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*“Design...
the animating
principle
of all creative
processes.”*

Vasari

1511-1574



The designer, engaged in the mournful business of tombstone carving, demonstrates his skills with humor and ingenuity on this 18th-century gravemarker.

When, in 1890, Maurice Denis said "It is well to remember that a picture—before being a battle horse, a nude woman, or some anecdote—is essentially a plane surface covered with colors, assembled in a certain order," he was talking about design and saying what Vasari, in the 16th century, had already eloquently put into words: "Design is the animating principle of all creative processes."

Words like design, form, beauty, plastic, aesthetic, artistic, creative, graphic are hard to define. Each word has more than one meaning and involves subjective interpretation. The expression *graphic design* is rich in meaning but difficult to pin down. To most people *design* means decoration: wallpapers, fabrics, fashions, floor coverings, etc., and the term *graphic* or *graphics* refers to graphic arts, to the printing industry, or to printmaking (the lesser of the so-called fine arts). Yet, to many, the expression *graphic design* most often draws a blank. (Note: The term "graphic design" was used by W.A.Dwiggins in a statement which first appeared in the "Boston Transcript," August 29, 1922 as follows: "Advertising design is the only form of graphic design that gets home to everybody." Whether Dwiggins is the original source of this appellation is a matter of conjecture.)

The *Oxford English Dictionary* devotes two columns to the word *graphic*, meaning: drawing, painting, lettering, writing, etching, engraving, vivid, clear; and four columns to design, meaning, among other things, a plan, purpose, intention, model, arrangement, decoration, etc. This plethora of meanings is too broad and imprecise to be clear.

Perhaps the term *commercial art*, once widely used, better describes what it is that a graphic designer does. But it, too, is not sufficiently specific to be truly meaningful. Unsavory associations (or snobbery) as well as the lack of clarity about its scope, may have contributed to its disappearance from the graphic arts scene today. In addition, the word *art* may suggest overtones of the Bohemian world.

Design focuses more on conception than it does on execution. The designer's creative efforts in the form of sketches, plans, or verbal descriptions are often intended to be executed by others: typesetters, printers, papermakers, model makers. The design for a postage stamp or a tombstone may be conceived by a designer, but it cannot come to fruition without the skills of a printer or a stone cutter.

The revolution in modern painting, with its emphasis on form, on abstraction, on relationships, and subsequently on photography and typography, has played its part in focusing attention on the design of the total surface rather than concentration on anecdote or subject matter. This too has contributed to the change of label from "commercial art" to "graphic design" in which emphasis is given not to hackneyed, literal illustration but to significant form, meaningful ideas, metaphor, wit, humor, and problems in visual perception. The ideas which have colored our way of seeing and thinking about design are built on the beliefs established at the beginning of the 20th century. Essentially, the ideals of the art of representation were replaced by those of formal design. Whether these ideas stemmed from the unorthodox visual concepts of Cézanne or Picasso, or the equally provocative ideas of the symbolist writers and artists (Stéphane Mallarmé, Émile Bernard, Maurice Denis), formal design, not representation, would determine the nature of visual thought.



*Antonio Pisano (Pisanello) 1395-1455
Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris*

Pierre Bonnard 1867-1947

What a designer does is equally broad and imprecise. *Specifically, a graphic designer is one who creates ideas, manipulates words and/or pictures, and generally solves problems of visual communication.* Items requiring the work of a graphic designer before they can be printed or produced include: price tags, catalogues, newspapers, magazines, posters, brochures, advertisements, books, book jackets, stationery, logotypes, packaging, product nomenclature (nameplates), signs—in short, wherever the visual manipulation of word and/or picture is needed, and whatever must be read or viewed.

Like any artist, the designer does not produce identical, anonymous products. His work, like the painter's, is unique. He produces one design, one advertisement, one poster, even though his work gives birth to countless reproductions. The designer who creates something entirely new is no rarer than the painter doing the same thing. And he, like the painter, is indebted to the same inspiration: to history, to other painters and designers, to Lascaux, to Egypt, to China, or to children.

That *graphic design* is generally considered a minor art has more to do with pretension than it does with terminology. The paucity of great art is no more prevalent among designers than it is among painters. To be sure, there is a basic difference between *graphic design* and painting. But that is one of practical application, and does not preclude consideration of form or quality. It merely adds more stress to the normal difficulties that original work entails.

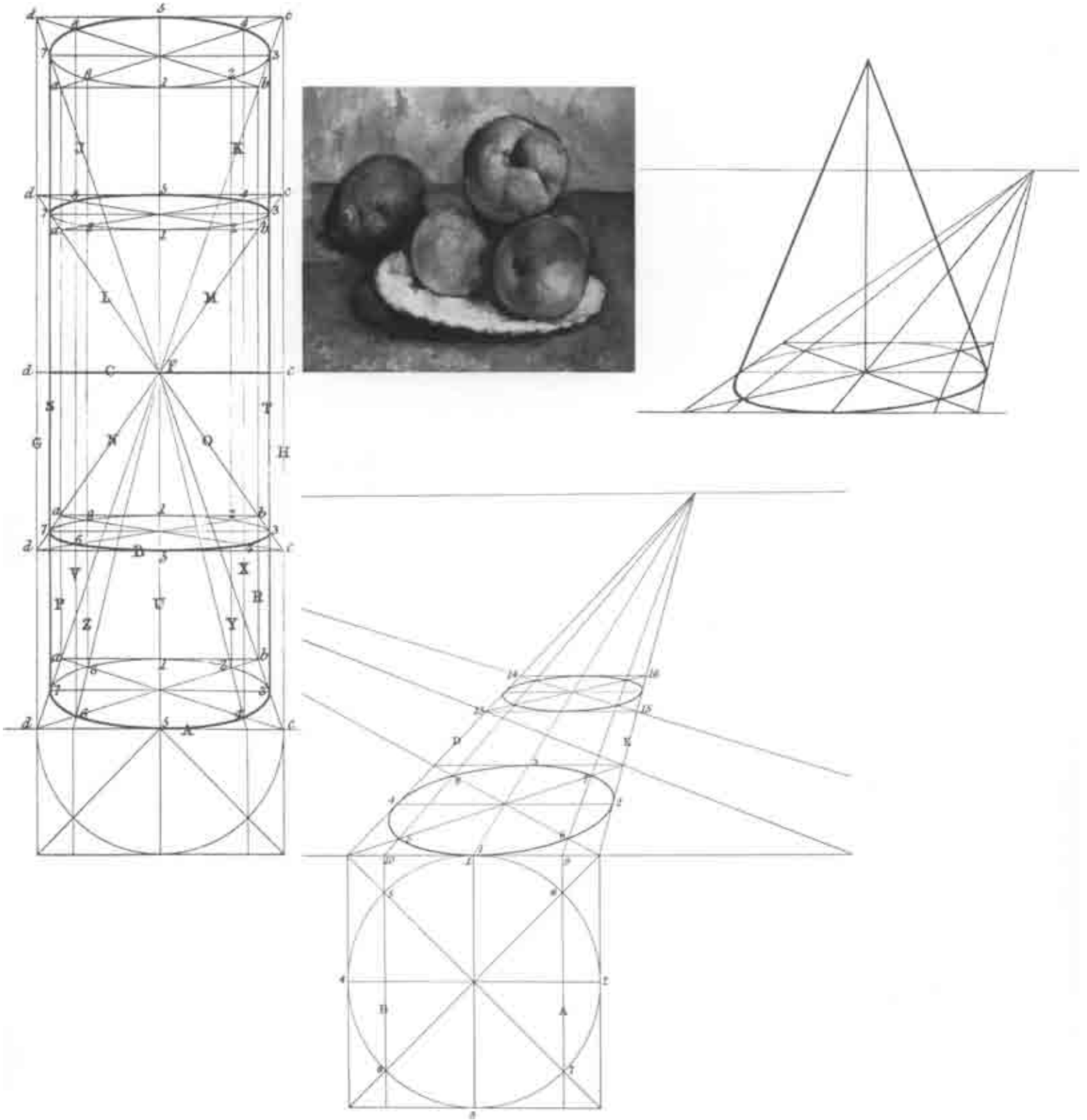
Back in the 19th century Théophile Gautier's (1811-1872) contempt for the utilitarian in art was expressed in such utterances as: "Nothing is truly beautiful except that which can serve for nothing...Whatever is useful is ugly." This was "art for art's sake." And when Adolf Loos, the same man who in 1908 wrote "Ornament and Crime," commented: "Art must be stripped of practical goals," he was echoing the prejudices of a great many artists and art lovers. How

