

Why has France's influence upon European graphic design been underestimated and neglected?

Deberny & Peignot
France
Graphic design history
Graphisme
Modernism
Twentieth century

Moderne times



Even for the French, graphic design history plays second fiddle to painting, sculpture, cinema, cuisine and couture. Yet France's advertising (*publicité*) and typographic (*graphisme*) legacies are by no means insignificant to a broad popular culture. In fact they had a huge influence on commercialism of the early twentieth century, particularly the United States' shift from post-Victorianism to modernity during the early 1920s. So why has it taken so long for an inclusive history of French graphic design to be written (and translated into English)?

Perhaps because it has been overshadowed by the scholarly attention paid to German, Russian and Dutch avant-garde Modernism. Or maybe because after World War II French *graphisme* was considered less world-altering than Swiss design (despite the fact that key International Style typefaces, such as Univers, were designed in France). Over the past two decades

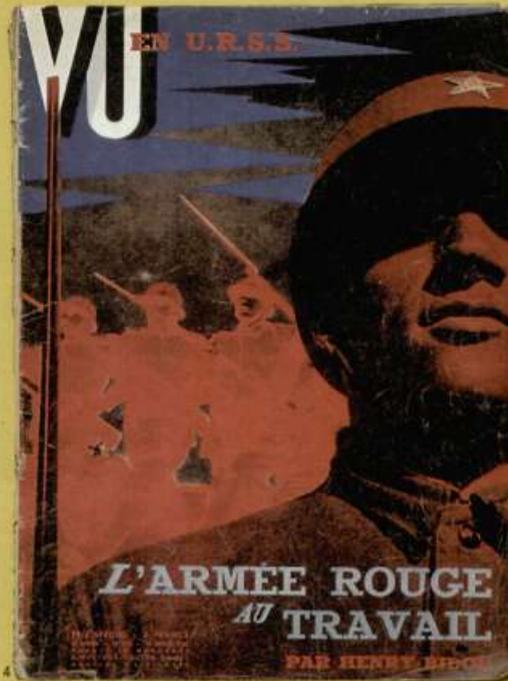
important texts have been written about Spanish and Italian design, so why has similar attention not been paid to the accomplishments of French graphic designers?

Whatever the reasons, judging from the chapters devoted to France in current English-language design history textbooks in addition to eighteenth-century type design and late nineteenth century Art Nouveau, the most celebrated French graphics are those luscious posters representing the moderne or Art Deco style by A. M. Cassandre, [Jean Carlu and Paul Colin, which, for better or worse, have since the late 1960s been fetishised by collectors and turned into pastiche by airbrush jockeys. Hence, little is known about France's significant contributi- n- to Modernism, as well as its contributions to pre-Modern and postwartypography. But now, thanks to Michel Wlassikoff's *The Story of Graphic Design in France*, the historical imbalance is being rectified through a thorough harvesting of historical fact. The Gingko Press edition has a fine English translation by Lisa Davidson and Sally Laurette (although, annoyingly, many proper names for well known designers are still spelled as though transliterated in French).

Wlassikoff charts a fascinating and lively chronology from 1500 (Diderot and d'Alembert's classic pictorial *Encyclopedie* to 2005 (books designed by M/M (Paris) and Frederic Teschner with many engaging highlights along the way. In fact, the evolution of French graphics from rococo to postmodernism is a fairly steady path of innovation, even though the later postwar period is virtually ignored in American and English design histories. Although pieces of this history have surfaced in English language texts - like the influence of Robert Massins experimental book typography and book covers - I was happily surprised to learn about Pierre Faucheux's similarly prolific and influential pioneering of eclectic typography. Also, while much has been written about the 1968 French student uprising and the agitprop posters of Atelier Populaire, Wlassikoff chronicles a heretofore, for me at least, unknown alternative design culture, including Atelier des Arts Déco and the designers for the underground paper, *Actuel* - work that eventually evolved into the intellectual French comic-book movement (including the publisher Futuropolis, whose stunning comic books pioneered what we now call graphic novels). Roman Cieslewicz (see *Eyeno*. 9 vol. 3), another

