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Lehni Frame

Implications of Displaying Graphic Design

Sara Zeller

Organizing graphic design exhibitions is always problematic: graphic design does not exist in a vacuum, and the walls of the exhibition space effectively isolate the work of design from the real world. Placing a book, a music album, or a poster in a gallery removes it from the cultural, commercial, and historical context without which the work cannot be understood.¹

The problem of decontextualization that Peter Bil'ak here observes for graphic design is not unfamiliar to curators from many fields, such as art, design, ethnology, or archeology, and it addresses a specific issue straight-on: How do you exhibit something that belongs to the mass media, to popular culture, without its context? How do you avoid incorrectly putting something on a pedestal and false interpretations?² As we can see from the examples we will consider in the present essay, the empty

space created by a temporary loss of function is filled with new meanings by the objects' new surroundings. Usually, these meanings are not accidental, but are chosen and applied consciously.

Since there are no conventions for showing graphic design, presentation formats are often renegotiated for each exhibition. While independent venues tend to use casual, low-cost displays using pins and clips to mount exhibits, museums favor large-scale installations.³ As an ephemeral object connected to everyday life, the poster is at odds with the frame traditionally associated with the formal presentation of paintings. Nevertheless, within the institutional context, posters nowadays are often framed—and the frames are usually explained as a measure to protect these rare historical items.⁴

Since the 1990s, institutional display formats have been increasingly subjected to research, analyzing their influence on the perception of exhibits and their power to create visual narratives that inscribe themselves into history.⁵ The frame has thus to be considered as much more than a protective device. As an inherent part of the display, it has a distinct influence on how exhibits are received. The impact of display on historiography is also increasingly being addressed in the field of graphic design.⁶ In recent research, the display of graphic design exhibitions has been identified as an important element for the “construction of history and meaning.”⁷ Against this

backdrop, the present essay will explore that issue within the context of exhibitions of Swiss graphic design. To do so, the means of display for a non-representative selection of exhibitions at the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich (hereinafter: MfGZ) and the Museum of Modern Art New York (MoMA) between 1951 and 2012, chosen because of their remarkable display designs, will here be subjected to closer analysis.⁸

Signifying value

For the MfGZ, the use of frames is not primarily a curatorial decision. For conservation reasons, all objects from its collections must be shown behind glass. Nevertheless, or possibly *because of* this, the frame affects how the visitor understands the exhibition—it creates hierarchies and meaning. By identifying objects as in need of protection, a certain value is attributed to them. For the large-scale exhibition *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design*, the curators Karin Gimmi and Barbara Junod consciously worked with diverse displays, while the exhibition was thematically structured and a great many objects were mounted in frames or placed in glass vitrines. A red band overhead displayed 100 posters arranged chronologically—and even though they were out of reach, they were all placed in neat aluminum frames.⁹ The “frieze,” as it was called by the museum itself, showcased a history of Swiss poster design from

1912 to 2012: one poster had been selected for every year. Here, it seems to be the combination of the frames, the chronology, the height, and the frieze’s omnipresence throughout the exhibition space that presented the museum’s collection in the light of the master narrative supplied by its own items. Not only was the awe-struck, upward-looking visitor informed about the highlights of Swiss poster design, but they also experienced Swiss poster history as a self-contained, linear development. Towards the exit, a contemporary section offered an alternative. Here, posters and objects were attached to wire with metal clips, or lay there for the visitor to browse through, reminiscent of the display modes that can usually be found outside institutions, such as in studio shows or poster festivals.¹⁰ The decision to use a casual display mode for some of the contemporary posters even served to enhance the special status of the collection’s items.¹¹ [Figs. 31, 32]

