Arts, crafts and wealth – A brief visit to the exhibition “Swiss Graphic Design in Seoul, 2014”
by Sara Zeller and Robert Lzicar

Bright colors, big letters in varying typefaces, multi-layered photographic elements and morphing structures – the vast visuality of graphic objects designed in Switzerland literally draws you into the venue of “Swiss Graphic Design in Seoul”. Inside you will find various kinds of artful printed matter, like posters, books, brochures, leporellos or flyers. Looking closer, more quiet works reveal themselves: A black sans serif font in one or two precisely determined weights skillfully arranged on black or white paper leaves an impression in no way inferior to a colorful collage. The exhibition shows impressively that contemporary graphic design from Switzerland includes a wide range of different design approaches and media. But, what unites these works that can be considered as “typically Swiss”?

When it comes to stereotypes Swiss graphic design is regularly said to be distinct, neat, tidy, even meticulous or perfectionist. These attributes can be dismissed as ghosts of the past, as they refer to the 1950s and 1960s, when the so-called Swiss Style disseminated throughout the western world. Nowadays in the western world, where international communication is daily business and ideas are shared globally just by clicking a button, frontiers and national categories no longer seem to be relevant. Nevertheless, “Swiss Graphic Design” is still used as quality label in graphic design, as the exhibition title suggests. But, what drives Swiss graphic design today, what characteristics link the exhibited works, and what are the topics graphic designers in Switzerland are interested in?

Material girls and boys
Taking a closer look at the exhibited objects, the use of high-quality material and unusual printing techniques – like silk screen, risograph or letterpress prints on thick, tactile or thin, see-through paper, cardboard or even fabric – strikes the visitor. This attention to materiality seems apparent, if a design is commissioned by the luxury or fashion industries, as represented by Bureau Collective’s (1) offset and silkscreen printed lookbooks for Swiss fashion designer Stefanie Biggel. Just seeing the booklets from a distance, makes the viewer want to feel them. While leafing through, you immediately start interrelating the material qualities of the lookbooks
to the fabrics and clothing as seen in the pictures. It leaves you with a tangible impression of Biggel’s work that goes far beyond high-gloss fashion photography. Architecture as well wants to appear in its material dimension not only in real life experience. This might have triggered Claudia Baseli to use silk screen printing on heavy paper for their corporate design for the Swiss Architecture Museum (SAM) (2). But also the typography refers to the construction of buildings by redefining the space of different printed matters and in various colors.

The visitor gets the impression that throughout the exhibition material is not just applied as an ornament but to communicate a specific content. Thus, it seems no coincidence that Büro 146 (3) used a metallic bronze to print their poster for the Haus der elektronischen Künste Basel. The color visually supports the associative effect of the reproductions of printed circuit boards. At the same time the text on the poster “ZZZZZZSSSSSSIILIIKKK. KLLLLIIKLIIIK. CHHRRRR. PIIIIIIIP” reminds the viewer of starting an old analogue modem and gives you a hint about what to expect when visiting the advertised exhibition. However, what can therefore be expected from Dafi Kühne’s poster (4)? The type is set in form of a sausage, enriched with splashes and the iris printing in blood-red colors represents a “Metzgete” – a Swiss culinary tradition, where you eat freshly slaughtered pork in various forms, like blood and liver sausages, bacon and boiled ham. But, the poster refers to this bloody but artisanal event also on the level of production: It is made from two large hand cut linoblocks and was printed with the designers’ own letterpress (5, 6). This makes the time-consuming production of the poster as archaic and somewhat anachronistic as the event advertised. Surprisingly, the poster was not designed to announce a real “Metzgete”, but to be sold as a print in limited edition at an online design shop. Thus, the aim of the poster – or more precisely the art print – is to be displayed: Either at the purchaser’s kitchen wall or as part of this exhibition.

