Exhibition Designs

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The list of minimum rates for design services, published annually from the early 1940s onwards by the Swiss graphic designers’ professional association Verband Schweizerischer Grafiker (VSG), also included exhibition stands for trade fairs, and window displays.¹ It is thus hardly surprising that window displays and exhibition stands for fairs such as OLMA in St. Gallen, the Mustermesse Basel (MUBA), and the Comptoir in Lausanne figured in a majority of graphic design portfolios of that period. [Fig. 131] The fact that this was an established field of work is also proven by courses held at public trade schools from the 1930s, and also by an article titled “Exhibition Design and Window Display” published in Graphis magazine in 1949, which was devoted exclusively to such commercial displays as important sources of income for Swiss graphic designers.² This article by Georgine Oeri shows that even graphic designers who were mostly known for their illustrative posters, such as Donald Brun or Celestino Piatti, had also designed exhibition stands. She presented mostly examples that mirror the playful design language of the 1940s, and she classified them as belonging to the international stylistic tendencies in exhibition design.³ [Fig. 132]

However, the abilities of graphic designers in that field were in demand not only in a commercial context, but also for representative purposes such as at the Swiss National Exhibitions, international fairs and world expos.⁴ [Figs. 130, 136] The Swiss National Exhibition Schweizerische Landesausstellung 1939 (LA39) brought together a great variety of such design ideas. For each pavilion at the LA 39, graphic designers were commissioned along with architects.⁵ This collaborative situation suggests that the graphic designers were primarily tasked with processing complex information in a visually appealing way and with the design of signs and lettering. During politically and economically unstable times, the LA 39 offered not only visibility for these designers, but also many well-paid jobs.⁶

From the 1940s onwards, a lively discourse developed around the topic of exhibition design. Many well-known graphic designers such as Max Bill, Richard Paul Lohse, and Josef Müller-Brockmann published on the subject, creating histories and typologies of exhibition design as well as giving instructions for designers.⁷ It is remarkable how these authors seemed only to be interested in the formal aspects of exhibitions, rather than in distinguishing between different content. Thus these designer-authored texts do not distinguish between exhibitions with cultural aims and those whose purpose is commercial. However, the examples featured therein were predominantly committed to a strict Modernism. The former genre of playful display design had now been replaced by uniform, educational formats.⁸ [Figs. 133, 134, 135, 136] The Swiss designers’ contributions, which were often published in multiple languages, also catered to the ongoing international discourse on the subject. Other well-known design professionals writing on the subject included the British graphic designer Misha Black, and the US architect Kenneth W. Luckhurst.⁹

¹ See VSG 1944.
⁴ In an international context, this happened as early as 1936 with Max Bill’s award-winning pavilion. See Wohlwend Piai 2013a: 139.
⁵ This was also the case with the Swiss contributions to world expos and international fairs such as the Triennale di Milano, where graphic designers were often commissioned together with architects. See Wagner 1939: 2.
⁶ See Ibid.
⁷ See Debluë 2020.
⁸ See, for example, Bill 1948: 65–71; Bill 1959: 2–14; Lohse 1953; Müller-Brockmann 1981.
⁹ See Luckhurst 1951; Black 1950.
Fig. I30  Installation view of the pavilion “Post, Telephon, Telegraph PTT,” Frieda and Werner Allenbach(-Meier) (graphic design), L. M. Boedecker (architect), Schweizerische Landesausstellung, 1939.
Fig. 131 Installation view of a trade fair stand for Oskar Rüegg, Hans Neuburg, 1940.
Fig. 132  Trade fair stands, Donald Brun (Ciba) and Celestino Piatti (Elastic AG, Basel), 1948.
Fig. 133 Exhibition truck from the traveling exhibition *Europe Builds*, Gérard Ifert and Ernst Scheidegger (graphic design), Abraham Beer, Lanfranco Bombelli, and Peter Yates (architects), 1950–1951.
Model for the pavilion “Die Frau und das Geld,” Nelly Rudin (design), Klaus Zaugg (photo), Schweizerische Ausstellung für Frauenarbeit (SAFFA), 1958.
Fig. 135  Traveling exhibition Stile Olivetti, Walter Ballmer, 1957.
Switzerland as a country is fond of festivals and exhibitions. Every twenty-five years national exhibitions are staged and often produce new display styles of lasting significance. Apart from the three annual fairs, the Swiss Industries Fair in Basel, the Compétence in Lausanne and the Olma in St. Gall, special exhibitions are regularly mounted in all parts of the country. The Swiss also participate in most international fairs. As in two and three-dimensional design, balance and harmony of form is the foremost consideration in Swiss exhibition displays. Large and simple shapes and surfaces with no unnecessary ornament are preferred, and are combined with exemplary, homogeneous lettering. As far as possible, the products to be displayed and their inherent forms are taken as the starting-point of all design work. The Swiss realized at a very early date that it is the striking basic conception that counts, not cluttered arrays that only confuse the viewer. Swiss exhibition designers can justly claim to have exercised an important influence on international developments in this field. (H.N.)

Der Schweizer Graphiker als Ausstellungsberater


Fig. 136  Tower of the chemical and pharmaceutical section at the Schweizerische Landesausstellung, Heiri Steiner, 1939, and the trade fair stand for an umbrella factory at Mustermessen Basel, Ferdi Afflerbach, 1952.