Swiss Graphic Design: The Origins and Growth of an International Style 1920–1965

A presentation by Richard Hollis followed by a discussion with Derek Birdsall, Ruedi Ruegg, Richard Smith and Cornel Windlin, supported by usm at Central Saint Martins, Cochrane Theatre, Southampton Row, London, 5:30pm, 16 May 2006

Swiss Graphic Design: The Origins and Growth of an International Style 1920–1965, by Richard Hollis gives the first comprehensive account of the development of the Swiss Style. Originating in Russia, Germany and The Netherlands in the 1920s, stimulated by the artistic avant-garde and alongside the International Style in architecture, Modernist graphic design and typography found a firm foothold in Switzerland before and after the Second World War.

By the 1950s Switzerland had developed a uniquely clear graphic language which matched the country’s reputation for efficiency and precision. Evident not just in posters but in advertisements, brochures and books, Neue Grafik or Swiss Style, as it became known, was respected internationally for its formal discipline: simple methods that could make posters dramatic and give an order and elegance to typographic design. Sharing the disciplines of Swiss Concrete Art, designers organised images and text into geometrical grids. With sans-serif typefaces such as Helvetica and Univers, these were the chief components of the Swiss Style which spread across the world.

Its influence is still seen today, recognisable in corporate publicity and highway signs from Amsterdam to Tokyo and from London to Los Angeles.
Derek Birdsall was born in England in 1934. In a career spanning almost fifty years Derek Birdsall has gained a reputation as the ‘godfather’ of British book design.


In 1984 he set up his own practice with Max Baltis that would become Designalltag in 1992. Amongst his designs: the literature periodical literatur, a digital type foundry which has developed into an internationally acclaimed platform for typography and graphic design. Windlin has created corporate typefaces for Mitsubishi and the Herzfeld Memorial Trust and design for a number of clients in both cultural and commercial fields, among them Tate Museums London, Kunsthau Zürich, Kunstmuseum Basel, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, Schauspielhaus Zürich, Vitra, Parco Department Stores and Foster’s Beer.

With Stephen Müller he co-founded Linetic, a digital type foundry which has developed into an internationally acclaimed platform for typograph and graphic design. Windlin’s posters and book designs have won numerous awards and have been widely published in design books and international graphics publications like Eye Magazine, I.D. and Idavista.

He has lectured in the United States, England, Germany, Austria, Israel and Switzerland. He lives and works in Zurich.
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