

Graphic designers were once just seen but not heard (or even heard of), insofar as even if their work were highly visible, they personally remained in the shadows. Now, of course, designers are lauded in major articles in mainstream newspapers and magazines. But a generation ago, very few designers received similar notoriety unless they signed their work – and only a handful, like Cassandre, Brodovitch, Rand, etc., were even allowed to do that. Don Ervin, who doubtless the reader of this has not heard of, never signed his work, which accounts for why the designer of some of the most visible Modern logos in America during the 70s and 80s, among them Tansamerica, TRW, Conoco and Abbott Laboratories, as well as the a slew of advertisements for Herman Miller (including one that arguably prefigures the famous silhouette iPod ads) was relatively unknown by the public at large, or the design community as a whole, including me.

A graphic designer, design manager, sculptor of fanciful streamlined metallic car models, and an avid soapbox derby driver (in crazy cars of his own design), Ervin died in an automobile accident on Wednesday, March 10, 2010 in Ulster, New York. He was 85. Because of his relative anonymity, he did not get a proper obituary in the mainstream or design press.



Seen But Not Heard Of:  
**Don Ervin,  
 Graphic Designer.**

By Steven Heller



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Given how little his death was reported (a write-up in a local paper was about all), one might assume he played a minor role in the history of design. Yet upon closer analysis, he proffered the less is more ethos as vigorously as any Late Modernist. What's more, his resume is just as impressive too: Director of Graphic Design at George Nelson & Company (1954–1962), Vice President and Creative Director at Sandgren & Murtha (1962–1973), a principal in Tempo Ltd. (1973–1975), and Executive Vice President and Creative Director at Siegel & Gale (1973–1987), where he managed some major corporate identities, including 3M and Conrail. Earlier in his career he worked at Architectural Record Magazine and Lippincott & Marguiles. No slouch was he.

Ervin was born May 2, 1925 in Washington, D.C., where his father was a member of the White House press corps and a former president of the National Press Club. During World War II, he served as a corporal in the United States Marine Corps and then graduated Carnegie Mellon University with a BFA in Industrial Design in 1950. Graphic design was not yet a bona fide educational discipline.

Some of the logos Ervin created, notably those for Met Life and Cargill, are still in use. And the advertisements he created for Herman Miller furniture are every bit as memorably icon as anything created

by Lester Beall. His movie title and poster for 'The Misfits,' starring Clark Gable, Montgomery Clift and Marilyn Monroe, is as graphically striking as any of Saul Bass' mnemonic title sequences. He even designed the sign systems for Colonial Williamsburg, thus leaving his mark on a monument to American revolutionary history.

Since Ervin's design was so integral to in the corporate identity mainstream and were such key examples of late twentieth century modernism (which is experiencing a stylistic design revival), it is perplexing why he fell under design history's sweeping radar. It wasn't for lack of visibility.

Ervin was simply old school. He just did the work. Specializing in corporate identity, encompassing every discipline from packaging to signage, like many other designers of his generation – a time when graphic design was more marginal to popular culture than other design disciplines – he settled into jobs, working for others, which already had established personalities. Paradoxically, of course, his own work helped to concretize those personalities.

Nonetheless, like many a Modernist he was happy to lay down guidelines for himself and other about the rightness of form. The following were 'suggested criteria for evaluating the effectiveness of a symbol of logotype:'

**Image Criteria:**

- The character should be appropriate to the activity.
- It should be appropriate to the particular audience.
- It should not be necessary to explain it.
- It should not be too complicated to remember.
- It should be simple enough to be memorable.
- It should be unique.
- It should be more classic than trendy.
- It should be contemporary and not dated.
- It should be long lasting and not out of date ten years from now.



