Designer Portraits

Roland Früh

"Qu’est-ce qu’un graphiste?” (What is a graphic designer?) asked the writer Charles-François Landry in his introduction to the Schweizer Grafiker – Handbuch, a publication from 1960 intended to introduce the members of the Verband Schweizerischer Grafiker (VSG) —the Swiss Graphic Design Association—and provide potential clients with information on their practices. The term “graphic designer,” wrote Landry, had not become properly established as a job description. Some used it with contempt, he said, some with love—but everybody used it differently. It was “un mot-choc, un mot-clef de notre temps” (a shocking word, a buzzword of our time). The profession lacked a clear definition, which left room for a very diverse understanding of graphic design. Again, the Handbuch illustrated this perfectly. Each member of the VSG was allocated a double-spread to show their work, and in a column to the far right, a photographic portrait and a short biography were added. The variety of designers included illustrators, shop window designers, poster artists, typographers, book designers, exhibition designers, and more. The VSG members responded to Landry’s question “What is a graphic designer?” with a kaleidoscopic answer.

Of interest here is how the members of VSG made use of the opportunity to present themselves in the best, but also in the most personal way possible. They carefully selected their work samples and their photographic portraits. [Figs. 86, 87, 88, 89, 90, 91] In only few cases did members use an existing snapshot. Otherwise, they generally chose a professional portrait in which the outfit, accessories, and location had been selected deliberately. Such complexity of self-representation is rare in the literature on graphic design. As a result, the Handbuch is an interesting case study in which the designers’ own portraits in text and image offer a very broad understanding of what graphic design encompasses.

When we take a closer look at the 136 portraits in the book, we can discern certain recurring themes. The picture of Walter Ballmer, for example, represented “the draftsman” wearing his white workcoat. [Fig. 86] He is in a setting that demonstrates cleanliness and precision, along with the tools of his trade—only the cigarette in his hand breaks the sober mood. White workcoats in portraits taken for self-promotion purposes can be found as far back as the 1920s, when ambitious designers such as the young Jan Tschichold sought to represent technical skill, cleanliness, and precision as counterparts to a printer’s workshop or an artist’s studio. The portrait of Solange Moser is of a different kind entirely. [Fig. 89] She is seated on the floor, drawing, illustrating, and is accompanied by her cat (which in fact is not the only cat in the book). Illustrators liked to present themselves pen-in-hand, eyes focused on a sheet of paper—an “artist’s representation,” but with a professional attitude. The photograph of Marcel Wyss is probably the most sterile of them all. [Fig. 90] Wyss was a graphic designer, but also a practicing concrete artist and editor of the magazine spirale. His portrait is almost all white, showing him in the process of installing a concrete sculpture, wearing a white turtleneck pullover and white trousers. Wyss’s spread presents only logo designs, so his two pages do not include any gray tones. It is all hard black and white, which gives it a very conceptual appearance. The last of our categories is that of the “globetrotter” or “metropolitan.” Several designers liked to present themselves while traveling, in front of foreign
landscapes or cityscapes—such as Warja Honegger-Lavater: she posed on top of a New York skyscraper, and her biography lists visits to Stockholm, Paris, London, Rome, and New York. [Fig. 91] Honegger-Lavater is introduced as an illustrator, though she had been running a design practice with her husband Gottfried Honegger and had been responsible for several well-known graphic design commissions too.7

To conclude, the Hand­buch of the VSG illustrates the variety of professional scenes and disciplines that all came to fit under the umbrella of graphic design. It also showed that some designers con­sciously chose how to be pre­sented, even balancing out their photo with illustrative work or their biography in order to achieve a consistent image of themselves. What seems surprising is that there was no real majority for any specific “type” among the graphic designers. The “serious” designers were con­trasted with the smoking artists, the ambitious metropoli­tans with the casual illustrators and their cats. The main technological changes that would so profoundly shape the profession were still to come. By 1960, graphic design still gave opportunities to those working traditionally, by hand, with paint and pencil, but at the same time it was the profession of the conceptual, artistic designers and even of commercial agencies too.

And how did Landry him­self answer his initial ques­tion? He wrote:

“The graphic designer is a very lively artist, who keeps up with his times; he is a sports­man of the arts, and what he produces is inevitably dynamic.”

(Le graphiste est un artiste bien vivant, qui marche au pas de son époque, c’est un sportif des arts, et ce qu’il produit est fatalement dynamique.)8

3 Out of the 136 portraits, only eleven are introducing female designers.
4 The six portraits described here were selected because they show their subjects’ intention to pose for a professional portrait, not just any occasional snap­shot.
5 See, for example, the portrait taken of a young Jan Tschichold in ca. 1928, in Jacobs & Rössler, 2019: inside cover.
7 Gottfried Honegger states in a conversation with Ruedi Christen that he met Warja Lavater when she had already been working as a graphic designer herself, and had been commissioned to design for the Schweizer Bankverein, amongst others. See Christen 2017.
Fig. 86  Portrait of Walter Ballmer in a draftsman’s coat.
Fig. 87 Portrait of Fridolin Müller.
Fig. 88  Portrait of Frédéric Riz à Porta.
Fig. 89 Portrait of Solange Moser.
Fig. 90  Portrait of Marcel Wyss.
Fig. 91 Portrait of Warja Honegger-Lavater.