

# Swiss Made

Constance Delamadeleine

Until the 1950s, Switzerland was internationally respected for its chocolate, cheese, and watches bearing the national designation “Swiss made.” From the 1950s onwards, graphic design came to constitute another source of its worldwide reputation. It has recently been claimed as one of “Switzerland’s most successful cultural exports worldwide” and is a central element in Swiss culture and the national identity of the country.<sup>1</sup> This was confirmed in 2014 as the Swiss Federal Office of Culture nominated “Swiss graphic design and typography” to UNESCO as an Intangible Cultural Heritage.<sup>2</sup> The conceptualization of the relationship between graphic design and Switzerland can be traced back to the 1950s, through the emergence of a national style labeled “Swiss Style.” This label encompasses iconic works produced between the 1950s and 1960s in Switzerland or by Swiss practitioners active abroad.<sup>3</sup> These Swiss productions were international trendsetters that paved the way for worldwide success.

Although the historiography of Swiss graphic design has long discussed the origins and success of this style, the creation of this label and its exploitation remain somewhat obscure. The follow-

ing voices highlight several mediating processes in the history of Swiss graphic design and offer space to lesser-known Swiss and foreign actors involved in the construction and deconstruction of this national label. This oral account tells us about perceptions of the “Swiss Style” and the different meanings ascribed to it, and elucidates the difference between what it meant sixty or seventy years ago, and what it means today.

According to some voices, this national label was exploited as a marker of distinction for Swiss designers working abroad. This was the case with Albert Hollenstein, a lesser known actor in the dominant narratives who founded a large graphic design, typography, and advertising business in Paris (Studio Hollenstein, 1957–1974). The use of “Swiss Style” was first and foremost a commercial argument for Hollenstein, as is stressed by Rudi Meyer in his interview. It was strategically displayed in promotional documents of the Studio to associate its services with the label “Swiss made,” a label developed by the watch industry in the 19th century that purportedly guaranteed quality, formal perfection, and precision.<sup>4</sup> The voices of Hollenstein employees reveal how national identity was a key element in the company culture, both inside and outside the studio itself. According to them, the “Swiss Style” was associated both with graphic design and with an overall attitude. Francine Tourneroché

evokes the way Hollenstein performed his Swissness through different means, while Albert Boton links the graphic design produced at the studio with the “Swiss spirit,” something that was also shared by French designers in the Parisian design community. These voices provide an additional layer to our understanding of the Swiss Style as a national label that was shaped abroad.

Other voices show how the national attribution of this label can in fact be a matter of debate. Fritz Gottschalk describes the Swiss Style as a united community sharing the same “DNA”; in other words, they shared the same vision of and approach to the practice. Despite its national attribution, the interviewees emphasize the international dimension of this community, as it comprised designers of different nationalities. Making Swiss graphic

design does not require a Swiss passport, as they often stress. Armando Milani reminds the reader that the Italian and Dutch designers Massimo Vignelli and Bob Noorda were also part of this community. All in all, the accounts offered here of the lively years of the Swiss Style present a transnational image of Swiss graphic design and typography.

For a new generation of Swiss designers, the label “Swiss graphic design and typography” remains equivalent to the Swiss Style, and they argue that it no longer fully reflects current design activity in Switzerland. Although the official design bodies maintain that this Swiss Style is a traditional part of national cultural identity, their opinion is not fully shared by the contemporary Swiss design community.

1 Museum für Gestaltung 2015.

2 Lzicar & Fornari 2016: 8.

3 Gimmi 2014: 113.

4 Kadelbach n.d.

## Henry de Torrenté

Opening speech for the touring exhibition *The Swiss Poster* held in London, Mar. 23, 1950 (de Torrenté 1950).  
Introductory note by Sara Zeller.

*The Swiss Poster* was a traveling exhibition organized by Pro Helvetia that toured Europe, the USA, and South America from 1950 to 1952. It comprised 126 posters by Swiss graphic designers, plus sixteen informative panels. Along with

similar events organized by Pro Helvetia, this exhibition has to be understood within the context of Switzerland's cultural diplomacy.

