



Visual Identities
by **Paul Rand**

Introduction

“He almost singlehandedly convinced business that design was an effective tool. He, more than anyone else, made the profession reputable.”

Louis Danziger

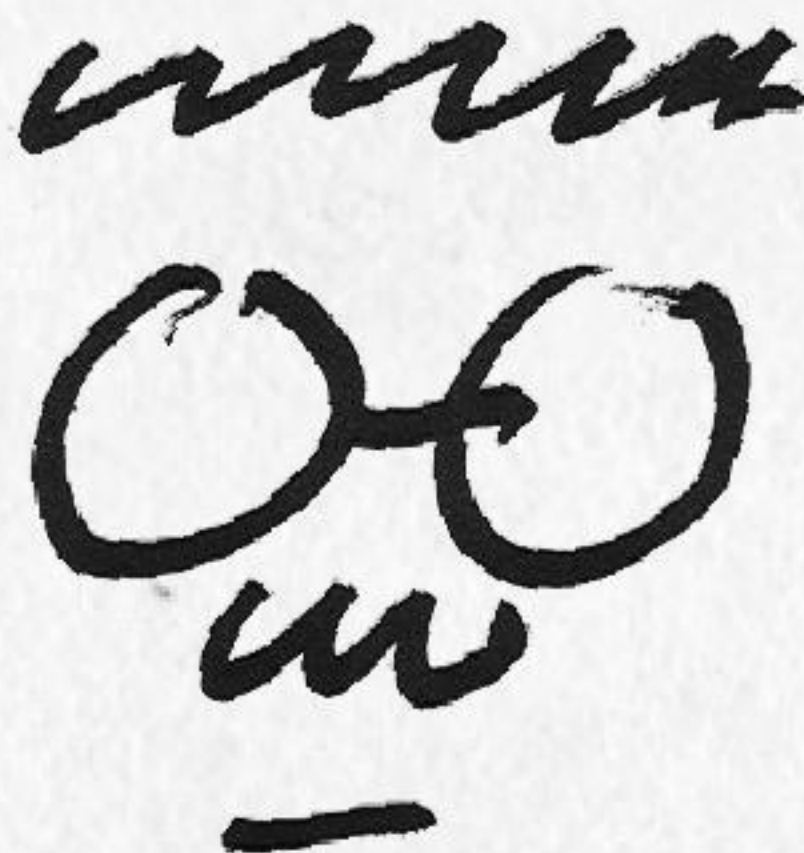
Paul Rand (15th August, 1914 – 26th November, 1996) is an American graphic designer. Rand is often considered the godfather of graphic design. He is one of the first adopters of the Swiss Style practice in America and is most famous for his corporate identities, with some designs such as ABC and IBM still in use today.

In his twenties, Rand had already amassed international acclaim via designing magazine covers for *Direction* for free, in exchange of artistic freedom. His reputation built up as he did page design for *Apparel Arts*' anniversary issue. At the young age of twenty-three, Rand became the art director of magazine *Esquire-Coronet*.

A faithful encounter with Bauhaus artist László Moholy-Nagy helped Rand anchor down his design philosophy and refine his style. During the meeting, Moholy-Nagy asked if Rand read art criticism. When Rand said “no,” Moholy-Nagy reportedly replied “Pity.” From that point onward, Rand began reading art criticism and philosophy as much as he could.

Throughout the rest of his career, he created countless memorable corporate identities as well as posters. Alongside his design career, he was also an educator, teaching at Pratt, Yale University, and Cooper Union. In addition, he published many books about his work and ideas.

Rand's final years were devoted to design work and the writing of his memoirs. He passed away at the age of 82 due to cancer. His death did not end his reputation, as he is a timeless inspiration.



Visual Identity



“Modernism means integrity; it means honesty; it means the absence of sentimentality and the absence of nostalgia; it means simplicity; it means clarity.”

Paul Rand

Corporate identities were Rand’s most well known achievement, with famous clients such as Ford and UPS. Influenced by Bauhaus and Modernism, his designs are minimal yet powerful.