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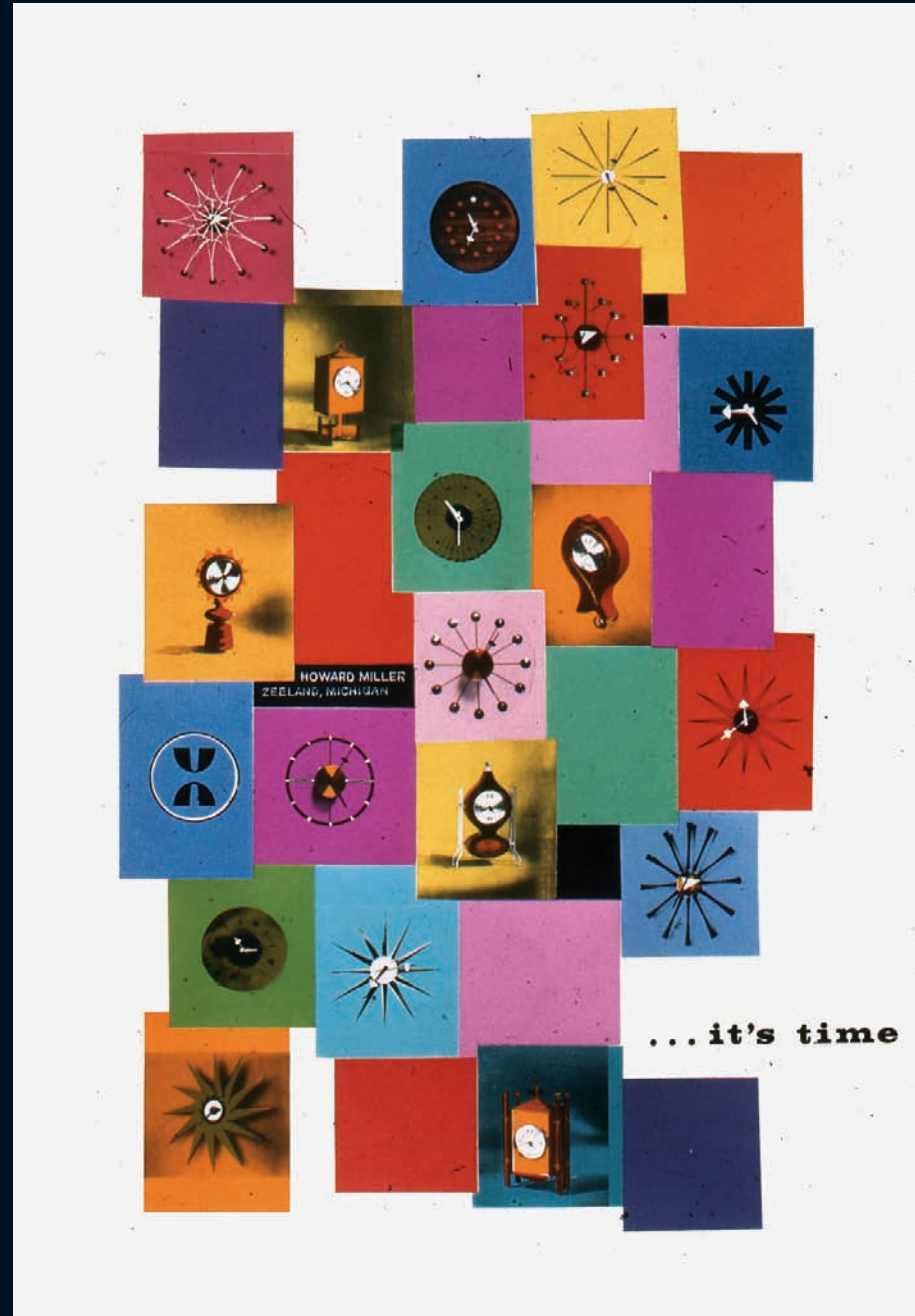
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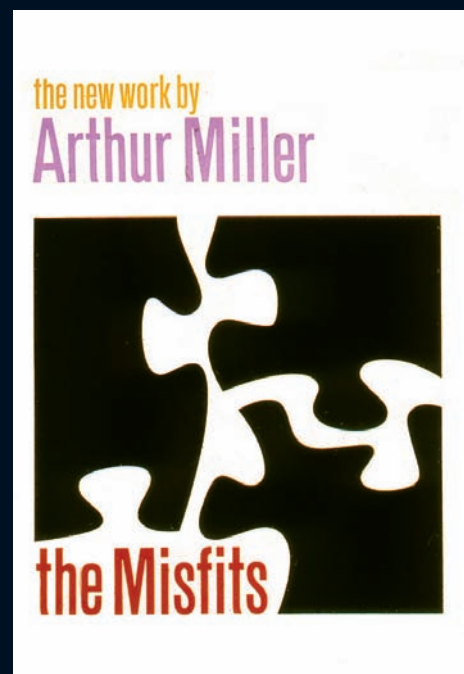
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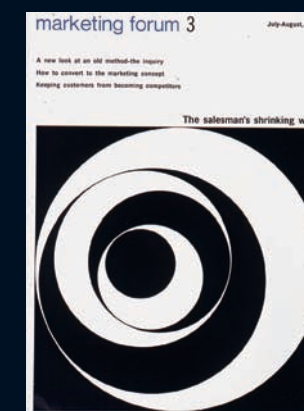
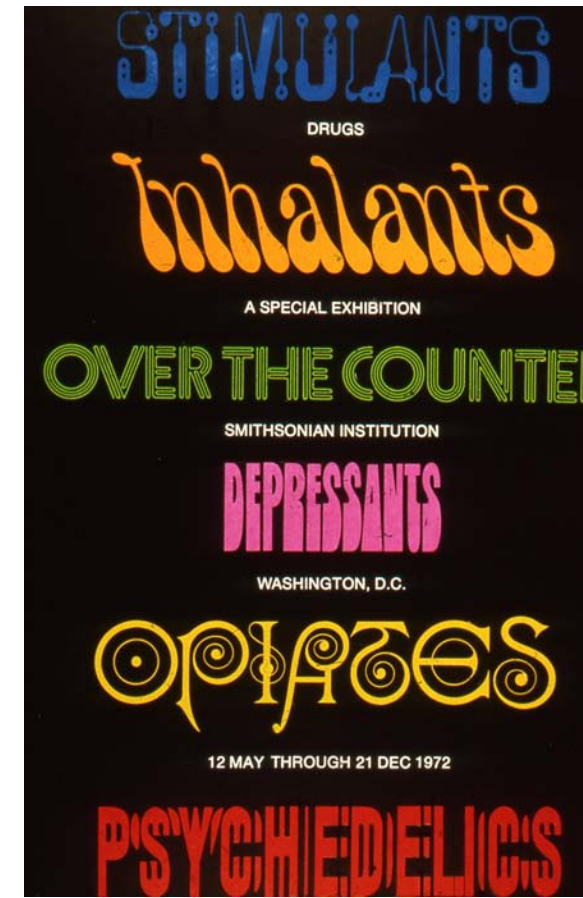
If these sound familiar it is because the precepts are still being touted. Ervin practiced what he considered – and other Modernists did too – the universal truth of logo design. In recent years, more complicated and ornate logos and marks have become popular, but the precision that Ervin brought to his work continues to live up to his bulletpoints.