With regard to the initial question, the love for special material and the interest in craft is certainly a similarity between the works on display. It often results in imperfect, but more individual solutions than precise offset printing is able to produce. Mistakes can not be reduced to sloppiness, but are an intended part of their concept. However, is this love for craftsmanship a visionary Swiss contribution to a global visual culture, nostalgic appreciation or a luxury fetish for materiality? Above all, it is the fascination for experimenting with techniques, material and craft – old or new, analogue or digital, high or low – that unites graphic designers working in Switzerland.
The art of book design

It is not surprising, that the exhibition presents publications just like pieces of art. Within the field of editorial design, art and artist’s books are challenging commissions for graphic designers that are treated by them with exceptional attention. The book “Neue Menschen” (“New Human Beings”) designed by Afrika – Florian Jakober & Michael Zehnder is based on a project by the artists Rico Scagliola and Michael Meier. It presents a portable exhibition between its shiny foil-covered cover and back (7). But the publication is not only a superficial display of artworks. Similar to an exhibition curator, it was part of the designers’ job to select and organise 350 from around 80'000 digital photographs in collaboration with the artists. During this one-year process the artists literally moved in Afrika’s studio. Thus, the designer role was inevitable to the project, rather than carrying out a client’s briefing.

Not only the design of art books, but editorial design in general is highly recognized in Switzerland. One reason for this might be, that none other than the Swiss Confederation itself awards outstanding achievements in book design and production. Thus, the Federal Office of Culture organizes a jury of renowned international members that selects a number of “Most Beautiful Swiss Books” on a yearly basis. Although the award is not connected to a prize money, it is one of the most highly regarded awards by graphic designers in Switzerland. Thus, it is not surprising that several of the latest award winning books are also displayed as part of the exhibition. For example, “Learning from Warsaw – 20 lessons” designed by ATLAS, “30 Years of Swiss Typographic Discourse in the Typografische Monatsblätter” designed by Robert Huber and Louise Paradis or Simone Koller’s editorial design for “Gestaltung Werk Gesellschaft – 100 Jahre Schweizerischer Werkbund SWB”. All awarded books are presented in a catalogue, which in turn is regularly designed by former award winners, as Maximage “The Most Beautiful Swiss Books 2013” (8-12).

But why, printed products, like books or posters, gain so much attention by contemporary Swiss graphic designers and not the more recently developed digital media, like websites or apps? Swiss design education has been modelled around a combination of art and craft right from the foundation of the “Kunstgewerbeschulen” at the beginning of the 20th century. Technological research and development, on the other hand, was assigned to the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Zurich and Lausanne. By this decision, two major and integral dimensions of
modern design were splitted into two separate educational systems. Driven by the rise of new media, Swiss universities of the arts decided to establish new specialized degree programs, like “interaction design” or “game design”, rather than to include training in digital media design into traditional graphic design curricula. This, on the one hand, led to a high quality and ongoing development of new approaches for designing printed products as this exhibition impressively shows, but, on the other hand, traditionally educated graphic designers in Switzerland have missed the chance to shape these important new fields of design.

Exporting Swissness

The visitor discovers a number of signs that refer to Swiss customs and traditions. “Swissness” as label and promotional strategy plays an obvious role in this exhibition. As noticed before, food culture is capable of distinctly shaping the visual appearance of a nation. “Anne Bäbi im Säli” was designed by Erich Brechbühl to announce a play in the local theatre of a small Swiss village. To do so, it refers to the form of chalkboards which usually can be found in front of a “Beiz” – a public space between a pub and a restaurant – to advertise its daily specials. Thus, Brechbühl found a formal and playful way to link the concept of local characteristics represented by both traditions that are typical for the german speaking part of Switzerland (12). He pushes this idea even further, by substituting the logotype of the sponsor – the famous Swiss soft drink “Rivella” – with the name of the theater. By doing so, the poster preserves and critically assesses a dying out part of Swiss everyday visual culture. Displayed in this exhibition, the poster furthermore exports a piece of Swissness directly into the heart of South Korea.

