Gender

Chiara Barbieri

In recent years, gender equality has been gaining currency. Nevertheless, it is hardly news that the history of graphic design, and design in general, has been affected by a gender bias: work experiences within the industry have been far from gender-neutral, and neither has its history. However, we still need more in-depth discussions on how gender and gendered discourses have impacted the practice of graphic design. In the last three decades, design historians—especially women—have been addressing this issue in an attempt to rebalance the historiography. Some scholars have focused on gender disparities in graphic design by acknowledging the contributions of female graphic designers and problematizing the impact of gendered culture and discourses on their careers and the perception of their work. Designers do not always want to have these conversations. Some did not feel comfortable having their perspectives reprinted in this volume, which in itself highlights the work that is still needed.

Gender disparity in the field of graphic design has many faces: it is expressed in the pay gap, in the shortage of women in senior positions and leadership roles, in the smaller number of women talking on stage at industry events, and in the fact that female designers have been underrepresented in the history of graphic design. Some of these aspects are broached more or less explicitly in the following passages in which interviewees address the topic of gender, and suggest how their work experiences were affected by gender stereotypes and expectations.

These passages from our interviews offer insights into female representation and women’s experiences within the graphic design industry. They give voice to different generations of female practitioners and show how gender is still an everyday issue, even though some change might have occurred. Mixed-gender and women-only design studios have met with problematic reactions. In 1970s Paris, Niklaus Troxler found the presence of women in the Studio Hollenstein provocative, while women-only graphic design studios are still an exception in 2010s Zurich, as is evident from Hi’s comment on the studio Bringolf Irion Vögeli. Misconceptions reveal the underlying sexism of an industry that is still patriarchal—as is society at large. Overall, the passages selected offer a personal perspective on gender disparities in the field of graphic design.

Gender stereotypes and biases resonate loud and clear in the words of Ursula Hiestand. In 1960, she established the graphic design studio E+U Hiestand with her then husband, Ernst. Wife and husband worked...
Ernst Wolfensberger
diversity stereotypes practice career associations

together until 1981, when they distanced themselves from each other in both their professional and private lives. Ursula’s words address the benefits and disadvantages of partnering with a male next-of-kin, from a female perspective. Historically, the gender bias of design history has resulted in a focus on the achievements of the male partners to the detriment of their female counterparts.\(^4\) In this case, her partnership might have eased Ursula’s inclusion into AGI as one of the first female members (if not “the” first) of an association that has often been criticized for being an elite club for white, middle-aged men.\(^5\) She recalls how her father dissuaded her from pursuing a career as a fashion designer, and so she chose something instead that he believed to be more appropriate, given her gender and the future expectations that went with it. She frequently refers to her children, thereby implying that motherhood might have both limited her career choices and pushed her to be resourceful and proactive. Hers is a case study that cannot be generalized. However, Ursula Hiestand’s voice offers valid points about how the multiple identities of female graphic designers—as practitioners, women, wives, and mothers—can impact on career decisions, and how they come into play and are lived out in everyday practice.


Public speech held at the philatelists’ association in Winterthur, Nov. 22, 1956 (Wolfensberger 1957).
Introductory note by Ueli Kaufmann.

In the 1950s, Ernst Wolfensberger, the director of Kreispost Zürich (the postal services of Zurich), gave several speeches to the Philatelistenverein Winterthur (Philatelists’ Association of Winterthur) that were devoted to the life and work of stamp designers. In the introduction to his lecture of November 1956, published as a small booklet in the following year,
Wolfensberger emphasized that women were given little attention and that he found it appropriate to first shine a light on two female designers: the lauded Bernese graphic artist Maya Allenbach and the Basel painter Faustina Iselin. His ensuing discussion of Allenbach’s works reveals the persistence of common stereotypes.


EW  Today I have the honor once again of making a contribution to your field of interest, and I have resolved to conclude my series of lectures on the life and work of our stamp artists with a few more biographical notes. It seems appropriate to me that I should first consider two of those women who have so far been given little consideration. The graphic artist Maya Allenbach is a native of Basel but lives in Bern, and has a holiday residence on the banks of Lake Murten, hidden among romantic birch trees. Her husband, an architect by trade, created a stimulating, contemplative recreation area for his wife to enjoy away from her everyday working life. One can assume that it was in this idyll that some of her ideas for successful postage stamp designs were first developed and came to maturity. In any case, Maya Allenbach has made a name for herself with the commemorative stamps she has designed. Her 1944 Olympic series of stamps for 10, 20 and 30 centimes were the first Swiss postage stamps to be designed by a woman, and attracted particular attention. She was skilfully able to present the Hellenistic figure of Apollo in classical form, together with the five Olympic rings. By choosing the
god of Corinth, the place of origin of the Olympic Games, she revealed her sense of history. The imposing image of the god impressively dominates the stamp’s pictorial space. The artist’s penchant for historical depictions is also evidenced by the stamp commemorating the 100th anniversary of the Swiss federal state in 1948. Maya Allenbach expressed the 100 years by the simplest means, using a red, parchment roll to symbolize today’s federal state, over which there towers a tree of freedom. On the stamps for 1955, her motif for the vintner’s festival in Vevey is a charming, traditional Vaud hat, and it is executed very tastefully. The presentation is paired with elegance with a finely tuned play of colors. It is therefore not surprising that this stamp sold very well. The stamps created by Maya Allenbach reflect historical thinking in a truly appealing, feminine way. Her artistic collaboration with her husband, as for example at the Swiss National Exhibition (“Landi”) in 1939, at the exhibitions for the headquarters of trade promotion in Budapest, Plovdiv and Zagreb, at the national stamp exhibition in Geneva in 1943, and in their design for the “Imaba” in Basel 1948, lets us conclude that male idea and female expression find themselves happily complemented in each other’s work.

