
Bookatainment: An Interview with Jim Heimann

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Who wouldn't want a job where all one does, day after day, is track down rare and exotic design ephemera? OK, maybe it's not for everybody—some people would rather ski, surf or golf—but it's a fine living for Jim Heimann. As the executive editor for Taschen America, the Los Angeles publishing arm of Benedikt Taschen's eclectic international imprint, Heimann is a cultural archaeologist who digs for and roots out the detritus that anonymous designers have left behind in their quests for eternal consumption. I asked him about his obsession—the only way to describe his tireless quest—and fascination with these artifacts, and what is worth preserving and what is not.

Heller: Benedikt Taschen has built a veritable empire publishing reasonably priced, well produced, visually seductive, sometimes enormous books on popular culture (i.e., the Icons series of vintage graphics), design and design culture (All-American Ads series), architecture (Richard Neutra Houses series), Hollywood, photography, erotica and all manner of sexuality. Do they exist merely as eye candy, or do they serve a higher purpose?

Heimann: It's interesting, the range of books Taschen publishes—from \$9.99 to \$12,500—and clearly they are visual books. But that's because Benedikt prints what he likes. His interest stems from a comic book store he had in Cologne when he was 18, and being mentored by a group of young Cologne gallery owners in the '80s who gave him a first-class introduction to the art world. Art and architecture are his real loves, and the rest of Taschen's titles spin off from there. He wanted to make art available to the masses because he couldn't afford art books when he was younger.

Heller: You started as an illustrator/artist, and continue to teach in the illustration department at the Art Center College of Design in Pasadena. How does your professional history lend itself to book publishing?

Heimann: I actually started teaching in 1980 at Otis Parsons (now Otis College of Art and Design). I see teaching as a constant education for myself—my students clue me in on what's happening out there and they are really good about sharing information. That translates in my ability to keep pace with trends and what the younger book-buying public is or isn't interested in.

In college I majored in graphic design and had a minor in history, so I learned how to write and do research. I know a lot about a lot of things, and over 30 years have cultivated an ongoing interest in art, illustration, architecture, history, design and popular culture. This resulted in my publishing about 10 books prior to being hired by Benedikt, who early on saw I had a wide range of interests similar to his own. My collecting of paper ephemera and my interest in the visual history of illustration and graphic design made it easy to work up a whole series of titles that dovetailed perfectly with the Taschen program.

Heller: You are a cultural archaeologist of artifacts, to be sure. But what exactly do you contribute to these books? What does it mean to be the editor?

Heimann: I am not an editor in the traditional sense. I am the “eye” for many projects. When I have a project that is under my supervision I shepherd it through the process. If you look at the All-American Ad series, I collected all of the original material, decided which ads we would use to tell the story of advertising per decade, oversaw the placement of the ads on the page, did some caption writing, selected the writer for the intro text, edited that material so it corresponded to what ideas I wanted it to say, handed it over to Benedikt, who fine-tunes every book, and then turned it over to the production team. Then I check proofs and it goes to press.

Heller: It’s safe to assume, for an inveterate collector like yourself, the Taschen position is a dream job. What have you been able to accomplish that you couldn’t have as a freelance illustrator/designer?

Heimann: It is the dream job. When Benedikt proposed the position to me it was “an offer I couldn’t refuse.” I am able to pretty much do what I want to do (with deadlines and some very intense weeks of work). No desk, no office hours. Nice budget for picking up material, an incredible social life. I did relinquish my roll as designer because Benedikt hated my book design. He dislikes most American book designers because he thinks in America it’s about the designer making a statement about themselves and not focusing on the content. Over-designing is how he sees it. But not designing the books has not been a big deal for me since I still have input. And now I have a tendency to agree with his opinion about “name” designers. However, he does admire the work of American classics such as George Lois, Paul Rand and Alvin Lustig, among others, for their simplicity.

I have always put book projects together with the idea of making visual material that wouldn’t otherwise see the light of day out into the public eye. I wanted, and still want, to expose the great imagery that’s out there and for it to be recorded for posterity. Publishing as many titles as I have—such as *California Crazy* (roadside architecture) and *Out With the Stars* (vintage Hollywood photography) —wouldn’t have happened outside of this job.

Four years ago I walked away from the freelance life, and I couldn’t be happier. I do occasionally miss doing art/illustration, but I don’t miss the irregular financial part. Now the check is in the mail every month, like fine-tuned German clockwork.

Heller: Your multitudinous collections—of everything from American nightclub photos and menus to tiki kitsch—require storage in two buildings behind your home. How do you determine what to keep? And where does it all come from?

Heimann: My collections have been ongoing since I was a kid collecting rocks. I remember in the early '60s seeing an American Heritage book on the '20s, including some John Held Jr. covers for the old *Life* magazine. Once I got my drivers license, I discovered an old bookstore in Hollywood that was jammed with vintage magazines. Lo and behold, there were the John Held *Life* magazines in a stack. I was stoked—bought what I could for three bucks apiece, and never turned back. I had just bought a piece of history.

