

Introductory Text

Paul Rand (1914–1996) was a pioneering figure in the field of graphic design during the second half of the twentieth century. He conceived of the “designer’s task” as the visual communication of a company’s or institution’s identity to a consumer—a radical idea at the time. Rand codified his design philosophy in his 1947 text *Thoughts on Design*, in which he demystified the seemingly serendipitous design process, challenging the perception that designers simply manipulate elements before happening upon a successful design. Foremost, Rand championed the practice of design as a thoughtful execution of an idea synthesized with an intentional use of form. For Rand, “visual communication of any kind ... should be seen as the embodiment of form and function: the integration of the beautiful and the useful.” Rand’s visionary and pithy conceptions of branding, or “identities”—though often graphically minimal—embody the artist’s complex philosophy, interest in modernist aesthetics, and singular wit.

Significantly, Rand brought the concept of corporate identity into the mainstream during a period of rapid economic expansion in the United States after World War II. For companies such as IBM, Cummins Engine, NeXT Computer, and Westinghouse, Rand crafted holistic identities, which not only included a new logo, but also featured packaging designs, promotional materials, and letterhead in an effort to signal to both internal staff and the broader public the character and values of a particular corporation. Rand articulated important social messages through designs for arts and culture publications and national and international organizations that promoted initiatives for environmental and humanitarian issues, such as Earth Day and displaced children. Even in Rand’s one-off commissions, including those for made for S.O.S. Children’s Village or the U.S. National Parks Service, he thoughtfully conveys the identity or character of a theme or event in his intentional designs.

This exhibition features a selection of posters and archival materials—including presentation materials, sketches, quarterly reports, book covers, and unrealized projects—spanning Rand’s prolific seven-decade career.

Jennifer M. Friess, Assistant Curator of Photography

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Modern Media Identities

In some of Rand’s earliest designs, he employs iconic forms—including the human body and references to music and architecture—gathered from the history of art, design, and typography and recontextualizes these elements in inventive ways that energize them for modern audiences.

For example, in the poster version of a 1939 cover he designed for the arts and culture magazine *Direction*, Rand integrates an existing image of a dancer, further emphasizing the figure's movement through hand-cut curvilinear shapes. This early design exhibits Rand's adept use of collage—made popular by avant-garde artists working concurrently in Europe between the wars—and signals the progressive views of the publication. Rand likewise manipulates the human form in his portrait of Igor Stravinsky (1882–1971), which was designed for the cover of a 1956 edition of the composer's critical text *Poetics of Music in the Form of Six Lessons*. Rand cleverly translates Stravinsky's silhouette into a series of black dots arranged across a lined background; together the forms read as notations on a musical staff—a fitting portrait of a world-renowned composer.

Rand's circus-inspired design for the IBM Pavilion at the 1964 New York World's Fair suggests his interest in incorporating visual elements from the history of architecture and design into this early corporate work. In his design for the 1966 International Design Conference in Aspen, Rand deftly articulates the program's theme—Sources and Resources of 20th-Century Design—by including a white silhouette of a life-giving egg and an asymmetrical splash of black drops that defy traditional boundaries of form.

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Corporate Identities

In the decades following World War II in the United States, Rand was at the forefront of advocating for unified visual programs for corporations. He believed that a logo alone was not enough to convey the identity of a company, and encouraged corporations to embrace intentional design practices.

Rand is best known for his role in the formation and refinement of the computer giant IBM's corporate identity, created over the course of his three decades designing for them. He modernized everything from the company's logo to its packaging, promotional materials, and letterhead in order to signal to IBM's staff and to the public the innovative character of the business. Indeed, Rand brought the concept of corporate identity into the mainstream through his work with IBM and even, as seen in *IBM Latin America*, to global markets.

Rand's designs for IBM and other technology-based firms, such as Cummins and NeXT Computer, convey their international scope and inventive culture through bold colors, simplified shapes, and pithy text staged on broad fields of neutral white, black, and gray backgrounds. Rand was also conscious of the power of subtle wit and employed visual strategies of humor—through juxtaposing different colors, shapes, and sizes—in each of his corporate designs.

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Public Identities

Rand received commissions from national and international organizations promoting educational, environmental, humanitarian issues and initiatives. For organizations that cultivated public good will, Rand incorporated quotations of familiar symbols with deep cultural or historical resonances.

In the 1990s, Rand designed a number of posters for the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA), an institution that commissioned renowned and emerging contemporary designers to exemplify good design practice for its student body. Here, the eye-catching and improbable combination of a snow-capped orange amusingly conveys winter semester course offerings to UCLA students and faculty. In his poster *Earth Day '95*, created for the event staged at the World Trade Center in New York, Rand conveys a poignant message about humanity's capacity for love through a forest of green hearts. In addition to the ethical message, the inks and paper used to make this poster are all environmentally friendly.

Rand's 1996 poster commission from SOS Children's Village conveys the significant goal of this NGO (non-governmental organization): to care for displaced and orphaned children. The upside-down silhouette of a child is filled partially with a detail from Pieter Bruegel the Elder's 1560 painting *Children's Games*, historically grounding the importance of youthful play. By featuring a tumbling child in his design, Rand emphasizes that the efforts of this worthy NGO are both active and, unfortunately, never complete. Commissioned by the United States's National Park Service, *Boston, A New National Park* features a tilted asterisk-like star holding a torch reminiscent of the Statue of Liberty's beacon. Blue and red squares fall in a celebratory cascade of confetti, marking the designation of national park sites in Boston related to the American Revolution.