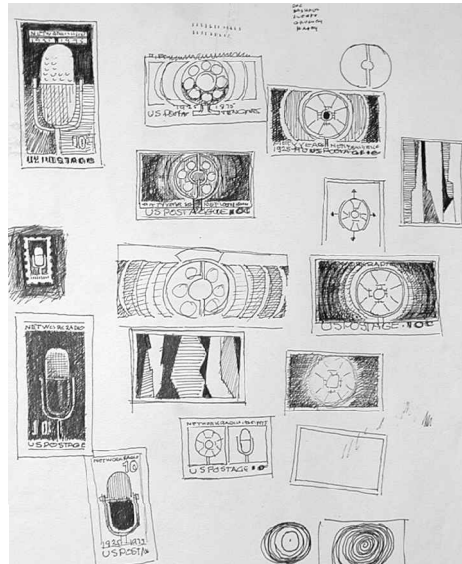
Berlin, was dedicated "To Johnny," designed and colored by hand by Warhol, written by Charles Lisanby, and included calligraphy by Julia Warhola, Warhol's mother.

Among his own book designs, Graham's *Somehow It Works*, a visual portrait of the 1964 Presidential election published by Doubleday, was lauded as one of the "50 Best Books of 1965" by the American Institute of Graphic Arts. In an NBC interdepartmental correspondence letter dated April 19, 1966, Grossman wrote that the honor "is another outstanding recognition of the extraordinary talents of John Graham." *Somehow It Works* was exhibited worldwide as part of AIGA's 1965 ensemble. The book featured photographs by David Hollander and Paul Seligman.

Figure 4
Decision 74



Figure 5
Broadcast Microphone Illustrations



Despite an impressive body of work, Graham has received little attention in historical accounts of corporate identity campaigns and graphic design. When he passed away on June 12, 1994, the only published obituary his family found was in *TV Guide*. A reader wrote, "In the news, they said a man named John Graham had died, and that he was very important to NBC. I missed the part about *how*." A *TV Guide* ghostwriter responded: "He didn't appear on-screen and wasn't a star, but he was indeed important to NBC. As an artist working for the network, Graham in the 1950s created the NBC peacock logo, one of the most endearing symbols in TV history..."

Grossman states that, despite his contributions, Graham was "a vastly under-appreciated art director," especially from a corporate perspective. Dorfsman adds that he was "an incisive idea person, a first-rate designer, and a first-rate art director." Dorfsman first met Graham in the early 1950s, and recalls that he "didn't have a press department to promote him like I did [at CBS]."

When Grossman came to NBC, he immediately recognized Graham's talent. "For the first time, John had someone who really appreciated his work," recalls Dorfsman. Grossman had come from the elegant designs of CBS, "and therefore valued "Graham's great sense of what would work, and what images and metaphors could convey. He had a sense of simplicity, and clarity of communication. He was a genius in many ways," recalls Grossman. As an individual, Dorfsman states that Graham "was quiet ... a modest guy," a characteristic that was reflected in his work: designs that were far from flashy, pompous, or overdone.

Above all else, Graham was a family man and commuted everyday from his home in Pennsylvania to NBC's headquarters in New York City. As a result, he went home a little earlier than other designers. The art design industry, says Dorfsman, required long



Figure 6 (left)
Cape Cod

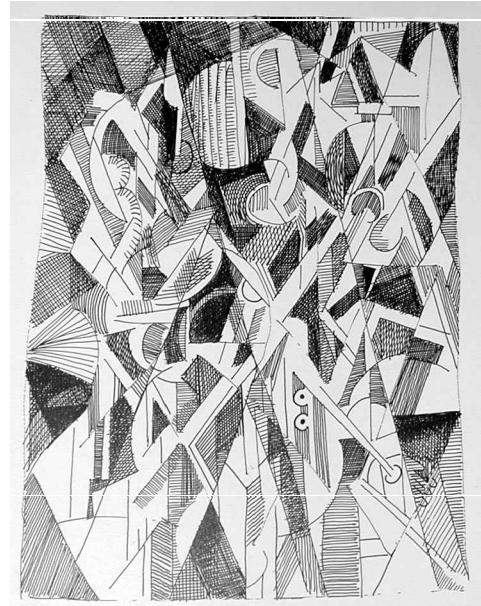


Figure 7 (right)
Cubism in Pen and Ink

hours and “if you left early, you lost stature. At the end of the day, people look around and wonder where you are.”

In 1977, after thirty-two years at NBC, Graham was unceremoniously discharged. A November 1977 *Variety* Magazine article, “NBC Axes Four Execs in Advertising Area,” stated that “NBC’s busy guillotine fell last week on the advertising and creative services departments ... and, in the unkindest cut of all, John Graham, who, as director of design, dreamed up the NBC peacock.”

Around the same time, the peacock and the snake logo gradually had been phased out and replaced by NBC’s “Abstract N” logo in 1976, which was created by an outside design firm. With production costs totaling an estimated \$750,000 to \$1 million, shortly after its unveiling, NBC was sued for copyright violation by Nebraska Public Television, which had an almost identical logo. The peacock returned by 1979—a less ornate version with just six feathers instead of eleven, and a rounder, symmetrical body—with a new slogan, “NBC, Proud as a Peacock,” but there was little mention of the art designer who originally created it.

A logo, a symbol, and an effective technique for the introduction of color television, the NBC peacock will always remain an indelible image in the hearts of the viewing public. In his book *Design, Form, and Chaos*, Paul Rand writes, “A well-designed logo, in the end, is a reflection of the business it symbolizes. It connotes a thoughtful and purposeful enterprise, and mirrors the quality of its products and services.” By producing a design that captured the full potential of color television during the medium’s infancy, John Graham created a symbol that has lasted for generations. His legacy has touched more lives than we’ll ever know.

Highlights of John Graham's Career



Born:	September 25, 1923
Education:	New York School of Industrial Art. Advertising design training with Howard Trafton at the Art Students League (three years).
NBC Employment:	November 1, 1945–December 31, 1977 NBC Art Director of Advertising and Promotion, 1956–1977 NBC Director of Design, 1966–1977.
Honors:	American Institute of Graphic Arts Awards, 1955, 1956, 1958–1960, and 1963–1965. American TV Commercials Festival Awards, 1965. Art Directors Club Awards, 1956–1957, 1960–1961, 1965–1966, and 1968. Communication Arts Magazine Awards, 1963 Curtis Paper Company Awards, 1953, and 1955. Direct Mail Advertising Association Awards, 1953 Hollywood Radio and Television Society Awards, 1974. Lithographers National Association Inc. Awards, 1955. New York Employing Printers Association Inc. Awards, 1955–1957. Printing Industries of Metropolitan New York Inc. Awards, 1963. Radio Daily Award, 1955. Society of Illustrators Awards, 1959, 1967, 1968, 1969. Type Directors Club of New York Awards, 1957, 1958, 1959, 1961, 1963, 1964, 1965, and 1967. Typo Mundus 20 Awards (Date Unknown).