

African-American Designers in Chicago: Some Preliminary Findings

by Victor Margolin

Within the history of graphic design little research has been done until now on the contributions of African American designers. For years, Georg Olden was held up as the token black in a field that has been historically dominated by white men and women. The lack of further investigation was due as much to a case of benign neglect as to a belief that, with the exception of Olden and perhaps one or two others, African-Americans had not produced a body of work that was worthy of historians' attention.

When, in the fall of 1998, I began a research project on African-American designers in Chicago, I found the situation to be otherwise. Chicago developed a strong active black community which produced a number of creative designers working across different visual fields from sign painting and graphic design to display design and advertising.

My first source of information on African-American designers in Chicago was *Black's Blue Book* of 1923-24, a directory of black businesses in Bronzeville, the part of Chicago's South Side that has been predominantly African-American. In *Black's Blue Book* I found an advertisement for Charles Dawson's services as an illustrator, letterer, and commercial artist. Dawson was a painter who had studied at both the Art Students' League in New York, where he was the first African-American student, and the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. After serving in the army, he set up a commercial art studio in Bronzeville in the 1920s. His clients included the successful black businesses of the day—banks, insurance companies, and firms that made cosmetics and hair straighteners.

There is a lack of continuity between Dawson's activity in Bronzeville, and the founding of the New Bauhaus in 1937. Some African-American students who attended the school beginning in the late 1940s but they came up without a knowledge of Dawson's work. Among them were Eugene Winslow and Fitzhugh Dinkins. As a high school student, Winslow was a talented draftsman. In 1949-50, he drew editorial cartoons as well as a special feature on famous African-Americans in sports for the African-American paper, the *Chicago Globe*. When he left the Institute of Design, he worked for a company that was owned by the father of a classmate. Winslow devised all the graphics for the company's merchandising system and then undertook many of the jobs for its clients.

By the early 1960s, he began to work more frequently for African-American clients. Among his projects were several calendars for the Supreme Life Insurance Company of

America that featured outstanding African-Americans such as the singer Elizabeth Taylor Greenfield and Jean Baptiste Pointe de Sable, the founder of Chicago. During this period, Winslow became an officer of the Afro Am Publishing Company, a black-owned firm that was founded in 1963. For Afro Am he created an extensive series of educational materials for schools that featured portraits of prominent African-Americans from the past joined by texts that described their accomplishments.

Winslow moved from working in a white-owned company to an intense involvement with a black-owned publishing company while Leroy Winbush founded his own design firm with a predominantly black staff but worked mainly for white clients. Winbush became a sign painter after graduating from high school and then got a job doing the signs for the Regal Theater where he met all the prominent black entertainers from Lena Horne and Billy Eckstine to Duke Ellington. He subsequently landed a job at Goldblatt's Department Store where he became head of the section that produced window displays for all the company's branches. Initially the only African-American in this office, Winbush learned to maintain a strong sense of professional authority in a white business environment. He was also able to hire other African-Americans such as Fitzhugh Dinkins and William McBride to work with him. In the early 1950s, Winbush left Goldblatt's to open his own office, Winbush Associates. He initially staked out a distinctive clientele, the La Salle St. banks for whom he began to do window displays. Eventually his firm worked for just about every major bank in the city. Winbush was also one of the few black designers to seek membership in the city's mainstream design organizations, the Society of Typographic Arts and the Chicago Art Directors Club. He became extremely active in both organizations, although it took him seven tries to gain acceptance in the Art Directors' Club where he eventually became President.

Another designer who developed his career outside the African-American community is Tom Miller, who, for thirty-three years, worked for Morton Goldsholl Associates, one of Chicago's leading design firms. Miller came up to Chicago from Virginia and studied the Ray Vogue School of Commercial Art where he was the only African-American student. In the early 1950s he joined the Goldsholl office which had developed an unusual practice that combined print design, packaging, exhibits, and animation. This meant that designers working in the firm had to do many things and Miller flourished in that atmosphere. He was responsible for some of the companies logos and innovative package designs, including the redesign of the 7-UP packaging. And he worked as well on animated commercials. The 7-UP job lasted over a few years and garnered national recognition for the firm.

The designers mentioned above are among the most prominent African-American “pioneers” who worked in Chicago. But one can also mention Herb Temple, Johnson Publishing Company’s senior art director, who oversees the design of *Ebony*, *Jet*, and other publications; Vince Cullers, who founded one of the city’s leading black advertising agencies; Emmett McBain, a talented copy writer and art director; Vernon Guider, the South Side’s best sign painter, and a number of others. As this research continues, we will begin to understand more clearly that, besides their well-known and impressive contributions of African-Americans to Chicago’s art, literature, and music traditions, they have been active contributors to the city’s graphic design scene as well.

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