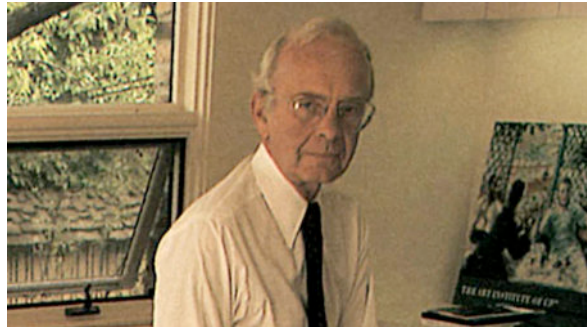


**1994 AIGA Medalist:
John Massey**

Recognition
1994 AIGA Medal
Born
February 1, 1931

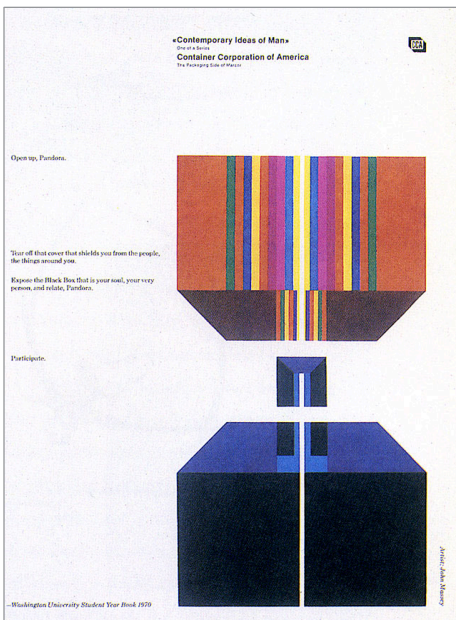
By Philip B. Meggs
March 1, 1994



Student interns received free admission to the fledgling International Design Conference in Aspen in 1953; in exchange, they escorted foreign speakers between the airport, hotel, and auditorium, helped with audiovisual equipment, ran errands and generally made themselves useful. One student intern from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign was the young John Massey. He was assigned to help two designers from Switzerland who he had never heard of before: Armin Hofmann from Basel and Josef Müller-Brockmann of Zurich. This experience proved to be one of the major revelations of Massey's life.

Massey vividly remembers picking up the two Swiss designers at the Hotel Jerome and taking them, along with their projector and slides, to the Wheeler Opera House to rehearse their presentations. Over forty years later, Massey recalls watching slides of their incredible Swiss posters and recounts how they changed his whole life. He was mesmerized by the order, color, selectivity of imagery and the overall aura and spirit of their work. He yearned "to be inside that work, to have it inside of him." From that day forward, he abandoned his dreams of becoming an editorial cartoonist and sought a higher level of aesthetic and communicative expression. He embraced Hofmann and Müller-Brockmann as role models and did everything possible to educate himself about advanced design thinking.

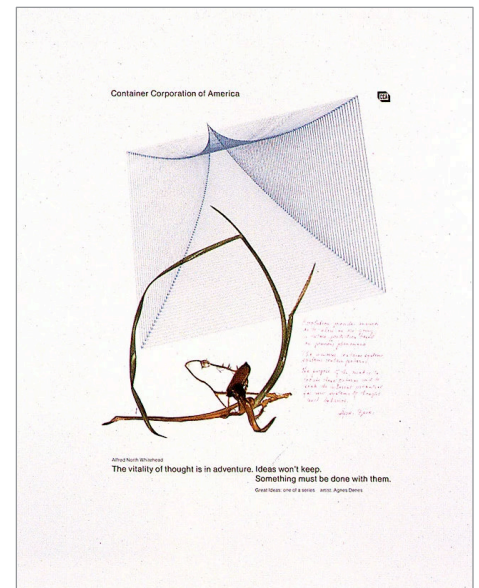
Massey's fascination with visual imagery dates from age six or seven, when he pored over illustrations, cartoons and photographs in magazines like the *Saturday Evening Post* and decided he wanted to become a cartoonist. He was interested in how artists interpreted things, and his involvement in art and drawing has continued without interruption from early youth.



Container Corporation of America, Contemporary Ideas of Man program, acrylic on canvas, 1975



Container Corporation of America, Contemporary Ideas of Man program, 1979. Artist: Ken Josephson



Container Corporation of America, Contemporary Ideas of Man program, 1979. Artist: Agnes Dennis

Massey was the official illustrator for his high school yearbook. While in his senior year in high school, Massey broke his leg in three places playing baseball. He studied fine art at Trinity College in Hartford, but had to leave school during his freshman year for additional surgery on the broken leg.

