

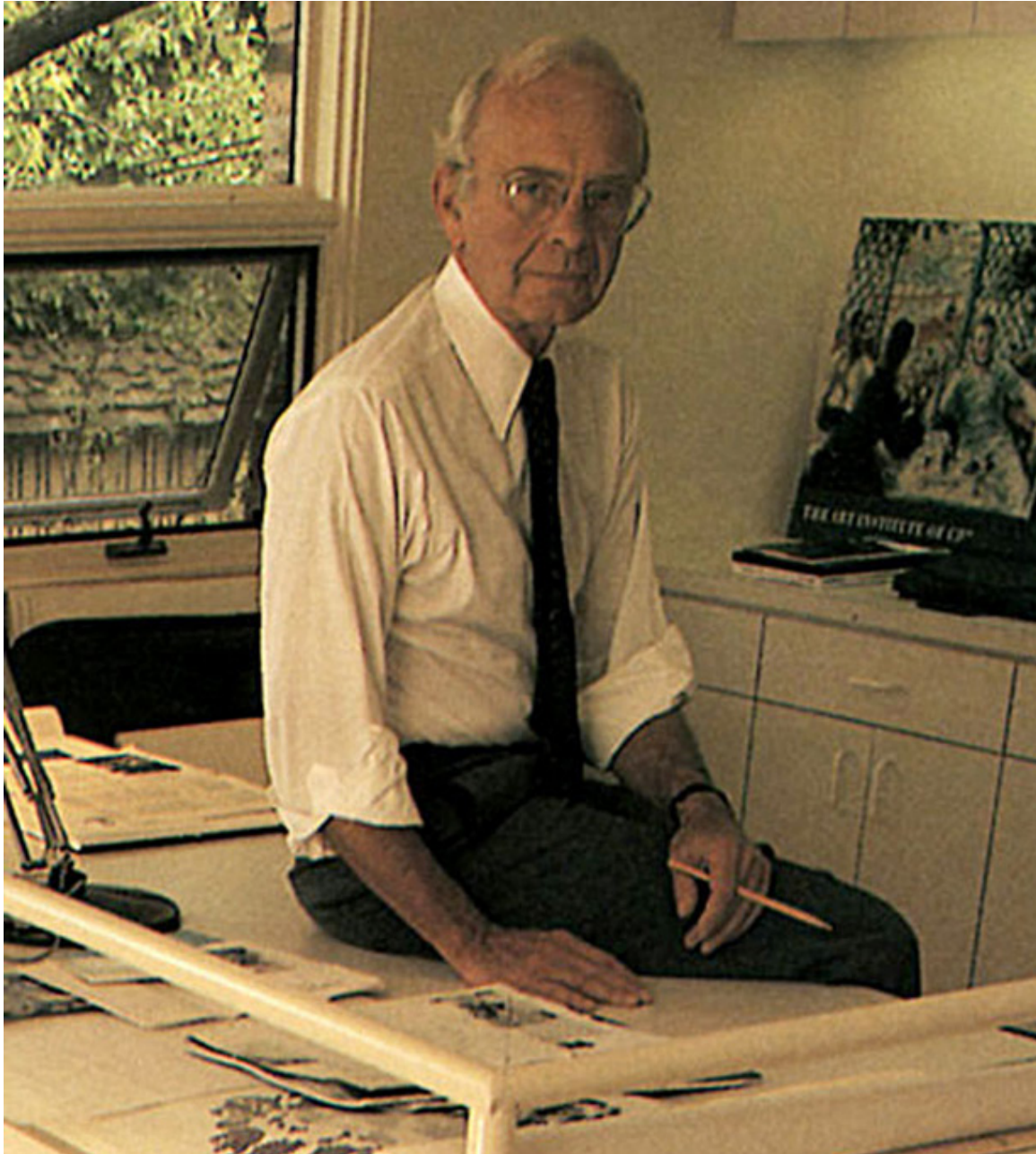
## A Midwestern Modernist Vision: A New Book on Designer John Massey

In the book *John Massey Vision*, writers Victor Margolin and Maren Nelson describe the career of Chicago graphic designer and artist John Massey (born 1931), from youthful cartoonist to prominent member of the American design community. Glowing quotes at the beginning of the book, accounts of Massey's talents as a designer and teacher, and testimony of his playful, calm, and supportive temperament suggest deep, widespread admiration for the man and his work.