A lot has been written about the Swiss Style of the late 1940s and 50s – the so called Neue Grafik – as being the Modernism’s classic or orthodox iteration. Although Ervin’s work was not as stoically wed to the limited number of Swiss typefaces or spare color palette, his philosophy (which became the mantra for Siegel & Gale) ‘Simple is smart,’ borrowed from the Amish, is just as integral to the rise of Modernism in America. The work in this case, actually does speak for itself.

After 1987 Ervin devoted himself to making fantasy cars from brushed and stainless steel machine parts, some of which he actually raced, at age 83, in a Kingston, New York, soapbox derby. But what stands out in his oeuvre, and should be included in the graphic design history books, exhibitions and courses (where there is nary a mention), are the logos and trademarks he created. Among those in my newly created pantheon are, the Abbott Laboratories ‘a,’ which Ervin

described as derived from the serpent of the staff of Aesculapius, the traditional medical symbol; the four radiating ‘Ms’ of Metropolitan Life Insurance, designed to give the ‘gray lady of insurance companies’ a contemporary aesthetic; and the flowing, bifurcated ‘T’ for Transamerica, designed to together the company’s multifaceted holdings.

But the most forward-looking of his work is advertising campaign for Herman Miller’s line of contract furniture that prefigures by decades the ubiquitous iPod ads with the black silhouette. Ervin’s show, among other things, an assemblage of black silhouetted tables and chairs against a flat red background, with just the Herman Miller in white. Other ads also show high contrast objects in black or white. This just proves that good ideas are usually recycled – and this comparatively unknown graphic designer had a great many good ideas.



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