

Art is Work, by Milton Glaser. Overlook, Woodstock & New York. 71 pages; Illustrated.
Reviewed by Victor Margolin

After considering the extraordinary range and depth of the projects in Milton Glaser's new book, *Art is Work*, it is impossible to imagine how he could have been excluded from the major exhibition, *Graphic Design in America*, curated by Mildred Friedman at the Walker Art Center in Minneapolis in 1989. Glaser is clearly one of the towering figures in postwar graphic design. He graduated from Cooper Union in 1951, spent a year in Bologna as a student of the Italian artist Giorgio Morandi, and then returned to New York to co-found Push Pin Studios in 1954.

While a member of Push Pin between 1954 and 1974, Glaser contributed significantly to the studio's eclectic style. Unlike the strict European modernist tradition that was taking root in America at the same time, the Push Pin designers considered all past styles – whether those of 19th century posters, Art Nouveau, or Art Deco - as legitimate sources for contemporary design. The Push Pin look was based far more strongly on images than typography and members of the studio were all noted for their particular drawing abilities.

Glaser's contribution to the studio's reputation was highlighted in 1973 with the publication of his first book, *Milton Glaser Graphic Design*. Isolating his own contributions from the larger body of Push Pin projects provided an opportunity to assess his sensibilities on their own merits. What was evident in the 1973 book and is even more apparent in this new volume is the artist's profound commitment to drawing as a way of apprehending the world. It is surely no coincidence that the image on the cover of *Art is Work* is a head of Picasso, whom Glaser cites unabashedly as one of his strongest influences. The presence of Picasso as influence and source, along with Glaser's verbal and visual hommages to other artists including Leonardo da Vinci, Piero di Cosimo, Sandro Botticelli, Piero della Francesca, and Claude Monet, supports his underlying polemic that the dichotomy between art and design is a false one. Hence, the book's title, which reinforces Glaser's assertion that "The overwhelming history of art, in fact, has been the history of people doing work for a specific purpose, in other words, commissioned works with specific intentions."⁽⁸⁾

Glaser's attempt to rupture the dichotomy between art and design has, no doubt, made it difficult for the public to categorize him. He is every bit the draftsman that David Hockney is, yet his work is not collected by museums as fine art. Is it because he is also a publication designer, a creator of packaging and identity programs, and a prolific producer of posters that the range of his inventiveness seems to be too great for art museums to embrace, even though he has had a plethora of exhibitions in galleries and museums of decorative art?

Despite the fact that his work has become deeper and richer over the years, Glaser has also experienced a certain lack of recognition by younger graphic designers who are attracted to a more fluid design approach, shaped by an emphasis on popular culture and strategies of appropriation that are evident in much contemporary art.

By contrast, Glaser has deep roots in the history of painting, drawing, and printmaking and relies continuously on earlier artists for inspiration and ideas. In this age of appropriation, it is sometimes difficult to distinguish between borrowing and a more organic use of sources. Glaser himself acknowledges and is not shy about revealing his own uses of the past. We see this, for example, in a splendid Cubist-inspired poster for Julliard, which draws on Picasso's "Three Musicians" of 1921. Glaser has penetrated the spirit of Picasso's painting and, if anything, exposed the design elements in it rather than emulated it as a work of fine art.

For me, Glaser's most moving homage to an earlier artist is his "Monet Project." Years after a visit to Monet's house and garden at Giverny, France, he produced a series of drawings and monoprints of the French artist and his surroundings which are imbued with feeling and atmosphere. They reveal as much as any work in this book, Glaser's developed inner sensibilities which are capable of portraying the most profound sense of awe and wonder.

The question of how to classify Glaser remains a tricky one because he so frequently puts his prodigious talents as a visual artist in the service of design projects that call for a particular kind of response. He is almost always negotiating with clients who commission his work for specific purposes. As he says several times in the book, he has been fortunate to work with numerous clients who have respected his abilities and given him the freedom to produce the best results he could. This is evident in many instances; for example, his calendar portraits of artists for the Zander paper company, his posters and other graphics over the years for the School of Visual Arts, his album and CD covers for Tomato Records, his posters for Olivetti, and his designs for the restaurants Aurora and the refurbished Rainbow Room, both commissioned by Joe Baum. All are magnificently illustrated in full color, along with the other images in the book.

Among Glaser's more commercial projects was the redesign of the identity, packaging, and store layouts for Grand Union supermarkets, a commission from around 1975. Glaser and his team redesigned the logo and placed bold graphic lettering on the outsides of the stores. Inside, they redid the packaging according to types of foods and redefined the special store sections as if they were small shops in a town square. Even in a project as commercial as this, Glaser brought a sense of culture that contributed greatly to the inventiveness and vigor of the design solutions.

Having been the co-founder of one of the nation's first and most successful city publications, *New York Magazine*, in 1968, Glaser has been setting standards for mass publication design for more than thirty years. In *Art as Work*, we see numerous examples of recent

publications he has designed, many with Walter Bernard through their company WBMG. Continuing the tradition of Herb Lubalin, one of his classmates at Cooper Union, Glaser tends to increase the prominence of the mastheads, sometimes reversing them out of colored backgrounds. He also institutes easy-to-read text arrangements and introduces a strong use of visual material, particularly on covers and lead sections of newspapers.

With a few exceptions of posters or logos that are based on trite ideas or clichés, most of the examples in *Art as Work* are exemplary. One sees, however, a shift in quality in the section of objects. Although Glaser has designed several attractive lamps, primarily in relation to restaurant commissions, other examples of his product design, a table for the Formica Corporation, several cutting boards for Alessi, and an apple-shaped watch for a Japanese manufacturer, for example, are less than distinguished.

Nonetheless, Glaser had full control over what to reproduce in the book and we should assume that he strongly values the work he selected. Clearly, many projects are not represented and it will be left to scholars and critics to bring them to public attention. Until that is done, we will not really be able to make a full assessment of Glaser's career.

Accompanying the images are Glaser's short descriptions and commentaries, which are always informative and frequently reflective. However, Glaser's own words cannot substitute for someone else's assessment of his work's meaning and value. A more mundane problem with the text is the considerable number of mistakes – repeated phrases, missing words, and misspellings – that ought to be corrected in subsequent printings.

Although *Art is Work* is not the critical edition that can most legitimately define Glaser's place in history, it is nonetheless a magnificent volume. In a documentary sense, it includes not only Glaser's commentaries on his work but also a selection of his conference papers and articles, which provide ample evidence of his dissatisfaction with the changing world of graphic design. Contemplating Glaser's visual projects of the past twenty-five years was an immensely engaging experience for this reader. I was deeply moved by the artist's sense of beauty and his aim to bring the wonders of color, light, form, and space to the everyday world. Many today are suspicious of such intentions but Glaser has pursued his course intrepidly for fifty years and deserves ample recognition for what he has achieved.

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