The framing policy of the MfGZ concerning the objects of its collection conformed to standard institutional practice. However, in an international context, most larger institutions only began to use frames to display posters systematically in around the early 1970s. The objects of permanent exhibitions were commonly framed before this practice was later adopted for temporary exhibitions.¹² Interestingly, it appears that poster frames from Zurich to New York seem to conform to certain formal criteria, for they comprise a discreet, almost invisible

design, preferably made of light metal. The MfGZ nowadays uses exclusively light aluminum frames by Lehni, a company with connections to the international art and design scene. The so-called “Lehni frame,” designed by Rudolf Lehni in 1976, is itself a celebrated example of Swiss design and is available in every possible size—up to *Weltformat*, the Swiss standard size for posters. The Lehni family established themselves on the art and design scene early on. Rudolf Lehni senior set up the workshop, and in 1932 he carried out Max Bill’s famous *Well-Relief* (Wave relief). Together with the designer Andreas Christen, Rudolf Lehni junior produced the aluminum bookshelves for Max Bill’s section at the Expo 1964 in Lausanne. Inspired by this same bookshelf, Donald Judd designed a furniture collection during the 1980s that is still exclusively produced and sold by Lehni.¹³ It is an interesting act of affirmation that a Swiss design museum should use a Swiss design object to display its posters; exhibit and display thus concur. As a part of the narrative itself, the Lehni-frame *frames* its content within the discourse to which the museum contributes.

The frame as institution

In 1988, Stuart Wrede curated the exhibition *The Modern Poster* at MoMA, which can be considered exemplary in many respects.¹⁴ The use of frames in the exhibition is also

particularly noticeable. Except for a scaffold-like architectural intervention in one room, the display design limited itself to the framed mounting of the exhibits and their conscious, picture-gallery-like arrangement on the walls. As the exhibits were presented in chronological order, visitors following the proposed circuit experienced a linear history of posters that began in Paris at the end of the 19th century. Recent research has shown how this specific display design supported an understanding of the exhibition as a master narrative confirming a canon previously established by the museum itself.¹⁵ The frames are thus an intrinsic aspect of the whole setting, which was an important agent in *framing* the exhibits as masterpieces, as artworks, while simultaneously telling *the* history of poster design. The institution decided to combine contemporary, lesser-known posters with established masterpieces, and as such changed the way they were perceived by the audience. The contemporary popular posters enter the essential circle of cultural heritage, and the masterpieces step down from their pedestals and rub shoulders with their ephemeral, printed equivalents. The graphic designer Niklaus Troxler was at the time barely known outside Switzerland, but the inclusion of two posters of his in this exhibition most likely made a large contribution to his international breakthrough.¹⁶ [Fig. 33]

The institution as frame

Another, earlier exhibition at MoMA entirely focusing on poster design from Switzerland offers a contrasting approach to the display modes discussed above that were mostly related to conservation, protection, and value. In the exhibition *Swiss Posters*, overseen by Mildred Constantine, the exhibits were either directly mounted on the walls or in rectangular display elements, without the use of frames. The eye-catching display architecture was discussed in the press release: “The installation will simulate a Swiss street display, with 4 typical free-standing Swiss telephone boxes plastered with posters. Walls will show identical posters side by side to make a repeat pattern as it is done in Switzerland where standards in size and display are regulated.”¹⁷ Most of the approximately forty exhibits were recent works and had been selected from the *The Swiss Poster*, a traveling show that had been organized in Switzerland by Pro Helvetia and that toured through Europe, the USA, and South America from 1949 until 1952.¹⁸ MoMA’s own poster collection provided a number of exhibits.¹⁹ The exhibition design was attempted to re-contextualize the exhibits in their *natural habitat*. Constantine probably got the idea for this original display design from browsing the catalog that accompanied the touring show: it contains photographs of Swiss street scenes with poster hoardings, and presents the telephone booth as a characteristic landmark.²⁰

In fact, mock-up poster columns and walls were at the time (and as a matter of fact still are) nothing unusual in poster exhibitions. At that time, it was still very common to show posters—mass-produced printed matter—without any protective glass or frame. Nevertheless, looking at MoMA’s exhibition history, we can see how certain posters were early on displayed in frames and within a white-cube setting. This was the case, for example, in an exhibition about the famous French poster artist A.M. Cassandre in 1936.²¹ This exhibition looked as if it were imitating an exhibition of paintings. When compared to the Cassandre exhibition, it becomes clear how the display of *Swiss Posters* did not present its exhibits as unique artworks, nor did it try to establish a canon of poster design. Instead, it showed them as part of the popular culture of a far away, overseas country. The press reviews also reported about the exhibition as being a kind of contemporary “period room” giving the visitor “[...] a real feeling of Europe”²²—only lacking the bistro chairs and trees of a garden restaurant.

