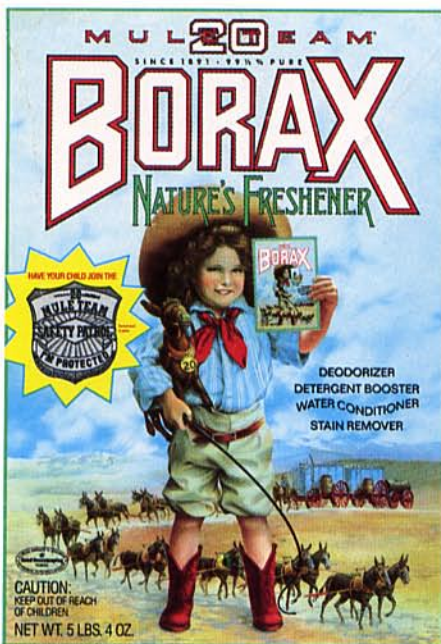


The Time Machine

By
Steven Heller



Centennial package for 20 Mule Team Borax.

Nostalgia. It sounds like an ailment, doesn't it? Neuritis, neuralgia, nostalgia. Take a bromo and call me in the morning. In fact, the word was coined in the 17th century to describe a severe illness brought about by homesickness afflicting soldiers during the Thirty Years' War. In addition to fits of melancholia induced by battle, protracted absences from hearth and home caused these warriors to experience intense stomach pains and nausea. By the 19th century, the word had come to signify a romantic memory of, or dreamlike return to, a more sublime time and place in history.

In the original usage, such yearnings were based entirely on personal experience. No matter that the memories were often idealized, those stricken longed to return to *their* homes and *their* families in *their* time. The later usage, however, implied returning not to a recent or subjective past, but to a distant, objective epoch that could be anywhere from decades to centuries earlier. Other psychological terms have replaced nostalgia, the disease, but the word as a social experience has become synonymous with a desire for things that are old-fashioned or ante-modern.

Despite these negative connotations, we have all felt nostalgic for something. During episodes of stress, one longs for a time when life was easier. Many of us also inhabit nostalgic environments replete with the clothes and furnishings of bygone eras. One might even argue that such preferences are not always based on a desire to return to the past, but on an inherent interest in a certain form or style. I have a Thonet chair, for example, not because I feel nostalgic for the 1930s—two decades before my birth—but because the chair has beautiful and classic form and is comfortable, too.

Yet there are those who find nostalgia inexcusable in any form. One vociferous cultural critic argues that “nostalgia is a desperate clinging to the past because people are unwilling to face their present yet are quite content to surrender their claims to the future.” Its manifestations, he continues, are like opiates that dull mass thinking. And there is justification for this criticism. Nostalgic references and images are accepted codes that marketers, propagandists, and both fine and applied artists use to market their wares, probably so that they won't have to challenge the limits of audience acceptance or perception. In the past couple of years, two new nostalgia magazines, *Good Old Days* and *Memories*, hit the newsstands, and a number of mainstream products, such as 20 Mule Team Borax (see left), Quaker Oats, Maypo, and Coca-Cola, have reissued their early packages in “limited collectors' editions” of millions. The reason behind this rejection of the old “new and improved” marketing strategy is apparently to attract a consumer longing for homespun values by trading on a product's venerable history. John Clive, a historian who is interested in the ethical dimension of history and its impact on contemporary society, writes that “nothing works better to further a cause—good or bad—than to lend it legitimacy by supplying it with a long heritage.” And so one might ask about those handsomely designed Crabtree & Evelyn packages, “Isn't all that faux Victorian and Ye Olde English imagery based on the assumption that the public has an insatiable appetite for the antiquated and picturesque?”

Maybe. But like any fashion, trends in nostalgia are cyclical. Not all nostalgia is rooted in a sentimental preference for Gilded Age quaintness. If László Moholy-Nagy were alive, he would be shocked to find that the material evidence of his efforts to replace bourgeois sentimentalism with machine-age rationalism

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is being used nostalgically by some contemporary graphic designers who have mined historical resources for usable styles. Indeed, Piet Mondrian, Theo Van Doesburg, El Lissitzky, and Alexander Rodchenko, all masters of the Modern and proponents of the timeless, would have been dumbstruck by some of the appropriations that are currently in vogue. Despite Moholy's advocacy of a universal visual language, he would have been the first to recognize that new social contexts alter the content and use of graphic design. I think he probably would have railed against mimicry of any kind. Moholy said that art should be of its time.

