SEYMOUR CHWAST

Born in 1931, Bronx, New York
Resides in New York, New York

ESSAY BY CLIVE COCHRAN

Every great city has its decade: Paris in the twenties, London in the sixties. For New York, and especially for Manhattan, that decade had to be the 1950s. Postwar America was experiencing a period of unprecedented economic growth, fueled by pent-up energy and resources released by victories in Europe and the Pacific, and marked by a boundless enthusiasm and optimism. It was a boom time, and nowhere was that more obvious than in New York City. They called it the Big Apple; everybody wanted a bite.

Graphic design and advertising clearly profited from the boom. This was a period of new thinking in graphic design, of advances in communications technology, and reinterpretations of prevailing idioms. Modernism and the International style had long since taken root in American design, and had evolved into what Phillip Meggs has called the New York School, a combination of the Modernist ethos and American pragmatism.

It was in this environment, in 1954, that Seymour Chwast, along with his colleagues Reynolds Ruffins, Edward Sorel, and Milton Glaser, established what would become Push Pin Studios. This event launched one of the most influential design movements of the last sixty years: the Push Pin style.

Many design scholars see Push Pin as an abrupt departure, a hard left turn away from the formal structure of Modernism, and revolutionary in its impact. That may be true, but Chwast and Push Pin share with the Modern school a rejection of the cliché ridden, banal clutter represented by most of what passes for communications design, then as now.

Push Pin and the Modernists both insist on the importance of the idea, the underlying concept behind the image. But the methods are very different. Chwast and his colleagues rejected the idea of cookie-cutter solutions, of what some detractors might deem the Modernist formula: establish a grid, slap down some Helvetica, set the text in flush left, random right, create a hard-edge metaphorical image to illustrate the headline. For Chwast, every design problem is different, and calls for a different approach. If Push Pin had a prevailing aesthetic it would be eclecticism, and a commitment to relentless curiosity about culture, image, and ideas. And there is something else: the Push Pin style relies heavily on illustration.

Both Chwast and Glaser refer to themselves as designers. Yet each insists on the importance of drawing. In fact, when Seymour was asked why he wanted to live close to his studio, he replied, “you never know when someone might need a drawing in the middle of the night”. According to his wife, the designer Paula Scher, he adheres to a demanding work schedule, although he probably doesn’t think of it as work: 11 to 12 hours a day, of drawing and thinking about drawing, for over 55 years. Scher says, “If there is a day that he doesn’t have any drawings to make, he comes up with ideas for things that will demand he make more drawings anyway… the act of making drawings is so ingrained in his being it has become equivalent to breathing, and if he doesn’t do it he will die.”

Despite his prodigious output, Seymour Chwast never seems to run out of ideas, although in his recent book, *Seymour, the Obsessive Images of Seymour Chwast*, he admits to a fear of repeating himself: “My fear of failure persuades me to work overtime to improve the work… I just slug it out until something appears that I like.”

One strategy is simply to exhaust the creative possibilities of a subject. This was the operating motive of the Push Pin Graphic, the promotional house organ of Push Pin studios. For example, issue no. 63 from 1976 was *The Chicken Issue*, in which the various Push Pin artists would each provide their individual interpretation of America’s favorite fowl. Seymour still applies this technique. In his recent book many of the images *are* obsessive; he seems to be asking himself, how many different ways can you draw a monkey, or a Mexican wrestler, or a car? He loves cars, but they are all vintage cars, rendered in paint, or ink, or woodcut, or painted cut sheet metal. Many seem to be two-dimensional replicas of cheap, tin, wind-up toys, complete with side, front, and rear views of the driver and passenger.

His constant experimentation with different media and surface materials is a hallmark of Seymour’s work, as is the insistent two-dimensionality. The art is flat, there is rarely a hint of perspective, or foreshortening, or Chiaroscuro, as though he is saying, "look, it’s a picture, focus on the idea!" There is also a certain muscularity about his drawing, perhaps even pugnacity, usually combined with an incisive wit that owes more to slapstick than irony. It’s like the Marx Brothers meet Picasso meets Mohamed Ali.

A good example is Seymour’s famous anti-war poster, *End Bad Breath*. His Uncle Sam is a contrary echo of James Montgomery Flagg’s famous recruiting poster. Both faces are in-your-face, but whereas Flagg uses foreshortening and perspective to achieve impact, Seymour relies on the power of the flat surface; a hard edged linocut with deliberate imperfections and bold color that will not be ignored. The title itself is a not-so-subtle comment on consumerism: we are more concerned with halitosis than mass destruction. That poster was made forty years ago, and just like Flagg’s *I Want You*, it has never gone out of print. In the interval, Seymour Chwast has continued to make drawings in his studio every day, 11 to 12 hours a day. After all, you never know when someone will need a drawing in the middle of the night.

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