Advertisements

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The exhibition *Swiss Graphic Designers*, a compilation of exclusively Modernist work by twelve Swiss designers, was shown in art museums all across the USA from 1956 until 1958.¹ The last page of the accompanying catalog shows a design by the Bernese designer Adolf Flückiger (an unknown name today) that is labeled as a “promotional booklet for [a] painting and plastering concern.”² [Fig. 1] In fact, it was the back cover of an exhibition catalog for Kunsthalle Bern, which between 1942 and 1960 almost continuously featured new advertisements for the painters and plasterers F. Gygi + Co. While a range of artists was commissioned to design the advertisements (among them well-known names such as Bernhard Luginbühl, Dieter Roth, and Otto Tschumi), most of the Gygi ads originated in the studios of three Bernese designers, namely Hans Hartmann, Kurt Wirth, and the abovementioned Adolf Flückiger. [Fig. 8]

A closer look at this long-lasting series reveals a wide array of solutions far removed from any formal dogmas. Restricted only by the means of reproduction—monochrome or two-color letterpress with line or half-tone blocks, woodcuts, and linocuts—the ads range from the strictly typographic to abstract and illustrative works. Sometimes their style lets one attribute them to a specific designer, while at other times they appear to be experiments without any connection to the work of any one person. Flückiger’s contributions demonstrate great diversity, which suggests that the selection featured in *Swiss Graphic Designers* was determined by the stakeholder’s own program—for they chose a Gygi ad that would fit their Modernist agenda.

By contrast, the reception of these Gygi advertisements shows that it was in fact their diversity that was especially lauded by many of their Swiss contemporaries.³ In the specialist press, this phenomenon was explained by the company’s attitude to patronage, its unusually open commissioning policy, and the “artistic honesty” of the designers they commissioned.⁴ Both parties were praised accordingly.⁵ [Fig. 2] The Gygi designs were frequently featured in publications and exhibitions.⁶ In 1954 the Bernese publishing house Stämpfli issued an entire book that was dedicated to the advertisements made for Gygi since 1942, and in the same year it was chosen as one of the Most Beautiful Swiss Books.⁷ [Figs. 3, 6, 7] Two examples of lettering for Gygi were also shown in the *Lettera* type catalog: the issue of 1961 features geometric lettering, while a playful ornate version was published in 1976.⁸ [Figs. 4, 5] The Gygi advertisements show a different facet of Swiss graphic design. They do not correspond to the dominant linear narrative of Modernist development, but reveal a stylistically diverse reality.⁹

1. See Zeller 2021. It was planned and executed by Allon Schoener, a curator at the Cincinnati Art Museum, and graphic designer Noel Martin. However, the selection of works and designers was provided by Josef Müller-Brockmann and Armin Hofmann.
5. See Ibid. A similar example of an extraordinary client-customer relationship can also be witnessed in the case of Olivetti. See “Corporate Printed Matter,” in the present volume.
9. The works of Hans Hartmann also bear witness to this. Fritz Gygi also seems to have supported individual careers of graphic designers, for in 1958 he published a book about the work of Hans Hartmann together with Stämpfli, which was distributed as a New Year’s gift to their clients. See Gygi & Stämpfli Verlag 1958.
Fig. 1  Advertisement for F. Gygi + Co., Adolf Flückiger.
Fig. 2   Various advertisements for F. Gygi + Co., different authors.
Fig. 3 Single spread from **Schönste Schweizer Bücher 1954**, showing the prize-winning book *F. Gygi + Co. Bern. Inserate und Neujahrskarten 1942–1954*. 
Fig. 4  Lettering for F. Gygi + Co., Hans Hartmann.
Fig. 5   Lettering for F. Gygi + Co., Hans Hartmann.
Fig. 6   New Year’s card for F. Gygi + Co., Kurt Wirth.
Fig. 7 Advertisement for F. Gygi + Co., Bernhard Luginbühl.
Two catalogs of Kunsthalle Bern featuring advertisements for Gygi and a cover design, Adolf Flückiger.