

# A Place On the Map

Designer, illustrator and artist Elaine Lustig Cohen is given a well-earned page in graphic design's canon with a recent retrospective at the Cooper-Hewitt.

By Steven Heller



From 1948 to 1955, Elaine Lustig Cohen was married to and, as she describes it, was “a blind disciple” of the charismatic Modernist design pioneer, Alvin Lustig. After his death in 1955, she emerged as a prolific graphic and signage designer in her own right, one of the few women of her generation to achieve this distinction. What Cohen learned from Lustig over their seven years together, and how this experience was translated is the key to understanding her own Modernist practice. The association also raises issues unique to Cohen’s career as a graphic designer: How was she employed by former Lustig clients? Did they expect her to continue “a Lustig style” or was she allowed to develop her own voice? Although Cohen managed Lustig’s office in Los Angeles and New York, and continued to run his business for a short time after his death before founding her own, her work had its own vigor and identity. A recent retrospective at New York’s Cooper-Hewitt Museum, on view through May 23, reexamines her significant body of work.



Alvin Lustig wed principles of Modernist painting and sculpture to commercial art, and during the '40s and early '50s helped define the very nature of American Modernism. As founder of Yale’s graphic design department, he also exerted great influence on the nascent profession. But in 1950 chronic diabetes began to erode his vision; by 1954 he was virtually blind. Although his impaired condition did not prevent him from teaching or designing — he would direct his wife and assistants in every detail of the work he could no longer see — this human tragedy forced Elaine Lustig to enter an accelerated state of professional maturity. She had learned how to do pasteups and spec type and she rendered a few of Lustig’s last book jackets while he specified color by referring to the color of a familiar chair or sofa in their apartment. But as an independent designer she was a novice.

When Lustig died in 1955, he not only left a legacy, but many unfinished commissions that some of his clients assumed would be completed by his widow. Little did they know that when Lustig was alive she had not designed at all. “As a rule,” Cohen says, “no one in the Lustig office designed except Alvin himself.” So his wife and his assistants, which included former student Ivan Chermayeff, did the dirty work while Lustig — dressed in a white shirt and tie — sat at his immaculate marble desk with only a tracing pad on which he made hundreds of thumbnail idea sketches.

When 20-year-old Elaine Firstenberg first met Alvin Lustig, who was 12 years her senior, in 1948 at the opening of a new Los Angeles art museum, she had already been smitten by contemporary art and wanted to paint like Stuart Davis. When she was 15, she had accidentally wandered into the Museum of Non Objective Art in Manhattan where Peggy Guggenheim’s collection of Kandinsky’s paintings were exhibited in an installation designed by Frederick Kiesler. The Modernist sensibility touched such a chord that she later enrolled in the art department of Sophie Newcomb College at Tulane University, which was founded on the principles of the Chicago Bauhaus. In those days, women were not encouraged to study art as an end in itself, so Cohen was compelled to take art-education courses in preparation for a career as teacher. After graduating she taught in an L.A. public school for a year before romance changed her life.

Firstenberg married Lustig after a whirlwind courtship, and took a job that she now describes as “the office slave” in his studio. Lustig presumed that she would work in some capacity but hadn’t intended to teach her graphic design. “Teaching me was not even an issue,” she recalls. “It was, after all, a different time.” But he did encourage her to help him with interior design projects by researching and selecting materials for later use. On her own she also made collages for unpublished children’s books and sketches of fantasy furniture. Nevertheless, she languished, bereft of the hands-on experience that even her previous teaching post offered.

At the time, California suffered from a weak economy and had hardly enough industry to support a healthy design profession. So an invitation from Joseph Albers for Lustig to establish a design program at Yale was a good reason for the couple to move

Because she was a one-person business, Elaine Lustig Cohen did not attract large corporate clients but focused her attention instead on cultural institutions, book publishers and architects. She did a considerable amount of museum signage and graphics, such as this page from a financial and planning prospectus for the Museum of Modern Art in Rio (opposite), and hundreds of jackets and covers, including *The Noble Savage* (right), a 1959 Meridian book that typifies her penchant for typographic playfulness.



to New York in 1950. Around this time, Lustig began to suffer the early symptoms of his illness. Despite his failing eyesight and an alarming physical deterioration about which even the stoic designer must have been aware, Lustig stubbornly denied his affliction and continued to practice business as usual, relying more on his wife than ever before.

