Bradbury Thompson

This is a research paper focused on famous graphic designer Bradbury Thompson’s works and inspirations. It will explain why this designer was truly unique on how he approached typography and graphic imagery as well as what inspired many of his most memorable works. Thompson worked hard as an art director, professor, author, and graphic designer throughout his lifetime and helped the graphic design field grow in countless ways. “His strong sense of design, coupled with his belief in the power of the printed word, characterized his teaching to four decades of students at Yale, where he was a visiting professor of graphic arts from 1956 until ill health forced him to curtail his work there this year” 1.

Thompson was born in 1911 in Topeka, Kansas and went on to work in many places throughout the rest of his life. “Interested in art from the time he was a boy, he worked in all manner of art and design” 2. He started designing in 1934 after graduating from Washburn College with a degree in economics. Thompson said that a degree in economics helped because he could then understand the world of commerce and its needs as well as the imperatives of communication. He worked at Capper Publications for four years as a designer for books and magazine covers. In 1938 he became an art director for Rogers-Kellogg-Stillson. There he started becoming associated with Westvaco's "Inspirations for Printers" where he started his interest in merging type and imagery in poster-like ways. His design for the Inspiration series demonstrated many of his ideas that continued to follow him throughout his life. He did a total of 61 issues from 1939-1962. Thompson then went on to become associate chief of the U.S. State Department's Office of War Information as well as art director of its publications Victory, USA, and America from 1942-1945. He was the art director of Mademoiselle Magazine from 1945-1959 and then the design director of Art News and Art News Annual from 1945-1972. Thompson as an author created The Washburn College Bible (featured below), “…the most monumental and innovative reassessment of bible typography since Gutenberg's own edition appeared in 1455” 2. This book was quite extraordinary because it was a three volume limited edition of the Bible. “He arranged the text in phrases, separating them where the reader naturally hesitated or stopped” 3. His other book was The Art of Graphic Design which showcases many of his works in graphic design and shares his inspirations and techniques. He designed formats of 35 other magazines that include Harvard Business Review, Progressive Architecture, and Smithsonian.

designed 120 stamps for the United States Postal Service. “Many of his designs became iconic snapshots of American history and culture” 1. However, Thompson is very much remembered by many students and others as an amazing professor. He taught at Yale University from 1956 till the end of his life.

Bradbury Thompson was a truly unique designer. He designed in a way were he used his common sense and clarity but still created unique and never before seen designs. “Bradbury Thompson’s mark is impeccable taste applied with great elegance—an elegance of simplicity, wit, and vast learning—and an intimate knowledge of the process of printing, always with style, with informed taste” 2. For one of the Westvaco Inspirations issues the designer sought to use typography in new ways by exploring the painter’s work. Thompson arranged typography that were in the spirit of these paintings and also brought in graphic shapes from within the paintings to places in different areas within the painting. The final product was that of a natural and fluid piece. Another thing that makes Thompson so unique is his creation of Alphabet 26 (featured below). This alphabet was based on the logic of consistency and was presented in Westvaco Inspirations 180 in 1950. This was to help simplify and improve our alphabet by recommending one symbol for each letter. Up until this point our alphabet had two symbols for each letter—upper case and lower case. Thompson wanted to create an alphabet with only 26 symbols that would help clear up some of the confusion in school that children were having when learning the alphabet, but he also wanted it to appeal to a broad segment of readers as well. “Alphabet 26 provides the necessary large letters for emphasis at the beginning of the sentence and for denoting proper nouns, an advantage over the exclusive use of an all lowercase alphabet” 3.

Thompson also believed that typography itself could serve as a graphic element on a page. “The Roman alphabet lends itself to nearly endless design possibilities...The symmetry and simplicity of the letter l...seemed to require an asymmetrical arrangement to provide graphic interest...However...the asymmetrical letter R similarly inspired an asymmetrical design for its spread” 4. He believed that a typographic designer needs to show the arts and sciences of the past as well as ones today. It needs to be created in the spirit of the designer’s own time but also merging with the past. Thompson’s unique way of arranging type into a playful and appealing designs stuck in the design field. Some of these designs even became trademark designs for corporations, institutions, publications, and societies (featured below).

In addition to type being used by itself, Thompson also found a unique way to merge typography and photography into one brilliant, cohesive work through simple techniques. “The typographer’s task is to create a constellation of type with the exact position, the precise size, and the particular value to strike harmony with the picture image” 4. This fusion of the two oldest forms of communication revolutionized graphic design and made a turning point from the free-form relationships of the 1920s to a new classicism and respect for history. Thompson was truly a unique designer and would never blindly mimic the past in his decision making. He knew how to be appropriate in creating his designs and knew how to create loud or quiet in a graphic statement. Using his knowledge to depict these things is part of why he’s such a successful self-assured design director.

Bradbury Thompson’s inspirations came from things in everyday life. “A constant interest in work plus an interest in everyday things can give the artist and designer endless numbers of fresh ideas” 3. One of Thompson’s two-page spread idea Horsepower came from tripping over his son’s toy horse. Another moment happened when Thompson was opening the door of his home. And the idea of doors opening into rooms revealed to him some aspect of life or living and became the idea for another Westvaco Inspirations issue called Enter and Exit (featured below). In another instance he was running his eyes along a line of type and that inspired a page in which greyhounds were running around the border of a page. Needless to say, his inspirations came from any and every possible source. It is evident that life itself is truly what inspires Thompson. “He was one of the most innovative and renowned graphic designers of the 20th century” 5.

Bradbury Thompson’s designs helped to transform the field of graphic design in multiple ways. He brought the idea of using purely letters from the alphabet to stand alone as their own graphic. He also combined typographic arrangements with the painter’s work, experimented with similar graphic shapes in other areas of the painting, and was able to relate all of them together. His genius combination of photography and typography on the printed page showcased an amazing new way of designing. Thompson recovered two of the oldest styles of communication and combined them to create a revolutionary new technique. He was one of the first to try all of these combinations and was one of the ones who succeed at it. These types of designs are seen throughout much of modern day’s graphic design from artists all over the world. “There is no better tribute to a designer than to find that something he produced even a decade ago is still in use” 3.