

His Second Life: An Interview with Paul Vjecsner

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A few weeks ago Kathy McCoy sent me this link to a website created by Paul Vjecsner (pronounced vee-yetsh-ner), age 81, a Holocaust survivor who arrived in the U.S. from Czechoslovakia in 1948 as an aspiring commercial artist. McCoy stumbled upon Vjecsner's site by chance while researching Herbert Bayer's life and times in Denver during the 1950s—where Vjecsner also worked for several years—and became fascinated by what she found: the life of a designer that would have fallen through the cracks if not for the web. Indeed the internet has made chance encounters a fairly regular occurrence. In this case, while the site is devoted to Mr. Vjecsner's interest in spiritual and philosophical pursuits, it also digs deeply into his art and commercial art legacies—from his early work in Prague to his illustrations for the U.S. Army and private American companies—and features a generous supply of photographs, from before the Nazi occupation and after fleeing for Hungary to his later arrival in New York. Vjecsner even shares his “intellectual discovery” and inventions.

Autobiographical websites are not necessarily newsworthy, as artists and designers are constantly filling the ether with their ephemeral output, but Vjecsner's thoughtfully preserved work, so articulately explained, could have easily been lost or gone unappreciated. After spending time on the site, I had to know more about Vjecsner, hear more about his life (and struggles) in New York's commercial art world and how he came to embrace the web. Kindly, he obliged my curiosity.

Heller: What inspired you to create such an in-depth website devoted to your career?

Vjecsner: It isn't really devoted to my career, since I included different sorts of things. I felt, before planning a website, that I had matters to contribute which were left unnoticed. As you can see, the title is “Exploring possible human knowledge”; i.e., I felt I had knowledge to contribute [to the world]. I included various things I had done, like much of commercial art, in order to draw attention to my capabilities and what I have to offer.

Heller: How old were you when you arrived in New York?

Vjecsner: 22.

Heller: When you came to this country, did you begin to practice commercial art right away?

Vjecsner: I came to the U.S. in 1948. I tried practicing commercial art right away, since that was what I started with in Europe and was since childhood my intention. But I couldn't get anywhere—hardly spoke English, no connections, etc. I joined the Army, where unexpectedly I succeeded doing artwork for the Recruiting Publicity Bureau.

Heller: What were some of your other early assignments, and how did you receive those commissions?

Vjecsner: I assume you mean in the U.S. I should make something clear from the start: I did not succeed in making a name for myself in the U.S., as you may know. I was extremely successful in the preceding two years in Prague, having grown up in that culture and being quite skilled at drawing. But I had no formal education, not only in art, but in general, due to the war years. So I was unprepared to assimilate to the U.S. conditions, the native commercial art in particular.

Heller: Some of your countrymen—Ladislav Sutnar, who emigrated to New York in 1939, and Karel Teige, who remained in Prague—practiced a “modernist” method of design. Did you know any of those designers in Prague?

Vjecsner: Frankly, I had never heard of them before I immigrated, and afterwards I only learned of Sutnar. They were not well known in Czechoslovakia, unlike Josef Lada, illustrator of *The Good Soldier Schweik*, or Jiri Trnka, who made animated films.

Heller: The Bauhaus played a role in shaping some of the New York based designers—both immigrant and native born—did these teachings have any bearing on your practice?

Vjecsner: I always liked modernism and the Bauhaus influence, but having no schooling and corresponding connections, I had to rely on my drawing ability for whatever job I could find.

Heller: What about American design—and commercial art, in general—at that time appealed to you, and what did not appeal to you?

Vjecsner: What appealed to me then in American work was creative illustration like that of David Stone Martin. I also liked abstract design, but at that time I couldn't get anyone to trust me with it. What I didn't much like was corny magazine or advertising illustration, although I had to of necessity participate in some of it.

Heller: What is “corny” in your estimation?

Vjecsner: By “corny” I may more accurately mean falsely sentimental. I have no problem with folksiness, as long as it is genuine. I am not one for “sugar-free”; it would be sad if young children and animals lost their sweetness.

Heller: What was it like back then in terms of getting work? Did you do only freelance or were you hired on staff?

Vjecsner: For me it was difficult, as I somewhat explained. Since I had nothing to fall back on, I was eager to get a steady job, which may have been a mistake. I didn’t know I could get something like unemployment benefits, which may have enabled me to embark on a freelancing career. That way I may have been able to concentrate on work I was interested in, with possibly better success.

Heller: Who were some of the art directors you worked with?

Vjecsner: I didn’t really work with any particular art director, but was a member—in the bullpen—of certain studios.

Heller: Did you belong to any of the clubs or societies devoted to illustration and design?

Vjecsner: When I worked in Denver, I was active in the Denver Art Directors Club.

