Summer 7-10-2019

Armin Hoffman

Ilze Spilde
Kutztown University of Pennsylvania, ispil778@live.kutztown.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://research.library.kutztown.edu/designpioneers

Ilze Spilde

Professor Kate Clair

Design Pioneers

10 July 2019

<center>Armin Hofmann</center>

Recognition and praise are typically associated with most renowned designers, but their influence on others is what keeps their work and ideas relevant. Designer and design educator Armin Hofmann helped shape both the design world in which he lived and the next generation of acclaimed designers. A believer in minimalism and structure in design, Hofmann was instrumental in creating the iconic Swiss International Style, a style of design that focused on simplicity, asymmetry, and structure. His well-known poster work exemplifies many of the Swiss Style characteristics. Hofmann worked as a design professor and later as head of the graphic design department of the Basel School of Arts and Crafts. His teachings heavily impacted his students, such as Kenneth Hiebert and April Greiman, who later brought elements of Hofmann's design ideologies with them as they blossomed into the next generation of leading designers. As illustrated by his highly-regarded design work, his contribution to the Swiss International Style, and his impact on later designers, Armin Hofmann was a true design pioneer.

Hoffman's Education & Career

Born on June 29, 1920, Armin Hofmann grew up in Winterthur, Switzerland. Although primarily self-taught, he was educated at the School of Arts and Crafts in Zurich, Switzerland, before working as a lithographer in the cities of Basel and Bern from 1943–1948 ("Armin Hofmann," *Vangeva*). Given that Switzerland was neutral and therefore fairly unaffected during World War II, the design world moved its focus to the creativity and innovation stemming from Switzerland's two cultural centers, Zurich and Basel. A clear difference between the designers of Zurich and

Basel was that the Basel designers sought to meaningfully communicate through minimal form and signs, while designers in Zurich referred to rational intellectualism and rigid grid systems (Samara). Hofmann believed in and promoted the Basel design approach throughout his design career, including his years of teaching.

In 1947, he was hired as a teacher at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel School of Art and Crafts, a prestigious art and design school in Basel, Switzerland. It was here that he "brought into the School a conviction that the old order and the old technologies were dead and ripe for radical renewal" (Hofmann and Wichmann 12). Hofmann believed that students not only needed to use modern technical equipment – a ball-point pen or rapidiograph, in those days – but they first needed a vast expanse of knowledge in order to put such tools to good use (Hofmann and Wichmann 13). According to Ken Hiebert, a designer and former student of Hofmann's, "Hofmann didn't let you merely utilize what you already knew. You had to strip that away, too, to immerse yourself into a new problem. There were no formulas. 'Swiss Design' was not the curriculum (Hofmann and Wichmann 11)."

Hofmann, who valued the relationship between form and communication in design, pressed his students to represent elements with simple means in order to communicate a message or idea of some nature (Hofmann and Wichmann 13). During his forty years of teaching at Basel, Hofmann developed the school's renowned graduate program and, after roughly twenty years at the school, replaced Emil Ruder as head of the Basel Design School. In teaching and leading at the school, Hofmann influenced the work and thinking of the next era of designers and artists, with his influence reaching across the seas to those in the United States and India. Many of his pupils, including Kenneth Hiebert, April Greiman, Robert Probst, Steff Geissbuhler, Hans-Ulrich Allemann, Inge Druckrey, Dan Friedman, and a number of others went on to become leading designers and educators; they serve as living testaments to the wisdom and ability of Armin Hofmann ("Armin Hofmann," *Hypocritedesign*). Through his convictions, accomplishments,

and teachings, Hofmann was especially crucial in forming the Basel School's international reputation.

Although his home was in Basel, Switzerland, Armin Hofmann exported his expertise when teaching abroad. Simultaneous to his teaching in Basel, he taught in the United States at the Philadelphia College of Art in 1955, and just one year later he started teaching at Yale University in Connecticut. (Poynor). Hofmann remained heavily involved with Yale throughout his career, and later served as director of the Yale Summer Program in Graphic Design, in Brissago, Switzerland (Poynor). By 1964, Hofmann was released from the winter semester of his teaching at Basel in order to travel to Ahmadabad, India to participate in building the curriculum for the Directorate of National Design Institute of India ("Armin Hofmann," *Vangeva*). His reach and impact on the design world spread with each of his international educational pursuits. With his experience practicing design through various media – books, exhibitions, stage sets, logotypes, symbols, typography, posters, sign systems, environmental graphics – and almost twenty years of instructing on the subject in numerous forms and places, Armin Hofmann published *Graphic Design Manual,* a book that captured his design principles and approach to teaching design (Poynor). In this book, Hofmann covers subjects from shape and line to letters and signs.

