

Bruce Blackburn, Designer of Ubiquitous NASA Logo, Dies at 82

He was known for the NASA “worm,” which has become synonymous with space exploration. He also designed the 1976 American Revolution Bicentennial star.

By Alex Vadukul

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Bruce Blackburn, a graphic designer whose modern and minimalist logos became ingrained in the nation’s consciousness, including the four bold red letters for NASA known as the “worm” and the 1976 American Revolution Bicentennial star, died on Feb. 1 in Arvada, Colo., near Denver. He was 82.

The death, at a nursing home, was confirmed by his daughter, Stephanie McFadden.

In a design career of more than 40 years, Mr. Blackburn developed brand imagery for clients like IBM, Mobil and the Museum of Modern Art. But he is best known for the NASA worm, which has become synonymous with space exploration and the concept of the technological future itself.

In 1974, his small New York-based design firm, Danne & Blackburn, was barely a year old and eager for a big project when he and his partner, Richard Danne, were approached by the Federal Graphics Improvement Program to rebrand NASA’s classic logo, which depicted a patriotic red chevron soaring across the stars.

Known as “the meatball,” the original logo wasn’t exactly cutting edge, evoking instead a vintage Buck Rogers sensibility of space travel. With the eyes of the world suddenly on the agency after the moon landing in 1969, NASA sought a more forward-looking image.

“They were totally unprepared for that kind of attention,” Mr. Blackburn said in “Blackburn” (2016), a short documentary about him. “Their unpreparedness descended to the level of how they presented themselves to the public.”

NASA introduced the worm in 1975. A sleek sequence of winding red letters, it quickly became a symbol of a boundless space age that lay ahead.



An example of NASA's worm logo, a bold sequence of curvy red letters designed by Mr. Blackburn. NASA

“We did get what we set out to accomplish,” Mr. Blackburn said. “Anybody we showed it to immediately said: ‘Oh, I know what that is. I know them. They’re really great. They’re right on the leading edge of everything.’”

But in 1992, a few years after the Challenger explosion, NASA dropped the worm and revived the meatball in a decision that was said to be intended to improve agency morale.

Mr. Blackburn and other designers lamented the choice. “They said, ‘This is a crime, you cannot do this,’” he said. “‘This is a national treasure, and you’re throwing it in the trash bin.’”

“His design sensibility was offended by what happened,” his daughter said. “He thought the meatball was clumsy and sloppy and not representative of the future.”

Creating the symbol for the American Revolution’s Bicentennial celebration was another big federal commission for Mr. Blackburn in the 1970s. The result was a soft red, white and blue star that applied a modern aesthetic to patriotic themes. By 1976 the logo was appearing on everything from stamps to coffee mugs to government buildings.

Another of Mr. Blackburn's creations, appeared on everything from stamps to coffee mugs to government buildings. Standards Manual

“They say in life there are moments that are once-in-a-lifetime opportunities,” Mr. Blackburn said. “And I got two of them.”

He also worked on logos for the Department of Transportation and the Army Corps of Engineers. In the 1990s, he was a finalist in the International Olympic Committee’s design competition for a centennial logo. President Ronald Reagan recognized his work with a Presidential Design Award in 1984. He served as the president of the American Institute of Graphic Arts in the mid-1980s.

In the documentary, Mr. Blackburn described his style as “programmatic” — design that “fosters imagery in the public’s eye that is permanent.” He added, “The art in design is problem solving and then giving it visual life.”

Bruce Nelson Blackburn was born on June 2, 1938, in Dallas and raised in Evansville, Ind., on the Ohio River. His father, Buford Blackburn, was an electrical engineer. His mother, Ruby (Caraway) Blackburn, was a homemaker and real estate agent. As a boy, Bruce spent hours painting and drawing in his bedroom. In his teens he formed a Dixieland band and won state music competitions playing the French horn.

He graduated from the University of Cincinnati in 1961 with a bachelor's degree in design and served in the Navy as a communications officer.

By the late 1960s, Mr. Blackburn had moved to New York to work for the design firm Chermayeff & Geismar. He later left it to found Danne & Blackburn. He parted ways with Mr. Danne in the 1980s and started his own firm, Blackburn & Associates, on Park Avenue. He married Tina Harsham in 1979.

In addition to his daughter, Ms. McFadden, Mr. Blackburn is survived by his wife; two sons, David Blackburn and Nick Sontag; a sister, Sandra Beeson; and eight grandchildren.

He and his wife moved to Santa Fe, N.M., a decade ago, and they settled in Lakewood, Colo., in 2017. A project that became important to him was designing logos for two Episcopal churches of which he was a longtime congregant: Emmanuel Episcopal Church in Weston, Conn., and St. Bede's Episcopal Church in Santa Fe.

Last year, Mr. Blackburn was surprised when NASA revived the worm logo and put it on the side of a SpaceX rocket that was launched into orbit in the spring. The fate of the worm had always remained a tender subject for him.

"I think he was glad to know that his design was finally back in space," his daughter said.

Last year NASA revived the worm logo for the SpaceX Falcon 9 rocket, which launched into orbit in the spring. SpaceX