As his career went on, his style was solidified and Rand began to theorise his own work — what logos are, what they are not, and what they are capable of doing. His theory can be summarized into four principles:

1 “A logo derives meaning from the quality of the thing it symbolizes, not the other way around.”

Designers sometimes talk about logos as if they were responsible for conveying meaning by themselves and, hence, the success or failure of a logo is a factor of the design.

2 “The subject matter of a logo need not match the subject matter of the business it represents.”

The only mandate in logo design is that they be distinctive, memorable and clear. Logos can look like whatever they want. They don’t have to directly depict anything about the company they represent. In fact, sometimes it’s better when they do not.

3 “Presentation is key.”

Rand placed great importance on the act of presenting a design to a client. For each design, a designer must tell a unique story that is tailored to the client. Rand often includes booklets that detail his design process and precise technical information.

4 “Simplicity is not the goal. It is the by-product of a good idea and modest expectations.”

If one truly understands what a logo is and is not capable of doing, then the designs will always have the simplicity.

NeXT

“No, I will solve your problem for you and you will pay me. You don’t have to use the solution. If you want options go talk to other people.”

Paul Rand

NeXT is a computer company Steve Jobs founded shortly after leaving Apple. Rand’s expertise was required, as NeXT was a newly founded company and its first product was kept in secrecy. The only information was the company name and that the product was contained in a cube.

Rand concluded from the company name that the product was going to be futuristic; it was not going to be a new computer, but the next wave of information processing for the educational market. With only a few clues, Rand was given a month to devise a logo that would embody as much symbolic power as the memory of a silicon chip.

The company’s logo was ultimately a logotype concealed in a cube. Rand had to sell the mark to Jobs, and devised a two-pronged strategy. The first was to present only one logo, which underscored his own confidence in the solution and deflected indecision on the part of the client. The second was to “speak” only through a presentation booklet, which concisely explained the rationale and showed the applications of the logo.

Jobs was pleased with the outcome. Just prior to Rand’s death in 1996, Jobs labeled him, simply, “the greatest living graphic designer.”

Confidence is key to a successful solution. The role of a designer is to solve a problem that cannot be solved by the client, and Rand displayed great levels of confidence through NeXT’s identity design.



IBM

"A logo doesn't represent a company. The company represents the logo. So the idea of changing a logo without recognizing the importance of the change is stupid."

Paul Rand

Rand's defining corporate identity was his IBM logo in 1956. The 8-barred blue logotype remains one of the most recognizable logos in the world.

IBM's previous logo was not as successful as it aspired to be. It was deemed faceless and cold, which gave the company an even harsher time as it was undergoing a transition from punched card tabulating business to computer business. Hence, a new corporate identity was required.

The previous logo was highly ornate, and Rand's strength lies on creating the greatest impact with minimal elements. The logo was stripped down to its acronym in the form of a logotype.

In 1972, sixteen years after Rand's first solution, the logo was updated to a striped pattern from a solid block to suggest "speed and dynamism".

Along with IBM's great customer experience, the logo remained powerful and used today.

Rand continued to design packaging and marketing materials for IBM from the early 1970s until the early 1980s, including the well-known Eye-Bee-M poster.

As the saying goes, "if it is not broken, do not fix it." Rand's solution to an already fine logo was to implement minor tweaks to add significance, without taking away familiarity that has been incepted to the consumer's minds.



ABC

"I think permanence is something that you find out... It isn't something that you design for. You design for durability, for function, for usefulness, for rightness, for beauty. But permanence is up to God and time."

Paul Rand

The American Broadcast Company's logo history was very much like IBM's; it was outdated and highly ornate. However, unlike IBM, ABC underwent seven identity changes over the course of nineteen years. None of the identities stuck until Rand's, then it was there to stay for over half a decade.

Rand was brought in after other designers had tried and failed. So the solution had to be found quickly. Realising immediately that ABC was a naturally rhythmic combination of forms, Rand proposed that they be set in a lower case gothic typeface similar to Futura, basing its design entirely on equal circles that comprised the negative space of the three letters, and dropped it out in white from a black circle.