He uses these elements and applies them to more abstract elements of design. For example, Hofmann begins the book with the idea of the dot. He explains that a dot can increase in size, adopt new colors or textures, serve as a plane's center, multiply, create gradations, and more, but fundamentally, it is still a dot (Hofmann 15). He goes on to explain that because of its balance and versatility, the dot is particularly good at exhibiting the key principles of composition, and is therefore "a building block of instruction" (Hofmann 15). Because the content in Hofmann's book, like the importance of merging shape and line with composition, is still relevant today, students and designers alike still reference the latest edition of his book.

Notable Design Work and Style

Given that Armin Hofmann was not only a skilled and influential educator, but also a respected designer, he produced much of his design work while teaching at Basel. In fact, his most widely recognized design works were his posters that were created for various areas of the school. Hofmann produced his seminal work, a series of posters for the municipal theater and art gallery of Basel, also known as the Stadttheater Basel and Kunsthalle Basel, while instructing at Basel (Poynor). His various posters gained such acclaim that they have been featured in various prominent museums around the world, including the New York Museum of Modern Art. The key reason that Hofmann spent so much of his career designing posters was because he firmly believed that this form of design in particular was one of the most efficient forms of communication (Hofmann and Wichmann 13). Posters are simple and direct, and therefore, Hofmann viewed this medium as an ideal force in which he could make an impact on anyone.

His poster for Brahms' Requiem (figure 1), for example, expertly expresses his intended message through repetition, clear imagery, symbols, and typography. The astute use of the bass clef symbol represents Brahms' music, the theme of this specific concert, while the purpose of the enlarged ear characterizes the act of listening. Hofmann aligns the bass clef and ear in height, positions them so that the two elements overlap, and purposely accentuates the shared,
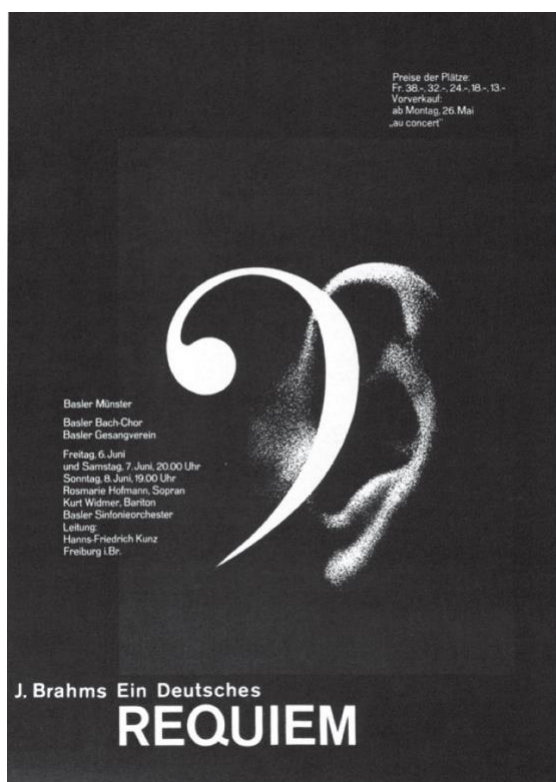
Figure 1
Poster by Armin Hofmann, 1986.
https://agnebaksyte.files.wordpress.com/2013/11/hoff-man1352786291500.png. Accessed 01 July 2019.

curved form of the bass clef and the ear in order to emphasize the marriage of the two symbolic images. Without even necessarily requiring the explanation of the poster through its text, the viewer understands Hofmann's message of listening to a concert simply through the conspicuous design and imagery of the poster. This instant understanding by the viewer illustrates Hofmann's effectiveness in communicating through design.

Apart from his effort to communicate with the viewer through his design work, Armin Hofmann shows a distinct style in his posters. He subtly exhibits simplicity, complexity, representation, and abstraction in his design work. His posters are generally characterized by an economical use of color, high contrast between light and dark, sans-serif typography, and an asymmetrical layout. The posters shown in Figure 2, created for the Basel School's theater productions and art gallery, all represent Hofmann's characteristic style regarding sparse color, contrast of value, sans serif typography, and simple layout. Of the six posters shown in the image, the top row of posters and the poster on the bottom right all portray themes for upcoming

Figure 2

Image of six posters by Armin Hofmann, Various Dates. http://www.designersjournal.net/jottings/designheroes/heroes-armin-hofmann. Accessed 01 July 2019.

theater productions. Note how these theater posters all include the high-contrast, black and white photography to better depict the gesture of performing and playing. Meanwhile, in the two art exhibition posters on the bottom left, Hofmann relies heavily on the abstraction of shape and negative space to convey the exhibit's modern artworks.