does one categorize the design for a printer's device by Hans Holbein, the magnificent medals by Pisanello, or an elegant magazine cover by Bonnard?

Attempts to reconcile the formal and practical were made at various times in the early part of this century (circa 1921-30) by, for example, the Russian Constructivists, dedicated to a program of good design for mass consumption. They were largely responsible for the attitudes many today profess in the fields of design, painting, and sculpture and demonstrate that a special point of view is as important as a special skill in achieving distinguished work. The early commercial work of René Magritte, for instance, shows that without such a viewpoint exemplary design is not possible. In comparison to the work of A. M. Cassandre, for example, one would have to judge Magritte's graphic design inferior. Ironically though, designers are tremendously indebted to Magritte's visual vocabulary.



Hans Holbein 1497-1543
Kunstmuseum, Basel



Cézanne

Cézanne, in a letter to Emil Bernard, Aix-en-Provence, April 15, 1904, wrote: "treat nature by means of the cylinder, the sphere, the cone, everything brought into proper perspective, so that each side of an object or a plane is directed towards a central point."

The statement is, perhaps, the most influential utterance to affect the course of modern painting, not because of blind adherence, but because reference to the cylinder, sphere, and cone was taken out of context¹ and innocently misinterpreted. A simple lesson in Renaissance perspective was construed to mean that geometric simplicity would now play an important role in the way we perceive modern painting. The work of Léger and Malevich, circa 1912, literally illustrates this misreading and shows how accidents are often the source of important discoveries.

¹See Theodore Reff, "Cézanne and Poussin" *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institute* Vol. 23, 1960 Numbers 1 & 2



*Fernand Léger 1881-1955
Contrast of Forms 1913*

*“It is well to remember
that a Picture – before*



a, or some

is essentially a plane

covered with

in a certain order”

Maurice Denis 1870-1943
A definition
of Neo-Traditionism
Art et Critique
August 1890

being a



Anecdote—

surface

assembled

*Francisco Goya 1746-1828
Nude Maja, circa 1800
Museo del Prado, Madrid*

*Pablo Picasso 1881-1973
Guernica, 1937 (detail)
Museo del Prado, Madrid*

Typographic is an art...

In a survey made by Clark University¹ (1911) to ascertain "the relative legibility of different faces of printing types," twenty-six faces of widely dissimilar designs were studied, among which were Caslon, Century, Cheltenham, and News Gothic.

"Ye Gods! and has it come to this?" was the reaction of F.W. Goudy, the prolific type designer, to the results of the survey which judged News Gothic to be "the nearest approximation of an ideal face." This tidbit appeared in Mr. Goudy's *Typologia* published in 1940 by the University of California Press. Prejudice is not the only "virtue" of this book. In fact, I found it utterly absorbing and hope that the reader's curiosity is sufficiently aroused to look it up.

Equally revealing, although sprinkled here and there with a number of miscellaneous ideas difficult to agree with, is Stanley Morison's little book, *First Principles of Typography*, Macmillan, 1936. In referring to the design of the title page, Morison dogmatically states "As lower case is a necessary evil, which we should do well to subordinate since we cannot suppress, it should be avoided when it is at its least rational and least attractive—in larger sizes."² And the discriminating reader will note both the sense and nonsense of the following: "the main line of a title should be set in capitals and, *like all capitals, should be spaced.*" The first part of this statement is, of course, clearly controversial; the italicized part is true most of the time, but not all of the time.

Both books, however, are full of scholarly, useful and occasionally amusing information. Useful, in the sense that they spell out those aspects of type design and certain aspects of typography, which have little to do with trendiness, and deal with those unchanging, timeless qualities about which good design is concerned.

1) *Typologia*, p. 142

2) *First Principles*, p. 19

Good
Typography
is Art.

Color theories of Goethe, Chevreul, Ostwald, of Rood, or Munsell, among others, are not much help when facing a blank canvas. Color is objective; color is subjective. A color that is perfect in one instance is useless in another. Color is complexity personified. The use of color implies not only a knowledge or, at least, an awareness of the mechanics of color, but also of the formal, psychological, and cultural problems involved. Color cannot be separated from its physical environment without changing.