HdT The Swiss posters, you will see, are—by law—regimented into a certain size, but this regimentation does, fortunately, not affect either their spirit or their style. In the same way as our narrow frontiers cannot stifle the diversity of Swiss culture, the limitation of space, if anything, rather stimulates the creative talent of the artists. You will find the impressionism of some of the French speaking painters side by side with the sobriety and wit of the school of the lively Rhine-town Bâle, or the influence of colourful peasant art, and the symbolism and even surrealism of the Lucernois Erni. It is indeed not difficult to distinguish in those posters many of the tendencies influencing our modern painting, which, like all Swiss art, turns its back on narrow nationalism and prides itself on welcoming all European cultural influences. Variety, therefore, characterizes the Swiss posters. [Fig. 34]



Fig.34  
Installation view of *The Swiss Poster*, former house of Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli, London, Mar. 23–Apr. 6, 1950, Swiss Federal Archives.

## Albert Boton

Conversation with Constance Delamadeleine, Vernon,  
Sep. 8, 2017.

AB Les autres écoles n'étaient pas des écoles suisses. Lui [Albert Hollenstein], c'était une école suisse. Il voulait enseigner la typographie en générale dans un style donné. À la base, c'était un cours [Cours 19] de toute façon nécessaire. [Fig. 35] Il y avait du monde. J'ai participé à un cours, dessin de lettres. Il y avait des français passionnés par l'esprit suisse. Le Style Suisse a beaucoup attiré de graphistes à Paris. En France c'était inconnu, cette rigueur, cette qualité. Ce style pur et dur de la typographie était très prisé par certains milieux, qui trouvaient le style français ringard. Il y a toujours eu des gens qui critiquaient les Suisses, qui revendiquaient une vision française.

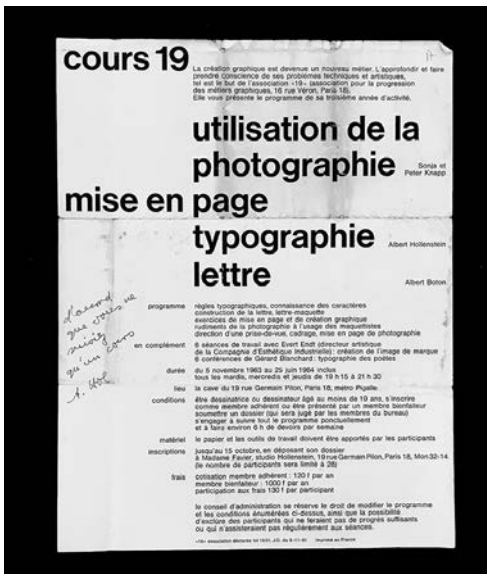


Fig. 35  
Studio Hollenstein, program of  
*Cours 19*, 1963, Albert Hollenstein  
studio, Ville de Paris, Bibliothèque  
Forney.

AB The other schools were not Swiss schools. He [Albert Hollenstein] was a Swiss school. He wanted to teach typography in general in a particular style. Basically, it was a necessary

course [Cours 19] anyway. [Fig. 35] There were a lot of people there. I took part in a course, drawing letters. There were French people who were passionate about the Swiss spirit. The Swiss Style attracted a lot of graphic designers in Paris. In France it was unknown, this rigor, this quality. This pure, hard style of typography was very popular in certain circles who found the French style old-fashioned. There were always people who were critical of the Swiss, they claimed a French vision [...].

### Francine Tourneroche

Conversation with Constance Delamadeleine, Paris,  
Nov. 24, 2017.

