

*Beware Wet Paint: Designs by Alan Fletcher.* Commentary by Jeremy Myerson. Phaidon, 1996.  
Reviewed by Victor Margolin

Alan Fletcher has had a long and illustrious career as an independent designer and as a founder and member of several important design offices—Fletcher/ Forbes/ Gill (1962–1965); Crosby/ Fletcher/Forbes (1965–1972); and finally Pentagram beginning in 1972. He recently left Pentagram and this book marks his rebirth as a sole practitioner.

Fletcher, along with Jeremy Myerson who wrote the introductory and background essays as well as a series of brief texts to establish continuity between the different graphic sections of the book, chose to place their emphasis on how a graphic designer thinks. Frequent references are made to design as an art of finding solutions to problems. There is certainly a strong modernist intention here to view graphic design as a way of giving visual form to statements or messages.

*Beware Wet Paint* is a reflective book. To explain how he works as a designer, Fletcher selected images from his extensive body of work and uses them to establish typologies of creative activity. Along with these images he provides the reader with short texts that convey his beliefs about design practice. “Design, says Fletcher, “is what happens between conceiving an idea and carrying it out.” Design is also “an intelligent equation between purpose and construction.” Although Fletcher firmly links intention to purpose, he also presents design as an almost ethereal act of imagination. At one point, he states in an interview with Rick Poynor, which is interspersed between the graphic sections, “I’m not into self-analysis. I might clog up my intuition if I did.”

Fletcher exemplifies a certain type of graphic designer, sometimes known as an “idea” man. Bob Gill is also one as is Paul Rand. For such practitioners, each project presents a new challenge which calls upon a prodigious capacity for invention. As Fletcher, shows at many points in this book, invention cannot be systematized. A letterhead concept, for example, derives from his observation when socializing with three film producer clients that their white shirts merged with the white conference table in their office; hence a letterhead with photographs of them wearing shirts that extend into the writing surface of the white paper. An idea for a pair of ashtrays resulted from an “unsolicited mental image” of a shape resembling a rotund Edam cheese that could be divided into an interlocking bottom and lid, both with serrated teeth to grip cigarettes.

Though Fletcher and Myerson make ample references to the ineffability of intuition, they do create a typology of creative acts that is intended to demystify it. Fletcher himself tells us and shows us with examples that he sometimes recycles ideas from one project to another

when he sees a fresh context for them. A pair of lips that illustrates a quote by Mae West, for example, is expanded into a collection of open mouths for a London Transport poster. Other creative techniques include inventing a shorthand of scissored shapes or splatters of black ink that represent animals or objects, adding lines to a shape to transform it into something else, tearing or folding paper to create new shapes or concepts, and assembling found collage elements such as stamps, labels and envelopes into the faces of humans and animals. Fletcher also has a keen sensitivity to the pictorial qualities of letters as we see in his poster for Daimler Benz, “100th Anniversary of the Automobile,” where the numbers 100 are arranged to convey the image of a car. His designs can be frequently referenced to the works of modern artists such as Matisse, Picasso, Duchamp, and Schwitters.

*Beware Wet Paint* is Fletcher’s attempt to liberate himself from the image of a corporate designer that characterized him for more than twenty years at Pentagram. His rebirth is evident in the difference between this book and *Pentagram: the work of five designers* which was published in 1972. In that book, which appeared when Pentagram was first organized and began looking for business. the images are organized by project in order to display the firm’s talent to potential clients. In *Beware Wet Paint*, however, the locus of attention has shifted from the client to the designer.

Fletcher makes reference more than once to his weariness with clients who do not understand his concepts or who abort a good idea. Several large projects—his signage program for the Victoria and Albert Museum and his changing logo for the Santa Barbara Museum of Art—are shown as examples of projects that outstripped his clients’ capacity to use them effectively. As an antidote, Fletcher presents his work in this book outside the client context. We are asked to appreciate the images more as demonstrations of an exceptional intellect at work than as the solutions to client problems.

Fletcher’s extraordinary capacity to generate ideas more than compensates for the caliber of his rendering skills, which is modest, as he himself acknowledges. His greatest strengths, in fact, lie in his visual responsiveness to his environment and in his ability to tap what David Gibbs, in an essay on Fletcher included in the book, calls “the archives of his mind.” He has the ability to easily, almost seamlessly, transform one thing into another. One of the most amazing pieces in this book is a fragment of two torn theater tickets with a punched hole between two ‘B’s. Fletcher reads this as “Bob” and sends it as a Christmas card to a friend by that name.

To generate ideas, Fletcher employs drawing, lettering, collage, and typography, among other means. This flexibility and reliance on his own inventive abilities ought to inspire young designers. At the same time, there are projects of Fletcher’s that are too reductive, particularly some of his calendars, and these do not hold up well against some of the more complex work

being done today. If there is anything that detracts from the high quality of Fletcher's *oeuvre*, it is his sometime reliance on images that are neither semantically rich nor impressively drawn.

His reemergence as an individual creative voice, however, is impressively commemorated by this volume whose attempt to explain one man's amazing capacity to think visually is a welcome contribution to the contemporary literature on graphic design. Through images, declarations, interviews, and critical essays, *Beware Wet Paint* presents Alan Fletcher as a designer to reckon with.

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