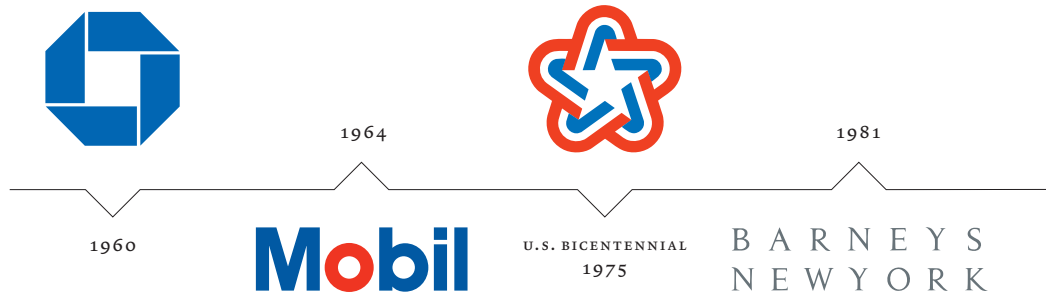


ivan chermayeff & tom geismar

PARTNERS, CHERMAYEFF & GEISMAR

Interview by Steven Heller

In July 2007, Ivan Chermayeff and Tom Geismar marked their 50th anniversary in business together, making their New York firm, Chermayeff & Geismar, one of the longest partnerships in the history of graphic design. Founded in 1957 as Brownjohn Chermayeff & Geismar, the firm has produced some of the most iconic identities of the 20th century (see above). It has also created memorable posters, environments, and exhibitions for the Library of Congress, the New York Public Library, and the United Nations, as well as books and book jackets. It is hard to discuss the integration of modern art into design—indeed, into everyday life—without acknowledging C&G’s contribution, through their fervent advocacy of corporate patronage of fine and applied art for both decoration and exhibition purposes. For almost four decades, C&G has been developing the look of some of Turkey’s most successful national corporations, and The Pera Museum in Istanbul recently honored the firm with a retrospective. In recent years the duo have downsized their firm, but at a time in their careers when most designers might turn away from commercial work, Chermayeff and Geismar have ratcheted up their productivity, at least with the clients they think can offer the greatest opportunity for creative practice. On the occasion of their golden anniversary, we caught up with the globe-trotting pair to discuss their past, present, and, yes, future.



HELLER: What motivated you, along with Robert Brownjohn, to start your design business? **CHERMAYEFF:** Robert Brownjohn and I knew each other well at the Institute of Design in Chicago. Then I got a fellowship to Yale and met Tom. We found that we had common tastes and feelings about many things. We were all trying to come to a level of defining what graphic design could be in the 20th century and feeling that the subject was relatively untouched, dealt with only by a handful of people, such as Will Burtin, Alvin Lustig, Paul Rand, and Lester Beall. **GEISMAR:** I was drafted into the army after graduating from Yale. A few months before my discharge, Ivan wrote and asked if I would like to join him and Robert Brownjohn in starting a small design office. Having no other prospect, I figured, “Why not?” So it’s the only real full-time job I’ve ever had. **HELLER:** What accounts for your longevity? **CHERMAYEFF:** BJ [Brownjohn] left in 1960 for England, because as a heroin addict, he could survive there, and we couldn’t survive with what that addiction meant to us. Our longevity can be summed up in one word, I think: trust. We respect each other’s judgments, and taste, and we have done so all along without very much argument. Our different personalities mesh together well. **GEISMAR:** Another major factor for us—perhaps the

most important—is having shared priorities. While ours have evolved in some ways over the years, they have not diverged, and they have been a major factor in decisions on structure, personnel, and the kinds of work we do. Beyond that, I think our timing was good. We came on the scene at an exciting time of change, along with colleagues like Milton Glaser and Seymour Chwast, George Tscherny, Bob Gill, Tony Palladino, and Alan Fletcher. Additionally, television, concept-oriented advertising, and inexpensive color printing were just coming into flower. Like our Pop Art contemporaries, we were interested in ideas more than style. Modeling our little office more on an architectural practice than on that of the individual star designers, we set out to work collaboratively and to try our hand at a broad range of projects. **HELLER:** What, for each of you, has been the most irreplaceable professional experience? **GEISMAR:** Designing the U.S. Pavilion at Expo ’70 [the World’s Fair] in Osaka, Japan, with architect Davis Brody, engineer David Geiger, and designer Rudy de Harak. Together we created a radical, inflated structure and acted as curators as well as designers for all the exhibits. The pavilion was the hit of the Expo—it was one of those rare times in a complex project when everything comes together in a satisfying



