

## Paul Rand: A Brief Biography

PAUL RAND (BORN PERETZ ROSENBAUM, AUGUST 15, 1914 – NOVEMBER 26, 1996) was a well-known American graphic designer, best known for his corporate logo designs. Rand was educated at the Pratt Institute (1929-1932), the Parsons School of Design (1932-1933), and the Art Students League (1933-1934). He was one of the originators of the Swiss Style of graphic design. From 1956 to 1969, and beginning again in 1974, Rand taught design at Yale University in New Haven, Connecticut. Rand was inducted into the New York Art Directors Club Hall of Fame in 1972. He designed many posters and corporate identities, including the logos for IBM, UPS and ABC. Rand died of cancer in 1996.

### Early life and education

Peretz Rosenbaum was born in Brooklyn, New York in 1914. As Orthodox Jewish law forbids the creation of graven images that can be worshiped as idols, Rand's career creating icons venerated in the temple of global capitalism seemed as unlikely as any. It was one that he embraced at a very young age, painting signs for his father's grocery store as well as for school events at P.S. 109. Rand's father did not believe art could provide his son with a sufficient livelihood, and so he required Paul to attend Manhattan's Harren High School while taking night classes at the Pratt Institute, though "neither of these schools offered Rand much stimulation." Despite studying at Pratt and other institutions in the New York area (including Parsons School of Design and the Art Students League), Rand was by-and-large "self-taught as a designer, learning about the works of Cassandre and Moholy-Nagy from European magazines such as [Gebrauchsgraphik]."

### Early career

His career began with humble assignments, starting with a part-time position creating stock images for a syndicate that supplied graphics to various newspapers and magazines. Between his class assignments and his work, Rand was able to amass a fairly large portfolio, largely influenced by the German advertising style Sachplakat (ornamental poster) as well as the works of Gustav Jensen. It was at around this time that he decided to camouflage (and abbreviate) the overtly Jewish identity telegraphed by 'Peretz Rosenbaum,' shortening his forename to 'Paul' and taking 'Rand' from an uncle to form his new surname. Morris Wyszogrod, a friend and associate of Rand, noted that "he figured that 'Paul Rand,' four letters here, four letters there, would create a nice symbol. So he became Paul Rand." Peter Behrens notes the importance of this new title: "Rand's new persona, which served as the brand name for his many accomplishments, was the first corporate identity he created, and it may also eventually prove to be the most enduring." Indeed, Rand was rapidly moving into the forefront of his profession. In his early twenties he was producing work that began to garner international acclaim, notably his designs on the covers of Direction magazine, which Rand produced for no fee in exchange for full artistic freedom. Among the accolades Rand received were those of Moholy-Nagy:

“ Among these young Americans it seems to be that Paul Rand is one of the best and most capable [ . . . ] He is a painter, lecturer, industrial designer, [and] advertising artist who draws his knowledge and creativeness from the resources of this country. He is an idealist and a realist, using the language of the poet and business man. He thinks in terms of need and function. He is able to analyze his problems but his fantasy is boundless. ”

The reputation Rand so rapidly amassed in his prodigious twenties never dissipated; rather, it only managed to increase through the years as the designer's influential works and writings firmly established him as the eminence grise of his profession.



The cover art for Direction magazine proved to be an important step in the development of the “Paul Rand look” that was not as yet fully developed. The December 1940 cover, which uses barbed wire to present the magazine as both a war-torn gift and a crucifix, is indicative of the artistic freedom Rand enjoyed at Direction; in Thoughts on Design Rand notes that it “is significant that the crucifix, aside from its religious implications, is a demonstration of pure plastic form as well . . . a perfect union of the aggressive vertical (male) and the passive horizontal (female).” In ways such as this, Rand was experimenting with the introduction of themes normally found in the “high arts” into his new graphic design, further advancing his life-long goal of bridging the gap between his profession and that of Europe’s modernist masters.

