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Exhibition design: Leslie Gill, Ines Yupanqui | Leslie Gill Architect

Graphic design: Yeliz Secerli

Lighting: Clint Ross Coller

Curatorial assistants: Hannah Braun, Olivia Casa

Blanksteen curatorial intern: Annie Roberts

Curatorial interns: Jessie Alperin, Olivia Rodriguez

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Art as Design, Design as Art

Despite the looming shadow in the 1930s of World War II, the magazine and book-publishing world thrived in New York. The city's budding graphic-design culture gave rise to a diversity of photography—as it absorbed literary, painterly, and cinematic elements—and challenged the conventional distinction between the fine and applied arts. One largely unsung hero of this graphic culture was Dr. Robert Leslie. His typesetting firm, along with *PM* and *A-D* magazines and Gallery 303, sponsored a generation of artists, designers, and graphic producers.

This fertile collaboration was evident in American fashion magazines such as *Harper's Bazaar* and *Vogue*. Their highly consequential art directors (and rivals)—Alexey Brodovitch and Alexander Liberman, respectively—were accomplished photographers. Brodovitch's influence, exerted equally by teaching and by example, cannot be overstated. In 1933 he founded the Design Lab in Philadelphia as a weekly gathering of students to focus equally on photography and the graphic arts. Through the Lab, he dared a generation of photographers and designers to challenge their formal conventions with his famous exhortation “Astonish Me!” He encouraged and expected the flouting of rules: the combination of high and low art, the use of outsized gesture or scale, stark doubling of figures and silhouettes, and full-bleed printing (without borders) from one page to the next.

The predominance of photography in mass media throughout the twentieth century is so overwhelming that it is easy to underestimate the vital importance of graphic design. The latter not only integrated the former within a constantly changing format, but also contributed to the import and efficacy of photography itself.

Fashion as Desire

The 1940s was the decade when American modernism in magazine publishing finally established itself during the boom economy of the war years. Photographers in the United States, such as Irving Penn and Richard Avedon, both of whom were Jewish and influenced by Alexey Brodovitch, fulfilled their magazines' mandate to fuse art and fashion. Both also altered the genre of portraiture across a spectrum from staged elegance to unadulterated objectivity. Following Edward Steichen's portraits of the cultural luminaries of his period, each developed a signature manner of depicting fashion and portraiture that broadened the myriad ways magazines rendered chicness and celebrity.

Two pioneering woman art directors were Cipe Pineles and Lillian Bassman, who was also a photographer. They hired exceptional photographers, including Blumenfeld, Saul Leiter, Penn, William Klein, and Avedon, to contribute to their magazines. All of these figures, with the exception of Avedon, began their careers drawing and painting, and thus were receptive to art directors' decisions.

Woman photographers, such as Bassman and Louise Dahl-Wolfe gradually entered the arena. With the help of Carmel Snow, an editor at *Harper's Bazaar*, they used color and natural settings to promote a bolder yet grounded sense of fashion and taste, closer to the everyday reality of the magazine's readers. But as fashion became more pragmatic throughout the 1950s and working readers shuffled familial priorities in postwar America, magazines began to set aside their lofty aesthetic goals. In response to cultural change, the time had come to offer something more relevant than mythic glamour and beauty.

The Contested Page

America in the 1950s was reshaping its aesthetic and commercial landscape in novel as well as profound ways. *Vogue*, *Harper's Bazaar*, and their respective offshoots, *Charm* and *Junior Bazaar*, became cultural touchstones. These magazines exceeded consumer culture, touching upon realities such as class, race, and social status. They provided a venue for an emergent protofeminism, broadening women's awareness of their bodies and how they were perceived in society.

Gordon Parks, the first Black hire at *Vogue*, went beyond fashion and expanded both the political and aesthetic boundaries of photography. Parks advanced a new image of modern society in the United States in *Ebony* and *Life*. He was keenly attuned to how people were represented as gendered, racial, or unseen, utilizing the camera as a means of persuasion.

Some figures pushed the limits of fashion. Lillian Bassman, for example, as an art director and photographer, dematerialized her garments into impressionistic swathes of color. Her renderings contravened her editor, Carmel Snow, who privileged the product and "its buttons and bows." Frances McLaughlin-Gill produced work that was more contemporary, less mythologized. Her depictions evoke her subjects' uncertain path forward—as women pressured to choose between work and family—in an environment of postwar social change.

Much of the work considered here evinces a broad transformation in documentary photography. The photographers wished not just to produce pleasing images, but to contest existing editorial standards and address topics that were deemed taboo or socially radical. These figures believed in the power of mass media to make visible that which needed to be seen, to provide the opportunity for people to see beyond the stereotypes that dominated popular culture in order to rethink the way they envisioned the world.

Reimagining Industry

As certain business executives realized in the 1940s, a competitive edge could be gained by hiring talented artists and designers to promote their companies and house journals. This was particularly true for industries whose connection to innovation was key to their success.

In 1945 Will Burtin was hired as the art director of *Fortune* magazine, where he demonstrated an extraordinary knack for graphically communicating scientific phenomena and theory. After elevating the pictorial quality of *Fortune*, Burtin went on to become the art director of *Scope*, a house periodical for scientists and the medical community sponsored by Upjohn Pharmaceuticals. The journal had previously been shaped by Lester Beall into an unexpected and compelling visual publication, considered by many to have been the most artistically designed biomedical journal in history.

Countless graphic-arts publications grew out of the booming advertising industry. One of the most influential was *Westvaco Inspiration for Printers*, directed by Bradbury Thompson. By the 1950s books and record covers, logos, packaging, and all manner of advertising reflected the newly dynamic, crisp look of American graphic design.

The Container Corporation of America, owned by the progressive philanthropist Walter Paepcke, was an enduring industrial source of work for artists and designers. From 1950 to 1975 the company ran the campaign “Great Ideas of Western Man,” which did not actually sell anything. Perhaps the most successful “non-advertising advertising campaign” in history, it promoted humanism in postwar America.

Graphic Effect

At mid-century many photographers moved toward a more interpretative, idiosyncratic viewpoint and became less concerned with the transparency of a narrative. Their work began to question Henri Cartier-Bresson's famous notion of the "decisive moment," in favor of their own, equivocal perception of it. This critical position was espoused by Lisette Model, a prominent teacher at the New School for Social Research in New York. Model rejected the "decisive moment" as a myth and emphasized the significance of the snapshot.

By the late 1950s photographers were increasingly disenchanted with editorial control, which emphasized accessible and punchy images. Louis Faurer, who worked for various magazines, was among the photographers disinclined toward photojournalism. This was particularly true of Robert Frank, who had little patience for editorial brinksmanship. Another outlier was Saul Leiter, whose aesthetics and interests were entwined with painting and the downtown New York scene. For these photographers, it was time to jettison the medium's goal to present a clear, prescribed point of view. Frank insisted that the "onlooker must have something to see. It is not all said for him."

A generation of photographers began to veer off to varying degrees in a subjective direction. While Black image makers, such as Gordon Parks and Roy DeCarava, had a range of interests, their overarching mission was to depict the underrepresented and establish a humane picture of Black life in America. Other photographers tried to establish an identifiable visual sensibility: Leiter withdrew into his intimate, voyeuristic black-and-white photographs and fragmented, abstract, and painterly visions; William Klein responded with brassy, telescoped, and contracted images. Thus they ensured that photography would have the last word.

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