

sion of the solutions found for its various components. It is 'beautiful' because it is just right. An exact project produces a beautiful object, beautiful not because it is like a piece of sculpture, even modern sculpture, but because it is only like itself.

If you want to know something else about beauty, what precisely it is, look at a history of art. You will see that every age has had its ideal Venus (or Apollo), and that all these Venuses or Apollos put together and compared out of the context of their periods are nothing less than a family of monsters.

A thing is not beautiful because it is beautiful, as the he-frog said to the she-frog, it is beautiful because one likes it.

'The basic teaching error of the academy was that of directing its attention towards genius rather than the average.' (*Bauhaus*)

A Living Language

'Good language alone will not save mankind. But seeing the things behind the names will help us to understand the structure of the world we live in. Good language will help us to communicate with one another about the realities of our environment, where we now speak darkly, in alien tongues.'

(*Stuart Chase, The Tyranny of Words*)

'... And after whan ye han examined youre conseil, as I han said beforne, and knownen wel that ye moun performe youre emprise, conferme it than sadly til it be at an ende.' Can one now address the public in the language of the fourteenth century? It is most unlikely that the public would understand.

Just as there are dead languages, it is natural that there should be modes of expression and communication that have gone out of use. It is a well-known fact that to get a message across we can use not only words, but in many cases also images, forms and colours, symbols, signs and signals. Just as there are words which belong to other ages, so there are colours, forms, signs and so on which in our time have come to mean nothing, or would convey a wrong meaning.

What does a blacksmith's sign mean to the children of today? To children in 1900 it meant a lot: it meant excitement. When they saw it they ran to watch the blacksmith hammering the glowing iron on his anvil, heating it every now and then in a furnace that threw off sparks like a firework display, nailing the finished shoe to the horse's hoof. Imagine the pungent stench of the hot iron, and the huge impulsive horse tethered to an iron ring set in the blackened wall of that smoky cavern....

Maybe a city child of today doesn't even know what a horseshoe is, and for this reason an object that was a symbol and a sign that evoked many images and meanings is now reduced to the status of a lucky charm.

We can point out similar changes in the colours used for visual communication. Looking into the past we find certain periods dominated by certain colours and forms: periods in which all the colours are earthy and the forms hard, some in which the whole range of colours is put to use, others in which everything is done with three or four colours. And so on down to our own times, when thanks to chemistry, plastic materials and other inventions, the kingdom of colour is governed by total chaos.

Certainly if we now used the colours of the 'art nouveau' period for roadsigns, these would fade magnificently into their surroundings. At that time they used some really refined combinations of colour. A faint idea of them can still be had from Roberts's talcum powder boxes and the labels on Strega bottles. They used to put pink and yellow side by side, or brown and blue, coffee and chocolate, pea-green and violet. Then they would make unexpected leaps from one shade to another, putting red with pale blue (instead of dark) and so on. Can we imagine a 'No Overtaking' sign with a coffee and chocolate car on a violet background? Well, yes. We can imagine it for fun, but we cannot use it for a roadsign in real life.

At some times in the past a certain series of colours, let us say all of dark tone, were indiscriminately adapted to all branches of human activity. The colours used for furnishings did not differ much from those for clothes or carriages. But today different colours have different uses. For roadsigns we use only red, blue and yellow (apart from the green light at

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traffic lights), and each colour has its well-defined meaning. In advertising we use bright brash colours or very refined ones according to our purpose. In printing we use the dull four-colour system which reduces all colours to a norm, while women's fashions make use of all the colours in rotation.



A double-bend sign in the style of Louis XIV. There have always been dangerous double bends, even in the time of Louis XIV, but then there were no roadsigns. They had heraldic arms instead. As the speed and volume of traffic increases, decoration is proportionally reduced, until it reaches the bare essentials of our present-day signals. Visual language changes according to the needs of the day.

In the past, images were nearly all painted, drawn or carved, and they reproduced visible and recognizable reality. Now we can even see the invisible. We have a host of machines exploring for us what we cannot see with the naked eye. We have X-ray photos, the world of the microscope, and the abstract inventions of artists. We have machines that enable us to see music and sounds in the form of luminous waves, machines that show us photo-elasticity in colour by means of polarized light, machines that slow up pictures of motion until we get as it were a blow-up of each instant. Then there are the lights which already form an accepted part of the nightscape, fluorescent lights, neon, sodium vapour lights, black light. And we have forms that are beautiful and exact because they are true forms: the forms of aeroplanes and missiles are dictated by the demands of speed, and were inconceivable in the past. These are forms we see every day, the colours and lights of our own time. To accept, to know and to use them is to express oneself in the language of today which was made for the man of today.

