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LIFE | 20 ODD QUESTIONS

Graphic Artist Michael Bierut on Logos and Emojis

The man who shattered Saks Fifth Avenue's fusty insignia and created Hillary Clinton's controversial campaign logo talks memorable hotels, Wile E. Coyote and the best typeface for résumés

By DAVID A. KEEPS

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"FORTY YEARS AGO, graphic arts were a form of black magic—only a handful of people even knew the names of typefaces," said Michael Bierut, a partner in the New York office of the international design consultancy Pentagram, who has crafted visual identities for clients as diverse as Saks Fifth Avenue and Manhattan's Museum of Sex. Today, when any 10-year-old with a computer can design custom letterhead, Mr. Bierut said, **"if Google changes its logo, everyone is expected to have an opinion about it."**

As much admired for his design punditry as for his packaging of Billboard magazine, Mohawk Paper and the New York Jets, Mr. Bierut this year entered the political fray with a bold social-media-savvy design for Hillary Clinton: a blue H pierced by a red arrow. **"Every act of visual communication, back to cave paintings, is designed to convey a message,"** said the 58-year-old, whose new monograph, **"How to Use Graphic Design to Sell Things, Explain Things, Make Things Look Better, Make People Laugh, Make People Cry, and (Every Once in a While) Change the World"** (Harper Design) was recently published. **"Graphic design is the whole series of decisions that get made to shape that message."**



LETTER MAN | Michael Bierut in Pentagram's New York office *PHOTO: JULIANA SOHN FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL*

In a recent chat, the Westchester, N.Y., resident, who also serves as a senior critic in graphic design at the Yale School of Art, parsed the elements of good business stationery, a dress-to-impress wardrobe and the epicurean perfection that is Fudgie the Whale.

My day starts with: the same routine: I brush my teeth and shave with products from Harrys.com. If it's 10 degrees Fahrenheit or higher, I run 3 miles in New Balance 990v3s shoes, then walk my West Highland terrier, Gladiator, water the flowers in the window box and get on the train to New York.

The most important tools on my desk are: Pilot Precise V5 rollerball black pens and those standard composition notebooks with the black-and-white pattern. I am on my 108th and currently get them from Gramco School Supplies, Inc., in Brooklyn.



Clockwise from left: 'Graphic Design,' by Milton Glaser; Pilot Precise V5 rollerball black pen; a bottle of McIlhenny Tabasco sauce; a Gene Meyer tie; Sir John Soane's Museum in London; Volkswagen Beetle A3; the Bierut-designed Saks Fifth Avenue bags *PHOTO: F. MARTIN RAMIN/THE WALL STREET JOURNAL (PEN, SAUCE, BOOK); MARK ROSKAMS (TIE); ALAMY (MUSEUM)*

The low-tech device I can't quit is: my Motorola flip phone, which is so old I can't even pretend it's reverse chic. I fantasize that people see me as a drug lord using a burner, but I actually look like a befuddled senior citizen.

The design books I always return to are: Marshall McLuhan and Quentin Fiore's "The Medium Is the Massage" (1967), "Graphic Design" by Milton Glaser (1973) and Paul Rand's "Thoughts on Design" (1947).

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To learn about graphic design: go to a flea market in Paris, Marrakesh, Tokyo or anywhere. Almost every matchbook, record cover or junky paperback book you'll see is likely to have more interesting graphic design than what you will find in a museum.

If you're updating your resume: avoid the Comic Sans typeface. It looks friendly but is the equivalent of Porky Pig reading the Gettysburg Address. I have worked with the documentary filmmaker Errol Morris, who conducted an online survey and discovered that people are more inclined to believe something printed in Baskerville. It has an amazing refinement and credibility.

On business cards: less is more. Just your name or email will do, like an old-fashioned calling card you'd present to the butler. When I was younger, tiny type was cool and exuded confidence, but as I get older, I appreciate type that's big—at least 12 point.

I advise people that: if you are curious about everything, you will do better work.

As a child I was obsessed with: the Titanic, the subject of my big sixth-grade report. There is something so compelling about this giant, beautiful ship that left on its first voyage and never made it to its destination.

The piece of architecture I most admire is: Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, which communicates something complicated so simply, intimately and memorably. It's shaped like a giant V for Vietnam and built into the earth like a metaphoric scar. As you descend through it, the wall gets higher, and because it is polished marble, you see your face reflected among the names of the dead soldiers carved into it.

I drive: a 2012 Volkswagen Beetle A3. I'm on my fifth one and—after trying light blue and red—I am back to yellow. What I love about the VW is the promise of simplicity. It actually resembles what a car would look like if it had been reduced to a logo. It's so depressing that this great company has been compromised by a scandal that is anything but simple.

The most beautifully designed hotel is: the Savoy. It was the essence of state-of-the-art modernity, circa 1890, the first hotel in London to have electric lights. The bathrooms have every kind of brass nozzle, spigot and fitting—like something from a Jules Verne novel—and you will never feel so pampered.

In the kitchen, I excel at: washing the dishes. The restoration of order really appeals to me.

My idea of a memorable hostess gift: will mortify my wife, who always selects them, because I'd take a Carvel ice cream cake. Everyone loves Fudgie the Whale.

My mouth waters at the logo for: McIlhenny Tabasco sauce. It has such mesmerizing geometries and looks like it's never been changed.

Every man's wardrobe should include: a dark blue blazer with gold buttons. When I moved to New York, I read that was all you needed to fit in, and ever since, I've had two. And I always wear a necktie to work. I didn't claw my way all the way from Ohio just to dress like a farmer. I've often thought that shirts are wallpaper and ties are posters, so I have quite a few colorful ties by Gene Meyer, which remind me of paintings by Josef Albers, Stuart Davis and Ellsworth Kelly.

For recreation I go: to a small museum. Sir John Soane's Museum in London is intense—one person's vision driven to the extreme. It's amazing how many minimalist architects are obsessed with it.

I dream of tackling: the standardization of fixtures in public bathrooms. It is so confounding to have to figure out whether to wave your hand or push a button to flush a toilet, run water, get soap and towels. Everyone flails around so much I would volunteer to solve this problem for free.



Free to download Bierut-designed emoji

As a graphic designer, I find emojis: terrifying—a soulless reductive endpoint. If Shakespeare is at one end, an emoji is at the other. At least if someone puts a smiley face over the “i” in their name, there is some gesture of personalization, not a mass-produced symbol that looks like it comes off the assembly line of Amalgamated Widgets. Having said that, I’ve designed one for The Wall Street Journal that communicates an Ambrose Bierce-style ironic skepticism that is an antidote to the wide-eyed kitschiness of the typical sentimental emoji.

My favorite cartoon character is Wile E. Coyote. He had this endless faith and brand loyalty and never thought to try the competition even though Acme products failed him time and time again.

—Edited from an interview by David A. Keeps

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