



reviewed by Steven Heller

## Power Behind the Throng

*A long overdue monograph recounts the life of a crucial modernist.*

ELIOT NOYES

By Gordon Bruce  
Phaidon Press, London  
240 pp., 200 color, 400 b/w illus.; \$75 (hardcover)

If Eliot Fette Noyes (1910–1977) had designed only the housing for the IBM Selectric—the classic 1961 typewriter with the “golf ball” printing element—it might have been enough to ensure him a place in industrial design’s pantheon. Yet the Selectric represented only a minuscule part of Noyes’s mission to introduce modernity to corporate America. A consultant as well as a creator, he influenced the titans at IBM, Westinghouse, Cummins, and Mobil to become not just passive patrons of the arts, filling executive boardrooms with abstract paintings, but rather sponsors of applied futurism. He constructed environments—from buildings to interiors to signage—that measured and reflected the ethos of American industrial innovation, and in doing so helped the leading proponents of postwar Modernism create their most significant work.

Given the various tomes devoted to Charles and Ray Eames, George Nelson, Chermayeff & Geismar, and my own book on Paul Rand, this biography by the industrial designer Gordon Bruce is long overdue—or at least out of sequence. Noyes hired

all of these storied designers to execute commissions, and though their reputations preceded the partnership, they blossomed through the connections Noyes fostered with corporate-leviathan clients. Beginning with a redesigned logo in 1957, Rand’s graphic system for IBM, where Noyes served as consultant design director in the late 1950s, led to many more lucrative and iconic commissions. Likewise, in 1964, as Mobil Oil’s “curator of corporate ethos,” Noyes entrusted Chermayeff & Geismar with creating a new corporate identity, and the result—a simple representation of Mobil’s name with a red letter O—has been celebrated ever since. Noyes not only matched talents to tycoons, but also smoothed the path to creative fulfillment. Over boardroom objections, he famously saw to it that one of Rand’s cleverest logos—the Westinghouse W that resembles an electrical circuit—made its way past the corporate gauntlet.

Why a monograph has finally emerged almost three decades after Noyes’s death is anyone’s guess, but Bruce does an able job of fleshing out the identity of a man who was anything but a shadow puppet in the theater of modern design. Born in Boston, in 1910, Noyes studied architecture and painting in Paris but was bored with traditional Beaux Arts teachings. In 1937 he entered Harvard’s Graduate School of Design to pursue his architectural training with the transplanted Bauhausians Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, under whose tutelage he flourished; after graduation, he joined their Cambridge-based firm. In 1940, Gropius recommended to Alfred H. Barr, founding director of New York’s Museum of Modern Art, that Noyes head up its first industrial design department. He mounted exhibitions in the early ‘40s that celebrated simplicity over the flashy streamlined style that predominated at the time: “Design for Use,” “Wartime Housing,” “Useful Objects of American Design Under \$10,” and “Organic Design in Home Furnishings.” (The last, which evolved from a 1941 competition Noyes sponsored, exhibited prototypes by Charles Eames and Eero Saarinen.) Through both exhibitions and writings, Noyes championed timeless design and criticized the

business strategy of building obsolescence into products. “The effect of trade operations is not only to kill or at least discourage original thinking in design, but even to foster unsound trends or fashions in design,” he once wrote.

Noyes spent the wartime years 1942 through 1945 in the Air Force, then served as design director in the office of the theatrical-turned-industrial designer Norman Bel Geddes. After Bel Geddes closed his shop in 1947, Noyes founded Eliot Noyes & Associates in New Canaan, Connecticut, and soon began his legendary association with IBM’s chairman, Thomas M. Watson, Jr. “I’ll work with you, not for you,” Bruce quotes the designer as having replied to Watson’s frequent invitations to join IBM’s staff. So it was as a consultant that Noyes, along with his team of handpicked experts, transformed a business machine company known for products with archaic Queen Anne styling into a multinational design institution through everything from buildings to memo pads. This outsider status was the key to Noyes’s relationships with all the other corporations for which he developed design reputations and cultures.

Bruce, a consultant for IBM, Polaroid, Siemens, and Porsche, unearths extensive material to explain Noyes’s influence and importance, but he fails to offer a critical interpretation of the projects. His workmanlike presentation of biographical facts and his reliance on long quotations from Noyes’s colleagues and admirers could have been enlivened by a more literary sensibility. Still, this book represents a missing link—and a major link at that—in the history of American design, for it fills in gaps missing from the standard Meggs, Hollis, and Remington graphic design history books. Since an omnibus account of American corporate modernism has yet to be written, Bruce, through his revelation of Noyes’s holistic approach to postwar corporate identity, has performed a true service.

Steven Heller is co-chair of the MFA Designer as Author program at New York’s School of Visual Arts. His most recent book is *Stylepedia: A Guide to Graphic Design Mannerisms, Quirks, and Conceits* (Chronicle Books).