Design helps to create everything that is around us—the cereal boxes on our breakfast tables, the ads we read, the websites we surf, the cars we drive, the buildings in which we work, the paintings we admire, the phones on which we talk—design shapes everything.

Design, however, is much more than the colors, the textures, and the shapes that give style to the objects and images that are part of our everyday lives. In fact, the concept of design is so broad that it can be quite difficult to define.

Yet, establishing a definition of design is precisely the task that the American graphic designer Paul Rand (1914-1996) pursued throughout his long career as he sought to understand and to enumerate the visual elements that combined to make some works of design stand out from others. Though he recognized that achieving the right combination of visual elements was quite difficult, Rand defined design quite simply, saying that it is:

The synthesis of form and content.

Born in Brooklyn and educated at the Pratt Institute, Rand found inspiration in the works of European modernists like Paul Klee, Pablo Picasso, Alexander Calder, Joan Miró and others. Study of the modernists led Rand to develop a new avant-garde style for graphic design that was based on restrained minimalism, focused ideas, cut paper, and photographic collage. He first made a name for himself by designing playful layouts for such publications as *Apparel Arts* and *Direction Magazine*, creating memorable and effective images that reflected his deep understanding of design principles.

Rand is best known for the corporate identities he designed in the 1950s and 1960s for such firms as IBM, ABC, Cummins Engine, and UPS. In these and in all his designs, he sought to achieve that synthesis of form and content that was necessary for the creation of what he called "good work."

A prolific writer, Rand documented his theory of design in articles and in four critically acclaimed books, all of which are written in a short and direct style and which examine complex subjects, namely the relation of graphic design to art, the relation of form to content, expression through typography, and humor in design.

Rand's remarkable ability to combine theory and practice informs this exhibition. Throughout the galleries, Rand's own writings are juxtaposed with examples of his work, demonstrating how he used both theory and practice in the development of his own highly influential definition of design.

Preface

In his 1996 book, *From Lascaux to Brooklyn*, Rand asserted that there is essentially no difference between the fine arts (painting, sculpture, dance, etc) and the applied arts (graphic design, advertising, etc). Rather, he argued quality, rather than genre, determines whether or not a piece of work should be considered to be "art."

…a beautifully designed advertisement, poster, or piece of printed ephemera, assuming that it is both utilitarian and aesthetically satisfying, is as much a part of the genus art as is a painting or sculpture.

In the following examples, Rand reveals how the aesthetic principles that shape form and express content in the fine arts, are also fundamental to the work of the designer.

The Paleolithic paintings in the cave of Lascaux were discovered in 1940 by four boys roaming through the woods in the Dordogne region of France. Dating to about 15,000 BC, the paintings depict ibex, oxen, bison, and antelope, but the most celebrated of the images is that of a wild horse, sometimes referred to as the Chinese horse, because it seems to have been translated from an old Chinese print.

In his book, *From Lascaux to Brooklyn*, Rand wrote:

> *The great lesson of the cave paintings of Lascaux is that art is an intuitive, autonomous, and timeless activity and works independently of the development of society.*

To support this argument, Rand compared the Lascaux Horse to well-known works of architecture, sculpture, and painting, as well as to objects of everyday life, demonstrating that the creation of all genres of art is informed by the same aesthetic principles such as….

order, unity, variety, contrast,
grace, symmetry, asymmetry,
rhythm, rhyme, regularity,
movement, interval, coherence,
dissonance, balance, tension,
space, scale, weight, texture,
line, mass, shape,
light, shade, color…

…The Tower of Pisa?

The Tower of Pisa, a Romanesque bell tower, was built in the 12th century aside the Arno River in the city of Pisa, Italy. The tower, built of white marble, is most famous for its unintended tilt to one side, which began during construction. Rand notes that the tilt creates a perception of impending disaster by introducing an element of tension that profoundly affects the visitor's experience.

