



AIGA DESIGN LEGENDS SPEECH

Part of an AIGA Presentation in NY

So many legends, so little time. Rick Grefe has asked me to speak briefly on the value of continuity in our profession. Of course one could take that charge to mean the short history of design, perhaps beginning with Peter Behrens, who is credited with invention of identity programs and coordinating graphic and industrial design activities. Or one might consider our history as beginning with the first cave paintings at the dawn of history.

I prefer the longer view that relates our activity to the fundamental needs of the human species. A species whose most distinctive characteristic is making things for a purpose, which turns out to be the actual description of what we do.

Any grandiosity or self-importance that this cosmic description of our activity creates in us will be quickly erased by the discovery that in a typical design class only 30% of the students will have any idea who Paul Rand is and will not be able to identify Eric Nitsche or Lester Beall, let alone Joseph Hoffman, Edward Penfield or Gustav Jensen. Incidentally, Jensen was a mentor to Paul Rand and, Cassandre aside, perhaps the designer he most admired, but I would not be at all surprised if most of us here tonight have never heard of him. – So much for understanding our own history. I have always believed that there is a psychological and ethical difference between those who make things and those who control things. If form making is intrinsic to human beings and has a social benefit, then we can think of the “good” in good design having more than a stylistic meaning. Linking beauty and purpose can create a sense of communal agreement that helps diminish the sense of disorder and incoherence that life creates.

The part of design that is involved in fashion and marketing has the least need to examine and understand our history. Examining what has happened over twenty years seems to provide enough information to meet professional requirements, but if our field aspires to be significant and worthy of respect, it must stand for something beyond salesmanship. Being a legend is an accomplishment that is hard won and sadly ephemeral, but being part of human kind’s desire to make useful and beautiful things links us to a glorious history.

Two weeks ago I developed a sudden, painful wrist condition. I went to a fancy hand



doctor who told me I probably had a “gouty” incident. That’s not “Gaudi” the great Barcelonian designer and architect. It’s gout, as in those 18th century engravings of rich, fat men with inflamed big toes. My wrist is fine but while I was in the doctor’s office I noticed a document on his wall called “What A Surgeon Ought to Be” written in the 14th century. I’ve changed a word or two but it seems like good advice for our profession.

What the Designer Ought to Be: Let the designer be bold in all sure things, and fearful in dangerous things; let him avoid all faulty treatments and practices. He ought to be gracious to the client, considerate to his associates, cautious in his prognostications. Let him be modest, dignified, gentle, pitiful, and merciful; not covetous nor an extortionist of money; but rather let his reward be according to his work, to the means of the client, to the quality of the issue, and to his own dignity.