

Alvin Lustig: Beyond Biography

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Abstract

The American graphic designer Alvin Lustig (1915–1955) was inspired by the fine arts of his time, so his work reveals much about both design and art of the 1930s, forties, and fifties. The close relationship between Lustig's work and fine art allows design historians to turn to art historical writing for help in analyzing Lustig's work. With the help of art history, analyses of Lustig's work can move beyond biographical chronology to broader studies of context. Design historians need the help of art history's investigations because there still isn't much graphic design history that attempts to analyze the evolution of taste. However, growth in graphic design education and a parallel interest in graphic design history may spur more complex studies in the future.

The following text examines Lustig's book cover designs for the publisher New Directions by investigating relationships between the covers and some trends in art and design at the time of their creation. This paper is an attempt to move beyond biography and understand why these covers were designed the way they were.

Keywords:

History, Form, Culture, Relationships

Over fourteen years, from 1941 to 1955, the American graphic designer Alvin Lustig designed approximately 115 books and bookjackets for the New Directions publishing company. New Directions was a client that allowed Lustig to repeatedly create 'artistic' designs for high-profile jobs, and this was possible for several reasons: the owner of New Directions, James Laughlin, was himself an artist, a poet; James Laughlin was wealthy, and his business was not begun out of a need for profit; and the texts published by New Directions were often controversial and avant-garde.

In a 1948 letter to James Laughlin, Lustig wrote about his relationship to art, and it is interesting enough to quote at length:

"... I think you must be aware by now that a descent into hackdom and servility is as impossible for me as to retire into the world of personal vision occupied by the "artist." I think that it is in this effort to break down the barrier between art and life that the most challenging problem lies, and in which I feel my contribution might be made. To continue to "invent" in the sense that the artist has done in the last fifty years is not as interesting to me as the problem of synthesizing and projecting these formal discoveries into a conscious reality shared on a broad level."¹

One of the "formal discoveries" that Lustig may have been referring to, and that he was influenced by, was so-called 'primitive' art.

Primitive Art

Interest in African, Oceanic, and American Indian art was in the air in America in the 1930s and forties. African art, especially sculpture, was first admired and collected in France by artists such as Vlaminck and Matisse. Matisse and Picasso were excited by the formal looseness and expressiveness they found in African sculpture. A little later, Dada and Surrealist artists became interested in primitive art because it represented an earlier state of

man, one free from the decadence of modern life. Generally, Surrealists were less interested in the formal characteristics of primitive art than its ability to suggest doubts about living in a psychologically troubling modern world.

In the thirties and forties the Museum of Modern Art held several exhibitions on primitive art and in 1940 the cave paintings in Lascaux, France were discovered and widely publicized. In New York some of the artists who would become known as Abstract Expressionists were seeing the primitive art exhibitions at MoMA. Artists such as Mark Rothko, Lee Krasner, Adolph Gottlieb, and Clyfford Still were intensely interested in myth, Jung, and a return to man's basic child-like connections to the earth. These artists appropriated primitive art forms for their own need to return to the primal, which in itself was an extension of the Surrealists' use of primitive art as a protest against the present.

Several of Lustig's New Directions bookjackets from the 1940s use 'primitive' forms and others inspired by explorations of primal human instincts. These forms can be gathered into the following categories:

Petroglyphs and Human Figures

Lustig sometimes used simplified human figures, which both illustrated aspects of the books and carried emotional significance as primitive forms. Some of his best-known New Directions covers use petroglyph-like figures (fig. 1). These figures were sometimes geometricized and look like drawings that may have been scratched out, especially when the figures are reversed out of a darker background as they might have been on a cave wall. Some of Paul Klee's paintings have the same quality.

There was a practical advantage in using simplified shapes on these book jackets; they made it easier to create strong designs using only two colors. Tints, overprinting, and positive and negative could be manipulated with less risk when the shapes were simple and didn't have much tone in them. However, these could have been any kind of forms, and Lustig's reflected the contemporary interests of artists in the subconscious and the instinctual, as

found in primitive art. Works shown in MoMA's exhibitions brought sources of inspiration to artists and designers in New York, where Lustig was working from 1943–46 and 1950–55.

Hands

Another element in several Lustig covers, the human hand, is tied to both Surrealist and Abstract Expressionist art (fig. 2). Hands were so ubiquitous in art and design of the forties that the threads of influence are difficult to untangle. Writer Bevis Hillier is probably correct in attributing this abundance of hands to Surrealism because hands, often disembodied, are ubiquitous in Surrealist art.

