

Brenda Mitchell-Powell

Why is Graphic Design 93% White?

Removing Barriers to Increase Opportunities in Graphic Design

The AIGA working conference brought together, for the first time, designers of color, educators, job placement and recruiting professionals, principals and partners from major corporations and design firms, representatives from other design organizations, and AIGA chapter representatives. The conference clearly showed that there is a resource of minority talent with considerable experience and great desire to broaden its opportunities. The AIGA is committed to continuing this effort, through its chapters' programs locally and by serving as a national clearinghouse for information on related projects and activities.

This program was made possible, in part, with public funds from the National Endowment for the Arts (Design Arts Program) and the New York State Council on the Arts (Architecture, Planning and Design Program). For further information, contact Allen Payne, Director of Programs, AIGA 1059 Third Avenue, New York, NY 10021; or call: 212-752-0813.

Cheryl D. Miller, president of Cheryl D. Miller Designs, had no idea that her 1987 *Print* magazine article, "Black Designers: Missing in Action," would catapult her to national prominence and be a catalyst for efforts to raise consciousness. In fact, she still receives calls and letters referencing that first documented account of the dilemma of black designers.

However, black professionals were not alone in their responsiveness to Ms. Miller's article. With heartening sensitivity, the national AIGA, directed by Caroline Hightower;

Steven Heller, editor of the *AIGA Journal*; and John Morning, president of John Morning Design, Inc., quickly acted

by establishing the AIGA Minority Task Force in 1989 to help end the marginalization of people of color (use of the term 'minority' is a form of denigration, since statistically the world's population is predominantly non-white). John Morning was chairman; other members include Michael Bierut, Randall Hensley, Eli Kince, and Cheryl D. Miller.

Thus began the impetus for the recent symposium and working conference held last April 5 at the High School of Art and Design in New York City, Diana Cagle, principal. Support for the program was provided in part by the National Endowment for the Arts' Design Arts Program and the New York State Council on the Arts' Architecture, Planning and Design Program.

Conference organizers prepared for the national event armed with the data compiled from AIGA minority surveys directed to 350 design firms, 235 design schools, and more than 500 multicultural designers. According to Ms. Hightower, the event was planned as "a national initiative [devised] to increase racial representation in the field of graphic design." Specific goals included "promotion of awareness, identification and articulation of



Visual Archetypes: Can we get past the cliches? Shown here are examples of drawings by conference participants from an exercise that required them to create visual archetypes of their first experiences with racial awareness.

problems, and development of a working plan to help provide realistic solutions." Long-term objectives include charting the future direction of AIGA and the graphic design industry and "preparing [the industry] for the work force of the Nineties and beyond."

Throughout the day-long conference, attendees shared personal and professional multicultural experiences through interactive sessions facilitated by Elsie Y. Cross, president of Elsie Y. Cross Associates, Inc. Ms. Cross is a diversity manager who "helps groups understand hidden meanings in language and culture; initiates dialogue; establishes a group level of comfort to legitimize speaking of race and gender; and assists organizations in developing strategies to ameliorate racism and sexism." When queried on her expectations, and on her evaluation of the conference's outcome,

she noted that voluntary attendance conferred greater receptivity to diversity and readiness to learn. (A more typical encounter involves a five- to fifteen-year corporate commitment mandated by an existing confrontational situation.)

One exercise involved the formation of small race- and sex-segregated groups instructed to compile lists of issues and problems (see following page) experienced by people of color in graphic design. Posted synopses noted concerns with cultural exploitation, lack of representation, conflicts between ideological and financial imperatives and between assimilation and integration, stereotyping, corporate and societal assumptions of inferiority, ignorance and arrogance toward

cultural diversity. Frustration was expressed as anger or internalized racism by blacks and as confusion or insecurity regarding establishment by whites.

Another particularly effective exercise required participants to create visual archetypes of their first experience with racial awareness. The most memorable images depicted common iconography tainted by subtle, yet unmistakable racism: Band-Aids® and Crayola® crayons, for example, were identified as "flesh-colored."

During the post-conference reception, participants expressed overwhelming satisfaction with the symposium. Black participants, in particular, spoke of their gratification with the strength of numbers represented by their constituency. Approximately half the conferees were Black; Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans, and Native Americans also attended. The failure to enlist a much broader-based support of advertising and personnel professionals—key players in long-term societal changes—was the only major disappointment voiced.