FT Un jour, Hollenstein invita tous ses clients à venir manger une énorme fondue qu'il prépara lui-même dans un gigantesque chaudron. C'était encore une façon de montrer son Style Suisse [...]. Albert Hollenstein cultivait son "Style Suisse", il portait des costumes de velours vert olive. Cela ne se faisait pas à Paris. Au studio, il portait le tablier de cuir des typographes, il avait la science de la typographie. Il voulait être le typographe suisse à Paris. Au début il faisait des maquettes, puis il s'est occupé du côté commercial. Il avait le don de recruter des professionnels qualifiés. Il a importé la Haas à Paris et a commencé à composer les noms propres tout en bas de casse. [Fig. 36] C'était nouveau, révolutionnaire, léger, fin et moderne, il est devenu le représentant de la typographie suisse à Paris. Il disait que les Français n'avaient pas le sens de l'écriture typographique, contrairement aux Suisses.

FT One day, Hollenstein invited all his customers to eat a huge fondue that he prepared himself in a gigantic cauldron. It was another way of showing his "Swiss Style" [...]. Albert Hollenstein cultivated his Swiss Style, he wore olive green velvet suits. That was not done in Paris. At the studio, he wore

the leather apron of the typographers; he had the science of typography. He wanted to be the Swiss typographer in Paris. In the beginning he made paste-ups, then he began taking care of the commercial side. He had a talent for recruiting qualified professionals. He imported Haas to Paris and started composing proper names in lowercase type. [Fig. 36] It was new, revolutionary, light, fine, and modern, he became the representative of Swiss typography in Paris. He said that the French did not have a sense of typographic writing, unlike the Swiss.



Fig. 36

Albert Hollenstein and Edouard Hoffmann, ca. 1960, photographer unknown. From left to right: unknown, Albert Hollenstein, and Edouard Hoffmann (owner of the Haas'sche Schriftgiesserei AG Type-foundry). Albert Hollenstein archive, Ville de Paris, Bibliothèque Forney.

Ursula Hiestand

Conversation with Chiara Barbieri and Robert Lzicar,  
Zurich, Dec. 4, 2017.

CB Comment décririez-vous le Style Suisse?

UH Ich denke, [der] Swiss Style war sehr eigenständig und hat in erster Linie Glaubwürdigkeit reflektiert: Einfachheit, Klarheit, Sachlichkeit. Reduzierungen auf das Wesentliche und das Verständliche.

CB How would you describe the “Swiss Style”?

UH I think that the Swiss Style was very original, and primarily reflected credibility: simplicity, clarity, [and] objectivity. A reduction to what is essential and comprehensible.

### Rudi Meyer

Conversation with Constance Delamadeleine, Paris,  
Feb. 5, 2018.

RM Nous étions des acteurs de ce “Style Suisse” et reconnus pour cela, nul besoin de l’affirmer; mais pour Hollenstein c’était l’inverse, il l’utilisait comme un argument commercial.

RM We were actors of this “Swiss Style” and were recognized for that, there was no need to affirm it; but for Hollenstein it was the opposite, he used it as a selling point.

### Armando Milani

Conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Feb. 13, 2018.

AM [Massimo] Vignelli e [Bob] Noorda con la Unimark [International] sono stati tra i primi a portare la grafica svizzera negli Stati Uniti.

AM [Massimo] Vignelli and [Bob] Noorda with Unimark [International] were amongst the first to bring Swiss graphic design to the USA.

### Fritz Gottschalk

Conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Zurich, Mar. 22, 2018.

FG Because we were people with that kind of education, with that kind of an approach, we were during those years like a fraternity. We sought each other out, we admired each other, we helped each other, we recommended each other.

### Fritz Gottschalk

Conversation with Chiara Barbieri, Zurich, Mar. 22, 2018.

FG If you look at [Walter Ballmer's] work and my work there is a kind of common way of attacking a problem, looking for a solution and executing it. And the basic principle or principles is or are what was called Swiss design and then developed into the International Style, which now has been used all over. It's amazing how this has spread. That's something that Switzerland could and should be proud of, but nobody is aware of it. And the trouble nowadays is that people, young people, are not interested in where this International Style comes from. To them it has been here all the time, it just happened and that's just the way you do it. While it was not like that when we got started. And we were also—Walter [Ballmer] in Milan and myself in Canada—we were pioneers for the Swiss Style, by all means. And we stood out, and whenever I went to Toronto, or New York or Chicago and wherever, the only designers I met were people who worked along the same lines. For instance—I don't know—with Giulio