Hands are a common shape on rock paintings and petroglyphs in Oceania, America, and Europe. For the Surrealists the connection of disembodied hands specifically to primitive art was less important than the ritualistic (primitive) act of human dissection. Not just hands, but all kinds of dissected body parts appear in Surrealist art. European Surrealists were exposed mostly to African and Oceanic sculpture, while American Abstract Expressionists were also familiar with American petroglyphs. For those artists interested in petroglyphs and cave paintings, disembodied hands could become a sign of the primitive.

The hands on Lustig's jackets, disembodied by the edges of the books, are similar to hands being used by many other designers of the time. Depicting hands was a blunt, slightly uncanny way of describing action. The bluntness has a self-conscious innocence, and reflects the interest at the time in simpler states of consciousness.

Photos of Lustig by the filmmaker Maya Deren, probably from the forties, include hands, and can be linked to both Surrealism and Abstract Expressionism. One shows Lustig next to a screen in the offices of *Look* magazine, which he designed, on which is depicted a hand and an eye. The hand on this screen is very similar to a mica hand from Ohio shown in the MoMA exhibition *Indian Art in the United States*. The other photo shows Lustig holding his hand in front of him, with the creases in his palm traced over in ink. Traced hands also appeared in a film by Man Ray from 1928 entitled *L'Etoile de Mer*.

Thin Lines

The lines used to draw primitive-looking human figures were part of a wider use of thin lines in design of the forties and fifties. On Lustig's book jackets, thin lines could suggest a human form or make letters. Some covers use hand-drawn lines in twiggly tangles (fig. 3). In the background of *New Directions 12* and *New Directions 13* the straight but unevenly-spaced lines form something of a screen, while in *As A Man Grows Older* (1949) actual twigs and thin natural detritus are photographed. Scratchily-drawn lines create loopy squiggles on *Exiles* (1946), and *Amerika* (1945).

Lines are endlessly adaptable and appeared on all kinds of applied art of the forties and fifties, from the ceramics of Hans Coper and Lucy Rie to textiles. As Lesley Jackson writes of textile design in the fifties, "what united many of these 'Contemporary' patterns was a distinctive wiry quality, as though the outlines were etched or drawn freehand with a fine-nibbed pen."² Jackson finds two sources for different kinds of linear patterns: Miró, Klee, and Calder, and the denser, more textural patterns of Abstract Expressionism.³ Again, Lustig's inspiration was fine art, and its preoccupation at the time with the child-like, earthy, and ingenuous. The MoMA catalog *Modern Art in Your Life* (1953) found something elementary in the use of lines. According to the catalog, the thin line is "apparently spontaneous and thoughtless and yet achieves an extraordinary subtlety." It is "always hovering on the brink of a decision which it never makes."⁴

Sticks and Balls

A design style that includes thin lines ending in round shapes is often associated with the 1940s and fifties, and is sometimes called the 'cocktail cherry' style. This style is usually attributed to the influence of scientific advances of the time, especially models of molecules made of tinker-toy-like sticks and balls. Stick-and-ball molecular models go back to the late 1800s, though it is questionable how familiar they were to artists and designers. In 1953 one of the most famous scientific models was made, Watson and Crick's helical DNA model, but it

lacked the joint balls of the style discussed here.

It is possible to say that, in Lustig's case, inspiration for his 'cocktail cherry' letters and forms comes from a source other than molecular structure. *A Season in Hell* was designed in 1944, quite early for the cocktail cherry style (fig. 4). Both the type and the shapes were probably inspired by Joan Miró, whose paintings in the thirties and forties often contained globular shapes connected by thin lines, as well as round and pointy hard-edged forms like those on *A Season in Hell*. Also, the shapes on *A Season in Hell* that are bisected and filled with different colors resemble shapes by Miró, especially in his 1940-41 "Constellation" series of 23 gouaches, which are full of bulbous shapes connected by thin lines. The "Constellation" paintings were not shown in New York until 1945, so Lustig's exposure to Miró could have been through MoMA's 1941 Miró exhibition and reproductions of his work. Lustig loved Miró and owned books about him.⁵ Other artists also made ball-and-stick forms, such as Picasso and Alexander Calder.

Nature, Klee, and Organic Form

Nature was a source of images on some of Lustig's most striking covers. Natural elements are not used to imitate nature, but to explore the surrealist possibilities in juxtaposing and manipulating natural elements, as well as textures and patterns similar to those made by Abstract Expressionist painters. The night sky on the cover of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* is an example of a painterly texture, while the nailed magnolia on *27 Wagons* (fig. 5) combines a beautiful natural object with human violence in an Surrealist manner, similar to the knifed flower in Magritte's painting *The Blow to the Heart* (1952).