Everyone stressed the need to sustain the constructive momentum that was established. John Morning commented on the "quandary of next steps," as he pondered the need for collective action. The general consensus favored implementation of a three-point initiative to achieve equitable participation of people of color: establishment of a mentor program, a job bank or referral system, and the implementation of educational opportunities.

Allen Payne, AIGA director of programs, emphasized the need to create an organizational platform based on a national perspective. He also stressed the need to

A report on the working conference organized by the American Institute of Graphic Arts on April 5, 1991 at The High School of Art & Design, 1075 Second Avenue, New York, NY 10021.

Caroline Hightower

A Beginning

The opening session of "Why is Graphic Design 93% White?" was organized so that individuals could face one another in an atmosphere of relative candor, and answer questions, one to one, about race that affect us as individuals and in society. There was a growing sense throughout the day that we could address and work through many difficult issues together towards a productive mandate for action. And we did.

After a series of varied working sessions that included us all, in groups and as a whole, there was a design-specific panel (see box, following page) that raised issues related to education, hiring, and design practice, both corporate and individual, followed by identifying priorities and options, and, finally, a number of initial conclusions about how to increase minority representation in graphic design (see Problems and Solutions, following page).

There is only a first time once. This was it. As a result, a community has been identified and a network established; priorities and goals have been agreed upon by a large working group. Effecting change will take a commitment of time and energy, which I believe we all share. Initiatives are already underway by AIGA and others—more will follow.

We have begun.

establish organizational guidelines to enhance educational opportunities. He underscored the commitment of the AIGA as he outlined ways in which the national organization could facilitate chapter participation in multiculturalism. The keys to these goals are three national initiatives: establishment of a national clearinghouse/resource center with a mandate for action, creation of contacts and projects devised for chapters, and guidelines and programs for communities and individuals.

Chris Jenkins, AIGA director of membership and chapters, wisely commented that increased participation by designers of color in both national and chapter organizations would encourage dialogue, enhance opportunities, and promote a greater awareness of issues of representation and diversity.

Ultimately, American economic imperatives will require an accommodation of pluralism. The issue remains: Voluntary and enthusiastic incorporation of multiculturalism will enable graphic design and its practitioners to shape the American landscape and effect ethical changes; rigid adherence to ethnocentric, male- and class-dominated perspectives will deprive the industry of much needed creativity and vitality, as well as revenue.

Comprehension and appreciation of the role of media as message, and indexes and standards of visual literacy gain importance as visual images outpace text in contemporary accessibility and influence. The relative infancy of graphic design, and its emphasis on ingenuity, may well be the means to enfranchise the full spectrum of the industry's participants.

Brenda Mitchell-Powell, president of Orange Ball Corporation, is the editor of ...and so they marched (St. Lukes Press, 1992) and the editor-in-chief of The Multicultural Review (Greenwood Publishing Group Inc.), scheduled to premiere in January 1992.



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Why is Graphic Design 93% White? Problems and Solutions

Group 1: Access to Resources

- ▷ Joint recruitment at high school and college level, professional intern/placement
- ▷ When you find someone with talent, foster that talent with financial incentives and demonstrative means
- ▷ Bring high school art teachers to top design firms and teach them what is going on in the design community.

Group 2: Old Boys Network=Ignorance, Fear, Guilt and Stereotypes

- ▷ Old Boy networks still exist: promote activities of inclusion rather than exclusion.

Group 3: Serving a White World: Perceptions of "Who Are the Customers?" and "Can People of Color Only Serve People of Color?"

- ▷ We have to explode myths; to learn how to rationally and articulately give reasons for selling to a multi-cultural/multi-racial market.
- ▷ Active advocacy as people of color (and whites as well) is a must.

Group 4: Lack of Role Models

- ▷ Education is an area where minority designers are not seeing role models. Time has to be made to make a connection to these young people (high schools, etc.).
- ▷ Career days in schools are a possibility. The AIGA and designers can do outreach to those efforts.
- ▷ Mentor programs. Field trips to minority places of business, or places where minorities are employed.
- ▷ Scholarship programs—done through competitions and/or corporate sponsorships.
- ▷ Brochures about careers in graphic design aimed a high school students, like the one that the St. Louis chapter did that was passed out at the symposium, would be good vehicles.