This statement is central to a debate going on today between those who argue that culture is a "big closet" (as Tom Wolfe termed it) from which graphic designers can freely select old and new styles, and those who admonish designers to find their own ideas—to ignore the past and address the present. In February 1990, the issue was posed by Tibor Kalman in a critical lecture titled "Good History/Bad History" given before the third annual design-history symposium sponsored by the School of Visual Arts in New York. Kalman asserts that contemporary design historians, and those like myself who edit design books, discourage original thinking by providing a cornucopia of "decontextualized" scrap on which designers parasitically feed. This argument implies that if history serves only as style-fodder, it cannot nourish, which leaves the designer hungry for more style. If historical reference is decontextualized, then the result is unabashed nostalgia. Though the worst-case scenario is correct, Kalman's argument is nevertheless myopic.

Some critics call the 1980s the "decade of appropriation," but artists and especially graphic designers have been appropriating form and style certainly since the 19th century—if not before—and often for good reasons. Leon Trotsky wrote in *Literature and Revolution* that "artistic creation is always a complicated turning inside out of old forms, under the influence of new stimuli which originate outside of art." Appropriate historical use is not the recycling of hackneyed techniques but the application of new ideas.

Here are some examples: In the

1890s, William Morris, the Victorian prophet and socialist thinker, returned to the medieval workshop tradition not simply as a reactionary stand against the ugliness of industrialization, but as a gateway to new social awareness. He believed that medievalism represented a more humanist philosophy. In the 1920s, the respected advertising designers T.M. Cleland and Walter Dorwin Teague borrowed rococo mannerisms from 18th-century French book design to enhance advertising art (specifically for automobile advertising) as a means of reconciling the fast pace of progress with traditional values. They were probably also reacting to the newly adopted concept of forced obsolescence, and used classical design forms as a code to offset any recognition that products were not being made to last. Also during the 1920s, the Dadaists and Surrealists used 19th-century printers' cuts to suggest the ad hoc nature of their messages. In the '40s, Lester Beall drew inspiration from Dada and Surrealism and borrowed some of their graphic and photographic elements, yet developed a distinctly American approach that reflected changes in art and media. In the 1950s, in part as a rejection of the spartan International Style, New York's Push Pin Studios, whose principals Milton Glaser and Seymour Chwast were interested in reviving drawing as an integral element of the design process, invested the early-20th-century styles of Art Nouveau and Art Deco with new energy and thus invented their own distinctive period style. In the early 1960s, a reappraisal of 19th-century Victorian woodtypes, by Otto Storch, Ed Benguiat, Herb Lubalin, Phil Gips, and later Bea Feitler, offered an eclectic alternative to orthodox Modernism yet did not slavishly imitate the original models. In the early 1980s, David King (in England) and Paula Scher (in America) reintroduced Russian Constructivism to the design vocabulary and so unlocked another treasure chest of forms unknown to an entire generation of young designers. And in the mid-1980s, with his manipulation of 1930s advertising cuts, Charles Spencer Anderson brought design back full circle to its nascent period when we were lowly commercial artists. Although Anderson's approach has ignited acrimonious responses among orthodox Moderns, who argue that this is the kind of stuff they fought so hard to eliminate 40 years ago,

I tend to be more generous in viewing the work as a form of satire that comments on a bygone age. An astute friend of mine put this so-called retro phase into clearer focus, asserting that we all borrow from the past but that designers are invariably limited in what they do by their knowledge. "My bookshelf," she said, "has many more books going further back in time than does Anderson's."

Which raises the issue of cultural Alzheimer's (or cultural illiteracy). I was startled to read in a recent study of New York high school students that only 32 per cent could place the American Civil War in the correct half-century. I'll bet that a similar level of ignorance would be exposed if graphic designers were asked to take a design history test. In fact, I met an AIGA member from Florida in her mid- to late thirties who had never heard of Paul Rand. That Chuck Anderson may be better known than Paul Rand is astonishing. And this explains why certain historical styles have become trivialized: Too many young designers—and some vets, too—are simply ignorant of original or even secondary contexts.

