

## Retrospectives

## The Fab Three and Co.

In 1970, New York's Pushpin Studios was given a retrospective at the Louvre, the first time an American graphic design firm was so honored by this world renowned institution. Ironically, this marked the beginning of the end of the era when Pushpin Studios exerted extraordinary influence on international graphic style.

Founded in 1954 by Cooper Union classmates Seymour Chwast, Milton Glaser and Edward Sorel, Pushpin Studios (the name was taken from the "The Pushpin Almanak," an earlier series of promotional booklets) was built on the premise that, as Sorel says, its members could not "work and play well with others," though they tried, at staff positions at other magazines and agencies. They reckoned that the symbiotic relationship of a small freelance studio would enable them to develop new methods and gain internal support without external interference.

If Art Nouveau and Art Moderne exemplified the shift in aesthetic values during the fin-de-siècle and the jazz age, respectively, then the Pushpin Style did likewise for the '60s and early '70s. An alternative to rational corporate Modernism, Pushpin recalled the graphic exuberance of nascent commercial art while it created its own contemporary decorative and conceptual approaches.

By the time the Louvre acknowledged Pushpin it had been a wellspring of innovative work for over a decade. It prefigured Postmodern pastiche and was the stepping stone for its member artists and designers who freely experimented with form and content at the first American graphic arts "workshop" since the Chicago Bauhaus. Now, to mark the 40 years since its founding, a traveling retrospective organized by the Cooper Union chronicles Pushpin's early legacy through an impressive sampling of the packages, posters, record and magazine covers, book jackets and



Seymour Chwast's anti-Vietnam poster.



PHOTO KATHERINE MCGLYNN

Pushpin members now (foreground) and then (background).

editorial illustrations produced from the mid '50s to the late '70s.

*The Pushpin Monthly Graphic*, the designers' own promotional tabloid/magazine, was testament to their wit and humor expressed through graphics and typography. It was a sensation with both the design community and clients. What truly distinguished Pushpin from conventional designers was not style, but, as exhibited in their magazine, conceptual intelligence.

In addition to the classic "Dylan" poster by Milton Glaser and "End Bad Breath," an anti-Vietnam poster by Seymour Chwast, the most memorable piece on view is an issue of *The Pushpin Graphic* (produced in 1968 after the tabloid monthly ceased publication) entitled "The South," a brilliantly subversive civil-rights polemic editorially pegged to the assassination of Martin Luther King. In quintessential Pushpin style, Chwast juxtaposes hand-colored, high-contrast, mythic photographs of the Old South — blooming magnolias, vast plantations, happy black cotton pickers — with images of civil-rights leaders who were murdered by racist extremists. As the pages are turned, the old mythic pictures incrementally reduce

in size while the new increase and fittingly end on a photograph of the March on Washington. A simple diecut hole pierces the "o" in the word "South" and continues through the inside pictures like a bullet hole.

Chwast and Glaser guided Pushpin's fortunes and persona, but other members contributed to its quirkiness. The work on view provides an insight into the development of the diversity of the overarching Pushpin style. As a young associate, Paul Davis's cartoon style evolved into a surrealist one that continues to influence the practice of editorial illustration. Reynold Ruffins wed modern typography to ornate illustration. And John Alcorn modernized the baroque through his type and images.

Twenty years after founding Pushpin Studios, Milton Glaser founded his own firm and left the Pushpin name to Chwast, who continued the *Pushpin Graphic* from 1976 to 1981. But it was like the breakup of the Beatles. Although Pushpin's principals and its associates have carved out illustrious independent careers, the chemistry generated by this critical mass of inspired individuals under one banner is a piece of history worth retelling. STEVEN HELLER