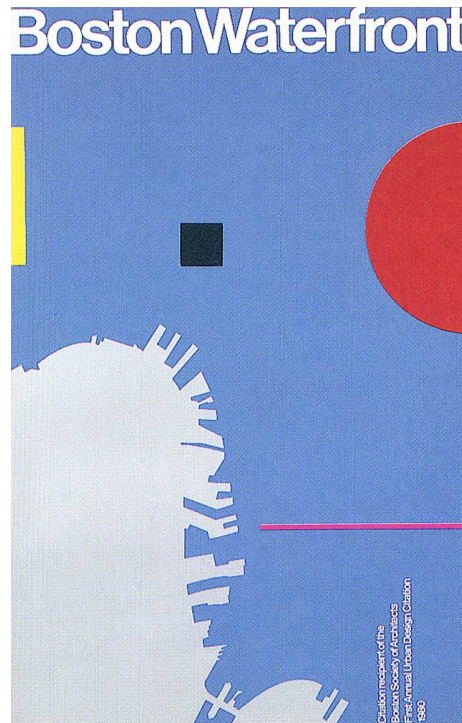
During a year of convalescence, Massey studied editorial cartooning at the Chicago Academy of Fine Arts under Ed Holland of the *Chicago Tribune*, then enrolled in the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana. At the university, he was the editorial and sports cartoonist for the *Daily Illini*

and also the editorial cartoonist for the two local newspapers, *The Champaign News-Gazette* and *The Urban Courier*. Massey's major was advertising design, but he was clueless about what exactly design was until his senior year, when he went to that early Aspen design conference. His education was centered on traditional training such as figure drawing and anatomy and did not seem especially relevant to his interests. After graduation in 1954, Massey's part-time job as book designer for the University of Illinois Press became full time. Massey worked for Ralph Eckerstrom, design director of the press. Eckerstrom proved to be a dynamic, intelligent man with a great sense of humor and an outgoing personality. From him, Massey learned the relationship between type and paper and cultivated a love of books. Massey still relishes the experience of receiving a book he has designed: holding it, turning the pages, smelling the ink. Eckerstrom's positive attitude and interpersonal relationships offered equally valuable lessons. His impressive presentation skills inspired Massey's own remarkable abilities in that regard.

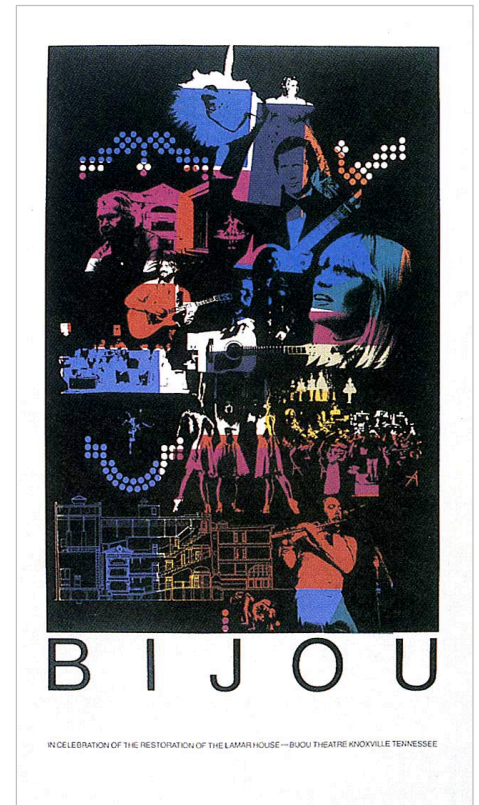
Massey became art director of the University of Illinois Press in 1957, after Eckerstrom left to join the Container Corporation of America in Chicago. Before the year was out, Eckerstrom invited Massey to become a graphic designer in Container's corporate design office at company headquarters. Shortly after joining Container, Massey met Container's design consultant, Herbert Bayer, who held the title Chairman of the Design Department from 1956 until 1965. Each month Bayer chaired a meeting to review and discuss all design projects and issues within the company. Massey's perspectives were broadened, helping him to achieve an international viewpoint. Bayer articulated the relationship between art, design, life and business. The connection between art, total reality and human thought was discussed.