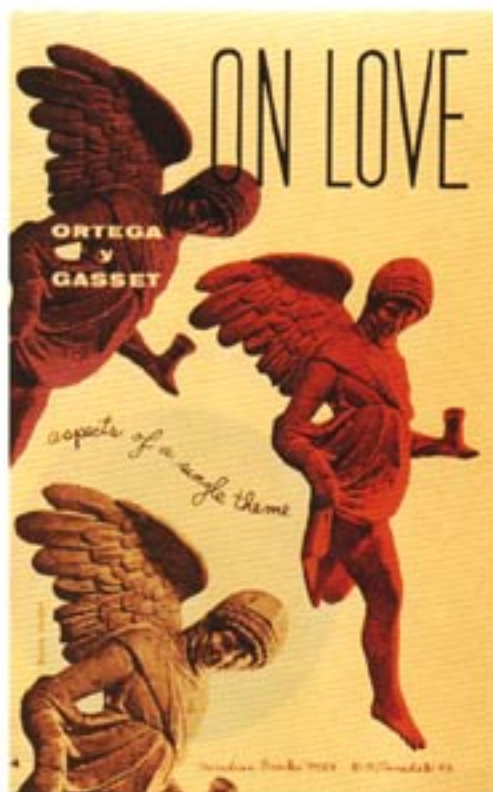
When the end came, Cohen was understandably unprepared to be thrust into the vortex of a design business. Only a few weeks after the funeral, architect Philip Johnson, who had previously engaged Lustig to design the signage for the new Seagram Building in New York, called Cohen to ask when she would have the first stage of the project — the alphabet — ready for presentation. Although today she recounts feeling terrified in the face of this rude awakening, she jumped in and completed the commission from scratch. Her success forged a beneficial relationship with a very supportive Johnson. But recognizing from Lustig's experience that the field had as many downs as ups, Cohen soon made the decision to close down Lustig's business in order to work from her home. "I knew that with an office I'd be working only to keep my employees occupied, and I didn't want that kind of headache." Around the same time Arthur Cohen, the publisher of Meridian Books — Lustig's client and the couple's best friend — called Cohen to tell her that his new list of 30 book jackets and covers was due. So began another trial by fire.

Today Cohen is often asked to recall her experience as a woman working in a man's world, but this was not a defining issue, she explains. Running a small business in a comparatively large industry turned out to be her primary challenge. "My gender may have been an issue for other designers," she admits, "but not for my clients," which included TWA, the FAA and the General Motors technical building in collaboration with Eero Saarinen. In 1956 she married Arthur Cohen, who soon convinced her that by having a real office she could get even more ambitious assignments. So against her instincts she started the office of Lustig and Wright, with Jack Wright, a former Lustig boardman who proved to be an inarticulate, indeed incapable, businessman. After a year, she and Wright split up and she returned to being a one-person, home studio.

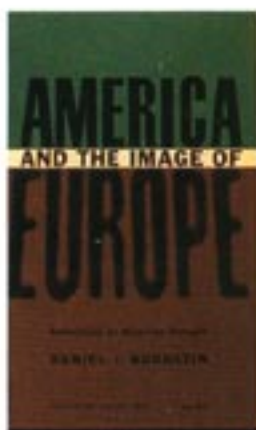
In addition to hundreds of jackets and covers, Cohen has designed lobby signs and catalogues for the Museum of Modern Art in New York, the Museum of Primitive Art, the Museum of Modern Art in Rio, Lincoln Center (in concert with Chermayeff & Geismar on signage that was never adopted) and the 1964 World's Fair doing graphics for the famed New York architects Harrison & Abramovitz. Most of her commissions came through architects whose own designs were complimented by what she has called "somewhat anonymous work." With her good friend, architect Richard Meier, who had not yet earned his major commissions, she designed various building interiors, including the graphics and interior motif for Sono, an Indian government-sponsored crafts store on Fifth Avenue, which in its day was distinguished for a modern grace and simplicity. In 1963, she began a relationship with the Jewish Museum in New York designing catalogues, invitations, bags and exhibition installations. The first exhibition, a collaboration with Meier for an exhibit of early Hebrew Bibles, was curated by Arthur Cohen.

