

Needed: An Inclusive History of Chicago Graphic Design

by Victor Margolin

The history of graphic design in Chicago has been dominated until now by the work of middle-class white men and a few middle-class white women.¹ Noticeably missing from the various symposia, exhibitions, and catalogues that have documented Chicago's graphic design history thus far are the contributions of African-American designers, whose accomplishments have been significant.²

When I first became interested in Chicago graphic design more than twenty years ago, I, too, wrote primarily about white men and women. I did not think to include African-Americans in my research because I didn't know of any. This changed when I met Chuck Harrison, a retired product designer at Sears Roebuck who was teaching industrial design at the University of Illinois, Chicago. Chuck was the first African-American executive to be hired by Sears Roebuck and he worked there for about thirty-three years. He told me about Leroy Winbush, who has had a long and active career in Chicago as a graphic artist and a designer of window displays for almost all of the city's banks. Leroy was active in the Society of Typographic Arts and the Chicago Art Directors' Club of which he was President at one time. He was also one of the first African-Americans, if not the first, to attend the Aspen Design Conference. (Figure 1)

Both Chuck and Leroy shared their extensive files of contacts with me. Soon I had built up a list of about seventy five names, including designers who had been working as early as the 1920s. These included people like Charles Damson, who graduated from the School of the Art Institute in 1917 and established a graphic design and illustration studio on the South Side in the early 1920s; Tom Miller, who worked for Morton Goldsholl Associates for almost thirty five years; Gene Winslow and Fitzhugh Dinkins who studied at the Institute of Design; Herb Temple and the late Norman Hunter, who were employed by Johnson Publishing where Temple recently completed fifty years

¹ In Philip Meggs' seminal *History of Graphic Design*, only one black designer, George Olden, is mentioned. And Olden did not appear until the third edition. No black designers were included in the Walker Art Center's exhibition "Graphic Design in America" and none were mentioned in Arthur Pulos's two-volume history of American industrial design, *American Design Ethic and The American Design Adventure*.

² One exception is the symposium, "African-American Designers: The Chicago Experience Then and Now," which I organized in cooperation with Charles Branham at the DuSable Museum of African American History in February 2000.

of service as an art director; Bill McBride, who designed all the programs for the South Side Community Art Center's Artists' and Models' Balls; Andre Richardson King, who helped start the signing department at Skidmore, Owings, and Merrill and then launched his own successful signing business; Emmett McBain, who designed record album covers for Playboy and Mercury Records and became a leading art director in several black advertising agencies; Vince Cullers who started his own advertising agency in the 1940s; Richmond Jones, who was active as an advertising art director and free-lance graphic artist; Harold Rollins, who designed books for the American Library Association, Don Patton, who worked for Science Research Associates; Herb Jackson, who taught at the Institute of Design and the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana; and Vernon Guider, perhaps the leading sign painter on the South Side for more than fifty years. And if we want to acknowledge the importance of cartooning among black graphic artists, we would have to mention Buck Brown, who has been drawing cartoons for *Playboy* since 1961. My list includes as well the names of younger designers like Kim Lovely, Vernon Lockhart, and Angela Williams and young cartoonists like Tim Jackson who runs a website devoted exclusively to the well-known black cartoonists past and present. Vernon and Angela are the co-chairs of the Chicago chapter of the Organization of Black Designers, which held its first national conference in Chicago in 1994.

How is it that African-Americans have been so engaged in the graphic arts in Chicago and yet, their activities have yet to receive adequate recognition? This is due partly to the way that broader research on Chicago has been done historically. The split between the research on how whites and blacks have lived in the city has deep roots. Histories of Chicago's social and cultural life have treated White Chicago and Black Chicago separately but not together. Most books on Chicago have covered the Potter Palmers, Marshall Fields, the founding of the Art Institute, and even the city's saloons, but they have rarely talked about Bronzeville, that enclave on the South Side where blacks coming up from the South began settling in droves around 1918 as part of the Great Migration north. We have, on the other hand, learned about Bronzeville in separate histories such as Alan Spear's, *Black Chicago: The Making of a Negro Ghetto, 1890-1920*, St. Clair Drake's and Horace Cayton's magisterial study, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City*, and Jim Grossman's *Land of Hope: Chicago, Black Southerners, and the Great Migration*.

Until I began my research on African-American designers in Chicago, nothing had been written on the subject. I have obtained all my material thus far from interviews

and a few biographical or autobiographical sources related to specific designers. What is now clear to me is that unless we begin to think about the history of graphic design in Chicago as a history of what both black and white designers have done, we will not understand the actual social dynamics that produced the particular conditions within which graphic design developed in the city.

As Drake and Cayton make clear in *Black Metropolis*, by the mid-1940s, there were proportionally few African-Americans in Chicago's labor force who were not porters, factory laborers, or maids. A small number worked for the city or for the post office, due to the influence of black politicians on the South Side, and a smaller group achieved professional status as physicians, dentists, lawyers, or entrepreneurs, although they worked almost exclusively in the black community.