He wrote:

The tower, a study in the harmony of heterogeneous elements — cylinders, semicircles, and oblongs — is also a study in negative and positive space, light and shade; in addition, it is a fine example of rhythmic animation, contrasting textures, and the hypnotic repetition of elegant arches…

. . .The Fountains of the Alhambra?

Geometry, which has always played a significant role in Muslim art, permeates the design of the Fountain of the Lions, located at the center of a 14th-century courtyard in the Alhambra, a Moorish citadel in Grenada, Spain. The dodecahedron (12-sided) basin of the fountain supports 12 lions carved of white marble.

Rand notes:

The highly simplified, delicately carved lion details contrast dramatically with the elaborate arches in the background.

. . . *The Baptistry of Florence?*

Built in Florence, Italy between 1059- 1128, the Baptistery of Florence is one of the oldest buildings in the city.

Composed of simple, geometric forms — rectangles, squares, diamonds, and half circles of dark green marble — each facet of the octagonal tower contains three dramatic arches. It is topped by a pyramidal roof, which gives the building an almost toy-like quality.

Rand observes:

One quickly realizes that simplicity and geometry are the language of timelessness and universality.

. . .Romanesque Capitals?

These Romanesque capitals, created in the 12th century, are characterized by simplicity in that the images depicted on them are treated as isolated elements floating in imaginary space.

Rand states:

. . .the same universal qualities of naiveté and simplicity that characterize the work of all primitive cultures are inherent in this art. Even the means of expression by the great painters of our time is related to Romanesque art.

. . . Cézanne's Apples?

In Paul Cezanne's *Still Life with Apples* (1895-98), Rand observes that a conventional subject is made especially beautiful by the skill with which Cezanne has interpreted the scene.

Rand writes:

Cézanne's still life is not three apples poised on a white dish but the effect of three apples on the interested spectator. His brush strokes are formal means of pulsating contrasts. The colors are not the subject's but the painter's; they are complementary effects, the vibrancy of paint, not the imitation of things.

. . . *Tipu's Tiger?*

This 18th-century wooden automaton, created in India during the early period of British colonialism, is a mechanical toy that depicts a tiger devouring a European (the human figure is shown close to life size). The toy simulates both the growls of the tiger and the cries of its victim. At the time that this was made, tiger attacks were an understandably worrisome issue for British colonists in India.

The image is at first disturbing, but its expression and exaggerated scale are so toy-like, its color so brilliant, that the impression is merely startling.

Rand wrote:

This is an interesting example of form softening the impact of content.

. . . *Fisherman's Buoys?*

Rand believed that modest subject matter, modest means, and modest talent do not always prevent an artifact from offering an aesthetic experience to the viewer. These buoys, made by fishermen or craftsmen, are designed in such a way that they convey the virtues of economy, simplicity, and modesty of means.

Rand saw that these objects shared the aesthetic qualities admired in the fine arts:

This is a useful object lesson for designers who believe that mundane subject matter, like soap or soup, is a hindrance to creativity.

. . . *The Parthenon?*

The Parthenon temple, located on the Acropolis in Athens, Greece, was constructed from 447 BC - 438 BC. It is considered by many to be the most important surviving example of Classical Greek architecture, not least because it demonstrates how the Greeks used principles of geometry to achieve an overall sense of balance and proportion.

Rand asserts:

What a particular proportion contains, and how it is designed, are more important than the shape of its containment.

He also notes:

Proportional systems are an incentive for some, an inspiration for others, and a crutch for too many.

. . . Brueghel's Children's Games?

According to Rand, *The Children's Games* (1560), painted by the Flemish Renaissance artist Pieter Brueghel the Elder, is:

. . . a complexity of contrasts, movements, and expressions united in a symphony of light and shade, curves, angles, and emotions - the whole gamut of conflicting phenomena.

The artist creates contrast by placing the playing children in a cityscape filled with sturdy buildings, however, that contrast is not jarring. Rather, all the elements of the painting are brought into harmony because Brueghel balances passive and active elements, as well as those simple and complex, allowing the viewer to focus on the joy of the children.