## Corporate identities

Indisputably, Rand’s most widely known contribution to graphic design are his corporate identities, many of which are still in use. IBM, ABC, Cummins Engine, Westinghouse, and UPS, among many others, owe their graphical heritage to him, though UPS recently carried out a controversial update to the classic Rand design. One of his primary strengths, as Maholy-Nagy pointed out, was his ability as a salesman to explain the needs his identities would address for the corporation. According to graphic designer Louis Danziger:

“ He almost singlehandedly convinced business that design was an effective tool. [ . . . ] Anyone designing in the 1950s and 1960s owed much to Rand, who largely made it possible for us to work. He more than anyone else made the profession reputable. We went from being commercial artists to being graphic designers largely on his merits. ”

Rand’s defining corporate identity was his IBM logo in 1956, which as Mark Favermann notes “was not just an identity but a basic design philosophy that permeated corporate consciousness and public awareness.” The logo was modified by Rand in 1960, and the striped logo in 1972. Rand also designed packaging and marketing materials for IBM from the early 1970s until the early 1980s, including the well known Eye-Bee-M poster. Ford appointed Rand in the 1960s to redesign their corporate logo, but afterwards chose not to use his modernized design.

Although his logos may be interpreted as simplistic, Rand was quick to point out in A Designer’s Art that “ideas do not need to be esoteric to be original or exciting.” His American Broadcasting Company trademark, created in 1962, epitomizes that ideal of minimalism while proving Rand’s point that a logo “cannot survive unless it is designed with the utmost simplicity and restraint.” Rand remained vital as he aged, continuing to produce important corporate identities into the eighties and nineties with a rumored \$100,000 price per single solution. The most notable of his later works was his collaboration with Steve Jobs for the NeXT Computer corporate identity; Rand’s simplistic black box breaks the company name into two lines, producing a visual harmony that endeared the logogram to Jobs. If ever there was a pleased client, it was indeed Steve Jobs: just prior to Rand’s death in 1996, his former client labeled him, simply, “the greatest living graphic designer.”

## Influences and other works

### Development of theory

Though Rand was a recluse in his creative process, doing the vast majority of the design load despite having a large staff at varying points in his career, he was very interested in producing books of theory to illuminate his philosophies. Maholy-Nagy may have incited Rand’s zeal for knowledge when he asked his colleague if he read art criticism at their first meeting. Rand said no, prompting Moholy-Nagy to reply “Pity.” Heller elaborates on this meeting’s impact, noting that, “from that moment on, Rand devoured books by the leading philosophers on art, including Roger Fry, Alfred North Whitehead, and John Dewey.” These theoreticians would have a lasting impression on Rand’s work; in a 1995 interview with Michael Kroeger discussing, among other topics, the importance of Dewey’s Art as Experience, Rand elaborates on Dewey’s appeal:

“ [ . . . Art as Experience] deals with everything—there is no subject he does not deal with. That is why it will take you one hundred years to read this book. Even today’s philosophers talk about it[.] [E]very time you open this book you find good things. I mean the philosophers say this, not just me. You read this, then when you open this up next year, that you read something new. ”

As is obvious, Dewey is an important source for Rand’s underlying sentiment in graphic design; on page one of Rand’s groundbreaking *Thoughts on Design*, the author begins drawing lines from Dewey’s philosophy to the need for “functional-aesthetic perfection” in modern art. Among the ideas Rand pushed in *Thoughts on Design* was the practice of creating graphic works capable of retaining their recognizable quality even after being blurred or mutilated, a test Rand routinely performed on his corporate identities.

### Criticism

Despite the prestige graphic designers place on his first book, subsequent works, notably *From Lascaux to Brooklyn* (1996), earned Rand accusations of being “reactionary and hostile to new ideas about design.” Heller defends Rand’s later ideas, calling the designer “an enemy of mediocrity, a radical modernist” while Mark Favermann considers the period one of “a reactionary, angry old man.” Regardless of this dispute, Rand’s contribution to modern graphic design theory in total is widely considered intrinsic to the profession’s development.

### Modernist influences

Undoubtedly, the core ideology that drove Rand’s career, and hence his lasting influence, was the modernist philosophy he so revered. He celebrated the works of artists from Paul Cezanne to Jan Tschichold, and constantly attempted to draw the connections between their creative output and significant applications in graphic design. In *A Designer’s Art* Rand clearly demonstrates his appreciation for the underlying connections:

“ From Impressionism to Pop Art, the commonplace and even the comic strip have become ingredients for the artist’s caldron. What Cezanne did with apples, Picasso with guitars, Leger with machines, Schwitters with rubbish, and Duchamp with urinals makes it clear that revelation does not depend upon grandiose concepts. The problem of the artist is to defamiliarize the ordinary. ”

This idea of “defamiliarizing the ordinary” played an important part in Rand’s design choices. Working with manufacturers provided him the challenge of utilizing his corporate identities to create “lively and original” packaging for mundane items, such as light bulbs for Westinghouse.

---

Paul Rand. (2007, April 11). In [Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia](#).

✳ [Return to Top](#)