After the Second World War and the advent of color photography, the advertising and entertainment industries were enamored with the use of flashy, colorful imagery and relied heavily on machine-made artwork, like the color photographs used in large posters for the food, tobacco, and beverage industries (Hofmann and Wichmann 21). This sudden excess of color was regarded by Hofmann as the "trivialization of colour," as he believed that this color profusion distracted viewers from interpreting the true meaning of a design (Hofmann and Wichmann 22).

In other words, Hofmann felt that people would merely see a colorful poster, instead of seeking to understand it. The appearance of the color television in particular vexed him, as the light, words, noises, and background music in color television caused color to lose its substance and impact and likewise created a blur of confusion between artificiality and reality (Hofmann and Wichmann 21). Hofmann's feelings toward this colorful artificiality heavily influenced his work, and he wrote:

> "With my simply constructed black-and-white-posters I have endeavored to do something to counteract the increasing trivialization of color evident since the Second World War on billboards, in modern utensils and in the entertainment industry… [I]t seemed to me that finely graded gray values and the subtle disposition of light-and-dark figures evoke and leave more colorful and lasting impressions than the gaudy allurements purveyed by the entertainment industry (Hofmann and Wichmann 21)."

As demonstrated through his work, Armin Hofmann subscribed to the theory that the economic use of color was more effective than the overuse of it, that precise and thoughtful blocks of color against a black and white background elicit a more expressive and meaningful reaction from the viewer. Despite the fact that color photography and color television could be included as part of the arsenal of new technological design tools that, according to Hofmann, students and designers ought to embrace, he believed that the sparse use of color was more effective in communicating a

design's desired message.

In addition to his vehement views on color, or lack thereof, Armin Hofmann also
practiced the use of sans-serif typography,
asymmetry, simplistic imagery, and high
contrast of value in his work. Given that
Hofmann was drawn to the power of
legibility in letters and their sign-like
structures (Hofmann and Wichmann 21),
it is of little surprise that he preferred
the use of clean, sans-serif typefaces like
Akzidenz Grotesk. It appealed to him
that viewers' own thoughts are generated
and imagery is conceived in their minds
upon reading a word or string of words
(Hofmann and Wichmann 21). In his
minimalist poster "Die Gute Form,"
or "The Good Form" (figure 3), Hofmann
alters rounded, sans-serif typography to

Figure 3
Poster for the "Die Gute Form" exhibition by Armin Hofmann,
1954. https://corvallisreview.blogspot.com/2018/03/ore-
gon-state-graphic-design-series_27.html. Accessed 01 July 2019.

compose the arrangement of letterforms into the message that they represent: good design.

Portions of letters are omitted to create dynamism and negative space, while the unbalanced and

asymmetrical layout of the combination of letters maintains visual interest in the piece.

Hofmann also effectively uses asymmetry and placement to move the viewer's eye in

his 'season poster' for the municipal theater shown in figure 4. The simple imagery of the hands denotes the gesture and body language that is so essential to theater, while the strong contrast of light and dark brings greater emphasis to this symbolism and reminds the viewer of the bright lights associated with on-stage performances. Although the typography is small, Hofmann subtly highlights its importance through the bold use of red – the only color on the poster that he reserves to accentuate the type. Hofmann has also crammed the type tightly together both in terms of kerning and leading. The placement of the type is almost loose, as though the hand above it has just dropped it. The different positions of the hands denote a variety of emotions – like calmness and surprise – that we read in these gestures. In addition, the arrangement of the hands gives the impression that each gesture is responding to the message of its neighbor.

Figure 4
Poster for Stadttheater Basel by Armin Hofmann, 1963.
https://www.hypocritedesign.com/armin-hofmann/. Accessed 01
July 2019.

The Swiss International Style

Another crucial way in which Armin Hofmann influenced the design world was in

his significant contribution to the Swiss International Style. The Swiss International Style, also known as the International Typographic Style or simply as the Swiss Style, was a design style developed in Switzerland in the 1950s. It is characterized by cleanliness, readability, and objectivity, and takes a minimalist approach to design ("Famous Graphic Designers Whose Work Is Art"). This Swiss style was embodied by designers like Ernst Keller, Emil Ruder, Josef Müller-Brockmann, Max Bill, Otl Aicher, and Armin Hofmann. ("Famous Graphic Designers Whose Work Is Art").