Cohen's work was resolutely modern. Ornament was eschewed in favor of functional typography. Pure geometry was preferred over amorphous shapes and forms. While not as fervently utopian as Lustig, who believed that good design and a good design education could truly change the world, Cohen once said that she was "brainwashed" into wanting to design everything. So in her capacity as a one-person shop she maintained an exhausting schedule, even after giving birth in 1960 to her daughter, Tamar. She quickly developed a visual personality that was at once distinct from like-minded practitioners, such as Paul Rand, Rudy DeHarak, and Chermayeff & Geismar, yet consistent with the same Modernist principles.

Cohen's early book jackets, such as *My Life In Art and Vision and Design*, are evocative of Alvin Lustig's late work, notably in



Although rooted in Modernist principles, Cohen nevertheless busted the conventional grid. *On Love* (above), a 1957 Meridian Book, is an exercise using repeating forms set against a pure white sky. In this composition, the classical cupid is transformed into a contemporary icon. For Meridian's 1960 *America and the Image of Europe* (left), she distorts a type that is curiously similar to the currently popular Template Gothic so that the word "Europe" becomes the shadow of "America."

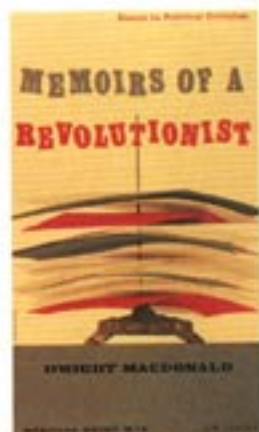
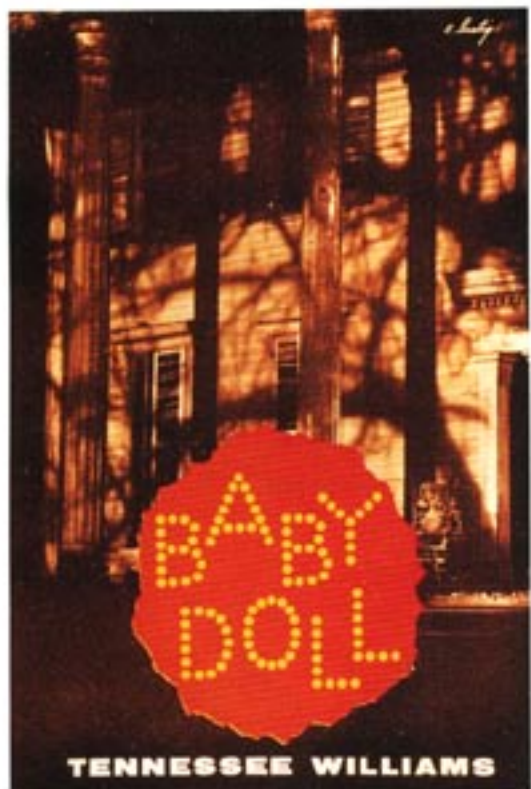
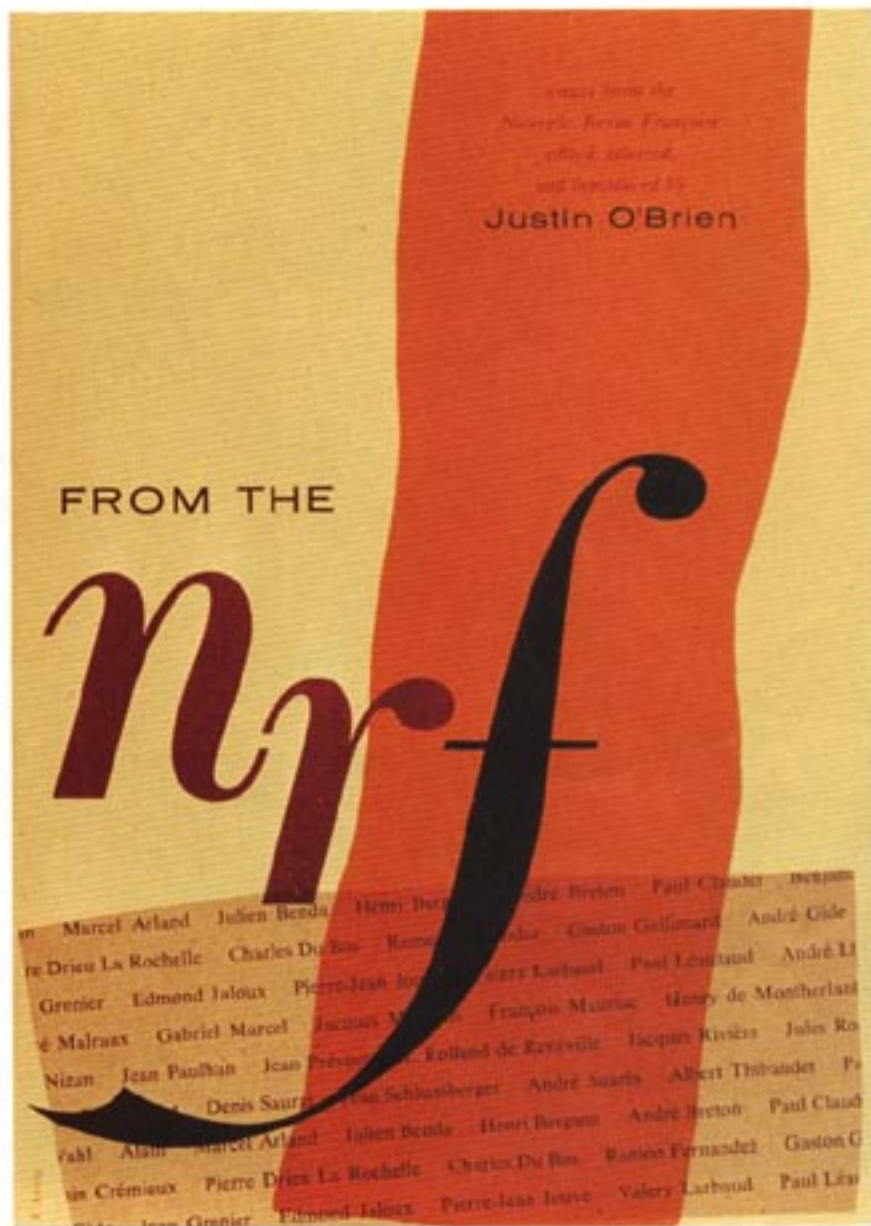