The solution was simple, direct, full of character, and accepted immediately without debate.

In the late 1980s, however, ABC was purchased by a media conglomerate, which attempted to alter or replace Rand's logo. Various designers were called upon to better the original (Rand was not invited to participate), and new versions included such tropes as stylized stars and eagles, but none could equal the simplicity of the existing mark.

Rand's work proved not only simplistic and powerful, but also timeless. He commented on the failed replacement saying he wasn't upset about it, "I thought they would have a hell of a time improving on it. Somebody can do something better, obviously, but in respect to its own form, it's perfect. You're dealing with four circles. I mean, it can't be bad. Circles are circles."



UPS

"I always used myself as a measure. I also used other people. Not experts, but rather simple people, like my eight-year-old daughter when I did UPS... I said 'Catherine, what's this?' and she said, 'That's a present, Daddy.'"

Paul Rand

UPS was fortunate enough to only have its identity changed for three times, which is quite impressive for a 106-year old company. Rand was made the designer for the third logo, and he was called upon for his uncanny ability to inject wit and whimsy into the corporate vocabulary.

Rand was not the only designer hired for the redesign. Many of the proposed solutions eschewed the shield as too antiquated. Although Rand also thought it should change, he said that it must be retained. His rationale was that the logo was viewed as a badge of UPS's authority and it was also "a good transitional phase. It wasn't so abrupt, so there was some recall for the old one."

Rand's challenge was no longer creating a new face for the company, but to transform the shield into a modern image. Streamlined contours, introduced balanced gothic lower case letters, and placed an outline of a package with a bow on top of the shield.

Unlike most of his designs, Rand came up with this solution rather quickly. "I didn't try anything else," Rand proudly admitted. "In fact, when I brought it to the client, I handed him a rolled up Photo-stat, he looked and said, 'You got anything else?' I said, 'No, that's it.' And he didn't know how to respond."



Ford

“My approach to the problem was that what Ford had was perfectly good, but it was old-fashioned. It was not keeping with the present technological era.”

Paul Rand

During the 1960s, companies were experiencing the redesign fever, and Ford Motor Company considered changing its familiar Ford script inside an oval nameplate.

Rand could not see any major flaws in the original design. In fact, he thought it was “perfectly good”, but he still accepted the offer to make a proposal, which resulted in one of his most interesting presentation books, replete with a new logo and scores of sample applications.

His approach was to modernize the script by removing the curlicue swash and streamlining the Art Nouveau elements.

One might notice that among all case studies, this was the most foreign design. It is because the design was never actually used. Despite being more consistent with the contemporary design of Ford’s automobiles, Henry Ford III rejected the proposal on the grounds that it was too radical a departure.

Perhaps the most valuable lesson is that no documentaries have described Rand being upset about the decision, nor did he show disrespect to the company. A true artist knows that they cannot please everyone, and that humble acceptance of rejection from a client is the sign of a seasoned designer.



What's next?



1962



2007



2003



2013



1961



2003



2009



2012



1965



2003



2000

2013

Most of the logos mentioned were designed in the '60s, with the exception of NeXT, which was designed in the '80s. Fast forward to the 21st century, NeXT has been bought and merged into Apple. ABC did slight aesthetic changes, while UPS created a completely new identity. IBM is the only company still using Rand's work.

Changes to the updated logos were mostly minor and aesthetic related. Including Ford, UPS and ABC all updated their logos with a glossy finish, expressing modernity through the use of skeuomorphism. In fact, this "glossy phase" also happened to many companies such as Apple and Microsoft towards the end of 20th century.

The digital age and its ability to reproduce a wide range of colors and gradients contributed to skeuomorphism. Many designers were spoiled by the aesthetics achieved by the computer. The shine was added to many logos, giving it a "sparkly clean" look.