Niklaus Troxler

E-mail to Constance Delamadeleine, Oct. 18, 2018.

Niklaus Troxler joined the Studio Hollenstein as art director from 1971 to 1972. This studio comprised creative specialists (art directors, copywriters, illustrators, photographers, typesetters, and typographers), administrative members (an accountant, secretaries), and salesmen, and numbered 100 employees in the early 1970s, who worked in mixed-gender teams. As revealed here in this quotation by Troxler, their gender mix seemed to be an uncommon practice in Switzerland, at least within the graphic design practice.
De travailler dans un team composé de filles était aussi une provocation. [Fig. 27]

To work in a team made up of girls was also a provocation [Fig. 27].

Hi (Megi Zumstein and Claudio Barandun)

Conversations with Jonas Berthod, Zurich, Apr. 6, 2017 and Nov. 13, 2017.

[Bringolf Irion Vögeli] were three women. Did that play a role at all? It was quite rare to have a women-only studio.

CB It’s also funny that everyone in Zurich always talks about the “lesbian bureau.” But none of them is a lesbian. Just because they’re women ...

MZ Yeah, it was like that: “Oh, you work with the ladies …”

CB It’s sexism in its purest form.

JB Wow. And was the fact that it was a women-only studio a criterion for you to work for them?
MZ No. I mean, I thought they were good. I admired their work. They had been running it for more than ten, twelve years at the time.

Anna Monika Jost


AMJ À l’époque, quand j’y étais, c’était dur pour une femme. Surtout pour une femme qui était jeune et qui n’était pas conventionnelle et pas traditionnelle. D’ailleurs Monsieur Ballmer, il m’avait fait le reproche quand j’ai été à Londres avec une amie et j’étais revenue avec une minijupe et j’étais allée travailler chez Olivetti avec une minijupe. Le lendemain j’ai mis autre chose et il m’a dit: “Ce que vous avez mis hier, je ne veux plus voir!” Je suis rentrée à midi et j’ai remis ma minijupe, et il n’a plus jamais rien dit. J’ai fait exprès parce que j’étais jeune et jolie à l’époque et ce n’était pas provocant, mais lui il était dans la tradition.

AMJ At the time when I was there [in Milan at Olivetti in the second half of the 1960s], it was hard for a woman. Especially for a woman who was young and unconventional and untraditional. In fact, Ballmer reproached me when I went to London with a friend and I came back with a miniskirt and went to work at Olivetti in it. The next day I put on something else and he said: “What you put on yesterday, I don’t want to see it anymore!” I came home at noon and put my miniskirt back on, and he never said anything again. I did it on purpose because I was young and pretty at the time and it wasn’t provocative, but he was traditional.


RL  What was it like later, after 1980, when Ernst [Hiestand] left? You had your own studio, but how did things proceed? Did you still get jobs, did you have to engage in networking yourself? How did things develop for you?

UH  Of course there is the fear of a woman with three children: “How can I survive?” ABM had been one of our major clients for twenty years. I went to the director, talked to him about my new situation and my wish for further
cooperation. He supported me. I had his trust because ABM advertising and the photo studio had been my responsibility for a long time. In total I worked for ABM for thirty-five years. Other clients were advertising agencies, architects, and exhibition organizers. I have always managed to earn my living with work that I enjoy and that fulfills me. Besides my work in the studio I had other fields of activity. Because of my interest in issues pertaining to education and training, I was elected to the supervisory committee of the vocational school for design, Medien Form Farbe, and was its president for many years. And before that, from 1974 to 1980, I became involved in the SWB project Thearena Aktionshalle Zürich. We wanted to use actual productions to try and provide alternative forms of cultural education. It focused above all on spontaneous, direct participation and on confronting people with unfamiliar experiences. “Thearena Weeks” took place three times in a tent in downtown Zurich, and twice in the Rote Fabrik at the lake [a venue on the outskirts of Zurich]. As President of the Thearena, I organized events, designed all the advertising material in an unpretentious manner, and put my stamp on it. The Thearena, as an experiment in alternative cultural education, was a success with the public and has proven itself. Looking back, I realize that my career was unusual for the 1950s and 1960s. As a young girl I wanted to go to the School of Arts and Crafts and become a fashion designer. But I received no support from my father: “You’ll be getting married and have children anyway.” And then I thought: “Well, I want to learn sign painting; with this profession I can earn money and become
My father had a studio for lettering. I did a three-and-a-half-year apprenticeship with him, and I was the first girl to have done that training at the time. I continued my education at the School of Applied Arts in Zurich at evening courses, then later in Paris and everything else was “learning by doing” and also luck.

Ursula Hiestand


CB Comment c’était l’ambiance à l’AGI, en particulier pour une femme?


CB  What was the environment like for a woman at AGI?

UH  I believe I was the first woman in AGI Switzerland. But you know something that was quite important for me, at the beginning we were “the married couple E+U.” But after our separation I continued to be a member. However,
I never felt treated as an appendix, but as an independent member. The annual, international AGI meetings all over the world, combined with lectures by AGI members, poster exhibitions, and visits to their studios and agencies, were always a great experience. I was accepted amicably into the men’s club. The meetings with eloquent personalities like F.H.K. Henrion, Jaques Richez, Anton Stankovski, Walter Ballmer were the most interesting and inspiring of my life. At the annual meetings we spent several days together and had time to exchange ideas and discuss problems that the profession brought with it among colleagues. This has also resulted in deep and long-lasting friendships. Many members of the AGI were also professors at universities. Therefore, the AGI also dealt with the education of graphic designers. Political questions were in the background: everyone was of the opinion that design improves the world. [Figs. 28–29]