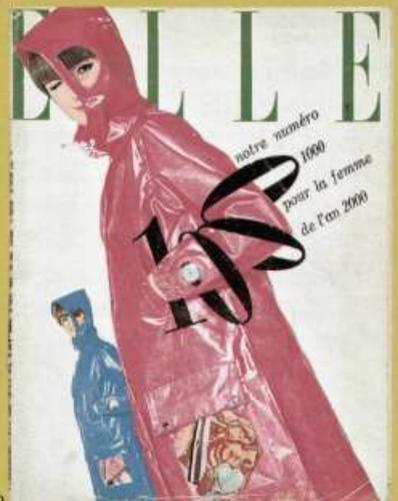
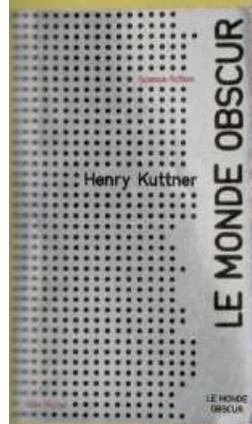
All images taken from *The Story of Graphic Design in France*, by Michel Wlassikoff, Gingko Press, £35, \$59.95. 1-3. France was a wellspring of the moderne in Europe. The following are exemplary of that sensibility. 1. Logo for SNCF, the French national railway system, designed by Maximilien Vox, 1937. 2. Catalogue for wine producer Nicolas, designed by Studio Draeger, 1930. 3. Peignot type sample for the Deberny & Peignot Foundry, designed by A. M. Cassandre, 1937.



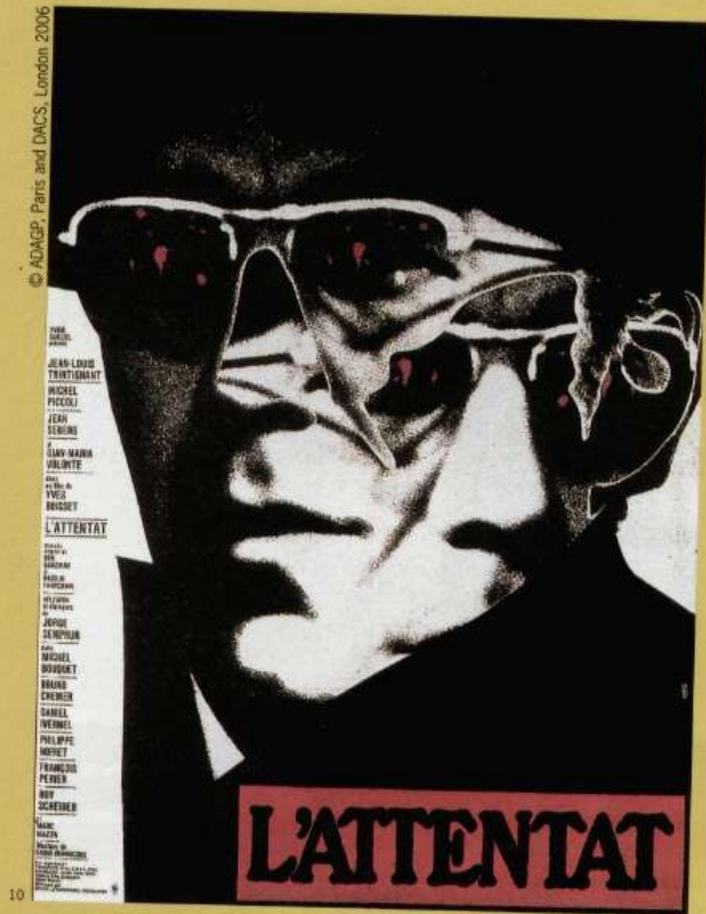


4. Cover of Vu, designed by Alexander Liberman, July 1935. Vu was the most progressive of all the French pictorial weeklies. The covers were usually photomontages printed in two or three colours. (See Eye no. 26 vol. 7.)
 5. Air France logo, designed by Roger Excoffon, 1958, one of the most recognisable modern airline identities. This original drawing is by Jose Mendoza.