. . . *Katsura Palace?*

Serenity and order enhance the splendor of this enchanted summer palace built just outside Kyoto, Japan in the 16th century.

The shoji (rice-paper screens) incorporated into the interior of the building can be moved to create an endless variety of patterns, contrasts, and rhythms that turn the building into a haven of tranquility and beauty.

Rand suggests:

The poetry of Zen is embodied in the gardens and architecture of Katsura. The wild horse of Lascaux, also called the Chinese horse, evokes this Zen-like quality as well.

…An ancient pitcher?

The decoration of this ancient pitcher defines its personality: the swelling blue stripes that embellish the belly of the vessel accentuate its profile and, like blue veins, impart life to an otherwise lifeless object by giving it sensitivity, subtlety, and simplicity.

In considering the decoration of this vase, Rand commented:

…the term "decoration" is sometimes considered insulting. Without decoration, the pitcher would appear less interesting, almost naked, to the viewer.

. . . *African Sculpture?*

Exaggerated body and facial features like those seen in this sculpture are typical of some kinds of African sculpture.

Rand admired many things about African art and acknowledged its influence on the modern artists that inspired him, saying:

African art played more than a passing role in the art of cubism. Freedom of expression, simplicity, imagination, fantasy, spontaneity, and innocence were part of its formal language.

He also observed the visual power of exaggeration in this work:

Its creator understands that emotions can best be expressed visually by overstatement rather than by literal depiction.

The Symbol in Advertising

Paul Rand, *Paul Rand: A Designer's Art*, 1985

It is in symbolic, visual terms that the designer ultimately realizes his perceptions and experiences; and it is in a world of symbols that man lives. The symbol is thus the common language between artist and spectator.

Words like simplified, stylized, geometric, abstract, two-dimensional, flat, non-representational, non-mimetic are commonly associated, sometimes incorrectly, with the term symbol.

In essence, it is not what it looks like but what it does that defines a symbol. A symbol may be depicted as an "abstract" shape, a geometric figure, a photograph, an illustration, a letter of the alphabet, or a numeral. Thus, a five-pointed star, the picture of a little dog listening to his master's voice, a steel engraving of George Washington, or the Eiffel Tower itself — are all symbols!

Typographic Form and Expression

Paul Rand, *Paul Rand: A Designer's Art*, 1985

One of the objectives of the designer who deals with type matter involves readability. Unfortunately, however, this function is often taken too literally and overemphasized at the expense of style, individuality, and the very effectiveness of the printed piece itself. By carefully arranging type areas, spacing, size, and color, the typographer is able to impart to the printed page a quality that helps to dramatize the contents. He is able to translate type matter into tactile patterns. By concentrating the type area and emphasizing the margin (white space), he can reinforce, by contrast, the textural quality of the type. The resulting effect on the reader may be properly compared to the sensation produced by physical contact with metal type.

With asymmetric balance, he is able to achieve greater interest. Bilateral symmetry offers the spectator too simple and too obvious a statement. It offers little or no intellectual pleasure, no challenge. For the pleasure derived from observing asymmetric arrangements lies partly in overcoming resistances which, consciously or not, the spectator has in his own mind, and in thus acquiring some sort of aesthetic satisfaction.

Integrating Form and Content

Paul Rand, *Thoughts on Design*, 3rd Edition, 1970

What we commonly understand as "originality" depends on the successful integration of the symbol as a visual entity with all other elements, pointed to a particular problem, performing a specific function consistent with its form. Its use at the proper time and place is essential and its misuse will inevitably result in banality or mere affectation. The designer's capacity to contribute to the effectiveness of the basic meaning of the symbol, by interpretation, addition, subtraction, juxtaposition, alteration, adjustment, association, intensification, and clarification, is parallel to those qualities that we call "original."

In the examples that follow, the abstract, geometric forms (attention-arresting devices) tend to dominate, while the representational images play a supporting role. The complementary relationship between these two types of images is dramatized when human expression is introduced.