

READER

Tales From the Font

Power Struggles in the Land of Helvetica

By Elizabeth M. Tamny

Behind almost every man-made thing in modern life--shoelace grommets, artificial grape flavoring, traffic patterns--there's a whole industry most people never think about, with its own companies and professional organizations, its own acronyms and jargon, its own internecine warfare. Most people, for instance, probably don't think much about typefaces. But the Chicago-based Society of Typographic Arts, which is celebrating its 75th anniversary this month, has had a broader influence and more raucous history than you might expect.

At a reception and exhibition held October 17 at Columbia College's Chicago Center for Book & Paper Arts, anniversary committee chairman Jack Weiss was wearing a purple T-shirt under his sport coat. It was a political choice, not an aesthetic one. The STA started out as the only regional chapter of the New York-based American Institute of Graphic Arts, founded in 1914. One fateful night in July 1926, the chapter hosted a wild party--for which the invitations were purple--at the Buccaneers' Club at Wilmette Harbor. What happened there is not entirely clear. "Someone was thrown overboard--some have it that there was a fight," says Weiss. In any case, after that the Chicagoans were encouraged to form their own organization, and on October 17, 1927, they did, declaring their independence in a broadside set in a tasteful Goudy.

After the split, AIGA didn't start another chapter in Chicago until 1986. It's hard to

imagine a professional organization with such a broad scope not wanting to have a local chapter, or the locals not wanting to belong to one, but that was the case. The STA's break with AIGA--which lives in the hearts of STA members like secession in a southerner's heart--may have been partly about one graphic designer dissing another's choice of typeface on a hot summer night, but it was mostly, Weiss explained at the reception as beery designers cheered and waved their glasses, "about Chicagoans wanting to retain their autonomy and not...be controlled by a New York organization."

The STA went on to play a vital role in the development of graphic design in Chicago, documenting its history and cultivating change and discourse. The city may have been known as hog butcher for the world, but even hog butchers need graphic designers. The advertising, printing, and transportation industries made Chicago the nation's largest, if not its most glamorous, producer of printed goods. The School of the Art Institute established a department of printing arts in 1921, though many people "who ended up doing design...didn't call themselves designers...they were called layout people or something else," says Rob Dewey, who wrote the bound STA history handed out at last week's reception. "That was that first generation." In the late 19th century Chicago typesetters, commercial artists, and printers regularly wrestled huge amounts of text into readable form in the massive catalogs for Ward's and Sears printed by the likes of R.R. Donnelley & Sons.

The STA, which met often both socially and professionally, directed enormous energy toward design through its combination of "talent, expectations, and just egos," says board member Matt Doherty. The organization counted among its members and affiliates many important designers, including Oswald Cooper and Frederic

Goudy--names the average computer user may recognize from her font menu. Their interests weren't limited to typography or even graphic design; their mission also included the wholesale elevation of public taste. To that end, STA members took field trips to meet Frank Lloyd Wright and Buckminster Fuller, and cofounded the International Design Conference at Aspen, created by Container Corporation of America owner Walter Paepcke and his designer wife, Elizabeth. The STA created an influential exhibit for the 1933 World's Fair, and was instrumental in disseminating the ideas of Moholy-Nagy and the New Bauhaus school. The STA even started a film group, the Magic Lantern Society, which evolved into the School of the Art Institute's Film Center.

Chicago graphic designers shaped the way we present and receive information. STA members worked on the Container Corporation's groundbreaking in-house ad campaigns, the fledgling Playboy magazine (where the STA's Arthur Paul was art director) and its now ubiquitous logo, packaging for Wisconsin's progressive Johnson Wax company, annual reports for every company under the sun, and of course typefaces. While many of the designers at the reception were understandably loath to generalize about what Chicago design looks like, Weiss says that it "has always had muscle to it, strength of character, humility, solidity, that isn't always seen in design work from the coasts....I think it could be said that we had our own artistic soul." A less positive spin might be that the work here is generally more conservative, due to more cautious attitudes on the part of clients. "Probably over the years it's been a veiled complaint of a lot of designers that they've had to struggle to experiment," ventures Wayne Stuetzer, a member of the anniversary planning committee. But then again, "it pays the bills--you might do something super for a dot-com in California, but you might not be in business next month."