Like design problems, color is a matter of relationships:

- materials
- textures
- finishes
- light
- shade
- reflection
- figure-ground
- contrasts
- proportions
- quantities
- proximity
- congruity
- repetition
- shape
- content

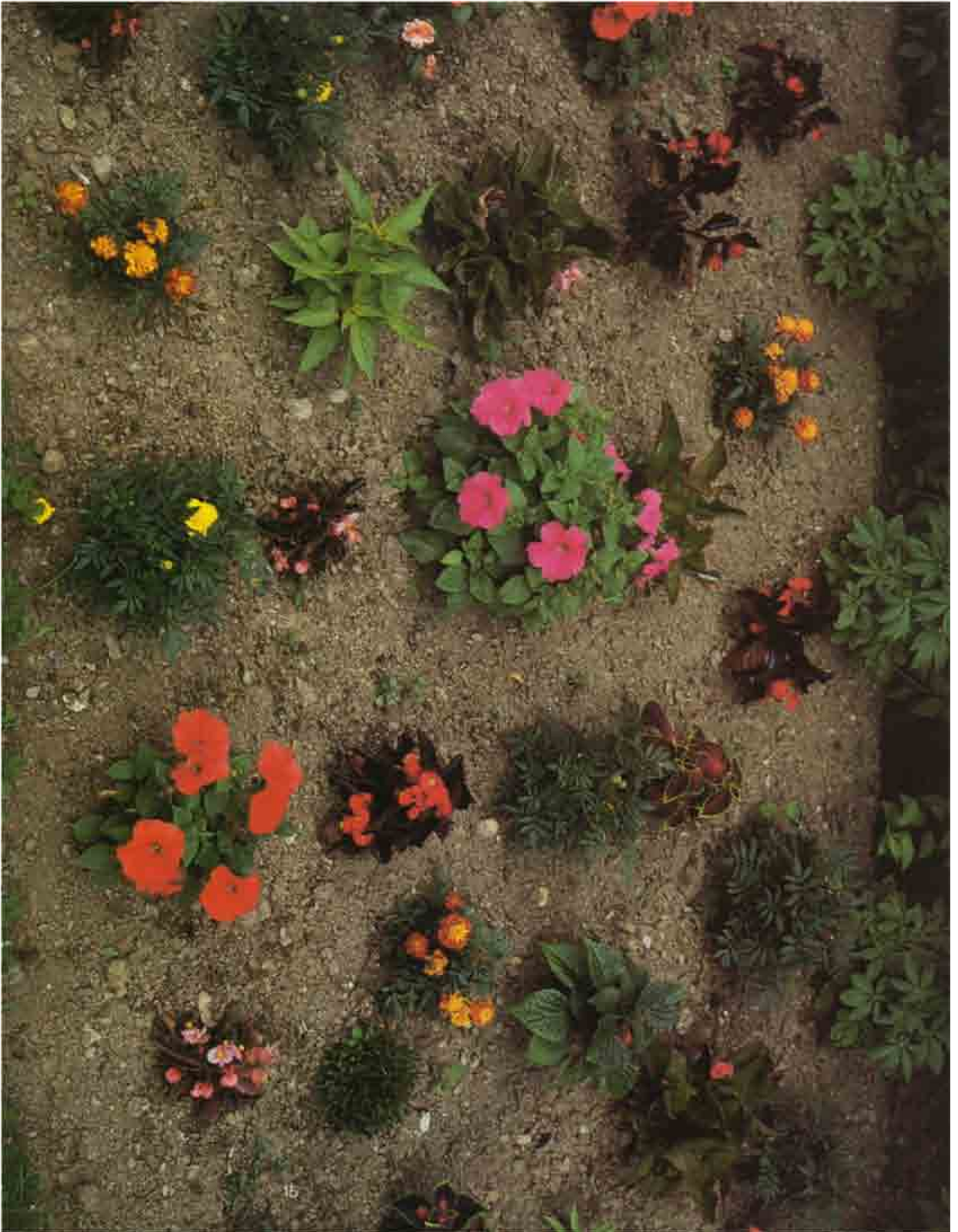
How often have we seen the “perfect color”—in a room, a painting, a sky, a rug, a dress, in a paint shop, or paper mill—without being aware of the implications of the surroundings in which this color resides—of the lighting, the architecture, the furniture, the hubbub, the silence and the condition of our own state of mind?

Matisse in his *Jazz* puts the problem in another way. Following is a paraphrase describing the problem of painting a bouquet of flowers: Walking in his garden one day he picks a bunch of flowers with the idea of painting a bouquet. After arranging the bouquet to his own taste, he discovers that the charm in first perceiving these flowers is now lost. He attributes this to the reminiscences of long dead bouquets which have influenced the arrangement of this new bouquet. And he ends by quoting Renoir: “When I have arranged a bouquet for the purpose of painting it, I always turn to the side I did not plan.”

Le Bouquet. Dans une promenade au jardin je cueille fleur après fleur pour les masser dans le creux de mon bras l’une après l’autre au hasard de la cueillette. Je rentre à la maison avec l’idée de peindre ces fleurs. Après en avoir fait un arrangement à ma façon quelle déception: tout leur charme est perdu dans cet arrangement. Qu’est-il donc arrivé? L’assemblage inconscient fait pendant la cueillette avec le goût qui m’a fait aller d’une fleur à l’autre est remplacé par un arrangement volontaire sorti de reminiscences de bouquets morts depuis longtemps, qui ont laissé dans mon souvenir leur charme d’alors dont j’ai chargé ce nouveau bouquet.

Renoir m’a dit: “Quand j’ai arrangé un bouquet pour le peindre, je m’arrête sur le côté que je n’avais pas prévu.”

It didn't take a master photographer to shoot the flower garden shown here. I was immediately taken by the stunning effect of the brilliant colors, and realized how the neighboring buildings, the earth, contrasting flowers and leaves, the tints and shades, and being partly on holiday, conspired to make this picture.



The Trademark

A trademark
is a picture.
It is a symbol
a sign
an emblem
an escutcheon
... an image.

There are
good symbols ...
like the cross.
There are
others ...
like the swastika.
Their meanings
are taken
from reality.

Symbols
are a duality.
They take on
meaning
from causes
... good or bad
And they give
meaning
to causes
... good or bad.

The flag
is a symbol
of a country.
The cross
is a symbol
of a religion.

The swastika
was a symbol
of good luck
until
its meaning
was changed.

The vitality
of a symbol
comes
from effective
dissemination ...
by the state
by the community
by the church
by the corporation.
It needs
attending
to get
attention.

The trademark
is a symbol
of a corporation.
It is not
a sign of
quality ...
it is a sign of
the quality.

The trademark
for Chanel
smells
as good as
the perfume
it stands for.
This
is the blending
of form
and content.

Trademarks
are animate
inanimate
organic
geometric.
They are letters
ideograms
monograms
colors
things.
Ideally
they do not
illustrate
they indicate
... not
representational
but suggestive ...
and stated
with brevity
and wit.