AIR FRANCE



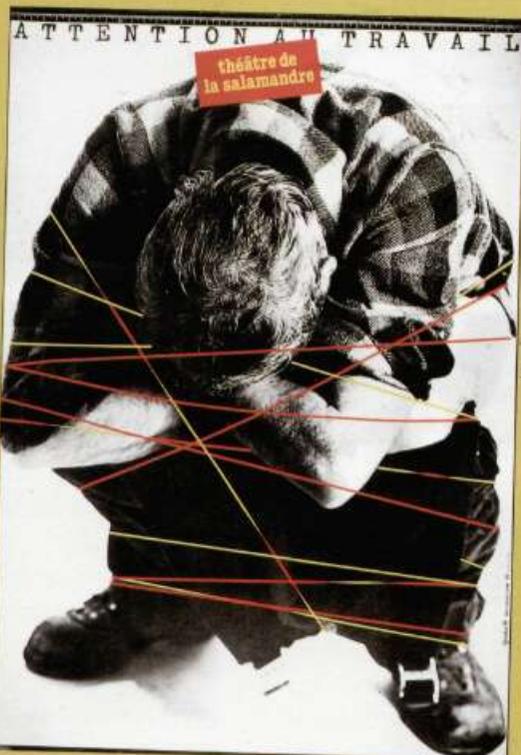
6-9. French design of the 1960s and early 1970s incorporated Swiss-style Modernism with a flair that was inextricably French. 6. Cover for Le Monde Obscur, a science fiction book, designed by Pierre Faucheux, 1974. 7. Cover from the 'Liberties' book series, designed by Pierre Faucheux, 1964-68. 8 and 9. Covers for Elle, designed by Peter Knapp, 1965



10. Poster for *L'Attentat*, a film by Yves Boisset, designed by Roman Cieslewicz, 1973. After the first wave of moderne poster artists, few were more innovative than Cieslewicz (see *Eye* no. 9 vol. 3). 11 and 12. *Qui? Resiste* magazine covers designed by Pierre Di Scullo, 1989. Politics was always well designed in France. This leftist magazine represents the rule, not the exception.



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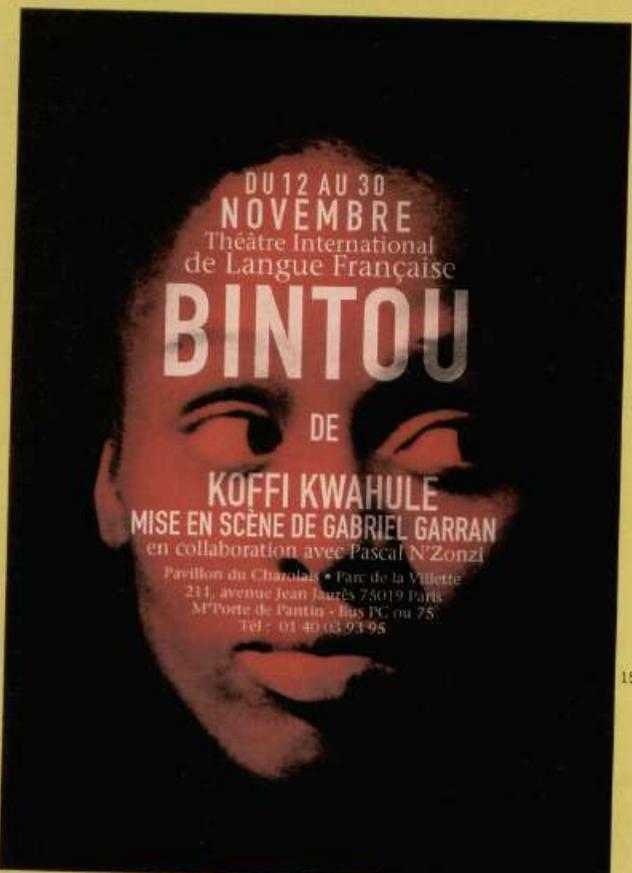
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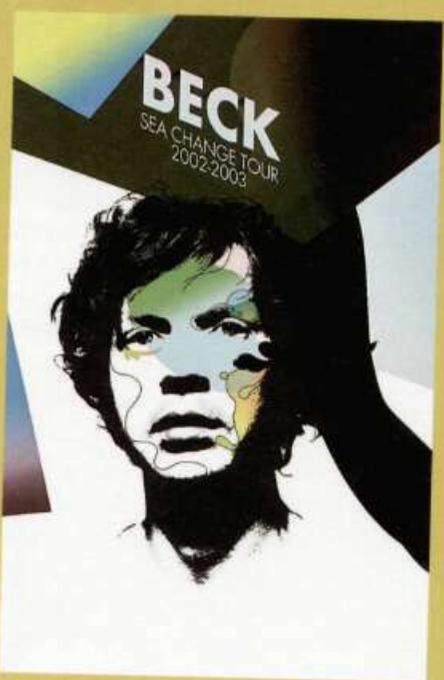
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13. Poster for the Théâtre de la Salamandre, designed by Grapus, 1979. Grapus (see *Eye* no. 3 vol. 1, and no. 27 vol. 7) emerged from the graphic and social revolution of the late 1960s to lead the way in new wave design.