Cittato we got along very well from the first time we saw each other, because we both believed in the same approach. Or [Massimo] Vignelli, he is part of this as well. And then it was taken over by some American and it grew, it grew, and it grew. And now it's omnipresent. [...] All the people we have mentioned so far, from Massimo [Vignelli], to [Armando] Milani, to [Giulio] Cittato, to whatever their names are, we all have more or less the same DNA, if you think about it: one guy is a little bit more like this, while Lora Lamm is more like that, but somehow there is a red thread going through. And the red thread, to my mind, is unfortunately missing in today's world. It's a different world we are now living in. But it does not mean that one should give up striving for excellence in design.

### Evert Endt

Conversation with Constance Delamadeleine, Paris,  
Oct. 4, 2018.

EE Hollenstein a apporté en France des outils, un savoir-faire suisse dans la typographie qu'il a transmis notamment à travers ses cours du soir, dans lesquels j'envoyais mes graphistes français pour se perfectionner et ainsi contribuer au renouveau de l'activité du graphisme en France perceptible avec la génération des années 1970. Le "Style Suisse" au début des années 1960 était porteur mais les années suivantes, ce style un peu sévère fut influencé par la presse américaine (*Esquire*, *Playboy*, *New Yorker*, *Harper's Bazaar*, etc.) et il s'est développé avec un mix de style adapté à merveille par les graphistes suisses à Paris. Du point de vue de cette nouvelle créativité, Knapp et Widmer étaient les principaux vecteurs de ce Style Suisse, réexporté aux USA par une jeune génération telle que Paul Bruehwiler et le Français Paul Goude. Hollenstein n'a pas eu la chance de suivre cette évolution, donc son influence est restée plutôt dans le domaine de la prestation

des services de la typographie [...] Être Suisse était un moteur à l'époque. Le "Style Suisse" était porteur.

EE Hollenstein brought tools to France, a Swiss know-how in typography that he transmitted especially through his evening classes, to which I sent my French graphic designers to improve themselves, which meant they were able to contribute to the renewal of French graphic design that was noticeable with the generation of the 1970s. The Swiss Style in the early 1960s was buoyant but in the following years, this style which was a little severe was influenced by the American press (*Esquire*, *Playboy*, *New Yorker*, *Harper's Bazaar*, etc.) and it developed with a mix of styles that was perfectly adapted by the Swiss graphic designers in Paris. From the perspective of this new creativity, Knapp and Widmer were the main vectors of this Swiss Style. It was even re-exported to the USA by a young generation such as Paul Bruehwiler and the Frenchman Paul Goude. Hollenstein did not have the chance to follow this evolution, so his influence remained in the field of typography [...] Being Swiss was a driving force at the time; the Swiss Style was buoyant.

### Gilles Gavillet

Conversation with Jonas Berthod, Geneva, Jan. 31, 2018.

GG Quand Cornel Windlin commence à travailler pour la Rote Fabrik [en 1994], je remarque ses posters. [...] Il refuse les codes classiques d'une identité visuelle, chaque poster est indépendant l'un de l'autre et emprunte des langages différents. Un poster emprunte le vocabulaire de Barbara Kruger, une autre fois celui du modernisme suisse, une autre fois ça va être produit de manière artisanale ... il aborde la communication d'un espace comme la Rote Fabrik où il y a des concerts non via le musicien mais via une approche assez

autoréférentielle qui offre un commentaire très fort sur la musique. Par exemple, je pense à ce fameux poster avec un Uzi [1994] ... Il y a aussi un re-enactment du modernisme suisse qui est fait via Sheffield, via The Designers' Republic, qui utilisent l'Helvetica pour des couvertures de disques techno. Quand Cornel revient et produit une vraie affiche moderniste locale pour parler d'Autechre, le commentaire est limpide. [...] À cette période se succèdent les ruptures stylistiques et les langages graphiques. D'une part il y avait déjà cette rupture avec le style moderne suisse, puis la vague digitale californienne d'Emigré à Carson, et ce changement fondamental de paradigme technologique qui pousse à explorer de nouvelles possibilités. La génération des Windlin, FUEL, M/M propose un certain retour sur le réel avec une esthétique très directe.