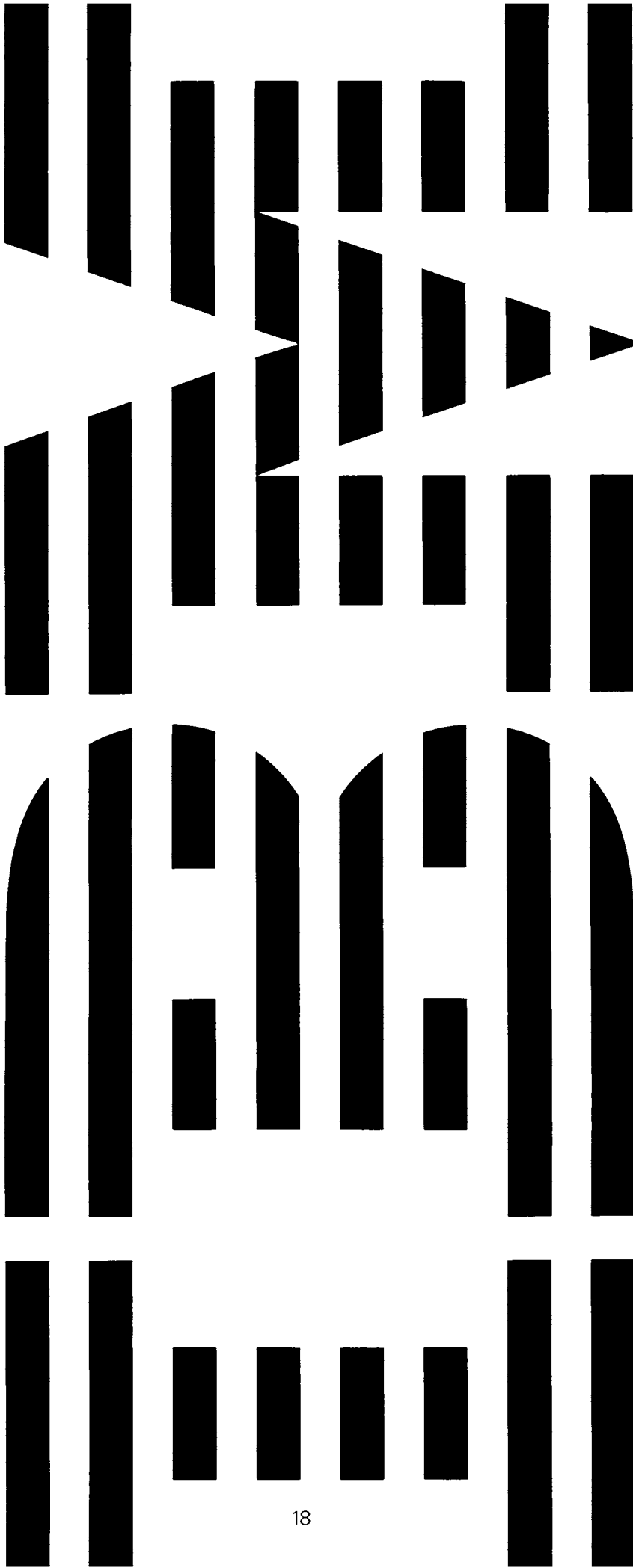
A trademark
is created
by a designer
but *made*
by a corporation.
A trademark
is a picture
an image ...
the image
of a corporation.



The need for simplicity is demonstrated in this blurred image of the ABC trademark. How much out of focus can an image be and still be recognized? A trademark which is subject to an infinite number of uses, abuses, and variations, whether for competitive purposes or for reasons of "self expression" cannot survive unless it is designed with utmost simplicity and restraint; keeping in mind that seldom is a trademark favored with more than a glance. Simplicity implies not only an aesthetic ideal, but a meaningful idea, either of content or form, which can be easily recalled.

American Broadcasting Company, 1962





Stripes

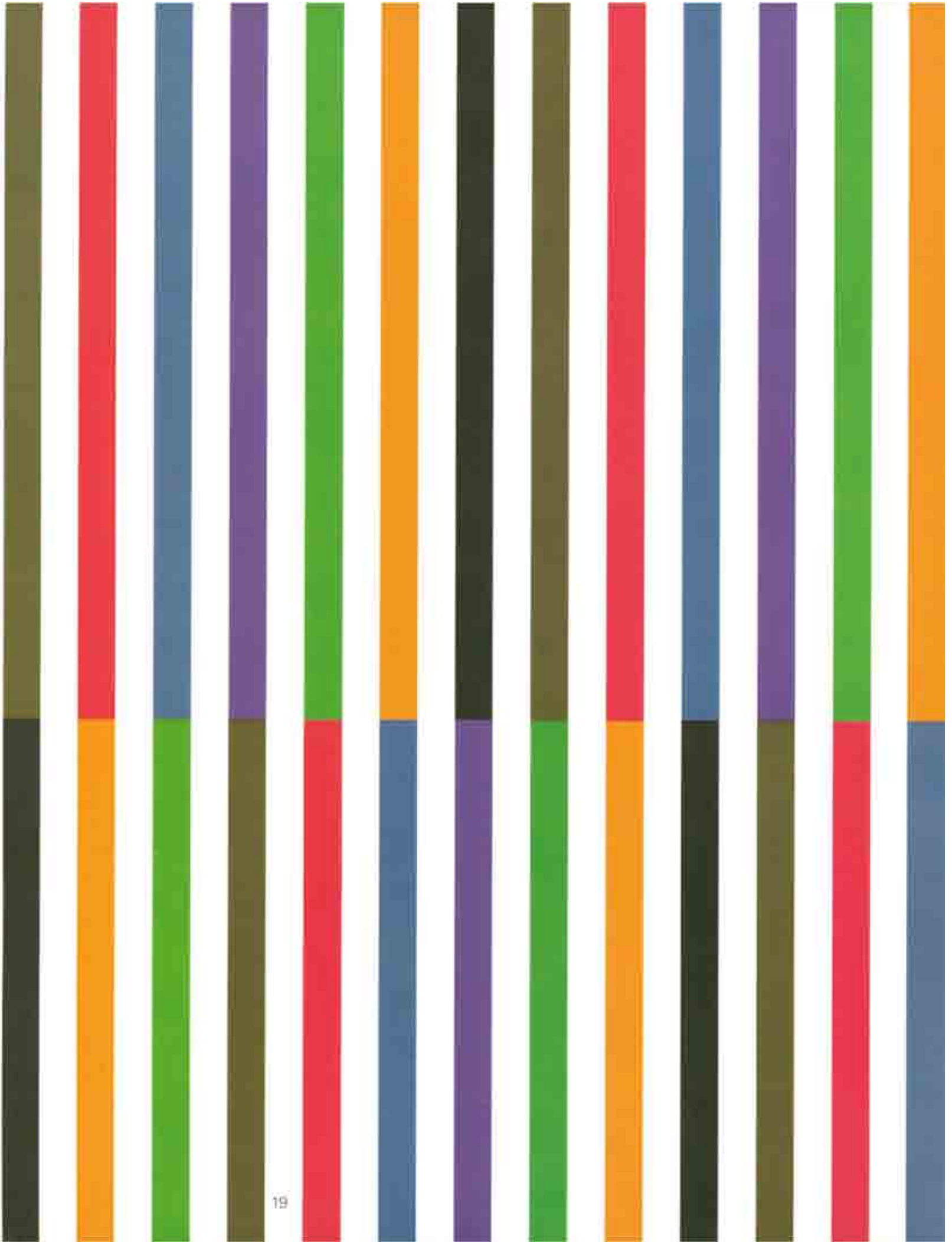
Nature has striped the zebra. Man has striped his flags and awnings, ties and shirts. Stripes are dazzling, sometimes hypnotic, usually happy. They are universal. They have adorned churches and mosques. Stripes attract attention.