This way of framing (and the corresponding absence of frames) shows how the institution understood the exhibition: as a contemporary documentation of Swiss, or at least European, poster design. Interestingly (or maybe typically), MoMA’s usual *masterpiece approach* and *personal cult* come to the fore in the press release. Characterized not as simple, anonymous designers, the



Fig. 31

Fig. 32



Fig. 31
Installation view, *100 Jahre Schweizer Grafik/100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design*, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, Feb. 10–Jun. 3, 2012.

Fig. 32
Installation view, *100 Jahre Schweizer Grafik/100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design*, Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, Feb. 10–Jun. 3, 2012.

Fig. 33
Installation view, *The Modern Poster*, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York, Jun. 6–Sep. 6, 1988.

Fig. 34
Installation view, *Swiss Posters*, Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) New York, Jan. 30–Mar. 19, 1951.



Fig. 33

Fig. 34



artists are referred to as “modern Swiss masters of poster design,” and some of them are listed by name: Donald Brun, Hans Erni, Herbert Leupin, Richard Lohse, and Carlo Vivarelli.²³ [Fig. 34]

Issues and potentials

The examples discussed here outline to what extent the use of the frame and the display design can provide information on how organizers classify their exhibits: whether as highlights of design history, as an assessment of a contemporary phenomenon, as artworks, or as insights into the popular culture of a foreign country. However, the discussed examples also raise many questions, and the transfer of graphic design into the exhibition space reveals the spectrum of *problems* that Bil’ak addresses. If an exhibition is regarded as a “strategic system of representations,”²⁴ then its *framework* seems to function as a visual code for value, whether intentionally or not.²⁵ Of course, the comparison to paintings, a recurring topic in the history of graphic design, becomes obvious. Is the decision to show a poster framed or not a question of whether it is considered to be art (or not)?

Peter Bil’ak’s manifesto-like text points out how graphic design in the exhibition space is detached from its former function. Instead of advertising a product or announcing an event, the posters on display suddenly refer to something else. By tracing

the presence or absence of a supposed detail of presentation, the frame, this separation becomes even more apparent. In addition, it reveals how these empty spaces are then filled with new meaning. For example, an illustrative poster from the 1940s in the exhibition *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design* not only stands for a specific stylistic tendency and a chapter of Switzerland’s political history, but also presents the museum’s collection as something valuable and comprehensive. The interplay of exhibition furniture, display architecture, and structure accordingly results in a complex network of meanings that in turn forms a unique framework for exhibits. In addition, the institution itself frames its exhibits in a certain context. As Ferguson writes: “Exhibitions are publicly sanctioned representations of identity, principally, but not exclusively, of the institutions that represent them. They are narratives which use art objects as elements in institutionalized stories that are promoted to an audience.”²⁶ Thus this cascade of framing elements forms its own reference systems, which in turn influence the historiography of the exhibited objects. As early as 1976, the artist Brian O’Doherty observed in his famous essay “Inside the White Cube” how art galleries constructed the history of Modernism.²⁷ In the present essay, I posit that the institutional influence on what we understand as the canon of graphic design should not be underestimated either.