The poster “Käseunion Neue” by Grotesk.cc (Reto Moser, Tobias Rechsteiner and Simon Renfer) combines two other icons of Swissness (13): First it refers directly to a historic poster by Viktor Rutz from 1938 (14), and second it makes use of the patterns of a fabric that can be found on the tables of restaurants and chalets throughout the country. Rutz’s poster was commissioned by the “Käseunion” (a union of dairy producing companies) to promote Swiss dairy products. To do so, it created a cliché of a Swiss dinner table as still-life illustration. In their updated version from 2011, Moser, Rechsteiner and Renfer for the Swiss Cultural Fund in Britain adopt the traditional scenery, but cover it completely with the red and white chequered tablecloth. While its predecessor was designed to promote the use of Swiss products on the home market just before WWII, the contemporary poster appropriates this traditional approach for the exhibition “Switzerland: Design for Life” in London, with the intention to promote Swiss
design culture to an international public. Also this second example reveals both, a proud and critical attitude towards the heritage of visual design from Switzerland. Whether, it reduces the national visual culture to the icons of Swiss Style, nor Swiss traditions are used as a stylistic device only. By criticizing stereotypes with contemporary methods, graphic designers from Switzerland create a forward-looking interpretation of Swissness that attracts a visually and culturally educated audience all over the world.

A rich tradition
Coming back to the initial question, what the contemporary Swiss graphic design presented in this exhibition has in common and how these similarities can be described? Tan Wälchli has posed a similar question to the designers of the “Most Beautiful Swiss Books” in 2008. Besides the well-known characteristics mentioned at the beginning, some designers emphasized that budgets for graphic design in Switzerland are often significantly higher than in other countries. On the one hand, this results from the country's wealth, and on the other hand from the legacies of Swiss graphic design and the historically developed high standards in the professional field. Wälchli further elaborates that a significant number of Swiss institutions – many of them funded by public money – are willing to pay for high-quality graphic design and thereby oppose to the global trend of falling prices for design services. Because the products don’t have to be competitive on an open market, graphic designers are able to experiment with innovative methods, utilize expensive materials or produce by applying labour-intense printing techniques. Hence, it is not surprising that none of the works presented in this exhibition have an entirely commercial purpose. But, the exhibition also shows impressively that it is well worth paying that price – the outcomes of the extraordinary combination of art, craft and economic wealth contribute significantly to the global reputation of Switzerland, not only as a graphic design nation. Thus it is not surprising that in 2014 the Swiss Confederation appointed “Swiss graphic design and typography” as one of eight Swiss “living traditions” – and besides watchmaking or yodeling – proposed to the UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage.

Further Reading

Christian Brändle et al. (ed.): *100 years of Swiss Graphic Design*, Zürich 2000.

Peter Bil’ak: *Graphic Design in the White Cube*, Moravian Gallery Brno 2006.


Graphic design is so much a part of our modern world that it is hard to imagine living without it. In some ways, we never have “design has been evolving nearly as long as we humans have.” The history of graphic design is ongoing. Before the invention of the printing press in 1440, the roots of visual communication stretch all the way back to caveman times. It seems like humans have always had an inherent drive towards art, evidenced by the early cave paintings dating back to prehistoric times. Subjects vary from animals to hand imprints to events like hunting, and they’ve been found all over the world (Australia, Spain, Indonesia, France, Argentina, just to name a few). The Seoul Museum of Art (SeMA), features the finest modern art in the country. On three floors, visitors have the chance to explore six exhibition halls, as well as a lecture hall and an extensive library where you can dive into art books, magazines and visual materials. One of the most popular permanent exhibitions features artworks of the famous Korean painter Chun Kyung Ja and should not be missed. Moreover, the museum constantly offers interesting temporary exhibitions. These include displays of works by Picasso to the cover photos of the National Geographic. The museum’s main building is Swiss designers also brought tremendous vitality to graphic design during this period. After studying in Paris with Fernand Léger and assisting Cassandre on poster projects, Herbert Matter returned to his native Switzerland, where from 1932 to 1936 he designed posters for the Swiss Tourist Board, using his own photographs as source material. He employed the techniques of photomontage and collage in his posters, as well as dynamic scale changes, large close-up images, extreme high and low viewpoints, and very tight cropping of images. Matter carefully integrated type and photographs into a tota