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Grand Designs

By PAUL SHEPHEARD

FROM LASCAUX TO BROOKLYN By Paul Rand. Illustrated. 187 pp. New Haven: Yale University Press. \$50.

What do you say to a man, at the top of his profession and well into a long and distinguished career, who writes in his new book that today "competence is in question, frivolous decoration is rampant, and mishmash is the message"? What do you say when he equates the decline in the standards of graphic design with the demise of a generation of enlightened big-business men, all gone now and sadly missed, and the quality of graphic design gone out the window?

"They don't make things like they used to" is the tenor of this book, which seems to have been put together to support an ailing modernist program for graphic art, in which Paul Rand is a key figure, the man whose logos for companies like I.B.M., ABC and United Parcel Service, to mention only a few, are icons recognized everywhere. And why don't they make things like they used to? It's computers, of course. You can do anything with those little beggars -- why, you don't even need talent.

"From Lascaux to Brooklyn" is a book of many facets: partly an effort to elevate Mr. Rand's field to fine art and partly an attempt -- tricky for a modernist -- to define esthetics, the elusive quality, according to this book, that distinguishes great art from trash. At the beginning it is a hymn to the sublime French cave paintings in Lascaux, and at the end a sort of anthem to a childhood spent in turbulent Brooklyn.

There are examples of Mr. Rand's work for Direction magazine in the 1940's and, in by far the best section of the book, examples of his stunning corporate logo work, presented here with summaries of the pitches that went with them. The whole

thing rambles over its subject like an absent-minded professor furiously fighting yesterday's battles. One section of the book is devoted to the argument between the graphic masters Jan Tschichold and Max Bill, who quarreled over traditional and modern back in Hitler's time. This old argument, with its arid preoccupation with margins and typefaces, seems to me as archaic as disputes about how many angels can dance on the head of a pin. Just let me click my mouse, I think; let me see the big picture.

Perhaps the best thing one generation can do about the previous one is sit tight and try not to pick holes. But how? In a section describing the essentially abstract nature of poster design, Mr. Rand quotes, of all people, the esthete Oscar Wilde: "By its deliberate rejection of Nature as the ideal of beauty . . . decorative art not merely prepares the soul for the reception of true imaginative work, but develops in it that sense of form which is the basis of creative no less than of critical achievement." But then, eight pages later, he quotes the modernist Robert Motherwell: "Most people ignorantly suppose that artists are the decorators of our human existence, the esthetes to whom the cultivated may turn when the real business of the day is done."

That kind of contradiction is a continual quality of the book, because Mr. Rand freely quotes all kinds of people, with very different axes to grind. Roger Fry, for instance, who, like the other Bloomsbury people, managed to combine modernism with snobbery: "No one who has a real understanding of the art of painting attaches any importance to what we call the subject of a picture." Oh, really? Fry was talking about Czanne -- and just how many pictures did Czanne paint of that mountain? It is all immensely confusing. Just when you've got used to the idea that a graphic designer is a fine artist, you read, "The designer-client relationship, ideally, is like the doctor-patient relationship: mutual trust is the common denominator."

I don't think this book is going to help people think more clearly than they do already. If you want to see how the modern can confer the riches of the world and the benefit of all time, just look around you: those cascading images of myth and irony flying past you may be too slippery to hold on to and may have a significance measured in split seconds. But that's not the problem; the problem is not letting go. The TimesMachine article viewer is included with your New York Times subscription. This article is also available separately as a high-resolution PDF.

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