The stripes of the IBM logo serve primarily as an attention getting device. They take commonplace letters out of the realm of the ordinary. They are memorable. They suggest efficiency and speed. The recent plethora of striped logos in the marketplace attests to their effectiveness.

Visually, stripes superimposed on a cluster of letters tend to tie them together. This is especially useful for complex groupings such as the letters IBM, in which each character gets progressively wider, thereby creating a somewhat uncomfortable, open-ended sequence.

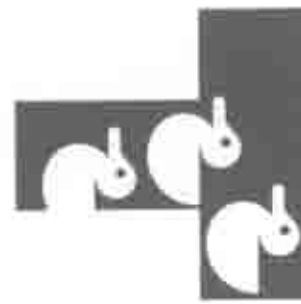
The multi-colored stripes show a section of an IBM Supply Kit package.





Repetition means remembrance. The efficacy of a trademark is dependent less on its design than on its exposure to public view. Familiar things (e.g., ducklings in this symbol for Tipton Lakes), as well as a touch of humor, are effective mnemonic devices. The geometric patterns which adorn the surfaces of many Romanesque buildings (see page 32), demonstrate an awareness of the significance of unity, scale, and the decorative possibilities of repetition. The surprising and often humorous variations of the patterning are a lesson in how to avoid monotony.



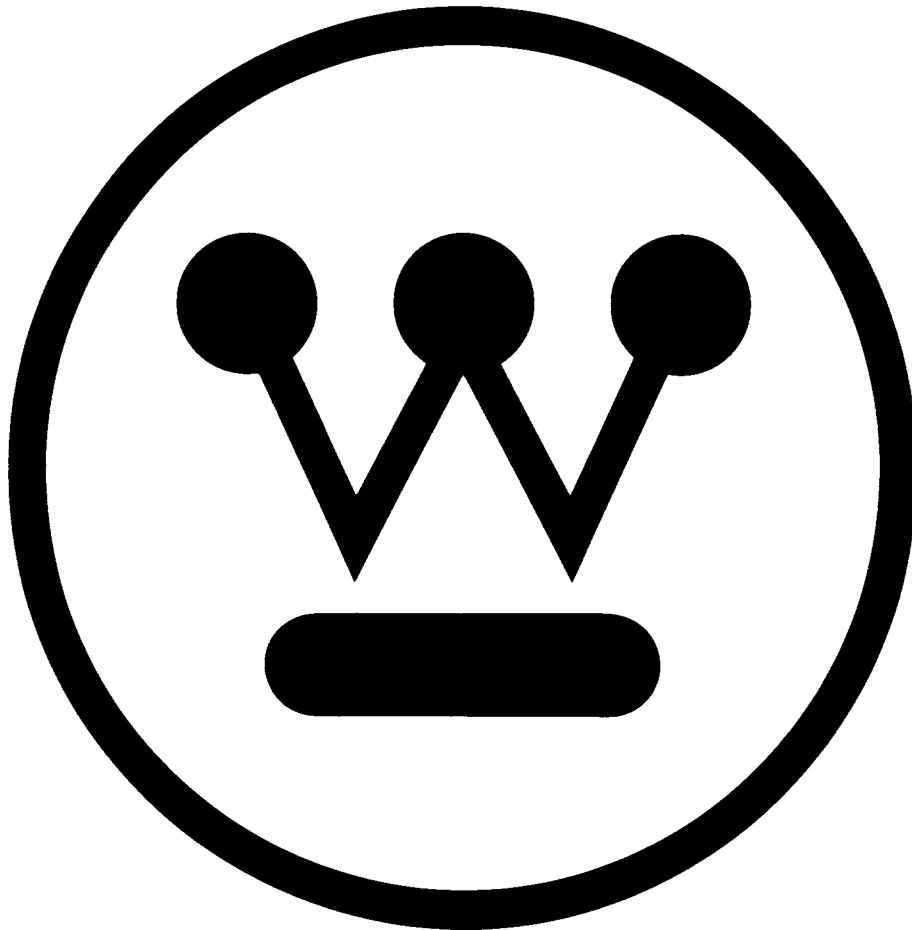


The Mask:

The development of any visual image must begin with some tangible idea, conscious or otherwise. It should come as no surprise that, more often than not, meaningful ideas are the product of chance, of intuition, or of accident, later justified to fit some prevailing popular theory, some practical need, or some formal obsession.

The symbol for Westinghouse (1960) as it appears today, is an adaptation of an earlier trademark. The problem was to transform an existing lackluster emblem, consisting of a circle, a 'W', and an underline, into something unique. Updating and modernization were a byproduct and not the focus of this program. The final design, which comprises a circle, a series of dots, and lines, was intended to suggest a printed circuit. One of the comments that this design evoked, when it was being presented, was that it resembled a mask. Although this idea was never intended, I believe that the effectiveness of this symbol is due partly to its anthropomorphism.

The mask, since recorded history, has served many functions: to disguise, to pique, to simulate, to enhance, to identify, or simply to entertain. Not unlike the mask, the trademark is a potent and succinct means—for good or for evil.



Like all such artifacts, the corn mask shown here serves a ceremonial as well as a practical function. These braided corn masks were worn at agricultural festivals of the Iroquois.