American Library Association, 1978



Limited-edition serigraph for the Boston Society of Architects First Annual Urban Design Citation, 1980



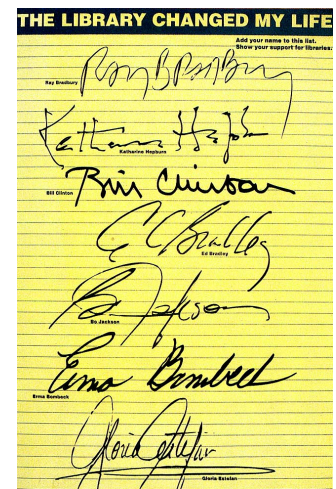
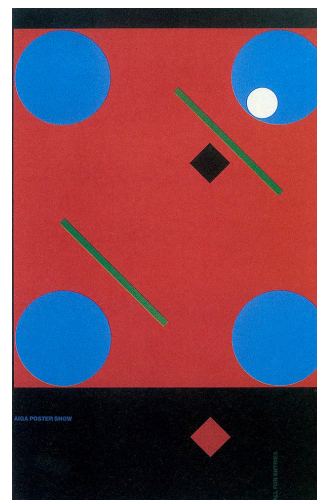
Bijou Theatre serigraph poster, 1983

Massey's office was seven or eight doors down from the office of Container's founder and chairman, Walter Paepcke, who built Container into one of America's most admired corporations and was venerated for his support of art and the humanities. Paepcke taught Massey the logic of integrating art and design into industry, for the benefit of society as well as those involved in the enterprise. Paepcke was also a great advocate of continuing education for adults and inspired this love in Massey. Paepcke's employees were encouraged to study the humanities, so they could understand how their work within the corporation related to the larger human community. Massey believes Paepcke and the philosophy he developed for Container were genuinely idealistic, yet pragmatic. Paepcke believed businesses affected society for better or worse. Container's renowned "Great Ideas of Western Man" ads became one of the most famous advertising campaigns in history. It was inspired by a design to propagate the important concepts of Western civilization.

From 1958 until 1964, Ralph Eckerstrom served as director of the Department of Advertising and Public Relations. Massey enjoyed a close and cordial working relationship with him, then became manager of design after Eckerstrom left Container in 1964. With Container's full knowledge and

approval, Massey had operated an independent design office in Chicago. When he replaced Eckerstrom, it did not seem appropriate for a top executive to run a separate business, so in 1964 Container converted Massey's studio into one of its divisions, called the Center for Advanced Research in Design (CARD). CARD enabled Massey to conceive and direct design programs for other organizations, including Atlantic Richfield Company, Inland Steel and the U.S. Department of Labor.

Advertising was added to Massey's portfolio, and he then became director of communications with responsibility for all of Container's communications activities in North America, Latin America and Europe. Massey places great value on becoming knowledgeable and involved in the entirety of the corporate structure; this enables designers to integrate design into the totality of the company. The communications program, offices, architecture, transportation, products and packaging were all guided by Massey as he made design an organic entity in Container's culture. Understanding that whoever controlled budgets had ultimate decision-making authority, he acquired this authority within the firm. From 1964 until its demise, Massey oversaw the continuation of Container's "Great Ideas of Western Man" institutional advertising. It took Massey five years to fully understand the integral relationship between the Great Ideas advertisements and Container's corporate mission. From a pragmatic point of view, the package relates to the world by becoming a bearer of messages about its contents. The "Great Ideas" campaign bears messages with broad ramifications for society. This campaign became a parallel process and metaphor for the processes and purposes of Paepcke's company. Making paper and packages are both arts and sciences. A solid is converted to a ninety-percent liquid, then reconstituted into paper. This new solid is then reformed to make packages. These packages protect, ship and inform people about the contents.



Series of Herman Miller, Inc. Booklets and posters based on notes and thoughts of Ralph Caplan, 1984

AIGA Poster Show call for entries, 1984

American Library Association, The Library Changed My Life program, 1993

For a remarkable two decades after Paepcke's death in 1962, his vision and philosophy remained an influence at Container via his employees, even through changes in corporate ownership. Naturally, new owners and managers altered its course as time passed.

A whole community of designers emerged from CCA and CARD. Between the two offices, as many as two dozen designers worked under Massey at a given time. Prominent Chicago designer Bart Crosby, who worked at CARD before launching his own firm, says CARD was "a scary place to work because the pressure to do great designs was so intense." Massey told him the keys to a design office's success were to "keep the overhead low and do famous work." Once Massey thought Crosby's designs for Herman Miller could be improved and told him, "There are two ways to do things; exactly as I told you, or better."