In many ways, the characteristics associated with the Swiss International Style parallel those represented in Hofmann's work. Like Armin Hofmann's own views, the Swiss Style valued communication above all else (Flask). The style gave particular importance to its asymmetric layouts, the use of a grid, sans-serif typefaces, flush left and right text, and the preference of photography over illustration ("Famous Graphic Designers Whose Work Is Art").
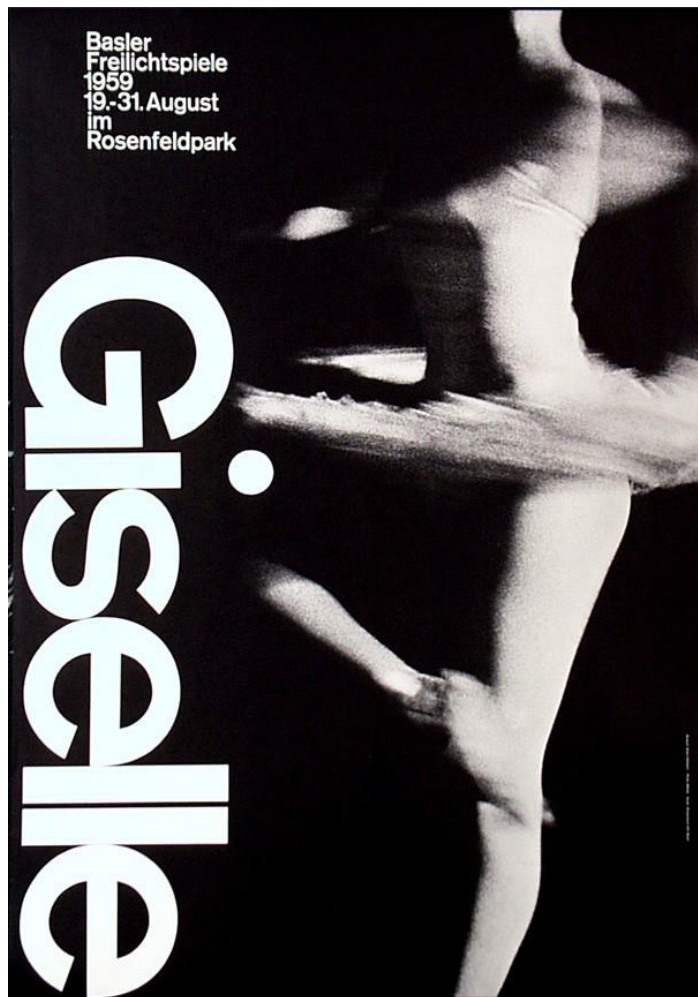

Figure 5
Giselle ballet poster by Armin Hofmann, 1959.
https://2paragraphs.com/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/Hofmann_Giselle_1959.jpg. Accessed 01 July 2019.

New techniques of photo-typesetting, photo-montage and experimental composition were implemented in works characterized by this style (Flask). Hofmann's famous poster for the ballet *Giselle* (figure 5) exemplifies how his own design style melded with The Swiss International Style. The sans-serif typography commands much of the area, with its placement flush against the bottom left corner, and the grainy, blurred photograph of the ballet dancer in the midst of a pirouette offers movement to contrast the solid, typographic pillar. The meticulous placement of the i's tittle not only brings the viewer's eye from the figure to the text, but it adds a point of stability to the dancer (Poynor). Hofmann's reliance on the fundamental elements of point, line, and shape better allowed him to capture the clean, minimalist aesthetic of the Swiss International Style, and demonstrates how this style and his work are still relevant to today's design.

Hofmann's Legacy

Although Armin Hofmann retired in 1987, he left behind a legacy through his work, his stylistic influence, and his students. His thoughtful, compelling work maintains its relevance over fifty years later, and therefore serves as a prime reference for contemporary design methods. Regardless of how long it might take, the process of discovery on one's own was a portion of learning that Hofmann heavily encouraged in his students, and it helped many of his pupils build their design prowess. Through the balanced guidance of Armin Hofmann, his students embraced various elements of Hofmann's influence – his simplistic use of design elements, his acceptance of technology, and his sign-like typography. As they matured into the next generation of skilled graphic designers, they applied the lessons learned at Basel. April Greiman, a former student of Hofmann's at Basel, not only felt the influence of Armin Hofmann's design style and contribution toward the Swiss International Style, but she held true to her teacher's wise insistence that designers needed to embrace the knowledge and use of modern technical equipment, instead of simply continuing with tools used from the past.