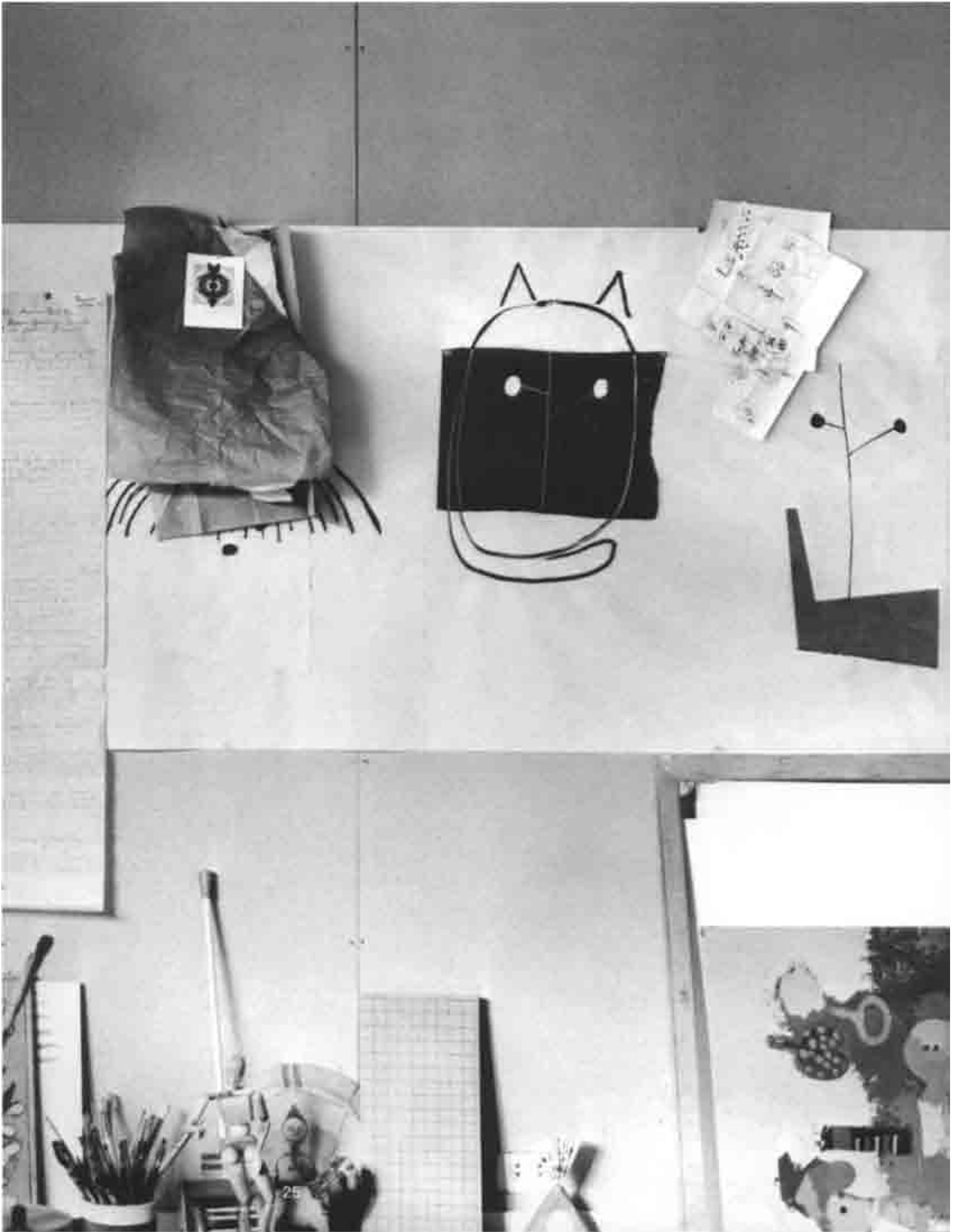
The Rebus

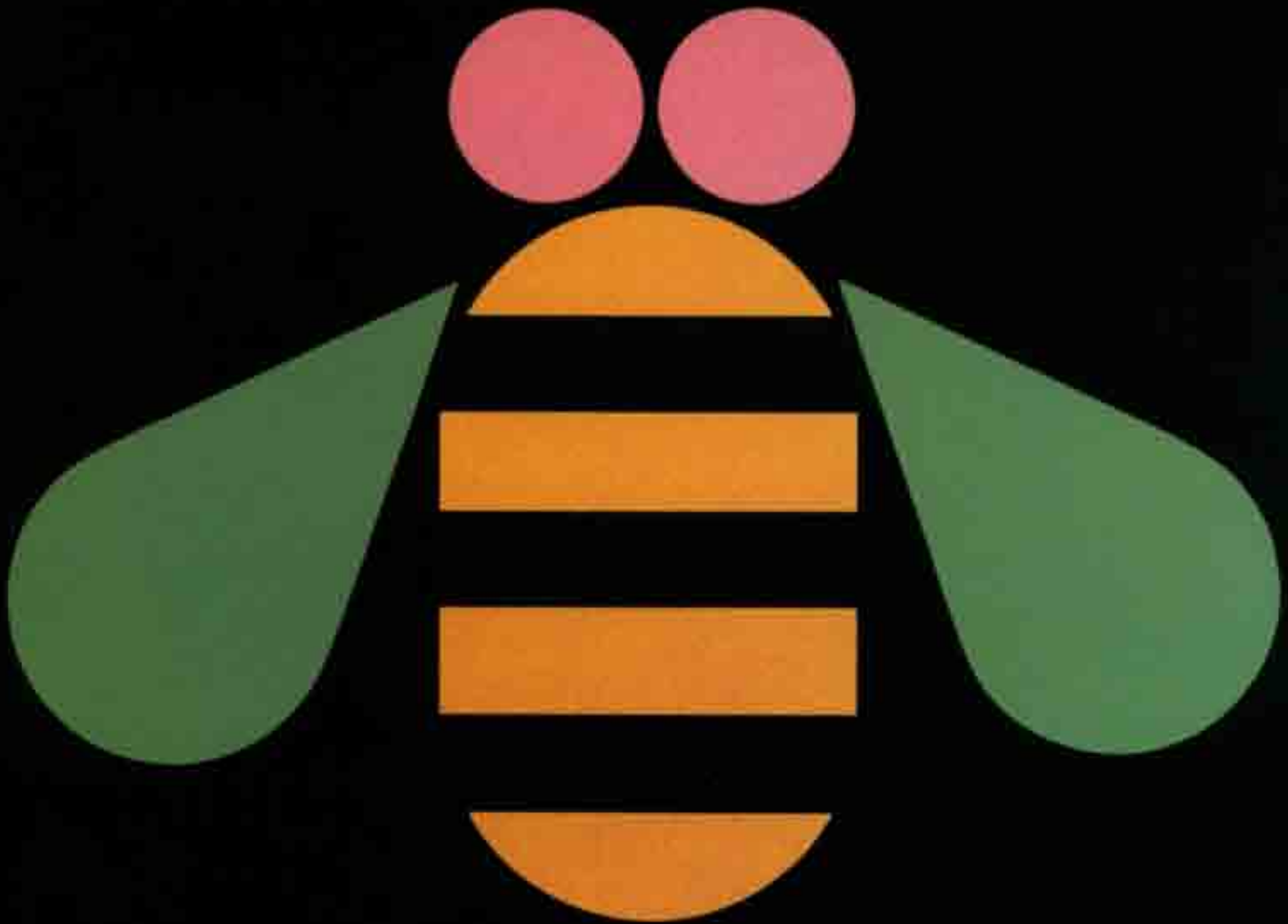
A letter says more than a thousand words. The dual reading is what makes such images memorable. They amuse as they inform. The 'C' device was designed for Colorforms Toys (1959). The 'U' symbol is an experiment in visual puns, as is the cover design for the AIGA, which combines a rebus (the eye for the letter 'i') and a collection of letters, to produce a mask. Of the twenty-six letters of the alphabet, the letters 'B' and 'I' (see following two pages) are clearly

the most graphic and least subject to misinterpretation. The rebus is a mnemonic device, a kind of game designed to engage the reader and, incidentally, lots of fun. The cat mask is part of a mural project.