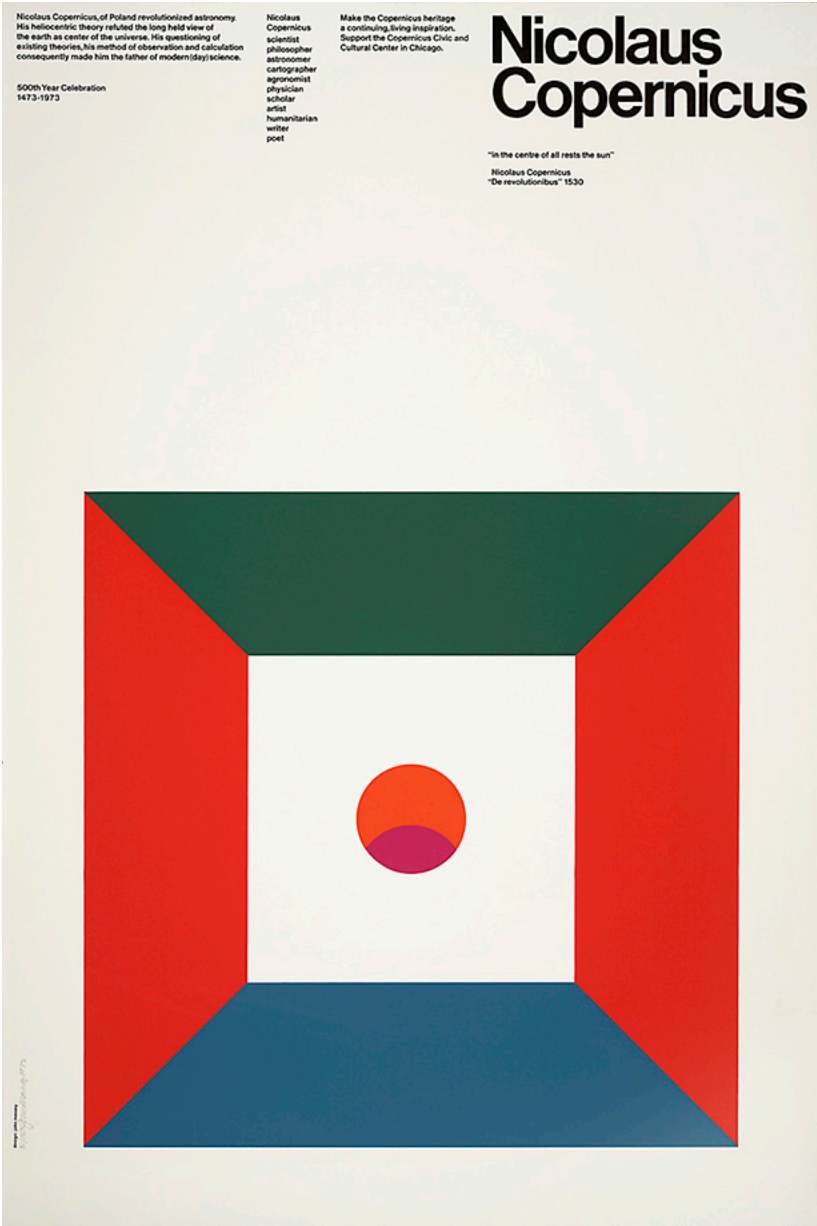
Massey's development as a designer was strongly influenced by mid-twentieth-century Swiss and German design, and one way to think about this book — and Massey's career — is as evidence of the influence of European designers and artists in the U.S. around World War II. Massey's attendance at the International Design Conference in Aspen, Colorado in 1953, when he was a young student, abruptly transformed his life. The conference exposed Massey to work by designers such as Armin Hofmann and Joseph Müller-Brockmann and offered him an exciting vision of what design could be. Luckily, he later spent many years working for the enlightened Walter Paepke, owner of the Container Corporation of America, supporter of avant-garde design, and advocate for a strong relationship between industry and design.

Youthful exposure to inspirational design can fuel an entire career. Massey found something in modernist European design and art that has intrigued him for decades, ways to investigate mysteries of existence through painting and design. Massey became known for reductive, spare design of almost spiritually nuanced expression. One former employee, Terry Westmacott, said of Massey, “He would reduce, reduce, reduce.” Massey was able to integrate his personal art into design commissions, some of them large corporate identities. In this way, he blurred the line between art and design, as did many European modernists



John Massey

Massey favors Helvetica and only a few other typefaces. He treats type as recalcitrant clay in the hands of designers: “As irascible as typography is, it loves to be disciplined by aggressive, clear-thinking designers. Typography under such tutelage lapses into a state of total, transparent euphoria” (Massey). One could not find a better example of the modernist attitude towards type, or at least an American’s interpretation of modernist attitudes.





It will be difficult for young designers who did not experience the early spread of modernism to understand the “euphoria” of Massey’s design and art. His kind of work requires earnest contextualization. Historians have the difficult task of describing the thrill and influence of new styles and ideas, long after they were new.

While the book’s essays supply context for Massey’s work, the book design has less perspective on its subject. The reproductions are relatively small and the spacious layout, combined with the choice of widely-leaded Adobe Garamond and Helvetica typography, recalls self-consciously elegant corporate design of the 1970s and 80s. The book structure is mysterious: there is no table of contents, paintings, collages, design, and historical photos are mixed together in chronological order of one image per spread, and the reproductions are divided into sections of equal length by contrasting paper stocks. The dividers make clever colored lines on the edges of the book block, but it is not clear what the divisions mean. These design decisions are interesting and

may reflect respect for Massey's style, or mimic the structure of art exhibition catalogs, but they bias design over clear and thorough explanation.

John Massey Vision is valuable for the story it tells of a Midwestern American modernist designer. The book will be hard to find because only 400 were printed. Hopefully, the essays will find their way online and become accessible to designers and historians everywhere.

The Type Directors Club: Archive

<https://archive.tdc.org/news/a-midwestern-modernist-vision-a-new-book-on-designer-john-massey/>