

RAINBOW ROLL

A colorful look at the historical roots of the split fountain method, used on this month's cover of *Print*.

By Steven Heller

Before digital printing, four-color process was too expensive for such low-budget printing jobs as county fair or dance hall posters. So to approximate a robust chromatic experience, commercial job printers employed a color printing method known as the split fountain or rainbow roll. A pressman would pour two different colored inks, one each into both ends of an ink well or fountain, which then, as the rollers revolved, spread the colors in the middle to create a third hue along with mixed gradients of the two original colors. Since black is frequently the base color (although any color is a possible base), the result ostensibly produces four or more colors, though not quite. This technique was well-suited for letterpress, offset and silk-screen printing, and more or less cost the same as two-color printing.

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the split fountain was the cheapest way to produce colorful advertising posters and other quotidian signs and bills. The rainbow signaled entertainment—fun and games. Owing to the quality of paper and inks, some outcomes were more elaborate than others, yet the split fountain was such a commonplace technique that using it was not a big deal. That changed in 1954 when French book designer Massin used split fountain to juice up his design for the cover of “L’Or” by Blaise Cendrars. Using bold nineteenth century slab serif typography, he paid homage to past techniques and produced a startling impression through the color’s luminosity.

By the early 1960s, split fountain, like other nineteenth century effects, was deemed so old fashioned that it was ripe for reappropriation by both Pop artists and eclectic designers. A resurgence happened during the late ’60s, when designers of underground newspapers and psychedelic rock music posters, responding to a lack of production funds, experimented with different ways of using single and multiple split fountains to turn on some good vibrations at a reasonable cost.

It was in “The San Francisco Oracle,” the pioneer psychedelic underground paper, where the split fountain reached its highest state of art and commerce. By bathing complex linear illustrations in gradients of vibrating colors, “The Oracle” defined the drug-addled carnival look of the Aquarian Age. Split fountain was a crude method, but it immediately became a “cheap chic” graphic trend identified with the alternative culture, and it was ultimately co-opted by youth-culture profiteers. In an ironic twist, some mass-produced youth-culture products employed four-color process to achieve the split fountain look.

Digital production has made four-color process cheap, rendering the split fountain technique no longer a budgetary issue. Letterpress printers are still stalwarts when it comes to authenticity, but most designers who enjoy split fountain’s prismatic luminosity now create their own rainbow rolls on their computers using Photoshop. ■