Photo: Hans Peters/20







Teaching art (design), perhaps more than other disciplines, involves a special kind of commitment from both teacher and student. Most complex is the task of formulating the problem. Ideally, an assignment should be so conceived as to be palatable, challenging, and absorbing, inviting curiosity and encouraging exploration. It should deal not only with formal but with manual skills.

Following is a problem description which attempts to fulfill some of these varied and desirable goals.

Visual Semantics¹:

Visual Semantics deals with the use and manipulation of words (letters) to illustrate an idea, an action, or evoke some particular pictorial image. This involves the treatment and arrangement of letters in such a way as to make a word visually self-explanatory.

Problem:

Develop three designs with the word "Léger." From the group of four specified colors (see p. 31) use only black for your first version, add a second color for the next and four for the last. Designs two and three should be seen as variations of the basic idea; not essentially different in concept, they should look different in the manner in which color is manipulated. Mere change of background without some other meaningful alteration does not constitute an acceptable variation.

Visual analogies which most clearly illustrate the meaning or spirit of a word should be sought, e.g., the letter 'o' is the visual equivalent of the sun, a wheel, an eye, etc. If additional elements are needed to reinforce your interpretations they should be simple, geometric shapes circles, triangles, oblongs; also benday screens or typographical material such as rules, bullets or mathematical signs.

¹*Semantics: the branch of linguistic science which deals with the meaning of words and especially with development and change in their meanings.*

Simple letters are preferred to fancy ones. Letters which imitate exotic alphabets or eccentric shapes should be avoided. Letters drawn accurately by means of ruler and compass are more suitable than freehand forms. (The reference here does not pertain to handwritten letters which possess their own peculiar characteristics.) The quality issuing from any process (facture), mechanical or otherwise, is a reflection of that particular process, and the visual effect (style) is intimately related to it. The more anonymous the letterforms (unencumbered by individual eccentricities or sentimental associations) the more meaningful. Originality is related more to the unexpected idea than to some flamboyant or peculiar technique. To defamiliarize the commonplace, to see it as if it were for the first time, is the artist's goal.

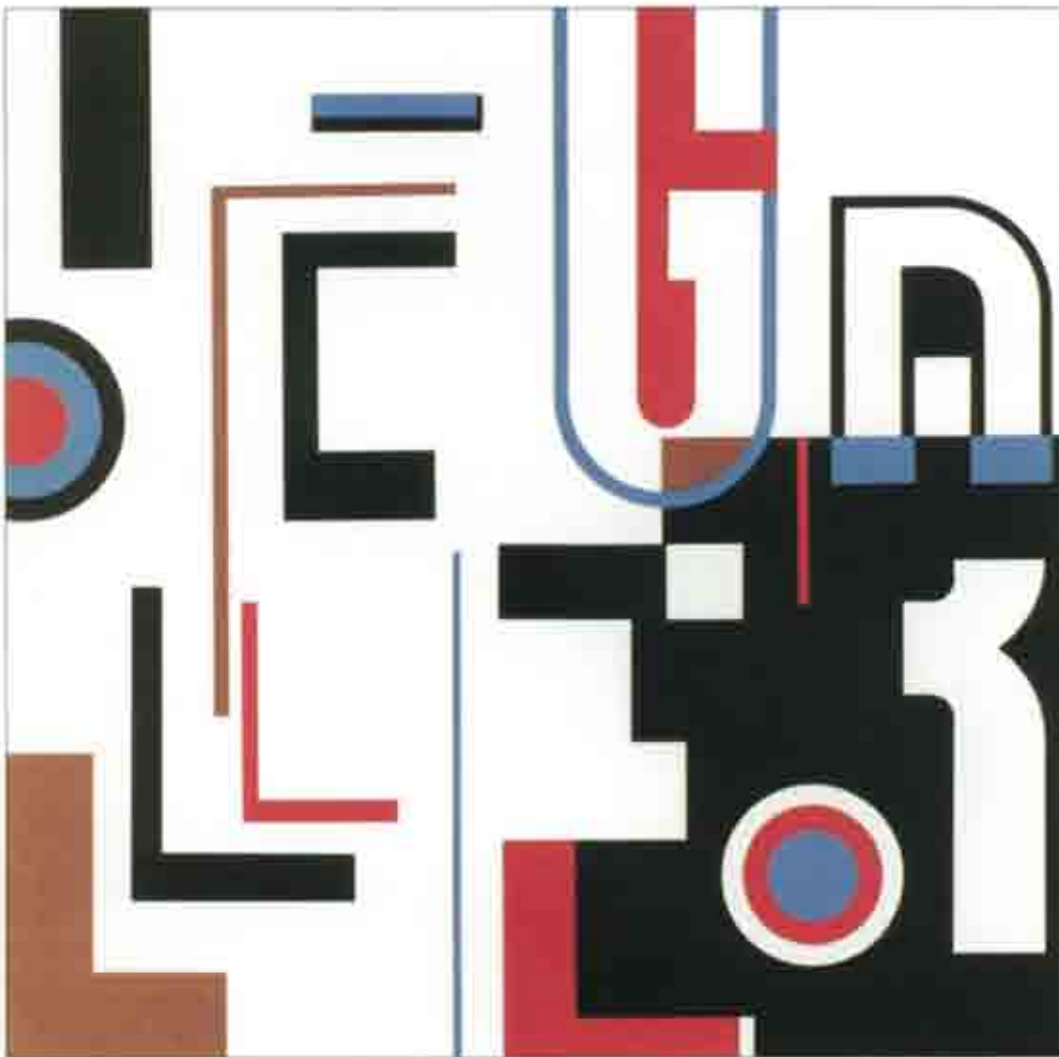
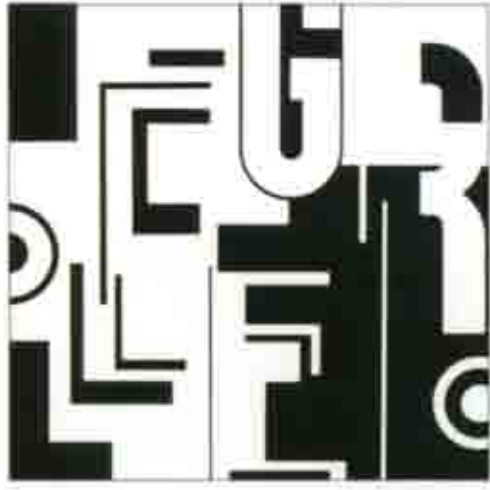
Fernand Léger:

An important aspect of this problem is to discover the fundamental ideas and design principles governing the work of Fernand Léger, but not to mimic his work. Many of the working procedures and design processes, formal and otherwise, which concern all artists, are especially discernible in Léger's work. As subject matter he favored the commonplace, so as to minimize psychologically extraneous associations and to emphasize form. He translated subjects into objects. He saw the human figure as an inanimate object, not unlike a bottle or a guitar. The visual power of the machine, which he saw as a "tool of a social liberation" and a thing of beauty, was interpreted with great force, in its fixed and, particularly, in its moving state. He was obsessed by the idea of movement.