way. **CHERMAYEFF:** For me, it is the feeling of joy that we have accomplished something that is genuinely appreciated. Recently, we were invited to do a poster for the Van Cliburn International Piano Competition, which we had done once before, in 2001. The new poster uses a little-known image by our old teacher at Yale, Josef Albers. The double joy was to be asked to do something by a client who responds very positively to every idea with involvement and understanding. In this case, the pleasure of honoring one of our heroes while accomplishing a creative act leaves one with the feeling that our profession is still worthwhile. **HELLER:** Over the years you added partners and also higher overhead. Two years ago, when most designers might retire to painting in garrets, you scaled down the business and moved into smaller quarters. Why? **CHERMAYEFF:** After more than four decades, we lost a lot of control over our time; most of it was spent managing and taking on questionable work to feed a lot of people. The office space was being turned into condominiums, so moving on was inevitable. At that point, facing our few remaining years, we said, Let's stop doing projects that are labor-intensive—profitable but not fulfilling—and get back to being designers. **GEISMAR:** Among the group there were, not surprisingly, somewhat divergent priorities. If Ivan and I had wanted to go off and play golf, it would have been easy. But we're lousy golfers. Hopefully, the change has worked out well for all concerned. **HELLER:** You

do a lot of work in Turkey for the major conglomerate Koç Holding Company. We've all heard about outsourcing, but usually it's the other way around. **CHERMAYEFF:** In the '70s, the chairman of Koç Holding, Rahmi Koç, asked the chairman of Mobil Oil who had done his design work. Koç came to New York to ask if we would design a symbol for his holding company, which is now essentially the largest private company in Turkey. We have designed identities for Turkey's biggest appliance company, its distributor of propane gas, and more recently, its oil refining company. We have created an identity for a combined retail and commercial bank that will be the largest in Turkey, and we are now completing another for a company that is the equivalent of Home Depot. All this involves loyalty on their part and performance on ours. The fact is, they have treated us like doctors. They are loyal and continue because we have fixed their wounds and haven't made them doubt our judgments. **HELLER:** So, what, after all this time, keeps you interested in design? **GEISMAR:** The short answer is interesting clients and challenging assignments, along with the pleasure of working closely with a group of talented young people. We actually believe in the old cliché that design is a problem-solving discipline, and we act on it. The nature and business of our clients varies widely. Many are nonprofits, universities, and public institutions with real needs. We spend a lot of time trying to understand those needs. We don't have ready answers,

but we're always reaching for something new and interesting and appropriate. **HELLER:** After 50 years, there must be some regrets, as well. **CHERMAYEFF:** Of course there have been disappointments and regrets, but we tend to dwell much more in the present than in the past. In late 2005, we became involved in a project in Mexico City, where a large industrial wasteland of old oil storage tanks was to be converted into a fascinating public park with an aquarium and other amenities. Without anything official in hand, but with much enthusiasm, we made trips to Mexico, prepared sketches, etc. But then the project became bogged down in presidential politics, where it remains. We are still hoping. **GEISMAR:** Well, with graphic identities you pretty much lose control of how well they grow and develop. Sometimes they can be implemented with both respect and imagination, keeping the spirit of the original concept. I find that very gratifying. But in other instances, they are either neglected or abused. For example, I cringe at how Chase is greatly overusing our bank symbol and, in some manifestations, using materials that make it look bulbous and cheap. I regret that we've never figured out a way to ensure consistently successful long-term lives for our design "children." **HELLER:** In all these years the field has changed so markedly from the days when your brand of modernism altered the methods and mores of design. What do you see as the key shift in style, attitude, and practice? **GEISMAR:** We have always adapted to technological changes, but our attitude toward design, our rather open approach, our focus on ideas rather than fashion or style, really hasn't changed. Maybe that makes us out of step with current attitudes. If so, so be it. **HELLER:** Do you have any intention of retiring in the near future? **GEISMAR:** Not as long as I can stay busy, challenged, and healthy. Actually, I think we've been very fortunate to be able to spend a good part of our lives doing something we usually enjoy. Not many people have that opportunity. **CHERMAYEFF:** As Noël Coward once said, "Work is much more fun than fun." **P**