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MONDRIAN AS A MARKETING TOOL

Philip B. Meggs

A visual style is not just an attractive surface decoration: it is often an expression of a philosophy, an ideology, and the spirit of its times. This is precisely why art nouveau or the psychedelic poster, for example, remain fascinating for contemporary designers and the general public. The mania for historical revivals during the last decade has often detached the visual appearance of an earlier style from its symbolic meaning and social context, rendering it neuter. This process can corrupt and debase the original, robbing it of its historical potency.

The debasement of Piet Mondrian, a founder of the de Stijl movement, is a classic illustration of this process. From the founding of de Stijl in 1917, until his death in 1944, Mondrian dedicated his life to the quest for absolute visual harmony and purity of form. But this mission was not seen as an end in itself; rather, Mondrian believed that pure art could have great meaning for society.

De Stijl began during World War I, when the politics of Europe were being reformed. Many artists, writers, and political activists believed that the old order of European society would be destroyed and replaced by a new society. Kaiser Wilhelm II of Germany was deposed in 1918 and replaced by a constitutional democracy that only survived until the rise of Nazism. Socialism and communism were steadily gaining ground throughout Europe, spurred by the Bolsheviks' triumph in Russia.

As the old social order was clearly passing, Mondrian sought nothing less than a new art of pure form and color. He believed that art could become a beacon pointing the way toward a new order in society. In his writings he spoke of achieving the universal in art as a sign of the "new age." He wrote, "It is the spirit of the times that determines artistic expression, which, in turn, reflects the spirit of the times. But at the present moment, that form of art alone is truly alive which expresses our present or future consciousness." His compositions were restricted to horizontal and vertical lines, rectangles, and squares, and a palette limited to black, white, grays, and the primary colors of red, yellow, and blue. This universal vocabulary of form was arranged in compositions achieving dynamic equilibrium. Mondrian saw his art as a metaphor pointing toward a universal harmony and order that might be attained in human society and daily life. This new spirit of art could be integrated into life by its application to architecture, product design, graphic design, and urban planning. Theo van Doesburg, cofounder of de Stijl, worked tirelessly to apply this universal language of form to applied design.

Seventy-three years after de Stijl began, how should we interpret the appearance of L'Oréal's Studio Line Daily Express Shampoo, packaged in a white container decorated with Mondrian's black horizontal and vertical lines and his squares of pure red, white, and blue? The advertising copy says, "Raise your styling consciousness with Studio Line's New Daily Express Shampoo. Express away residue in one lather to illuminate clean hair." It closes by urging the user to "gently prime hair for infinitely better styling, wet maneuvering, and expressing yourself."

The new formal vocabulary wrested from thin air by Mondrian, van Doesburg, and their confederates is pressed into service as a marketing tool for shampoo. Is this the extension of universal principles of harmony and unity into daily life? No, it is the shameless usurpation of serious art forms, seizing the style while leaving the content and the context behind. Shampoo is given the luster of high art. To make sure the magazine reader (or perhaps *marketing target* would be more appropriate) makes the connection, the red, yellow, and blue configuration from the package hangs on the wall in the background as a work of art.

Art is a form of language, and its manipulation to accomplish predetermined objectives is consistent with the contemporary manipulation of spoken and written language. As Louis Danziger once said, a corruption of language began during the Eisenhower presidency when the Department of War was renamed the Department of Defense. This doublespeak is still with us. President Reagan named the proposed MX missile "the peacekeeper"; the Department of Defense took "protective action" when it invaded Panama. And the purist forms of Mondrian's paintings are "appropriated" for L'Oréal's shampoo, offering "one lather clean; lightweight conditioning; and easier styling." Even the word *appropriation* is doublespeak, a palatable substitute for *plagiarism*. Plagiarism is regarded as a form of piracy, the stealing of someone else's work. Appropriation, on the other hand, is now regarded as making sophisticated use of existing material.

These issues become very complex. Not all appropriation is plagiarism. It is possible to extend an existing formal vocabulary, to continue a tradition, or to revive forms that have been cast into the dustbin of graphic history. When, in the 1890s, William Morris revived typefaces from the incunabula at his Kelmscott Press, he was restoring excellent typographic forms that had perished in the industrial revolution. Paula Scher's typographic posters for Columbia Records did not merely mimic Russian constructivism; they synthesized visual attributes from that movement with other design properties, such as the spatial compression of nineteenth-century wood-type posters, to make masterful and original designs. I have heard designers and architects ridicule contemporary housing developments continuing the tradition of Victorian farmhouses. The Greco-Roman architectural style of marble buildings lined with columns lasted from the seventh century B.C. to the third century A.D. One is forced to wonder whether the Victorian farmhouse style can't be viable for two hundred years, if its functional use of space,

economy, appropriate use of materials, and overall function and appearance satisfies the physical and emotional needs of its occupants.

In many instances, the preoccupation with graphic design history during the last decade has been a form of homage, respecting and honoring past masters and movements. But when appropriating forms from the past, each designer must carefully assess whether he or she is continuing a tradition, honoring the past, or debasing the original by separating it from its symbolic meaning and historical context. Historicism has often occurred at the end of an era or movement, signaling that the period is closing and a new period will begin. We are in a period of flux. Radical changes in Russia and eastern Europe, along with renewed concern about the environment, are altering culture. The historicism and appropriation of the 1980s may well yield to new visual forms in the 1990s that express a new age, just as Mondrian and van Doesburg sought new forms to express a new age seventy-three years ago.

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