GG When Cornel Windlin started working for the Rote Fabrik [in 1994], I noticed his posters. [...] He rejected the classic codes of a visual identity; each poster was independent of the other and borrowed from different languages. One poster borrowed Barbara Kruger's vocabulary, another the vocabulary of Swiss Modernism, while another was produced in an artisanal way ... he addressed how to communicate a concert space like the Rote Fabrik not through the musicians, but through a rather self-referential approach that offered a very strong commentary on the music. For example, I'm thinking of that famous poster with an Uzi [1994] ... There was also a re-enactment of Swiss Modernism via Sheffield, via The Designers' Republic, which used Helvetica for techno record covers. When Cornel came back and produced a real, local Modernist poster to describe Autechre, the commentary was crystal clear. [...] At this time, stylistic breaks and graphic languages followed one another. On the one hand there was already this break with the Swiss Modern style, then there was the Californian digital wave from Emigré to Carson, and this fundamental change of technological paradigms that

pushed us to explore new possibilities. The generation of Windlin, FUEL, M/M proposed a certain return to reality with a very direct aesthetic.

Hi (Megi Zumstein and Claudio Barandun)

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

JB Why did you choose to work with [Bringolf Irion Vögeli]?

MZ [...] They needed someone, and I thought they made kind of, how would I say, compared to London, hardcore Swiss design [*laughs*], but really nice and taken-care-of projects. They made things really well and nice. [...]

CB But is Bringolf Irion Vögeli really the Swiss way? Would you say that?

MZ I mean, coming back from London it really was ... Not fancy, a bit solid.

CB But also you could say ... [it was] the British way of the Swiss Style. But I don't want to ... It's difficult to say. Because I wouldn't say that they do the Swiss Style. But what is this Swiss Style? How would you define it? [...]

MZ Yeah, maybe the Swiss Style is not the right word. But I thought ... It's really hands-on graphics, just solid graphic design. Not too fancy, not too exaggerated, but still very nicely made.

CB That's all true. But is it the Swiss Style?

MZ By then, for me, compared to London, it was the Swiss Style.

CB But this project, “Swiss Graphic Design and Typography Revisited,” is it related to location—design which is only located in Switzerland? Because I was thinking during this time now, whether we are Swiss designers in [a] “classical” way of understanding [it]. And I would say: no.

MZ I would say yes. [...] I think this term “Swiss graphic design” just changed.

CB But I think this term comes from this era, the 1950s. It’s not only Müller-Brockmann. It’s also Lohse and Bill at the time. They made really great stuff, but ...

MZ That’s true, but if you’re abroad then you still see that, okay, Germans work differently. And it’s not that far away or a different area. But you still notice that this looks more like Swiss design. And not in terms of this 1950s Swiss design.

CB You mean nowadays?

MZ Nowadays. Also if you’re in Holland, for example, [...] you can’t really say why, but it’s a bit louder than in Switzerland, visually. A bit noisier. But also really funny. And they do enjoy what they’re doing a lot. It looks completely different to Berlin, for example. Totally different.

JB And it’s really hard to describe what ...

MZ Yeah. You can’t really say what exactly makes the difference. In Amsterdam there are

loads of good designers, so you see design stuff all over the place, everywhere. I'm quite sure that in Berlin you also have loads of designers, but you just don't see it in the streets in that density. Also, not in this quality.

CB I'm not saying there is no Swiss Style, or there is no Dutch style or German style. I think there is, as you mentioned, a Basel style and a Bern style, but you don't have to be as big. I just said in this classic way of defining Swiss graphic design, I would say we're not Swiss in this tradition. We're not standing in this tradition, we're denying it in a way. [...] it's the way that it is revisited. It becomes some other, more modern way of defining Swiss graphic design. That I wouldn't deny being [a part of]. I mean, we are located in Switzerland, so actually ... We have no choice [since our work is Swiss by definition].