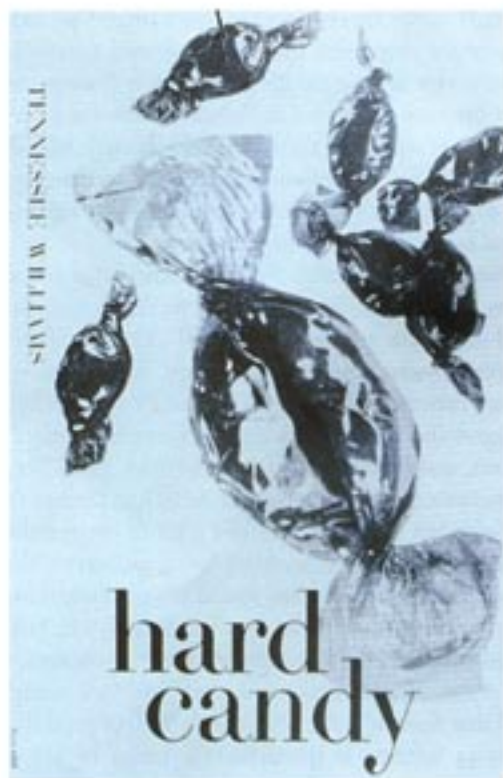


Right: Cohen enjoyed playing with form as much as content. In a purely formal composition, the 1958 cover for Meridian Giant's *From the NRF*, she works with layers of transparent color to frame an otherwise unwieldy amount of information.

Below: As if torn out of the photograph of this classic southern mansion, the garish typography for Meridian's 1957 *Baby Doll* suggests the psychological tensions between the old and the new south.