Heller: How much of your own method was allowed to come through aside from the “corny” magazine and advertising illustration?

Vjecsner: It’s hard to speak of my own method since I had been involved in so many endeavors. As a result I am actually glad that I became more versatile than most anyone, able to do serious illustration, stylized work, design and so on. As a rule, I tried to do things the way I thought I should, although bosses sometimes wanted an imitation of someone else’s style.

Heller: You’re very eloquent. How long did it take you to master English? And how long was your language a hindrance to getting the kind of work you wanted?

Vjecsner: It was only a hindrance when I dealt with people of prejudice. Otherwise, I studied English diligently from the start, getting gradually better. I also tried from the beginning to think in English, which makes a great difference, and I improved a lot when turning to pursuits that require writing, like philosophy or mathematics.

Heller: You say you didn’t have any formal education, but how did you learn to do what you did?

Vjecsner: I began to draw portraits when a child, acquiring a habit of observation of light and shade, proportion, etc. Also, I tried to get art books, making my mother worried about spending money on them, since we had hardly anything to spend during that wartime, before yet greater calamities.

Heller: You worked in Denver for a while. Did you work with Herbert Bayer?

Vjecsner: No, I just met him once.

Heller: I have a friend who survived the camps as a “designer.” He worked making signs and painting pictures for guards. When he came to the United States after the war he got a job with Paul Rand doing advertising illustration. Did you have a mentor or close associate here who helped you along?

Vjecsner: Interestingly, I also survived thanks probably partly to drawing portraits of guards, or of their families from photographs. I can’t say I had a mentor here; I did meet with the known illustrator Albert Dorne, who liked my work in the Army, but although he made some recommendations, nothing came of it.

Heller: You also say you did not succeed here, at least at first. What was your measure of success? Was it simply getting work and making a living, or was it being an artist of some kind?

Vjecsner: I definitely wanted to make a living in commercial art, not wanting any other work then.

Heller: Did you take your portfolio around to magazines and agencies?

Vjecsner: Magazines and agencies mainly worked with freelancers—although illustrators often belonged to studios, which did the business transactions—and, as mentioned, I was anxious to have a steady job. I did, however, take a portfolio to wherever I went looking.

Heller: At what point did you stop pursuing that career, and why?

Vjecsner: That desire ended in my 30s, partly because I didn’t like the kind of work I had to do, and also because I became interested in other fields, which somehow always simmered in the back of my mind, alongside the interest in art.

Heller: What did you do after your commercial art career?

Vjecsner: For a while I explored “fine art” possibilities, which became a disappointment. It appeared to me that the artists were far less than in the commercial field picked on the basis of talent. It depended in my view more on who was declared great by a looked-to authority than on the commercial necessity of doing a good job. Afterward my interests turned more to mental activities, having found I was able to gain insights in them. I came up with some inventions based on geometry, had a couple of papers published in regional mathematics journals, and then turned to exploring a wider range of philosophical issues.

Heller: At the time you were practicing, commercial art did not have a scholarly interest at all. Now design history is taught in most design schools. Books have been written about the likes of Rand, Sutnar, Saul Bass and many others. Do you have a sense of this history now? Or is it simply arcane?

Vjecsner: There were actually books published on Norman Rockwell and maybe others, but perhaps they don't belong in the design category. It's difficult for me to say whether I have a sense of that history, since I've been away from the area awhile. But I do feel that commercial art deserves more credit as a valuable occupation than it used to.

Heller: In producing your website, were you aiming to establish a legacy? Or where you trying to connect with others who either knew your work or went through similar struggles?

Vjecsner: One idea I had was to unabashedly refer on the website to my commercial art, whereas in the past the field, or the likes of illustration, were somehow held in disrepute. Regarding a legacy, the problem is that the web is such an ephemeral thing. Here today, gone tomorrow. As indicated in my first answer, the website belongs to one of my efforts to impart what I think I can contribute to knowledge. I try other ways as well, to make me feel I live a useful life.

Heller: How do you feel about being “stumbled upon” and now work from your commercial art days is of interest to design scholars? Does this validate your impulse to do the website or is it just one of those serendipitous things that occur when you put yourself on the internet?

Vjecsner: It feels good. I may not have had an impulse that the site would succeed in any way, but I did of course intend to call attention to it. There have been a number of positive reactions—most often praising the “pictures” and sometimes being affected by my autobiography, a couple of times by history teachers.

Heller: If you had your commercial art career to do over, what would you change?

Vjecsner: I may have stayed in Prague longer, where my career already had a successful start, and once establishing a firmer reputation, I may have emigrated. But then again, the communists took over just before I left, and there was no telling what dangers I would have faced.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).