

Telling Stories Visually

By Kit Hinrichs

I've often wondered why I love editorial design and how having experienced the creation of a magazine has influenced everything I design; from identity programs to promotions, from way finding systems to annual reports. Magazine design encompasses all the elements of good visual communication, and they're certainly the most fun.

Actually, magazine design has always fascinated me—largely because it's about storytelling, which I've always loved. We all enjoy having stories told to us. However, I think as a right-brain person and a designer, so I'm a visual storyteller rather than a verbal one. From my perspective, storytelling is about appropriately employing good typography, analysis, strategic thinking, interpretation, pacing, imagery, structure, and color.

If one were to analyze the pieces of the whole, you'd soon discover that many specific areas of design are intrinsic to magazines. A cover, for example, often has to work as a mini-poster. Like a good poster, it has to attract you from a distance, communicate quickly, and define itself from things around it.

Certainly some of the most iconographic covers that have influenced my career were those created for Esquire magazine by George Lois. The cover of Andy Warhol drowning in a Campbell's soup can, for example, comes to mind. George was one of the best advertising art director's ever; he brought strong, emotionally driven concepts that are required for high impact advertising and applied them to editorial

only a magazine but an entire company. Leo Leonni fled Fascist Italy, like many European designers who left their homes because of political and cultural oppression, and brought his vision to America. His covers at Fortune magazine are classic. I'm fortunate to work with both D.J. Stout and Paula Scher, two of my partners at Pentagram. D.J., who began his own legacy at Texas Monthly after Fred Woodward left, brings a strong storytelling approach to magazines. He also has a "take-no-prisoners" approach to covers. Paula's distinctive imagery and ability to reinvent herself graphically make her one of the leading designers in all disciplines today. Each of those designers understands how to integrate personality into whatever it is they're creating. The personality of a magazine is most uniquely

cover's visual strategy use non-specific images like you'd find on Bride's or fashion magazine covers? In those instances, the covers mostly relate to the overall context of the magazine: using the cover blurbs to carry unique copy points. Some magazines don't subscribe to a rigid cover stylebook for the art, and let each cover represent a different perspective with each issue; they never discipline themselves to a dedicated position. The point of this isn't about which direction you choose, it's about choosing one and sticking with it.

As students of design, it's essential that you have a deep sense of your culture. Not just the music, art, media, literature, and other facets of your 20-something culture— but the larger culture in which you live. That includes having a knowledge and appreciation of fine and graphic art history. After all, we stand on the

Starting from the left:
George Lois, Esquire
DJ Stout, Poster
Fred Woodward, GQ
Paula Scher, Web Work
Willy Fleckhaus, Tween



“we stand on the shoulders of GIANTS”

design. Advertising is like that: the best of it deals with concepts that use images to transmit information quickly, efficiently. Advertising is about storytelling, too, but it has to communicate quickly— on the fly— like magazine covers.

Other editorial designers and art directors whose work I find inspiring include Willy Fleckhouse, Fred Woodward, Gail Towey, Paula Scher, and D.J. Stout. Mid-way through college, I spent a year in Germany, suspended in another culture, and discovered Willy Fleckhouse who was art director at Twen, a German magazine published in Munich. His work taught me brand new things about photography and cropping, pacing, scale, and ways of shooting. Clearly, Fred Woodward is one of the most imaginative art directors working today. He has an uncanny ability to reach into his knowledge of typography, art, and design history to come up with some of the most memorable layouts ever put to page. Texas Monthly, Rolling Stone, and GQ are among his list of successes. Gael Towey's sense of color and her overall vision are wonderful. As Creative director at Martha Stewart Living, she developed a "look" and personality for not

defined by its cover— first, through the logotype. Like any good brand mark, it must capture the feel of the publication, and it must be able to work with different subjects over a long period of time. Of course, it also has to be distinctive, but not so much as to make it difficult to work with other typography. I'd suggest looking at GQ, Vogue and Wired as good examples of magazine logotypes.

Cover formats— the true physical structure of a cover— are also important elements of a magazine's identity. National Geographic, for instance, has its distinctive border, format, and nameplate. Certainly, the distinctiveness and style of the imagery is essential to the look of the cover. Do you use illustration (like the New Yorker) or bleed environmental photography (Arizona Highways)? Will the imagery be used for "concept" covers, which deal metaphorically with inside stories or perhaps an entire theme issue (Esquire)? Or will the

shoulders of giants. It also includes understanding typography, its emotional value, and history; it's crucial to be able to read and understand how type works.

Type is essential to storytelling. Too many young designers are consumed with imitating or using the freshest, hottest styles, and pay no heed to content. As designers, your job is to understand the story, the content, first, and transmit it— make it accessible to your audience. Content and audience drive design. The fact is that to be able to tell a story well, graphically, you have to read, analyze, and understand it before you ever pick up a pencil or turn on a computer.

Finally, work hard.