However, the skeuomorphic trend is at its dawn, as more and more companies are going back to the flat aesthetics that Rand and many older designers embraced. One of the world's most valuable companies, Google, recently made the change from its bevel-filled logotype to solid fills of colors. Apple and Microsoft also made the change from skeuomorphic logos to flat designs.

It will be no surprise to see corporate identities reminiscent of Rand's work coming back in the future. If that is the case, it will justify Rand's significance in graphic design, at the same time show the timelessness of his creations.

Quotes

Rand is a man of wise words. His quotes are plentiful, insightful, and shows a lot about his thought process. These are some of his quotes on graphic design.

“Design can be art. Design can be aesthetics. Design is so simple, that’s why it is so complicated.”

Don’t try to be original; just try to be good.

Simplicity is not the goal. It is the by-product of a good idea and modest expectations.

You will learn most things by looking, but reading gives understanding. Reading will make you free.

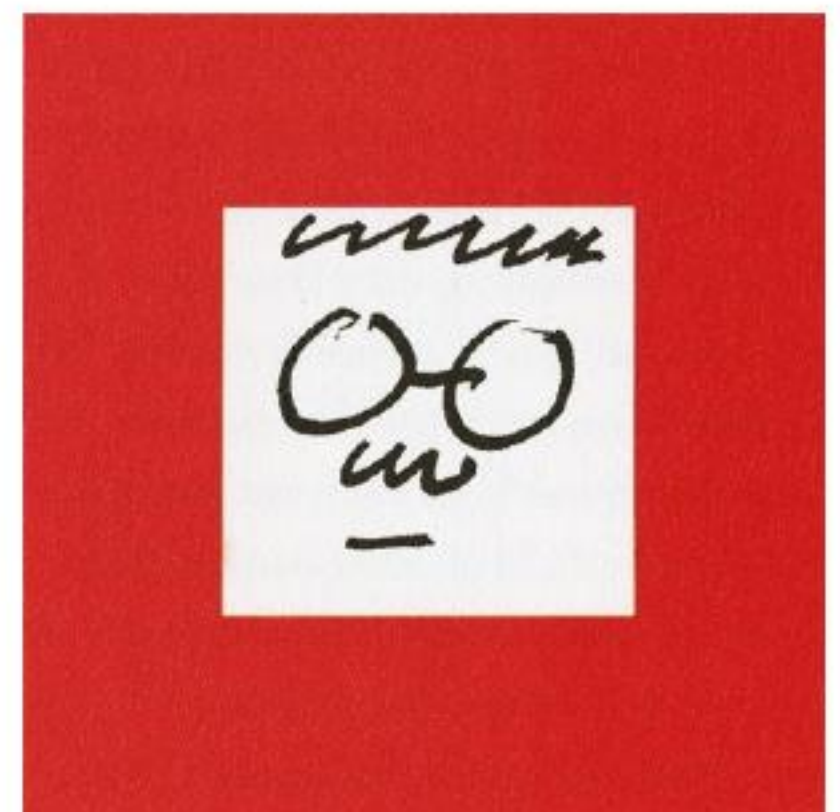
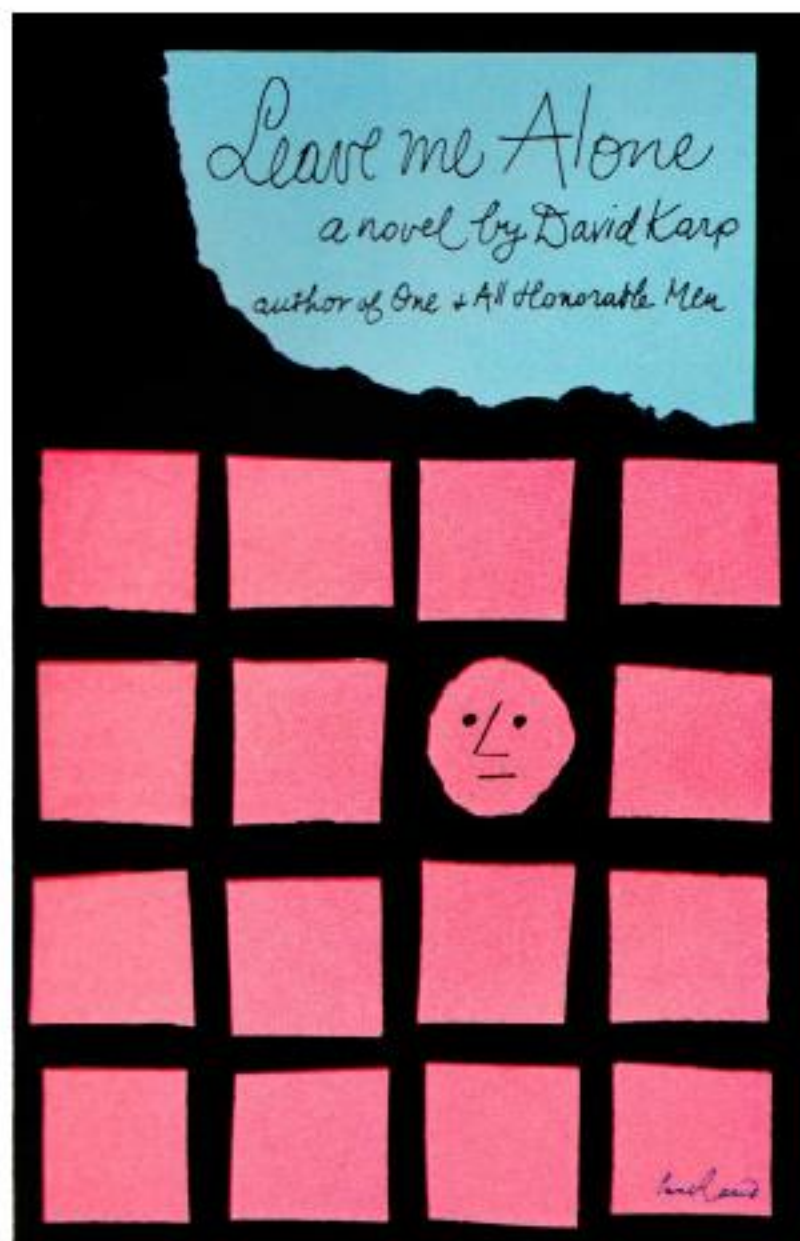