Most of the material I collect now is for book projects, both ones I am working on and future projects. I try to avoid three-dimensional artifacts because of the space problem. I am always on the lookout for Hollywood nightclubs, Los Angeles history, Vegas, Tijuana, Cuba and surfing memorabilia, menus and match covers too. I have a tendency to focus on the decades from 1920 to 1960 but now have expanded into other eras. Anything that is graphically dynamic makes it into my shopping bag.

I don't do eBay. Sunday mornings from 5:30 a.m. to around 11 are reserved for the flea market. We have a different one every Sunday here in L.A. and it's something I have done religiously for 30 years. I've found that in four or five hours I can find more "stuff" at a fraction of the price than I could sitting in front of a computer for days. Plus now I have "pickers" throughout California who know what I am looking for so I often get first shot at their goods. I have a very good and loyal network that gets me almost anything I am looking for.

Heller: I often ask myself what value is there in all this collecting—and what virtue is there in publishing what I call "voyeur books." Do you ever ask that yourself? And if so, do you have an answer?

Heimann: It's interesting you call them "voyeur" books. I always considered the books both you and I publish as an invaluable way to expose the more ephemeral aspects of culture to the world at large. Collectively they say a lot about who we are. Match covers and menus may seem like claptrap, but I have had scholars call me, who can trace American eating habits from what they saw in those books. I have a vegetarian menu from an L.A. restaurant that dates from the early 1900s, confirming for one researcher that L.A. was an early source for healthy eating way before Woody Allen joked about it. That's just one of the many questions I have been asked about the material I have published.

Nobody ever attempted to put together the visual history of American advertising in such an exhausting way that we did in that series. I was very conscious of creating a sense of history by the ads I chose. I wanted them to reflect American buying habits and cultural changes for each of the decades. Benedikt's fascination with the ad series stemmed from the fact that Europeans, especially after WWII, did not have the means to be an ultimate consumer society like Americans. Yet the world loves American culture, so he knew this would be a successful series. I own every one of those ads and amassed the magazines they came from. I think they are a wonderful reflection of America in the 20th century.

Heller: Since we're talking about value and virtue, Taschen has done well by publishing erotica and some raunchier stuff too. Is it out of prurient interest or is there something more redeeming to the subject matter?

Heimann: Let's talk about sex. Our sex titles, *ahem*, our erotic books, could be considered eye candy. But they comprise a small amount of the Taschen success story. European attitudes toward sex are so much more liberal, and they are perplexed by the disgust Americans display towards the body and sex. So I think it's almost an adolescent response that Benedikt enjoys publishing these books in the United States. Especially ones with overt nipple displays, because showing them is one huge no-no in America. He flipped out at Comicon when virtually every display in the convention center with the slightest indication of firm nipples—from Crumb to Frazetta to *Vampirella*—had Post-it notes covering them. Same for Tom of Finland—I think Benedikt enjoys splashing this material in the faces of prudes. Of course they have to have a certain level of artistic merit—he isn't into porn for porn's sake.

Look at our series on the history of men's magazines—who else would publish this? I am sure there is a certain amount of prurient interest that attracts the buying public, but come on, America. Relax. Sex is here to stay. Redeeming? Who wants to be redeemed?

Heller: What have been Taschen's lesser titles, and why? And does quality ever equate with sales?

Heimann: Actually, the sex titles are by no means huge revenue builders, but we do a modest business on them. We publish clunkers, as does every publisher. But the success rate is amazingly in our favor. Quality is a major concern with all titles. There is the overriding German sensibility of perfection. Beautiful printing and binding. Hours of pre-production work getting images perfect. Our buying public sees this, and it definitely translates into increased sales.

Affordable and high quality art books are the bread-and-butter. People know high quality and good pricing, and that is what I think has made the Taschen publishing house the success it is.

Heller: You've struck a successful balance between producing quality, inexpensive books and some extravagant, expensive ones too (for instance, I love the mammoth Stanley Kubrick film monograph). Are there any rumblings around Taschen's ocean-liner office at the Crossroads of the World about "the end of print," "print on demand" or any other paradigm shifts?

Heimann: We talk about this all the time, but it seems there will always be a market for the type of books we do. "The end of print" may be more of a concern to literary efforts and newspapers, but visual books are hard to hang onto in a digital format. There still is that base function of opening up a book and having it handy to peruse at your leisure while lying on a couch or taking a crap.

The book as an art object and a collectable is an old convention that used to be reserved for the upper crust. Taschen has made it a bit more democratic. Either that or people have more expendable income. When the Muhammad Ali G.O.A.T. (*Greatest of All Time*) \$3,000 edition is moving swiftly and the champs edition of the same book (with a stand by Jeff Koons and four signed prints) is on its way to selling out at \$12,500, something is going on. These books will always be in the marketplace in some form. Perhaps diminished down the line, but for now there is a market. An international market, I must add.

Heller: At the rate you're going, you might need a third building to house your collections. Do you ever get rid of anything?

Heimann: I don't collect just to have the stuff. Everything I pick up has to find its way into a book and/or have some sort of historical or cultural significance. At some point the material will hopefully find a home in an institution or archive. Either that or my daughter is going to have one hell of a garage sale once I bite the dust.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA "Designer As Author" at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).