Group 5: What the Graphic Arts are as a Profession, a Career

- ▷ The power of advertising to sensitize people and eliminate a lot of pre-conceptions about color, race, and religion is enormous. A deliberate advertising effort should be undertaken, not just by the AIGA, but by the whole advertising and design community.
- ▷ Look to the coalition of organizations that have the power to get funding for programs for young people to learn about design.
- ▷ Give training in networking: knowing how to utilize resources and knowing what resources are available to get jobs.
- ▷ Noel Mayo at Ohio State has a scholarship program.
- ▷ There is a summer camp career academy at the [Metropolitan] Transit Authority Mentoring Program which includes graphic design; get in touch with a representative from there.
- ▷ The AIGA should set up a committee to establish guidelines for students (and their parents) who want to go into design careers.
- ▷ RitaSue Siegel has developed a design comic book entitled "What is Graphic Design?" It's in a very basic form that anyone can understand.
- ▷ The AIGA and other arts organizations should lobby Washington to get more funding for art/design programs in the schools.

Group 6: Language Facility

- ▷ Graphic design is about communication; people who get into the field need to have basic communication skills.
- ▷ The AIGA should establish professional terminology.
- ▷ Graphic design is global. It does not limit itself to English. Designers have to be open to other languages, other cultures.

Group 7: Internalized Racism

- ▷ This issue wasn't addressed. [It should be noted that participants were instructed to choose issues/groups and come up with "doable" steps and actions. The avoidance of this topic does not indicate its unimportance, rather the participants chose to tackle problems where they could realistically effect change.]

Symposium Panel

Six panelists, representing a wide range of professional experience in graphic design, discussed many of the concerns affecting minority representation in the graphic design industry: education, recruitment and employment, corporate involvement, and business management. The following is a selection of important points that were addressed during the conference:

Richard Wilde, Chairman, Department of Graphic Design and Advertising, School of Visual Arts, New York, NY.

"...Students who end up in graphic design programs at the college level arrive by fortuitous routes. Generally, they choose graphic design as a concession. This is anything but a clear-cut issue concerning the white majority. It goes without saying that it is infinitely more difficult for a student of color to find his or her way into the graphic community."

The graphic design department at SVA has a 25% minority population—that's actually the good news—the actual breakdown is 11% Oriental, 7% Hispanic, and 7% Afro-American. This speaks poorly for a city with a population of over 30% Afro-Americans: more than two million people! The long-term solution obviously lies in the sustained, sequential involvement of the arts at the grade school level."

Steff Geissbuhler, Associate, Chermayeff & Geismar Inc., New York, NY.

"When I first came to Chermayeff and Geismar there were already black employees, and the firm is almost thirty years old. We have always had minorities on our staff...It has proven a very beneficial asset because diversity brings in different cultures and attitudes—and some of our clients are black. What we have in our industry is something terrific in common—design—and that is a matter of quality, ideals, art and history. Not color."

Fo Wilson, Designer, Studio V, New York, NY.

"To want to be a professional of any kind in America a person of color has to be a long-distance runner and a hurdler. One of the first hurdles I had to overcome was just telling my family I wanted to go to art school. To them, that meant I would be poor, starve. I ask myself why I have had a relative degree of success in my field—success meaning I have clients, I have work...Since the majority of businesses are white-owned, the majority of my clients, for me to be successful, must be white."

Talent is not equal. Black designers many times have to be better than good just to be good. I constantly had to go into interviews and defy all the misconceptions people had about blacks...I had to be articulate, I had to be presentable, I had to be capable...all of which they assumed I wasn't."

Richard Curtis, Managing Editor of Graphics and Photography, USA Today, The Gannett Company, Arlington, VA.

"Philosophically and practically, my company is committed to equal opportunity for all people...to affirmative action programs which we pursue aggressively and for jobs that mean something to everyone....Affirmative action is a matter of commitment and the commitment has to come directly from the top of the company—from the board of directors and the chief executives on down. Because if it's not pervasive in the corporate environment, then it doesn't exist. You only "do" or "not do," there is no "try."