If ignorance is not excusable under the law, then why is it rewarded by so many graphic design shows and publications? While I allow that Anderson's graphic style is appealing because it is humorous, and am fairly sure that it will evolve into something else, I was disturbed that PRINT magazine, with which I am closely associated, chose to recognize an Anderson lookalike recently in its Mini-Portfolio section. Why do we celebrate clones of clones? Yet for balance, we must look back to when the Modern approach was funneled into the mainstream through style books and typographic specimen sheets. The results were varied; but today, some of the imitators are celebrated for expanding the boundaries of design. Indeed, some imitators did build upon the methods of the avant-garde with intelligence, making their approach more commercially accessible.

Given the absence of a codified graphic design history (until Philip Meggs's *A History of Graphic Design* was published in 1983), reapplications provide a kind of ad hoc history course for designers unaware that graphic design even has a history. John Clive writes that "the mere fact that someone uses the past for purposes not strictly or exclusively historical . . . does not necessarily mean that the result cannot constitute a major contribu-

tion to historiography." Some clip art books, which preceded the current crop of in-depth analyses and histories, are indeed showcases of historical material. Without Clarence Hornung's compendia of 19th-century commercial engravings (published by Dover Books in the 1950s), it probably would have taken much longer to become aware of some lost and important graphic forms. Without Leslie Cargara's German trademark books and Eric Baker and Tyler Blik's compilations of vintage logos and trademarks, our collective knowledge, I think, would be lessened. While these books are invariably used by many as a reservoir of ideas and forms—and the images are so frequently clipped that they sometimes become nostalgic clichés—they are nonetheless records of design archeology.

Borrowing from the past is an evolutionary stage in virtually every designer's and illustrator's life, akin to the venerable practice of drawing from plaster casts. Milton Glaser once told me that "every generation has to make its own discoveries, even if they are *old* discoveries." Sometimes the results are unique and unforeseen. Brad Holland has often copied the styles, though not the ideas, of his admired masters as a bridge between influence and originality. After Paul Davis discovered naive American art, he combined it with elements of René Magritte's Surrealism, resulting in a uniquely personal vision. Paula Scher's eclectic education, as evidenced in some, but certainly not all, of her work, is a guided tour of Victorian, Modern, and modernistic styles. Each historical application is not an exact reprise but an homage or parody translated through her wit. Tibor Kalman has intentionally given a portion of his work the ad hoc look of the untutored sign painter or printer, as both a celebration of the naive and a wry commentary on the state of contemporary professional design.

Intentionality as opposed to sentimentality is an important distinction here. Used as a logical reference point or subject of parody, historical reference is valid and necessary. But as Oscar Wilde wrote, "A sentimentalist is simply one who desires to have the luxury of an emotion without paying for it." And this is the essential difference between the user and abuser of history. When nostalgia is an end in itself, the result is often sentimental. Using Constructivism just for its colors and shapes, or Social Real-

ism just for its heroic façade, is cultural vandalism. Using these styles to randomly convey ideas and products without any relation to their original context is stupid.

History provides paradigms, and paradigms change over time. Rand's own half-century of work is evidence of how this happens. For example, he owes a lot to an understanding of the various methods and ideas developed before he even became a graphic designer. He admired designers such as Lucian Bernhard, Gustav Jensen, and Otto Arpke, but with the exception of a few very early pieces, his work bears no overt resemblance to theirs. The formal ideas embodied in Constructivism, De Stijl, and the Bauhaus philosophically contributed to what is undeniably Rand's original approach. But just look at his work. No one can accuse it of being Bauhausian or, to coin a term, De Stijlian. Rand's work is about communication through economy and often wit. It is of the moment, yet timeless. If we didn't see or know some of the dates, an accurate chronology would be impossible. In transcending ephemeral style, Rand's design is classic.

Yet it must also be noted that style is a necessary signpost. The design critic Misha Black wrote, "It is impossible for man to produce objects without reflecting the society of which he is a part and the moment in history when the product concept developed in his mind. In this sense everything produced by man has style." We must expect designers to work in the ambient or vernacular language of their eras. Answering a question about the distinctive period look of the 1984 Summer Olympics graphics system, Deborah Sussman once told me, "Many of the great things that we love in the environment, from monuments to public buildings, from cathedrals to temples, are of *their* time. Most art is."

And so we ought to turn to the designs of Bernhard, Cassandre, Garretto not for imitation but inspiration. Although they aren't cathedrals or temples, they are monuments of a sort. They vividly represent the broader style of their era. True, by today's measure, these styles are now locked in time. But their makers were not prisoners of time.

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