The New York Times

ARCHIVES | 1993

By VICTOR MARGOLIN

DESIGN, FORM, AND CHAOS

By Paul Rand.Illustrated. 218 pp. New Haven:Yale University Press. $45.

PAUL RAND is America's pre-eminent statesman of graphic design. Early in his long career, which began in the 1930's, he garnered acclaim as the art director of Esquire and other magazines, as well as for his memorable advertisements and book jackets. In 1954 he was brought to I.B.M. by Eliot Noyes, who was in charge of I.B.M.'s design program, to revamp the company's visual identity. His thoughtful program became a model for other companies and led to his extended involvement with corporate design. Besides earning recognition as a designer, he was also an influential teacher, serving on the faculty at Yale University from 1956 until recently.

Mr. Rand has always been an articulate spokesman for and about graphic design. He published several books previous to "Design, Form, and Chaos." But this volume -- a collection of essays intended for the general reader, although some pieces were previously published in specialized design journals -- is the first in which he compares his own work with what he sees as the ills of current practice.

He has strong opinions about design quality. Good design, he believes, is based on established formal criteria. He defines design as "the abstract (or formal) aspect of a work that takes precedence over other considerations." He comes to this view through his admiration for modern art. He was one of the first American designers to pay attention to the work of Klee, Kandinsky and other European modernists as well as to the advertising that was influenced by them. Stimulated by these artists,

Mr. Rand developed a strong concern for integrating what he calls the elements of design -- scale, size, shape, color, value, texture and weight -- into tight arrangements that enmesh content in powerful formal compositions.

For him, design is a calling, not simply an occupation. Although the designer does not create works to be enshrined in museums, he or she does design the myriad forms of graphic communication that range "from birth announcements to billboards." Mr. Rand believes this material makes an essential contribution to the quality of life and deserves our utmost attention. Opposed to his faith in intuition and formal order as determinants of good design is the bad design that the uncultivated public has been conditioned to accept.

"Design, Form, and Chaos" is, in fact, an excellent example of Mr. Rand's capacity to create beautiful forms. As much a visual narrative as a verbal one, it contains many examples of his work from recent years. These are handsomely printed in duotone and color reproductions. The book also displays such delightful graphic inventions as full-page spreads, variations of scale and color, a tasteful use of white space and masterly pacing. As an object it rivals the best accomplishments of two of Mr. Rand's predecessors, Eric Gill and Jan Tschichold, to whom he pays homage in this volume in a book review and an essay, respectively.

The examples of Mr. Rand's work reveal the fineness of his visual perception. This is particularly evident in a sequence of chapters on corporate logos where he takes the reader step by step through the process of designing a logotype. Some of these chapters are based on prospectuses for corporate clients and show how Mr. Rand's ability as a teacher extended from the classroom to the board room.

However, he shows little tolerance for deviations from his own beliefs. There are strong similarities between his views and Matthew Arnold's propounding of "the best that is known and thought in the world," which has long been the rallying cry of neoconservatives bent on defending the primacy of Western heritage against a horde of attackers.

Just as the neoconservatives find fault with new scholarly approaches in the humanities, so is Mr. Rand impatient with much that occurs in design education today. In his most polemical essay here, "From Cassandre to Chaos," he cites Roger Kimball's critique of academic theory in "Tenured Radicals," a book that helped to shape the public perception of political correctness as a destructive force in higher

education. Mr. Rand criticizes "graphic design theorists of the 'new' " and states that "reaching for the

new

is tilting at windmills; the goal ought not to be what is

new

(original), as Mies put it, but what is

good.

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Mr. Rand sees much of today's graphic design as the result of fads and fashions. Part of the problem, he believes, is that design classrooms have been turned into forums for social and political issues. Opposing this, he says bluntly that "social issues are not esthetic issues, nor can they be the basis for esthetic judgments." Such a statement is not likely to gain many adherents among young designers.

While Mr. Rand echoes neoconservative complaints about the university, his own work cannot be attacked as easily as critics assail the ethnic and gender exclusions of the traditional curriculum. For his work is less about differences of subject matter than it is about issues of excellence in making graphic design. He is correct when he warns that the manipulation of computer capabilities can become a poor substitute for design knowledge, and his claim for the importance of drawing skills should also be heeded. Much unsatisfying work lately proves both of these points.

But he attempts to insulate his vision of excellence from the tides of historical change. He is wrong in his belief that young graphic designers are unfamiliar with the history of their profession and that raw intuition is inherently more powerful than theory in generating good design. Although he thinks that design shares much with other forms of visual culture, he gives no recognition to all the postwar art movements that have provided alternatives to the once-dominant belief in artistic form as the principal determinant of quality.

Because he is unwilling to grapple with the potentially valuable contributions of new ideas and new technology, Mr. Rand unnecessarily isolates himself from much that is influencing young designers and students. This is unfortunate because his knowledge, commitment and accomplishments should remain an inspiration for many years to come. But he places his own work in forceful opposition to the

contemporary scene and thus shuts off opportunities for dialogue. Like the neoconservatives, he thus becomes an easy target for attack. And he deserves better.

A version of this review appears in print on May 2, 1993, on Page 731 of the National edition with the headline: More Than Meets the Eye.