At *USA Today* my [graphic design] staff reflects the diversity of the country. The way we've developed that is to not sit and wait for them to come through the door; we've aggressively identified and pursued people, recruiting them, maintaining contact with them and interviewing them...It's not only good to do, it's good business."

Michelle Stuhl, Professional Recruiter, Roz Goldfarb Associates Inc., New York, NY.

"Recently there has been more demand from our clients for people of color. The majority of these requests...are coming from large corporations. The professional opportunities are opening up. The way that we identify talent is through the portfolio. We don't see what color someone is when their portfolio is dropped at the reception desk...we make our decisions based on their work, their talent. Portfolios are color blind."

Roger Tucker, Principal, Tucker Hilliard Associates, South Orange, NJ.

"We are a marketing communications and design firm specializing in graphic design, copywriting, and advertising. Our clients include *Black Enterprise Magazine*, Coca-Cola, Citibank, Clairol, PSE&G, McGraw-Hill, Blue Cross and Blue Shield of New Jersey, and *The New York Times*. That's just some of them."

Success is relative, and in this competitive industry, we are considered a successful company, but this goal of having a company was not something I "fell into"...I was accepted into Cooper Union after being told by my high school guidance counselor that no minority had gotten into the school in eight years and the likelihood of my getting in was very slim. I like challenges—being in this business is a super challenge—so I took that first one on. And I succeeded."

The AIGA working symposium, "Why is Graphic Design 93% White?," showed that there is a pool of minority talent with considerable experience and great desire to broaden its opportunities. It was valuable for these designers to meet each other, to exchange ideas and contacts, and to meet mainstream colleagues whom they might not have otherwise. The activities of the day, particularly the panel discussion, delineated the hurdles that limit the number and the prospects of minority graphic designers.

The conference was unique in bringing together for the first time as many as 50 designers of color, and also in discussing perceptions and attitudes that are so critical to making decisions to employ designers of color. These issues are almost never acknowledged in a public forum, much less with any candor.

The challenge now is to somehow extend the activities and thinking that were behind this conference to a much larger audience in graphic design, individuals who are in a position to affect decisions on hiring. Only their concern and responsibility can enlarge the opportunities that exist for designers of color.

John Morning, Chair

Resources

The following is a resource list for further information regarding education, recruitment and professional development. For information directly regarding the symposium, contact Allen Payne at AIGA, (212) 752-0813.

Ms. Estelle Allen, President

Employees Manpower, Inc.
Suite 4587
One World Trade Center
New York, NY 10048

Mr. Kenneth Clay, Director

Higher Education Opportunity Program
Pratt Institute
200 Willoughby Avenue
Brooklyn, NY 11225

Mr. Tim Fitch

Design Arts Program
National Endowment for the Arts
1100 Pennsylvania Ave., NW
Washington, DC 20506

Mr. Leon Goodman, Manager for Recruitment and Staffing,

Channel 13 WNET
356 West 58th Street
New York, NY 10019

Ms. Caroline Hightower, Director

The American Institute of Graphic Arts
1059 Third Avenue
New York, NY 10021

Mr. Noel Mayo

Ohio State University
Department of Industrial Design
280 Hopkins Hall
128 North Oval Mall
Columbus, OH 43201-1363

Cheryl D. Miller

Cheryl D. Miller Design
353 Lexington Avenue
New York, NY 10016

Mr. John Morning

John Morning Design, Inc.
40 West 17th Street
New York, NY 10011

Ms. Deborah Norden

Architecture, Planning and Design Program
New York State Council on the Arts
915 Broadway
New York, NY 10010

Mr. Raymond Plumey

Minority Resources Council
The American Institute of Architects
308 Pleasant Avenue
New York, NY 10035

Mr. Stan Ray

The High School of Art and Design
1075 Second Avenue
New York, NY 10022

Mr. David H. Rice, Chairman

Organization of Black Designers
717 "D" Street, NW
Washington, DC 20004

Ms. RitaSue Siegel

RitaSue Siegel Agency, Inc.
18 East 48th Street
New York, NY 10017

Ms. Michelle Stuhl

Roz Goldfarb Associates, Inc.
10 East 22nd Street
New York, NY 10010