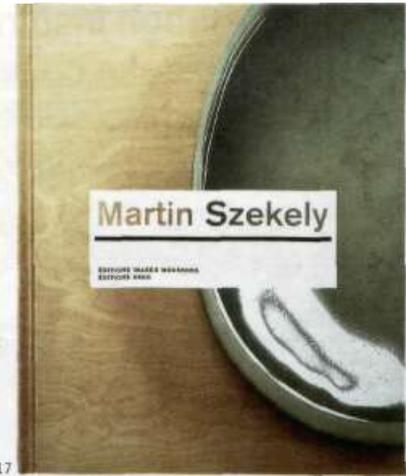
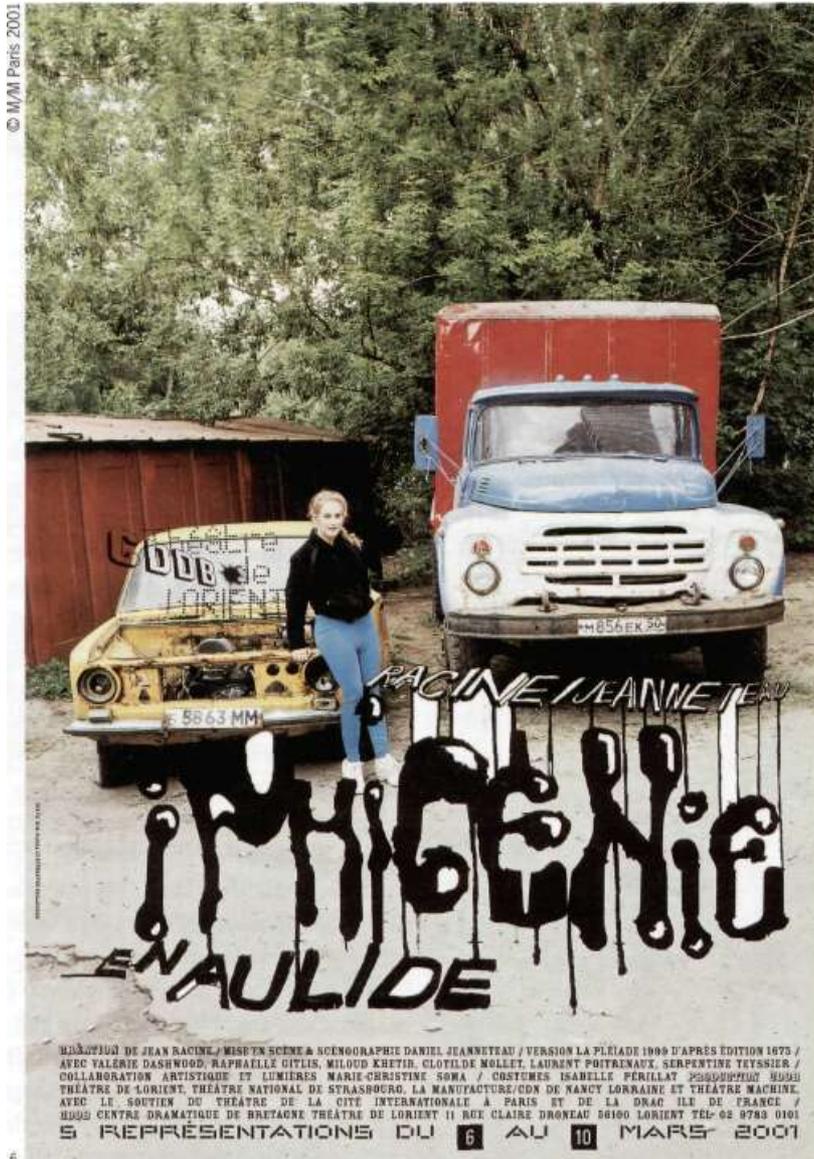
14 and 15. With the advent of the computer, French design seemed to blend into an international Esperanto of design. 14. Poster for *Bintou* at the Théâtre International de Langue Française, designed by Verdet-Lakits, 1998. 15. Tour poster for Geffen Records, design: Laurent Fétis, 2002.



