

Survival of the Fittest

A brief, not-exactly-Darwinian evolution of the graphic design annual.

by Steven Heller

DESIGN ANNUALS DID NOT EMERGE on Earth until some time after the ancestors of today's graphic designers rose from the primordial ooze known as a print shop at some unspecified time in the late 19th century. The reasons were thought to be economical, but there were other physical causes as well. In order for the annual to exist, the "layout person," as the evolving hybrid craftsman/artist was referred to, had to become a "creator" of original type and image compositions.

When this new species of print shop laborer realized it was less strain on the sacroiliac to move type and image around while sitting behind a drafting board than to move stacks of paper on and off a press while standing on a hard concrete print shop floor, creativity welled up, and as Darwin would say, there was a "multiplication of species."



"The Annual" itself, however, took more time to coax into existence, what Darwin called "gradualism." The following is a not-exactly-but-close-enough-Darwinian account of graphic design's and the graphic design annual's evolution.

The early designer-erectus quickly proved that he (or she) was increasingly necessary to the financial well-being of the printer because customers were happier with good layouts than without. That's when he (and on rare occasions, she) was elevated from a backroom noodler to a behind-the-glass creative premium service provider for printing clients.

As supply tried to keep up with demand, the profession grew and practitioners emerged through apprenticeships on one hand, and art schools on the other, with tool kits of skills that ranged from typographic layout to handlettered bills and show cards, many of which displayed exemplary taste and acute ability.

By the 1890s, printing trade and advertising magazines started publishing examples of these exemplary layouts, which became templates for less-evolved practitioners. Lettering guidelines, illustration techniques, decorative compositions and all manner of "layout for printing" produced in particular styles were on view to be copied. Plagiarizing "commercial art" was an oxymoron.

But there was unease in the ranks of the growing field. Rules were installed to govern aesthetic and technical production while an evolutionary anything-goes-laissez-faire was influencing another segment. The former were ostensibly for book designers, while the latter served the advertising profession. The two segments were often at odds over rightness of form. Each demanded a system to measure standards.

Printing trade magazines, like the prominent *Inland Printer* and *American Printer*, devoted editorial sections to the showcase of contemporary design. This was a subjec-

tive yet effective determination of what was arguably the best of the best. By the early 20th century, professional organizations picked up the design standards torch and began exhibiting printed pages and books. More monkey see, monkey do (Mr. Darwin).

Trade shows, selections of recent work through peer reviews—juries by any other name—dotted the printing and advertising capitals, like New York City, Chicago and Boston. Some were devoted to the book arts with meticulous attention to typographic and printing detail. Others were concerned with the cream of the advertising crop. Designers were becoming individual stars.



In 1914 the American Institute of Graphic Arts was established by an amalgam of multidisciplinary designers, editors and producers; they mounted shows of members' work. Eventually this review process evolved into annual competitions.

Louis Pedlar and Earnest Elmo Calkins, a forward-thinking ad man who had been organizing exhibitions since 1908, founded the New York Art Directors Club in 1920.

W.A. Dwiggins coined the term "graphic design" in 1922, and it eventually stuck.

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Although women wouldn't be allowed membership in the Art Directors Club until 1942, there were women represented in the annual exhibit, often credited as "lay-out" or even "designer." The exhibits were accompanied by thick, bible-like annuals.

The annual tome or brochure was a sample book of current trends, and selection was an honor but also served as a calling card for more (and hopefully higher-priced) assignments. Although the annuals were primarily used within the profession to showcase old and new designers, they were increasingly used as validation for clients, too.



In the late 1920s, certificates were bestowed on "winners" of the competitions, which were framed on walls of honor in most agencies and studios. The annual show and its offshoots became so prestigious that medals and ribbons were soon created to distinguish the good from the better from the best.

After World War II, societies for commercial art, production and art direction, and graphic design grew up all over the

U.S., some with associations to European sister organizations where the vocation had a longer tradition of professionalism. Annual competitions and other selection approaches were everywhere in the industrialized world.

The field was getting increasingly smaller, in large part owing to these annuals. Europe welcomed Americans. Americans welcomed Europeans. *Graphis Annual* from Zurich became one of the most well-paged of all the annuals (and never even mounted a physical exhibit).

Graphis magazine was the first to launch a competition, and they did so with only one juror: publisher/editor Walter Herdeg. *Communication Arts* magazine followed up with its first competition in 1960, which was ultimately segmented into four annual contests: graphic design, advertising, photography and illustration. A fifth competition, interactive, was added in 1995, with all jurors being peers and educators.



The *Print Regional Design Annual* was launched in 1981. Each organization or publication has different selection criteria;

Print's was based on the regional composition of design in the U.S. Originally, the jurors were the editor and art director, but the pool eventually expanded to include peers, design educators and critics.



Graphic design is now in evolutionary flux. Media is changing and definitions are morphing between graphic and digital. Not surprisingly, annuals are in flux, too. For the past 10 years, graphic designers have been trying to find their way in an increasingly multimediated, collaborative world. The style and fashions inherent in graphic output involved designers attempting to say, *Look at me, world, typography is still important. Books and posters aren't obsolete. I'm still vital enough to be a force of art and culture.*

This year graphic designers are saying, *I'm here, I'm healthy, and I'm proud! And I don't have to show off to get your attention.* This 2014 RDA is decidedly calmer than previous issues: It's about self-confidence and clear communication. Darwin would be proud. ■