Lustig admired Paul Klee, who was associated with Surrealism and interested in nature. Lustig's use of thin lines to suggest natural forms brings to mind Klee's scratchy, thin drawings of apparently microscopic nature. The rings of *The Sheltering Sky* (1948) could be any number of natural forms, and the jacket of *Siddhartha* (1951) resembles an object in a stream or embedded in layers of soil.

Curved, bulbous, swooping shapes are often associated with design in the fifties, and are described as 'organic' or 'biomorphic'. Many of Lustig's New Directions covers use organic shapes. The simpler of these jackets, such as *Spearhead* and the Direction series, resemble work by Jean Arp and Alexander Calder, while the more complex resemble Miró's lively canvases. Jean Arp expressed a desire to create as a plant creates, to not merely reproduce nature. In this way the artist would be an extension of nature, creating significant form in an almost automatic way.⁶ This interest in a primal connection to nature is akin to primitivism and the Surrealist preoccupation with dreams and the unconscious.

Labyrinths and Minotaurs

Ancient man-made forms that are associated with mystical power, labyrinths appear on some Lustig covers (fig. 6). Labyrinth petroglyphs are found throughout Arizona, New Mexico and the northern states of Mexico. A labyrinth appears, appropriately, on Lustig's cover for E.M. Forster's *The Longest Journey*, and the cover of William Carlos Williams's *Selected Poems* is labyrinth-like, though its nested forms could also be compared to some paintings by Klee or Baumeister.

Obvious depictions of minotaurs did not make their way onto Lustig's covers, although there is one series that uses shapes that suggest a minotaur. This Directions Series uses lines that may be an abstract composition, or may be a semi-human shape with turned-down horns, reminiscent of Max Ernst's *The King Playing with the Queen* (1944), or one of Paul Klee's pictographs. In Surrealist art, and especially Picasso's, minotaurs represent the unbridled animal side of human nature, so the primal is evoked once again. *Minotaur* was the name of a well-known Surrealist journal published in the thirties.

Surrealist Photography and Sculpture

The type of photography that Lustig used on some of his covers also connects him to Surrealism. The nailed magnolia on *27 Wagons of Cotton and Other Plays* is a Surrealist

image, a sinister combination of violence and beauty. Other photographs on Lustig covers have a sinister bent. The face on *Death on the Installment Plan* looks like a death mask, and the smaller reproduction is bisected, just as many human figures in Surrealist art were sliced and chopped. The cover of *Light in August* is mysterious, and its backlit figure ominous (fig. 7).

Another form of Surrealism found in some Lustig covers are photographs of objects collected and arranged in a way similar to the Surrealists' desire to "divert the object from its destination by attaching a new label and signing it, thus reclassifying it by the exercise of choice".⁷ Examples of such Surrealist objects are Duchamp's *Readymades*, Salvador Dali's *A Tray of Objects* (1931), and Joseph Cornell's boxes. Lustig's cover from the already-mentioned *As a Man Grows Older* is a strong example of this reclassification, because the plant parts are not obvious symbols for characters in a novel; these twigs have been diverted and reclassified indeed. Similar to Cornell boxes are the two Lustig covers for the Stendhal novels *The Green Huntsman* (1953) and *The Telegraph*. Here, three-dimensional symbols are tucked into photograph-covered boxes.

Gottlieb, Rothko, and Still

While three-dimensional compartments are Surrealist, two-dimensional gridded fields are more reminiscent of Abstract Expressionism, specifically the paintings of Adolph Gottlieb. The cover for *Three Tragedies* (fig. 8) is the only cover that can be compared to a gridded Gottlieb painting, but it is such a famous cover that this similarity is worth noting. In some of his paintings Gottlieb created grids that held symbols, which he wanted "to give the semblance of meaning but not specific symbols which could be deciphered and rationally explained in verbal terms."⁸ It was also important in Gottlieb's work was that there was not one focus in the painting. According to Hobbs, viewers had to peripherally scan the painting, and this emphasis on peripheral vision "served as a visual analogue to the preconscious or perhaps even the unconscious mind."⁹ *Three Tragedies* also places mysterious and evocative symbols into a grid so that they contrast yet are of similar strength. Such an unspecific, mysterious cover is appropri-

ate for a collection of plays that strip away details of setting and time.