A Rose is a Rose is a

And then you go up to it and see, for the sake of argument, that it is an artificial rose. Then you become aware of the material it is made of, cloth or plastic or paper. But at first glance you were certain of one thing only, that it was a rose. This apparently insignificant fact is the subject of careful study today, for it is vital to the problems of visual communication.

All over the world psychologists, designers and research workers in other fields are trying to understand and establish objective rules that will enable us to use these means of visual communication with increasing precision.

The growing use of symbols such as roadsigns and trademarks on a worldwide scale demands absolute clarity of expression. It is no longer possible to confine oneself to local tastes. If a visual message is going to get across to people of different languages and backgrounds it is essential that the message does not lend itself to wrong interpretations. Another point is the speed at which signs can be read, though now we are pretty well trained to take them in in the blinking of an eye. Reading them is a matter of conditioning, and we do it without thinking, as when we put our foot on the brake when we see a red light. We are surrounded by countless

visual stimuli, posters that flash past the car windows, lighted signs, blinking lights, images that crowd in upon us on every side, and all intent on telling us something. We have already made a catalogue of stimuli in our own minds, and the process goes on without pause. Almost without realizing it we arrange these images in order, rejecting those that do not interest us. We already know that roads signs occur at a certain height above the ground and have exactly those shapes and colours and no others.

Putting things in pigeon-holes like this helps us to make snap readings of signs, and today it is important to have quick reflexes, so as not to waste time, or worse.



All over the world this kind of lettering conveys an immediate message: 'strip cartoon'. Even before we read what it says. It goes without saying that an essay on Giotto as an architect ought not to have a title in such lettering. I know this is an exaggeration, and that no one would in fact think of using lettering like this for such a subject, but exaggeration often throws light upon the negative aspects of a problem (in this case a problem of graphic design). Between these letters and the right kind for the job there is a vast range of letters to choose from, both printed and drawn, and countless ways of arranging the title. Often a firm unwilling to call in a graphic designer will use lettering suited to cheese to present a book of famous artists, and we may see an advertisement for the Bible which looks at first sight as if it were trying to sell us beer.

A Rose is a Rose is a

So we all have inside us (naturally with some variation from person to person) groups of images, forms and colours which have exact meanings. There are masculine forms and colours and feminine forms and colours, warm colours and cold colours, images of violence and images of gentleness, images connected with culture and the arts and others that are just plain vulgar. It goes without saying that if I have to publicize a cultural campaign on behalf of works of art I must not use vulgar colours, lettering associated with ads for canned foods, or a brash method of composition. On the contrary, I must immediately convey the idea that here we are dealing with something lofty and not to be compared in any way with commonplace things. A lot of people think that the public does not understand such matters, but it is not a question of understanding. There is a whole mechanism already at work on its own, quite independent of logic or reason. It is true that a badly designed poster will have some effect if the walls are smothered with it, but a good poster would achieve the same results less wastefully by giving more pleasure.

Unhappily there is a lot of confusion and waste in these messages that surround us. They often weary us with their petulance, their insistence on cramming things we don't want down our throats, and (what is worse) doing it clumsily.

There is one American catalogue that gives a choice of one thousand two hundred colours, and that's not all of them. In the face of this one simply cannot go on using the same red as a background for quite different products, for car tyres, perfumes and foodstuffs, as if one had no other resources. The eye of the beholder is hopelessly muddled, and his first impression, which will determine whether he is interested or not, is a vague and indefinite one.

The same can be said of form. There are things on sale that demand a tremendous effort to guess at their proper use. With the confusion of form that persists today a brush can look like a cat, a lamp like a weighing machine, a home like an office and an office like a drawing-room, a bank like an electrician's workshop and a church like a stand at the Earls Court Exhibition.

The Stylists

One of the commonest aspects of design, and one of the most facile, is styling. It is within the scope of all those who have artistic stirrings, who sign their work with a generous flutter of calligraphy as if setting their mark on a romantic masterpiece, and whose lips are constantly laden with the words Poetry and Art.

Styling is a kind of industrial designing, and of all branches of design the most ephemeral and superficial. It does no more than give a veneer of fashion, a contemporary 'look', to any object whatever. The stylist works for the quick turnover, and takes his ideas from the fads of the day. The 'aero-dynamic' period was the Golden Age for stylists.

What most interests a stylist is line, sculptural form, a bizarre idea. A little science fiction does no harm and a sense of elegance is basic.

The project (let's say a car body) is first sketched out with coloured pencils. The stylist strikes while the iron is hot, perhaps making a thumbnail sketch on the back of a cigarette packet. The great thing is to get it down before inspiration cools. Then it is worked out in more detail and on a bigger scale, using artists' charcoals. This second sketch is always done with a great flaunting of perspective and with dazzling