The means of achieving contrast and creating ambivalent space were deliberately sought and thoroughly explored. He usually treated background and foreground of his pictures with equal emphasis, in a lively, competitive relationship, or as a dialogue between abstraction and representation, between the real and the imaginary. He separated color from its form and studiously avoided the use of local color, thus calling attention both to color and to its object. Free color, free form, free association, and fresh visual combinations were devices he used to animate the two-dimensional picture plane and defamiliarize the commonplace.



Mary Muth
Type Literacy



*Edward Kieninger
Bressana, Switzerland*

Contrast, simultaneity, repetition, and the elimination of conventional space illusion were uppermost in Léger's thoughts. Following are some of the pictorial means he used to realize his ideas:

Overlapping (space illusion)
Shifting (movement)
Enlarging (closeup, microscopic view)
Exaggerating (color, shape)
Neutralizing (objects, people)
Floating (against gravity)
Distorting (odd scale)
Cutting (cropping)
Fragmenting (part for whole)
Dividing (negative-positive)
Framing (picture within a picture)
Rearranging (nonconventional)
Coordinating (harmonizing)
Repeating (patterns)
Grouping (crowding, simultaneity)
Isolating (scattering)

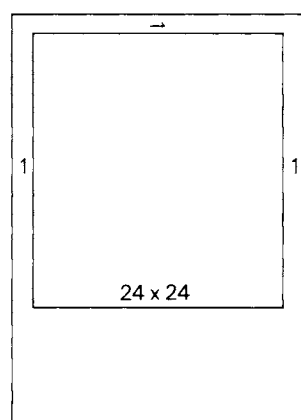
Colors:

Venetian red, raw umber, gray blue, deep gray.

Apart from any psychological and symbolic associations, color is largely a problem of quantitative relationships. Color values change optically, in relation to other colors, against black, against white, against gray. Overlapping or contiguous colors appear to be dimensionally different from those in isolation. The colors for this exercise were chosen for their harmonious relationship, and have no symbolic significance.

Format:

26 x 36.6 centimeters.



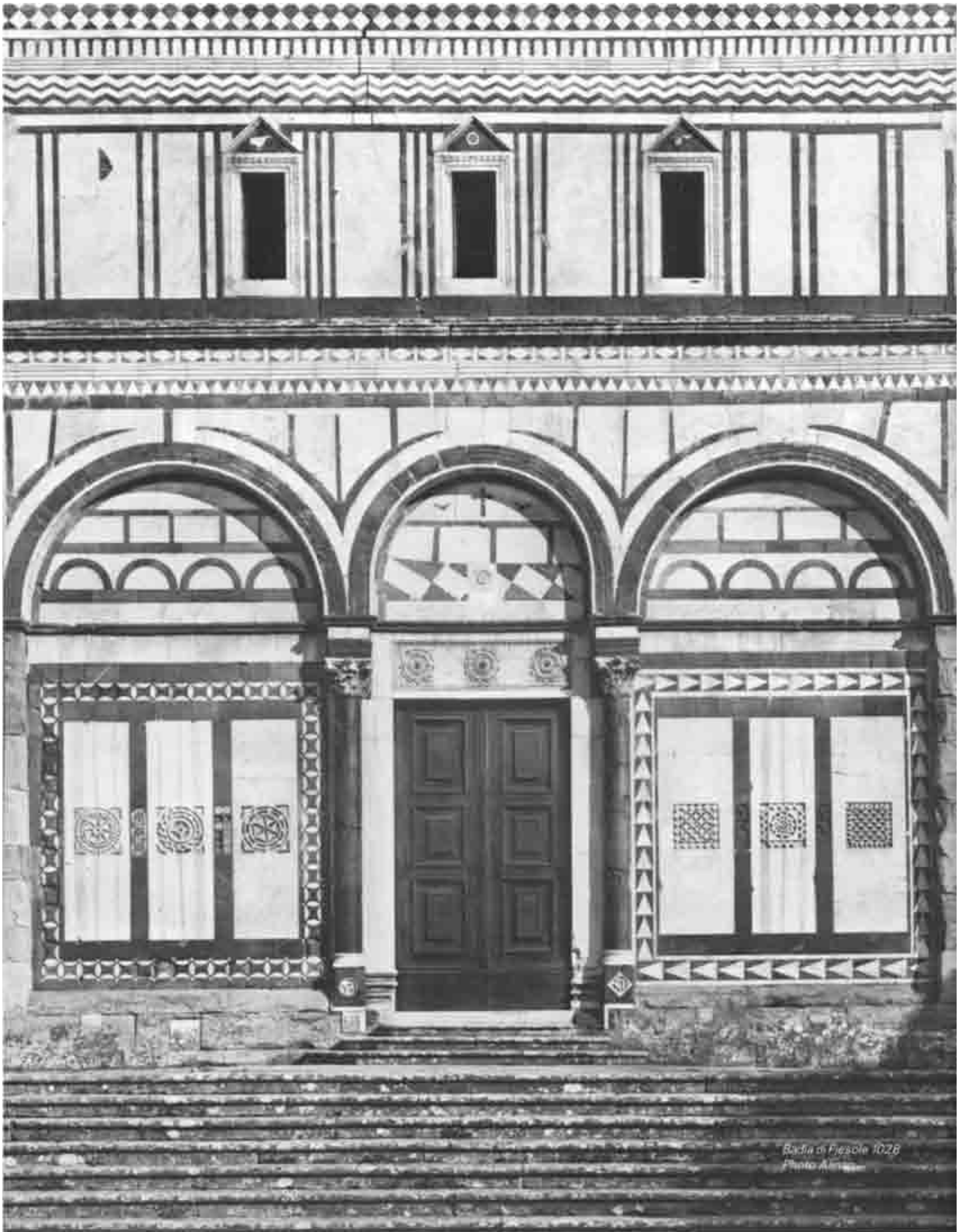
The format is based on a Root 2 rectangle, the proportion of which is derived from the square and its diagonal. It is aesthetically pleasing and has certain practical advantages. Continuous folding in half yields the same proportion. It is also the standard European paper proportion (DIN).

Materials:

3-ply kid finish bristol, colored papers, markers, tempera paints or Plaka.

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Léger, Werner Schmalenbach, Abrams 1976
Léger, Lawrence Saphire, Blue Moon Press 1978
1918, 1931 Léger and The Modern Spirit, G. Fabre, 1982



*Basilica di Fiesole 102B
Photo Alinari*