There are two other Abstract Expressionist painters that are evoked by Lustig covers. Garcia Lorca's *Selected Poems* (1955) is a nod to Rothko's fields of color. Also, there are several covers containing shapes similar to ones painted by the Abstract Expressionist Clyfford Still. The Still-like shapes on these covers are the jagged, vertical ones, which can be seen in Still's mature paintings from the forties on. Still wanted to create tough pictures redolent of myth and primitive power that declared a "negation of the space-time continuum" and set "brutish snares" for methodical reason, transparency, and measured control.¹⁰

Whether or not Still's themes are appropriate to apply to Lustig's book jackets, or whether Lustig was even influenced by Still, what is important is the toughness associated with these forms, and the "Modernist assumption of artistic potency as born of psychic regression".¹¹ It is possible to see the jagged form on *Illuminations* as fire, on *Nightwood* as a piece of driftwood, or on *Summer and Smoke* as smoke. However, these shapes are not literal illustrations, and the morphology they share with Still can be seen as evidence that Lustig was also reaching for 'artistic potency'.

Alvin Lustig brought the concerns of fine art to mass-produced book covers. Lustig knew what he was doing, as quoted at the beginning of this essay: "To continue to 'invent' in the sense that the artist has done in the last fifty years is not as interesting to me as the problem of synthesizing and projecting these formal discoveries into a conscious reality shared on a broad level." Lustig's goal was a classic Modernist one of bringing 'good design' to the people, and for him 'good design' was that which asked the same philosophical questions and took the same risks as those taken by the fine arts.



Fig. 1
Exiles,
James Joyce, 1946

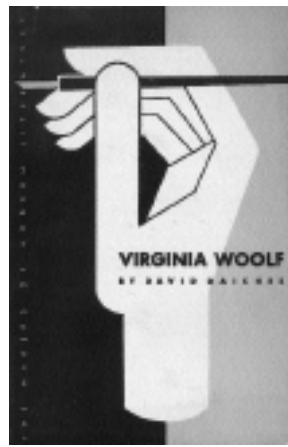


Fig. 2
Virginia Woolf,
David Daiches, 1942

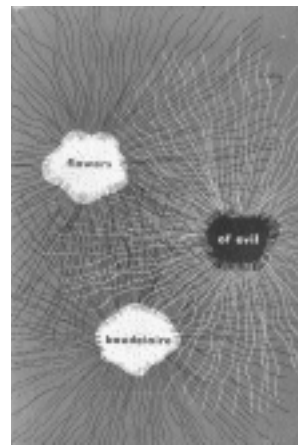


Fig. 3
Flowers of Evil,
Baudelaire, 1946



Fig. 4
A Season in Hell,
Rimbaud, 1944



Fig. 5
*27 Wagons Full of
Cotton and Other Plays*,
Tennessee Williams,
1949

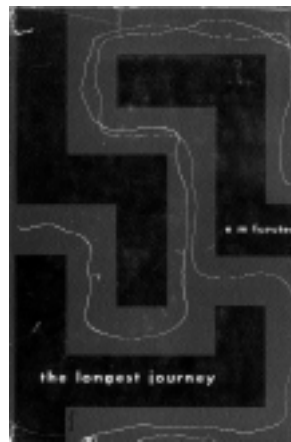


Fig. 6
The Longest Journey,
E.M. Forster, 1944



Fig. 7
Light in August,
William Faulkner, 1946



Fig. 8
3 Tragedies,
Lorca, 1948

Notes

1. Alvin Lustig, letter to James Laughlin, January 9, 1954. *New Directions Publishing Corp.*, Records, ca. 1933–1997, bMsAm2077 (1039). Houghton Library, Harvard University.
2. Margot Coatts, *Lucie Rie & Hans Coper—Potters in Parallel*, London: Barbican Art Gallery, 1997, 29.
3. *ibid.*
4. Robert Goldwater and René d'Harnoncourt, *Modern Art in Your Life*, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1953, 32.
5. Elaine Lustig Cohen, discussion with Doug Clouse, 2004.
6. Tim Martin, *Essential Surrealists*, Bath: Parragon Publishing, 1999, 150.
7. André Breton, *Surrealism and Painting*. Boston: MFA Publications, 2002, 280.
8. Robert Carleton Hobbs, and Gail Levin, *Abstract Expressionism: The Formative Years*, Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981, 21.
9. *ibid.*
10. Demetrios, James T., ed., *Clyfford Still: Paintings 1944-1960*, Washington, D.C.: Hirshhorn Museum and Sculpture Garden / New Haven: Yale University Press, 2001, 41.
11. *ibid.*, 32.

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