Before the New Wave hit America in the early 1970s, some Japanese graphic designers were already playing with the visual forms, discordant relationships, and multi-leveled typography of Western Postmodernism. In fact, contrary to the belief that Japanese graphic design leans heavily on Western culture, Tadanori Yokoo, Akira Unjo, Kiyoshi Awazu, and Genpei Akasegawa conducted graphic experiments in Japan well before they were introduced in the U.S.

Yet no Japanese designer has been more committed to defining an alternative graphic language than Koga Hirano, who since 1965 has designed literally thousands of posters and book jackets. In particular, the posters Hirano created between 1968 and 1982 for the Black Tent Theater, a traveling company, both responded to and helped to define Japanese underground culture of the late 1960s and ‘70s. Influenced by the ‘50s Gutai group, or Japanese beatniks, and the early ‘60s happenings of John Cage, the theater collectives that were part of this culture rebelled against Japanese tradition. And Hirano’s posters, with their often transparent layers of color and multiple levels of type, offered a visual corollary to the anti-establishment feeling among Japanese youth. Like the postwar generation in the West, they, too, fought the dominant conservative attitudes of their culture.

Hirano’s posters long preceded all work that would come to be identified as Postmodern. Given that many Japanese graphic arts organizations and annuals were displaying international trends, it’s likely that Hirano saw contemporary Western work; and some of it may have been assimilated into his occasional Modern book jacket designs. But he did not develop his methods directly from Western design movements as much as to thesame historical well that fed them. One notable influence is Berlin Dada. Hirano translated this early-20th-century art movement by combining two traditional methods of everyday Japanese writing that are not ordinarily mixed—horizontal and vertical—and thus demanded that the reader come to the page from two different vantage points. This approach is anathema to traditional Japanese esthetics and politics. In the 1920s, the vertical typesetting of most Japanese texts was altered to accommodate horizontal settings. But as Richard Thornton points out in *Japanese Graphic Design* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1991), there was no directional consistency; sometimes the type read from left to right, other times from right to left. Hirano’s intersecting directional typography exploits the complexity of his language in the service of youth culture’s visual codes while testing a rather arbitrary linguistic decree. He also customized and distorted Chinese-derived kanji characters to create word images, and cut and pasted photographs and drawings onto layouts that looked as if they had been designed only minutes before going to press. The casualness is deceptive, for the posters were painstakingly composed.

Hirano compares his method of “action design” with the clean, staid boardwork—what he calls “desk work”—of Japanese corporate designers. Not all of the posters are slap-and-paste, however. Some of his most exquisite work has combined 19th-century Japanese woodblock influences with typographic twists that bring the retro illustrations up to date. Occasionally, he has added tame typography to a powerful black-and-white photograph to underscore its force.

Hirano was fluent in many forms of graphic expression before joining the alternative movement. Like many of Japan’s socialist graphic designers from the late 1920s and early 1930s, he has been inspired by German Expressionism—especially the work of George Grosz—and the Russian avant-garde—particularly the graphics and poetry of Vladimir Mayakovsky. A Japanese influence was the 1925 group formed by Murayama Tomoyoshi, an illustrator who spent 1922 in Berlin and upon his return to Tokyo promoted Expressionism, Dada, and Constructivism through an arts periodical, MAVO, that gave the group its name. Bauhaus theories brought to Japan from Europe by design pilgrims such as Tomoyoshi and Yonee Masa-mu also had a strong impact on Japanese graphics between the wars. For the mainstream, though, 1920s Western design styles were introduced to Japan through trade magazines. A 26-volume encyclopedia titled *Commercial Art* that was distributed widely to advertising and interior designers showed graphic artists how to apply these styles to everything from trademarks to window displays. The emergence of a nationalist military government in 1936 put a halt to most foreign influences. Decades later, Hirano helped to rekindle the spirit.

According to Kohei Suguiru, a Japanese design scholar, Hirano’s book work introduced contemporary European ideas—a strange combination of ad hoc French street graphics and the German grid—to Japanese graphic design. Asked about this contribution, Hirano says, “I’ve never consciously tried to do my work in a European style. Nevertheless, I think the European taste was
3. "Tsuzaka o Moyatsu Toshishichi no Buto" (The Dance of Angels Who Burn Their Own Wings), poster for Black Tent Theater, 1970.
within me before I became a designer.” His book jackets for Japanese reprints of European and American titles may borrow an illustration or some other element of the original design, but “turning Western idioms into something Japanese is not part of his approach,” wrote James Fraser in a 1993 catalog for an exhibition of Hirano’s work at Fairleigh Dickinson University Library. “Yes, there are influences, but more in that subtlety in which a master draws the viewer’s eye into the unfamiliar by giving an illusion of the familiar.”