Drake and Cayton draw heavily on the important study of Estelle Hill Scott, "Occupational Changes Among Negroes in Chicago, 1890-1930," which was done for the WPA and published in 1940. They include a chart that divides occupations into three categories, "clean work," "manual labor," and "servants." In the "clean work" category, 78% of the workers are native-white, 20% are foreign-born and 2% are black. These figures shift to 50% native-white in the "manual labor" category, with 41% foreign-born and 9% black. In the last category of "servants," the number of blacks jumps exponentially to 34%, almost rivaling the 38% of foreign-born and surpassing the 28% of whites. Given such a distribution, it is no wonder that so few blacks made it into the design field, which sits squarely in the category of "clean" work.³

Therefore African-Americans in Chicago rarely thought about design in any of its forms as a profession since it entailed working for white business clients or in white organizations as professionals, something that hardly seemed possible, at least until the 1960s. When Charles Dawson began his career as a graphic artist and illustrator on the South Side in the early 1920s, there were no white clients in the city who would have hired him even though he was the first African-American to study at the Art Students' League in New York and was a graduate of the School of the Art Institute. Dawson virtually invented a practice of graphic design in Bronzeville. He worked entirely for black clients, notably the few banks, insurance companies, and firms that made hair and skin care products. (Figure 2) It is doubtful that anyone on the North Side ever saw any of

³ St. Clair Drake and Horace Cayton, *Black Metropolis: A Study of Negro Life in a Northern City* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1970, c.1945), 219. The authors devote a considerable amount of space to the issue of "job ceilings."

Dawson's work and it surely did not occur to him to seek membership in the Society of Typographic Arts. His ads appeared in the *Chicago Defender*, which was distributed to black readers throughout the United States and in other promotional materials that remained within the black community. The positive images of black men and women that Dawson presented in his ads were in sharp contrast to the caricatures of blacks that one could find occasionally in publications such as the *Chicago 27 Designers* annual more than a decade later. (Figure 3)

It is doubtful as well that designers on the North Side knew anything about the tradition of sign painters who did much of the local advertising work in Bronzeville. Some of these men were legendary. We have a lineage that stems from George Davenport, (Figure 4) who was prominent in the early 1920s, through Frank Phillips, Mentrell Parker Sr., and others including Vernon Guider, who built a reputation designing signs and show cards for the Regal Theater. Today Guider is in his 80s and still does signs for churches, restaurants, and other South Side clients.

Interviewing a number of older designers, I learned that they all faced many obstacles as they developed their careers. Both Gene Winslow and Fitzhugh Dinkins had a progressive design education at the Institute of Design and Winslow was a professional editorial and sports cartoonist for the *Chicago Globe*, an African-American newspaper, before he went to the ID. Yet neither Winslow nor Dinkins could advance in the white business world after their graduation. Winslow did get a job working for the father of a white classmate of his and his designs were considered excellent. (Figure 5) But he was asked to work behind a screen so that white clients wouldn't see him when they came to the office. Eventually, Winslow returned to the black community where he was actively involved with a publishing company, Afro-Am, which produced educational materials about famous black leaders for school children. Tom Miller, by contrast, spent his entire career in Morton Goldsholl's office, where he did everything from package design to logos and props and backdrops for animated commercials. (Figure 6) Whereas other designers left Goldsholl to start their own businesses and thus gained recognition that way, Miller, who could work easily under Goldsholl's patronage but who would no doubt have faced serious obstacles had he tried to start his own business and seek white clients, was hardly known by his Chicago peers, even though he was responsible for the Goldsholl firm's well-known redesign of 7-Up's packaging and corporate identity.

The accomplishments of Miller, Winslow, Winbush, and others make it clear that many blacks could have been successful graphic designers in Chicago, had there not

been so many obstacles in their way. Even in the militant 1960s, when racial barriers were breaking down in many professions, little changed in the Chicago graphic arts community. There were a few African-Americans in the STA or the Chicago Art Directors Club but, with the exception of Leroy Winbush, they were invisible to most white members of those organizations.⁴

To make the contributions and struggles of black graphic designers in Chicago more visible, we need to tell the story of graphic design in the city as a social history and not just an aesthetic one. Yes, a lot of great work has been produced here but the situations within which it was possible to create such work were not open to everyone. For most black designers in Chicago, making a living was a struggle, but many of them succeeded. Some found white designers such as Mort Goldsholl, Henry Glass, or Carl Regehr who served as patrons or mentors, or else, like Leroy Winbush and Vince Cullers, they started their own businesses. At one time, Winbush Associates, which hired many black designers and production people, did window displays for almost all the banks on La Salle St.

Black struggle and accomplishment are essential components of Chicago's graphic design legacy. Bringing them into the narrative provides a more realistic historical context for all designers. An awareness of the black experience in design exposes the deep bifurcations in the city's social structure that have existed historically and highlights the dynamics by which African-Americans have fought to make a place for themselves in a profession that did not welcome them with open arms. We all need to understand that the history of graphic design in Chicago is rooted in a complex social process which has at times excluded some people while privileging others.

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⁴ African-Americans in the STA between the 1960s and the 1980s include Leroy Winbush, Tom Miller, Richmond Jones, Herb Jackson, and Andre Richardson King.