"The environment was so creative and stimulating," Crosby remembers, "that there was nowhere else to go except to start your own firm."

Joseph Michael Essex, another well-known Chicago studio head who worked for Massey early in his career, says, "John was the buoy who defined where a designer could go. He once told me, 'Be classical or extraordinary; nothing else is acceptable.'" Essex says Massey had a way of letting people work with him, not for him. He mentored from a distance, giving staff designers as much freedom as they could handle.

In 1983, Massey left Container and established an independent design consultancy, John Massey, Inc. Clients have included the Tribune Company in Chicago, FSC Paper Company (one of the largest manufacturers of 100 percent post-consumer recycled paper in the country), The Chicago

Community Trust, American Library Association, American Planning Association and Herman Miller, among others.

Massey began teaching at the University of Illinois at Chicago in 1984 and was appointed full professor in 1986. Teaching has enabled him to share his experiences and insights with an emerging generation of designers. He operates a course for seniors, who must submit their portfolios to him for admission. Each semester they design a comprehensive project for a public or private sector client, as Massey leads the team through the process of data collection, analysis, design, development, and ongoing work sessions with the client throughout the semester. The course culminates in a final presentation to the client's management group or board. Massey delights in his work with students, and confesses to never knowing how the project will turn out as the design process involving his interaction with students proceeds.

Massey is fascinated with order and the potential for expression through orderly systems. On a recent trip to Egypt with his wife, Barbara, Massey entered tombs 3,000 to 5,000 years old. Sections of some of the wall murals were incomplete and a red grid marking system had been applied to the walls in modules approximately a half-inch in size. Vast wall murals of hieroglyphics and images were all based on this system. Massey is fascinated by the order in earlier art, the order in the universe and the order within chaos. His art and design are always based on a system, often a grid but sometimes an unstated system in his mind's eye. Massey believes even elementary systems contain the potential for unlimited possibilities.

For Massey, color is one of the most powerful vehicles for experiencing and expressing thought and emotion. "We understand our environment in terms of the juxtaposition of color," he says. Planes, proportion and space are defined by where one color ends and another begins. Hope, fear, space, our physical and natural environment are all defined by color. The act of placing one color next to another is the most difficult thing an artist can do."

Massey is a classical typographer. Order, clarity and legibility are paramount goals. His typographic palette is limited to great faces that have stood the test of time, such as Bauer Bodoni, Garamond, Helvetica, and Univers. "Assembling letters into words, which are easily recognizable symbols," he notes, "is the essence of typography." He muses that much typographic work today has more to do with decoration and self-expression than with typography.

Massey has been involved in painting, printmaking and photography throughout his career, and sees very little difference between his fine- and applied-art activity. He says, "A graphic design must satisfy the problem it was conceived and planned to solve, but it can achieve a life of its own, transcending the assignment. This autonomous life is achieved because the creator imbues it with a spirit." Massey cultivates this spirit through his prints and paintings. He believes those who attempt to meld art and design should understand when it is appropriate to join them or separate them.

"John really is an artist who is a designer," says Bart Crosby. "He believes in cosmic energy? being in tune with the cosmos. He has a spiritual philosophy about design and how you create it." Crosby says Massey became a spiritual creative force of a generation of designers; he can "create abstract images to communicate with people."

"John Massey's approach to graphic design is very comprehensive," adds William Clarkson, former chairman and CEO of Graphic Controls Corporation and a Massey client at CARD, then at John Massey, Inc. "He steps back and assesses the total situation before starting to design. By understanding the total context, he could tune into the organization, its culture, its needs? then reflect them in his work. Or, if he senses problems, he addresses the philosophy and direction.

"John is soft-spoken and an exceptional listener with outstanding interpersonal skills; he builds excellent relationships with clients. His presentation skills are masterful. With so many professional lawyers, architects, and graphic designers, one feels like the clock is ticking, ticking, ticking. With John, after the fee is established one knows he is going to work on the problem until it's right."

John Massey is a generous and honest person, known for personal modesty and uncompromising standards of excellence. True to character, when I interviewed him for this essay, he talked more about his influences, employees and clients than himself. He has helped his clients to understand the role of art and design within a company, and how it can help a company in achieving its mission. He has been the catalyst for observable changes in management attitudes about the integration of art and corporate life.

Ethics, aesthetics, creativity and hard work characterize John Massey and have enabled him to establish a paradigm of the graphic designer as a vital force in contemporary life.