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A look back at I.D.'s first issue, where the struggle between form and content was played out even in this wellspring of modern innovation.

Lustig's Legacy

By Steven Heller

A design icon doesn't come along every day. To be so considered it must not only transcend its function and stand the test of time, but given its function it must represent the time in which it was produced and manifest the artistry of its creator. The cover of *Industrial Design*, Vol. 1 No. 1, February 1954, was not just the emblem of a new publishing venture, but a testament to one man's Modernism. Despite failing vision owing to acute diabetes – which would take his life in 1955 at the age of 40 – Alvin Lustig was deeply involved in the design of the first two, and nominally with the third issues of the magazine as art editor, art director and art consultant, respectively.

Known in the late '40s for introducing art-based ideas to book-jacket design and in the early '50s for imbuing the same spirit to furniture, textile and interior design, Lustig was a pioneer of the new formalism that evolved into American Modernism. He saw his role as the framer of ideas that were visual in nature. And although he never had the chance to further develop his basic design concepts at *Industrial Design*, he left behind a modern design icon and a format that continued to define the magazine for years thereafter.

Industrial Design was the brainchild of publisher Charles Whitney, who also published the successful *Interiors*. In 1953 he was convinced by his friend and advisor George Nelson that the time was right to introduce a specialized periodical devoted to practitioners of this burgeoning field. *Interiors* was already

featuring an industrial design column that had evolved into a discrete section and Whitney realized it had commercial potential as a spin-off. *Interiors* was also so beautifully designed that *Industrial Design* could have no less the visual panache of a coffee-table book, replete with foldouts and slip sheets. To accomplish this an eminent art director was sought. This was the age of great magazine art directors – Alexey Brodovitch, Alexander Liberman, Otto Storch, Cipe Pineles and Alan Hurlbut – and Whitney fervently believed that a magazine's design would be the deciding factor in its success. From the very start Lustig was entrusted with the authority to design the magazine as he saw fit.

On the editorial side, however, Whitney decided to take a calculated risk by promoting two young *Interiors* associate editors as coeditors of the new venture. Jane Fiske Mitarachi (now Jane Thompson

of the architectural firm Thompson & Wood) and Deborah Allen were new to the field of industrial design, but they had a clear plan to introduce a distinctly journalistic sensibility into professional publishing that emphasized criticism and analysis as opposed to the typical puff pieces common to the genre. As it turned out, this became a point of philosophical contention between the editorial and art departments.

If they had been given a choice, the editors would have preferred an art director who, as Thompson states, "would have been in the trenches with us," a designer with journalistic instincts rather than, as she saw it, a formalist sensibility. As a renowned book designer, Lustig had made certain assumptions about the presentation of content that were often inconsistent with the editors' ideas of how a magazine should look. "We didn't want the words to be gray space, we wanted them to have meaning," recalls Thompson. Lustig instead designed the magazine as he would a book. Blocks of text type were used to frame an abundance of precisely cropped photographs, consistent with a Modernist aesthetic that was respectfully neutral, allowing for a wide range of material to be presented without interference. Moreover, it was what Whitney wanted, so the editors reconciled themselves to building the magazine's editorial reputation through informative features written by authors not previously associated with trade publishing.

The tension between the

editors' journalistic and the designer's formalistic principles resulted in a magazine that was an ambitious assemblage of reportage, critique and commentary in unmistakably modern dress. Although the editors would have elected to have more subheads, decks and screamers to spell out their editorial intentions, the unembellished layout and unpretentious typography more effectively signaled a radical departure from the typical trade journal, which in the end is really what the editors hoped to achieve. Lustig stood by the belief that a strong formal foundation would hold the weight of any editorial concept and withstand the inevitable tendency to employ design fashions to draw in attention.

Although Thompson disliked the first cover with its precisionist grid and silhouetted photographs, she now grudgingly admits that maybe Lustig's judgment was wiser: "He wanted to make a strong, simple statement, which he believed had to stand up against the covers of the elegant fashion magazines." Lustig's design set the standard for future covers and his successor, Martin Rosensweig, who worked with Herbert Bayer, continued to produce covers for a few years that rigidly adhered to the same formal practices.

The early issues of *Industrial Design* are landmarks, for they reveal an innovative shift in the nature of professional publishing from a trade to a cultural orientation that was in no small way underscored by Lustig's classically modern design. ✦

Below and opposite: Alvin Lustig's unembellished cover designs for I.D.'s first two issues in 1954.