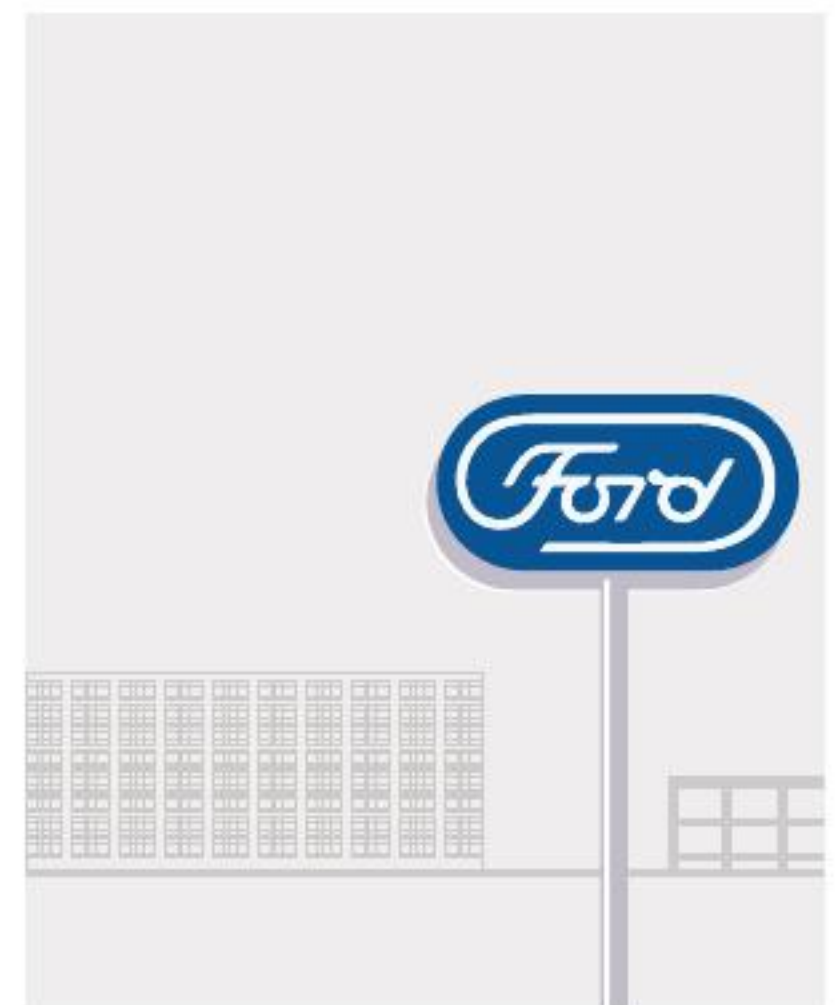
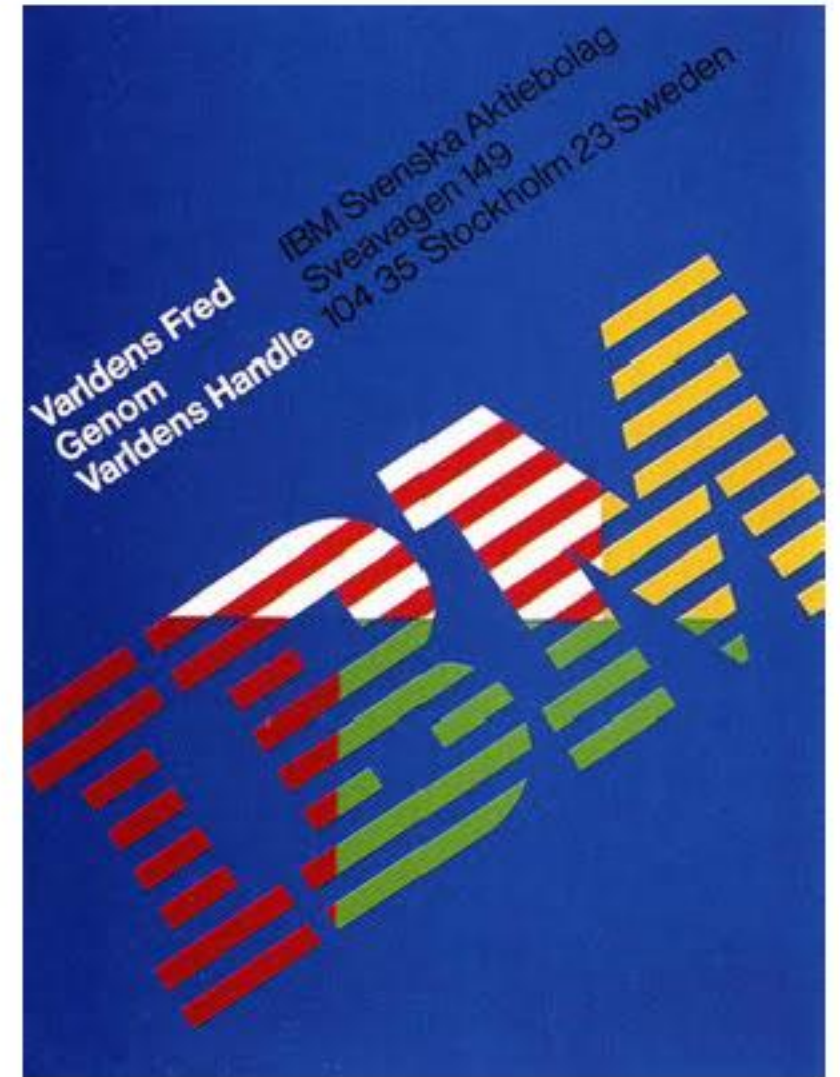
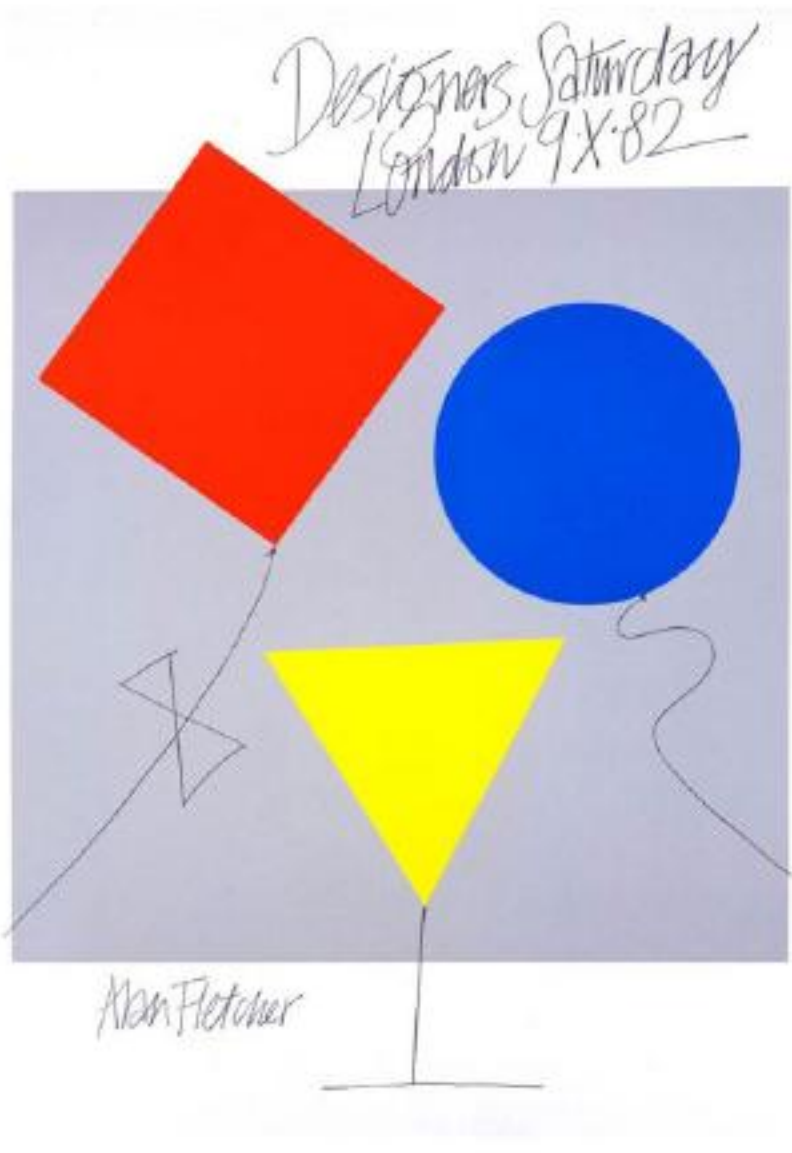
Without aesthetic, design is either the humdrum repetition of familiar clichés or a wild scramble for novelty. Without the aesthetic, the computer is but a mindless speed machine, producing effects without substance. Form without relevant content, or content without meaningful form.”

All art is relationships, all art. Design is relationships. Design in a relationship between form and content... Your glasses are round. Your collar is diagonal. These are relationships. Your mouth is an oval. Your nose is a triangle – this is what design is.



Posters

All the design elements incorporated here are derived from Rand's graphic design work, including icons, posters, and graphics used in his visual identity presentation booklets.





Bibliography

Roslyn Bernstein & Virginia Smith,
Artograph No. 6: Paul Rand,
(New York: Baruch College, 1988)

Steven Heller, Paul Rand,
(London: Phaidon, 1999)

Designed and written by Joel Tsui
Composed in Caslon, typefaces designed by William Caslon in 1722.

Copyright © 2014 Joel Tsui, Portland, Maine, Maine College of Art