Koga Hirano was born in 1938 in Seoul, Korea (renamed Keijo by the Japanese forces that occupied Korea at this time), to Japanese parents. At the conclusion of World War II in 1945, his architect father moved the family to Tokyo. As a teenager, Hirano hoped to be an architect, too, but lacked an aptitude in mathematics. His second choice for a course of study at Musashino Art University was graphic design. One of his earliest student posters, a proposal for an advertisement for a book titled Jump Before Seeing by Kenzaburo Oe, was awarded the grand prize by Nissenbi, the association of Japanese advertising designers and artists. In the rigidly hierarchical Japanese business system, this prize was the key to a career. In 1961, Hirano was hired by the advertising division of the prestigious Takashimaya department store to design newspaper ads.

“Designers in those days were considered unimportant,” he said in a 1985 interview. Clients were “suspicious of the word ‘design.’” After two years of turning out formulaic work, he quit to freelance. In 1964, left-wing political interests led him to help found the June Theater, a company whose roving band of actors performed dramas and dances with antiracist and anticapitalist themes under a black tent. (In 1968, the company changed its name to the Black Tent Theater.) Hirano originally worked as the theater’s set designer and designed its posters and brochures from 1968 to 1982.

In 1964, Hirano also earned his first commission designing a book for Shobunsha Publishing Company. Since then, as the company’s principal freelance consultant, he has designed thousands of jackets and covers for individual titles and series. The collected work offers a vivid, evolutionary picture of his career.

Hirano entered the field at a time when Japanese industry had begun to compete seriously in the world market, and when Japanese design emerged, by corollary, as a respected and commercially vital profession.
Although by the mid-60s Japanese designers were experiencing a golden age, Hirano was cautious: "Still a newcomer in a designer's world, I told myself not to fall into the trap of people's admiration," he says. "I wanted to avoid becoming popular so I could do things my own way and not be in a situation where I was always thinking about meeting expectations." One method of avoiding popularity was to tinker with the Japanese language in ways that other designers had not attempted, by mixing type styles and typefaces as well as using verbal puns as a counterpoint to pictures. Still, he insists that he was no reformer. "I accepted the Japanese typesetting systems as they were," he says. And despite years of experimenting with type and calligraphy, he believes that the goal of design is to permit a book to be read.

Even with his rebellious nature, Hirano prefers the medium of book jackets precisely for its limitations. "I have to be given some restrictions for my work—in colors, size, etc.," he says. "I can come up with more interesting ideas by trying to be as eccentric as possible within the restriction." He points to a particular series of books for Shobunsha as an example: Each of the jackets is printed in bright yellow with a hard-to-read bold, black ideogram on the front. Individually, the designs look abstract, but when more than five different books are displayed together, the characters reveal a message.

Hirano also is attracted to book publishing because he can be inside the editorial process. "An ideal system for book designers is one where they are the exclusive designer for the publishing company. I say this because I myself cannot be merely a designer. I have to be in the working group of people who know the plan." As the member who gives the project a visual identity, Hirano tries not to reflect any "personal matters" in his work. Within the group, which comprises an editor, assistants, marketing people, and others, everyone must have an image of how the book is supposed to look. The editor, however, is in charge of "coordinating" the members so that everyone shares the same ideal. Sometimes, of course, this is impossible. In such cases, Hirano draws his image from the conceptions of different members, and "from there I create my own design." This seemingly contradictory procedure, says Mari Hyodo, a design scholar, stems from the "typical mentality of Japanese groupism where public and private affairs cannot be completely separated."

Hirano is passionate about letterforms. "Designing a character is almost like awak-
ening its original soul,” he says. He recognizes in kanji ideograms a tool without visual equal. “As a rule, each Chinese character is a picture. People from cultures using the Roman alphabet often say a Chinese character is like a well-composed abstract painting. That may be true for them, but for us these characters are given an all too concrete picture. One would be amazed by its descriptive and symbolic impact, but also experience a moment of bliss in which shape and meaning coincide and reveal themselves simultaneously.” This precisely describes what Hirano hopes will happen when he does his job well: “One would no longer need to wonder which came first, the shape or the meaning. It becomes a composition demanding that the reader receive it with all five senses.”

Hirano is not on a quest for the perfect letterform. He claims not to want his typogra phy to look “too soft or beautiful,” but rather to have a quality that will “force people to think and wonder when they look at it.” He is therefore fond of maru-go-shi, round gothic type common on store signs. Describing it as “frightening” because it represents thoughtless, mass-market typography, Hirano claims to use it a lot “solely because I am afraid of the results.”

His work for other political and cultural media, such as Takarajima (Treasure Island), an alternative arts magazine he co-founded in 1972, reveals how Hirano reclaimed gothic letterforms called goshikku from crass commercial use and even made them hip.

Except for a few curious homages, such as a jacket for William Morris Kenkyu (Studies on William Morris, 1991), a monograph about the late-19th-century English design pioneer in which Hirano addresses the Morris esthetic with a uniquely Japanese interpretation, few of his current works have European overtones. Over the past decade, as Japanese graphic design has found its own identity, he has led the way in developing a design language that belongs exclusively to him and Japan. Recently he has begun to focus on typography. His letterforms and compositions push the Japanese character into new areas of expression. Now approaching 60, both Hirano and his work have matured, but he is no less passionate in his commitment to the alternative.