Nevertheless, there are also museums that seem to be aware of the authoritarian gesture of framing, have actively addressed the problem of exhibiting in the past, and remain conscious today of the implications of framing posters. In a conversation with Clémence Imbert, Ada Stroeve, a curator at the Stedelijk Museum Amsterdam, recounts that she did not want to use frames for posters, but was confronted with the need to protect her exhibits. So in the 1970s, Stroeve conceived a system using Plexiglas for the museum, which allowed her to avoid actual frames and thus prevent any comparison between posters and paintings, while still adhering to her institution's guidelines on the protection of its objects. To this day, the Stedelijk often uses a light protective system developed by Carolien Glazenburg in 2000 that tries to evoke the notion of a picture frame.²⁸ However, exactly this need for protection seems to communicate the same value system as before. So, is perhaps the only solution we are left with to consciously address the implications of institutional power within exhibitions themselves?

- 1 Bil'ak 2006: n.p. As Teal Triggs explains, Bil'ak's text draws on Brian O'Doherty's writings problematizing the impact of the seemingly neutral gallery space, the White Cube, on historiography. See Triggs 2016: 18.
- 2 On this matter, see, for example, Ernst 1996: III-135.
- 3 Imbert 2014: 91.
- 4 Imbert 2017: 12.
- 5 See Staniszewski 1998. For a critical anthology about exhibitions, see Greenberg, Ferguson & Nairne 1996. Meanwhile, a whole discourse has developed in various disciplines analyzing how "exhibitions create knowledge about the subjects they seek to represent," fostering a critical attitude towards display design and other institutional *framing devices*. See Moser 2010: 22.
- 6 The latest representative research on the subject has been conducted by Clémence Imbert. In her PhD dissertation, she analyzed graphic design exhibitions at the MoMA in New York, the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam and the CCI/Centre Pompidou in Paris. See Imbert 2017.
- 7 Lzicar & Unger 2016: 250. For another case study on that matter, see also Imbert 2015: n.p.
- 8 However, the present essay is by no means a comprehensive study of the use of frames for poster exhibits and their impact on graphic design history. Rather it wishes to shift the focus on an often neglected and supposed "detail" of the presentation of posters and graphic design in general.
- 9 Press release, *100 Years of Swiss Graphic Design*, Zürcher

- Hochschule der Künste, Archiv ZHdk, GBA-2012-D01-004-003.
- 10 Imbert 2014: 91.
- 11 The frame as a signifier of value in different contexts is explored, for example, in Duro 1996: 44–62.
- 12 The MoMA, for example, used frames from 1976 onwards for their permanent poster displays. Imbert 2017: 410.
- 13 See “History,” in <https://lehni.ch/en/company/history/> (accessed Mar. 23, 2020). About the *Well-Relief*'s relation to Bill's graphic design, see Hollis 2006: 59.
- 14 As current research shows, MoMA's understanding of graphic design decisively influenced design history, and the exhibition display has been identified as an important element that revealed the museum's concepts and also fostered a specific view on graphic design. Imbert 2015: n.p.
- 15 Imbert shows how MoMA's authority regarding the interpretation of what is good and valuable should not be underestimated. See Imbert 2015: n.p.
- 16 Zeller 2017: 5–15.
- 17 Press release, *Swiss Posters*, Curatorial Exhibition Files, Exh. #467.2. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
- 18 This traveling exhibition is the focus of the PhD thesis of the present author.
- 19 Press release, *Swiss Posters*, Curatorial Exhibition Files, Exh. #467.2. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
- 20 Pro Helvetia 1950: n.p.
- 21 See the exhibition *Posters by Cassandre* at the Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1936, as in: www.moma.org/calendar/exhibitions/1805?locale=de (accessed May 23, 2019).
- 22 Press release, *Swiss Posters*, Curatorial Exhibition Files, Exh. #467.2. The Museum of Modern Art Archives, New York.
- 23 Ibid.
- 24 Ferguson 1996: 178.
- 25 Imbert 2017: 416.
- 26 On that matter, see Ferguson 1996: 175.
- 27 “The history of modernism is intimately framed by this space [art gallery]; or rather the history of modern art can be correlated with changes in that space and in the way we see it.” O'Doherty 1986 (1976): 14.
- 28 Imbert 2017: 407.