Lower right: For *Memoirs of a Revolutionist* (Meridian Books, 1958), Cohen makes the journalist's "spike" into a colorful illustrative symbol of author Dwight Macdonald's life as a social critic.





the script signature that she eliminated after 1957. Her adaptation of simple graphic elements and economical typography were also borrowed from Lustig. Yet as she developed more confidence in her own vision, she began to experiment. *The Dislocation of Personality*, for instance, is a splendid example of conceptual design — a dramatic solution that illustrates the psychological issues of an otherwise didactic text.

Drawing from her knowledge of forgotten 20th-century avant-garde typography — which she began studying while married to Lustig and passionately continued after his death — Cohen purveyed a synthesis of classic modern and contemporary sensibilities. *The Writings of Martin Buber* and Buber's *For the Sake of Heaven* both derive from examples of the 1920s New Typography. The former, influenced by, yet not imitative of, Schwitters and El Lissitzky; the latter, a synthesis of John Heartfield's jacket collages and Mark Rothko's abstractions. By the early '60s, her jackets and covers suggested a very eclectic vision.

Cohen retained some of Lustig's working habits but not his palette, type preferences or personal marks. Like Lustig, she made scores of tiny idea sketches in order to define a total solution. But unlike his later tendency to completely intellectualize his work, so that he never "dirtied" his hands with mechanicals, she enjoyed what the hand could do and reveled in the meditative pleasure of assembling paste-ups where she refined the details. Indeed her work, though rooted in rationalism, depends on the accidents that the hand forces. Design for Cohen was not unlike painting or collage; in fact it was a game. Playfulness is evident in her interior book work through extended title-page treatments, unconventional at the time, in which a book developed cinematically, building up speed with type that stretched over a number of pages until finally beginning the text. Her fondness for kinetic solutions set her apart from others who practiced more conventional bookmaking approaches.

By the time Cohen was totally comfortable with working professionally as a designer, she had also reached, in her mind, a dead-end. As the sole proprietor of a home/office, she was confined to virtually the same client base that she began with — museums, publishers and architectural signage. "It had backfired on me that I didn't have an office," she says. "Working alone I couldn't do large projects." In fact, to get the FAA account in the early '60s, she asked friends to sit at desks in her office and look busy during the client pitch, and had no desire to repeat that kind of folly. So in 1969, after over a decade of independent practice, she informed her clients that she was turning her attention to painting.

Coincidentally Arthur Cohen decided to quit publishing, which triggered certain financial difficulties that forced the couple to sell off pieces of modern art and avant-garde documentation, including magazines, manifestos and catalogues. From this ad hoc offering, Ex Libris, the Cohens' bookshop dedicated to avant garde-materials, was born. Ex Libris, which Elaine Cohen continues to run, became an extraordinary resource of 20th-century design documents that have made a significant contribution to design history. But with the exception of a few hand-picked jobs — including the design of a catalogue of Philip Johnson's architecture — Cohen chose only to design the Ex Libris catalogues, which she did in an appropriate historical manner that predates recent design trends in retro, vernacular and historicism.

The business of graphic design became a closed chapter in Cohen's life because moving forward would have forced her to focus on the commercial, rather than the artistic, aspect of her practice. And unlike Lustig, who believed that design and art were one in the same, Cohen saw design and painting as separate but equal. Her return to painting and collage, which she now exhibits at the Julie Saul Gallery in New York, was not a repudiation of what she had done, but another passion in a life of artistic passions.

The Cooper-Hewitt exhibition, curated by Ellen Lupton, is not only a reappraisal of a student and exponent of American Modernism, but a testament to how a single designer helped to redefine the nature of graphic design. ★

Cohen roamed freely within the confines of Modernism. Long before the age of computers, she had learned how to play with a Photostat machine and among the results were curious distortions, happy accidents and exercises in different scales. The jacket design for Meridian's 1959 *Hard Candy* (above) is a visual play on the title that renders an otherwise mundane object larger than life. Less heroic, but no less playful, is Meridian's 1958 book *The Main Stream of Music* (right), in which type, color and graphic marks are harmoniously wed.