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16 and 17. New approaches to French design veer between exuberant eclecticism and neo-ate Modernism. 16. Poster for COOB Theatre de Lorient, 2001, designed by M/M (Paris). 17. Book cover, designed by Frederic Teschner, 2003.

internationally known Polish-French designer, is well represented but so is the lesser-known Pierre di Sciuolo, (see *Eyeno*. 23 vol. 6) whose covers for *Qui? Resiste*, show a hand-wrought typographic sophistication that took another ten years to emerge in the us.

Wlassikoff gingerly covers the pre-Modern period, with the early French type foundries (such as Laurent & Deberny) and satirical periodicals (such as *L'Assiette aubeurre*). He analyses the way that French design became prominent through the worldwide popularity of everything Art Nouveau, from posters to architecture. But the most enlightening are the chapters addressing the emergence of French commercial Modernism.

France may not have had the Bauhaus, but it did have type firms such as Deberny & Peignot that engaged in progressive typographic research; Alfred Tolmer, whose book *Mise en page* was a seminal handbook on modern print design applications; and Maximilien Vox, an outspoken designer, who established typographic standards through his 'experimental' magazine *Divertissements typographiques* and other writings. France also hosted many of the epoch-defining design expositions - from the 1925 Exhibition of Decorative and Industrial Arts (which set the standard for French commercial modernity and where Le Corbusier's *L'Esprit nouveau* was introduced to the world) to the international Exhibition of 1937 where the Union des Artistes Modernes charted a course of progressive Modernism (thwarted by World War 11). France also launched the Alliance

Graphique Internationale, the preeminent organisation of international design. In these chapters Wlassikoff chronicles the rise of and reaction to Modernism, and the need for French designers to create a uniquely national design language in response to the German and Russian avant-gardes.

You will have to read the book to learn more about the dichotomies and tensions between the progressive and regressive camps, but Wlassikoff does not shy away from exploring how graphic designers under the Nazi occupation and the Vichy regime politicised aesthetics and undermined French hegemony in the design world. For example, here's a caption that caught my attention: 'As a result of the Nazis' anti-Semitic obsession, the decree of June 7, 1942 required Jews in the occupied northern zone [of France] to wear the yellow star - the prelude to their deportation and extermination. The word "Jew" on the star varied according to country; the Debemy & Peignot studio produced the plate for the French version.' For Charles Peignot's foundry - the publisher of the great design magazine *Arts & metiers graphiques* and hot-house for progressive type design - to be so implicated is fascinating. While this is only a small detail from a time when many designers (including Maximilien Vox) embraced Vichy's nationalism, it is one that sheds more light on the French design experience. And also one among many pieces of data that makes this book well worth reading not only in France but in design history classes everywhere.©