

Press release

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Graphics. Designing the everyday

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Visual communication is omnipresent: on packaging, posters, stamps, street signs, watches, advertisements and signage systems. Featuring items from the Swiss National Museum collection, the exhibition shows that design is much more than mere decoration: it structures information, helps with orientation, stirs emotions, imparts values and can reinforce or question social conventions.

The first part of the exhibition focuses on the effect of design. Colours, pictures and fonts often catch our eye even before the words do, and speak to us directly. Advertising harnesses this effect to its own ends; for example, it presents products as desirable and uses them as a conduit for values, gender roles or expectations of what an ideal body should look like. Posters and print advertisements from the past, for example, show how women were long portrayed as nurturing housewives, almost like window dressing, while men tended to be shown as competent, active and dominant. Such images helped shape perceptions of what counted as ‘normal’ – for decades. At the same time, the exhibition shows that graphics can also be used to expose these conventions and critically question them.

Health, consumption and ‘Swissness’ are another focus area. Advertising for tobacco, alcohol and heavily processed foods has long promoted enjoyment, freedom and abundance, while disregarding the risks involved. And national identity is also constructed graphically: the Swiss cross, mountains, crossbow, William Tell and trusted brands translate values such as quality, precision and reliability into memorable images. The ‘Swiss style’, with its clear grids, sans-serif fonts and functional design, has become known internationally as a hallmark of modern Swiss graphics. At the same time, the exhibition takes a critical look at ‘the Other’: exoticizing and racist images show how visual design can also represent power dynamics, stereotypes and Western perspectives.

The second part of the exhibition explores the creative process behind graphic design. It shows how much observation, craftwork and systemization go into seemingly simple visual solutions. Poster designs by Paul Brühwiler, Theo Ballmer and Donald Brun reveal the work that went into finding the right motif, composition, technique and expression. Brühwiler’s film poster for the Filmpodium Zurich uses a woodcarving as the basis for the screen print from which the poster was made. This design series features a range of approaches. Ruedi Külling’s sketches for the OLMA trade fair posters and Siegfried Odermatt’s draft ‘Design

aus den Niederlanden' (design from the Netherlands) show how shapes, colours, paper, font and printing process are incrementally condensed into a succinct visual format.

The ubiquity of graphics comes across particularly in signage, corporate design and product creation. Signage systems similar to that of the Swiss Federal Institute of Technology in Lausanne (EPFL) model or the wayfinding system at Monte Verità show how typographic, colour and formal elements structure spaces. The corporate design of the city of Lucerne and drafts for the Palexpo convention centre demonstrate how logos, manuals and applications create a recognizable identity. Everyday objects also tell a story of graphic design: the Swatch watches by Robert & Durrer, including the Banana, Nautilus and Jelly Fish models, combine graphic patterns, colours and industrial production into small portable symbols of their time. Packaging like that for Cementit or advertisements for Schweppes, BiC and Akris illustrate how recognition, word play, minimalism and photographic precision contribute to the success of a brand.

The exhibition thus shows that far from being peripheral, graphic design is a key formative element of everyday life. It influences what we see, buy, remember and believe. It can show the way, create trust and forge identity, while at the same time reinforcing clichés or leading to exclusion. By connecting historical examples with design processes, 'Graphics. Designing the everyday' reveals a visual culture that surrounds us on a daily basis – inviting us to take a closer look.

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