At the reception, multiple slide projectors threw up images of the work of STA members and other Chicago designers over the years--posters, ads, book and magazine covers, signs, logos. The love designers had for Helvetica in the 60s and 70s is overwhelming, but the work is beautiful and in many cases looks quite contemporary. As Doherty says, when you look at one of these pieces, decades after its creation, "It's not dated, it's not wrong, it's not old. You look at it and you go, 'That works!'"

But of course if a piece of commercial design is really doing its work, not in a slide show but on the side of a box or the back of a bus, you don't think about whether it works. You think: hey, maybe I want a Frappuccino. Design, for all its visibility, is an invisible craft. Within the industry, there are of course institutionalized channels through which better work gets recognized. But the STA, according to Dewey, was more about "everybody contributing and elevating standards communally," and less concerned than most with academe, awards, or individual "design gods."

For this reason, it was sometimes viewed as "clubby or folksy," not professional enough for a professional organization--which is partly why AIGA eventually reestablished its Chicago chapter. But although the STA was fundamentally tied to the Chicago design community, says Stuetzer, "there was always hope for a national organization." In 1975 and '76 some of the designers, among them Jack Weiss, met to formulate a plan, and talked to AIGA leaders about a partnership--but nothing came of the discussion. In '89 the STA forged ahead anyway, changing its name to the American Center for Design. The ACD "tried desperately to be a national design organization--and succeeded for several years," says Stuetzer. It hosted the first national design conference on interactive media in 1993. It held successful interdisciplinary meetings and the first major curated (as opposed to juried) design show. But without the local focus, the organization lost its core membership, which gave AIGA a foothold. The Chicago AIGA chapter, which now has more than 1,100 members to the STA's 153, "is doing great work and great things," says Stuetzer, and many STA members have also joined AIGA. "But we want to bring

back that personal context. We lost that when STA changed into ACD."

The ACD diminished the social component of the organization. The board wasn't entirely local, there were fewer opportunities to volunteer, and placement services suffered. Some members of the old STA missed the collegiality and the face-to-face discussion of design ideals, and it wasn't long before they began meeting informally on their own, calling themselves the Supper Therapy Association. By the late 1990s Doherty was calling the secretary of state's office every six months to find out if the STA name, which belonged to the ACD, was available again. When he found out one day in 1998 that it was, he ponied up the \$25 to reserve it himself and then broke the good news to the group.

The re-formed STA held its first workshop that year, and in March 2001 held its first public event, an exhibition and silent auction of the works of Ralph Creasman, an STA member who'd died in 1999. About a year later the ACD disbanded, and its remaining membership was folded into the STA's. The group's current month-long anniversary celebration includes two ongoing exhibitions: One is a historical overview of work by STA members, culled from the archives at the UIC library's special-collections department; it's at the library and open from 8:30 AM to 4:30 PM weekdays through spring 2003. The other show, at the headquarters of educational publisher Scott Foresman in Glenview, features books published by the STA and textbooks designed by STA members; it's open weekdays from 10 AM to 4 PM. There's a free reception and \$50 gala dinner on October 30 (for more info call 847-866-7480).

Until recently, I'd always assumed the Society of Typographic Arts was exclusively for type designers--I had a romantic notion of them as ironworkers in Chicago's aesthetic smithy, forging the raw matter from which the nation builds its text. I wasn't the only one; in fact, in 1983 the group legally changed its name to STA, the way Kentucky Fried Chicken became KFC, hoping to emphasize its interest in the broader world of design. But now that the STA is back, it welcomes the specific associations. "Today," says Weiss, "we strongly support the concept of

'typographic arts' because all that we do as professionals involves the art of communicating with typography--whether on a printed page or a computer screen. And we intend to stay focused on that concept in all that we do in the future."

The letter was certainly king at the reception. The art on the walls and in cases was full of texture and color and illustration, but type--thin, fat, curly, plain, bold, small, stretched, tightly spaced, spare, colored, black-and-white--made it sing, expressing an endless variety of mood and intent. "I think of typography in terms of values," says Dewey. "[It's not] marketing, where...you'll get a certain reach and a certain market share and take it to your boss and feel good. This is something that's not measurable in that way. It's the value of respecting the audience. It's saying, I'm not going to talk at you, I'm going to stand and have a conversation and engage you in a deeper way, if I do my job well."