During the 1980s, when the majority of other designers were hesitant and scared by the

unfamiliarity of computer technology and its possibilities in design, April Grieman welcomed

them. Not only was she excited by the new digitization, but she became "instrumental in

exploring and spreading the idea of involving advanced technology in the arts and design

process" ("April Greiman | Biography, Designs and Facts"). She saw technology as a new

tool in the toolbox of the designer. Grieman was appointed to head of the design department

at the California Institute of the Arts, won the Grand Prize in Mac World's First Macintosh

Masters in Art Competition in 1981, and continues to be an important contemporary graphic

designer ("April Greiman | Biography, Designs and Facts"). Similar to Hofmann's early

adoption of technologies like the ball-point pen, or Grieman's integration of computers, some

may argue that the newest technologies are not as thoroughly taught in art schools as they

ought to be. As written by Armin Hofmann himself, "[t]he more cunningly devised [new

technological instruments] are, the greater the knowledge that is required before they can be

put to wise and responsible use (Hofmann 11)." The question of whether today's schools

assimilate these technological ideologies with the same fervor as Armin Hofmann remains to

be seen.

　　　　With technology advancing as quickly as ever, the importance of educators staying

current with innovations in design and technology remains very relevant. Computer programs,

like those included in the Adobe Creative Suite, are a prime example of constantly changing

technology. For example, with the prevalence of social media, Adobe Spark has now gained

traction as a tool to quickly and easily create visual content for social media marketing purposes.

The web and mobile app allows users to create graphics, videos, and web stories for various

online platforms. Three and a half years ago, Spark was not even in existence, but today many

design agencies are utilizing it for its simplicity and speed.

　　　　Similar to Spark, Adobe's motion graphics program After Effects serves as another

crucial component in today's design world. Previously, most design jobs generally required

adequate experience in Adobe InDesign, Illustrator, and Photoshop. Now, however, with the emergence of sponsored ads on Instagram and brief commercials interrupting online Youtube videos, a significant number of design agencies and jobs are seeking employees who are not only able to create a visually appealing static design, but also able to construct motion-based design work with programs like After Effects and Spark. The constant upgrade cycle of computer programs and the evolution of technology in general emphasizes that, in order to stay relevant in the design world, one must never stop learning.

Works Cited

"April Greiman | Biography, Designs and Facts." *Famous Graphic Designers*,
        www.famousgraphicdesigners.org/april-greiman.

"Armin Hofmann | Biography, Designs and Facts." *Famous Graphic Designers*,
        www.famousgraphicdesigners.org/armin-hofmann.

"Armin Hofmann | Biography, Life, Work, Logos and Awards." *Famous Logos RSS*,
        www.famouslogos.net/armin-hofmann/.

"Armin Hofmann." Hypocritedesign, 26 Apr. 2018,
        www.hypocritedesign.com/armin-hofmann/.

"Armin Hofmann." *Vangeva*, www.vangeva.com/armin-hofmann/.

"Famous Graphic Designers Whose Work Is Art." *Widewalls*,
        www.widewalls.ch/famous-graphic-designers/.

Flask, Dominic. "Armin Hofmann." *Design Is History*,
        designishistory.com/1940/armin-hofmann/.

"Heroes – Armin Hofmann." *Designers Journal*,
        www.designersjournal.net/jottings/designheroes/heroes-armin-hofmann.

Hofmann, Armin. *Graphic Design Manual: Principles and Practice*. Niggli, 1965.

Hofmann, Armin, and Hans Wichmann. *Armin Hofmann: His Work, Quest and Philosophy*.
        Birkhäuser, 1989.

Matthews, William. "Armin Hofmann." *History of Graphic Design*,
        historygraphicdesign.com/the-age-of-information/the-international-typograph
        ic-style/803-armin-hofmann.

Poynor, Rick. "2011 AIGA Medal: Armin Hofmann." *AIGA*,
        www.aiga.org/medalist-arminhofmann/.

Samara, Timothy. *Making and Breaking the Grid: A Graphic Design Layout Workshop*.
        Rockport Publishers, 2017. EBSCOhost,
        search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=nlebk&AN=1563449&site=eds-live&-
        scope=site.