

The Accidental Minimalist

Graphic design in the West is a relative latecomer to the creative arts. In Japan, however it had flourished for hundreds of years in woodblock prints. Yet it took one fortuitous event to bring it all together. *Ngjom* looks back on a failed poet who became the father of modern graphic design



It is taken for granted today that effective visual communication need only have a minimal, clever visual to get its message across. Less is more. And least most of all. But it wasn't always so. That it transpired was thanks in large part to Lucien Bernhard (1893–1972).

An exhibition of Bernhard's work at the Universiti Sains Malaysia (USM) Penang in December 2006, organized by the Goethe Institute and USM, paid tribute to Bernhard's talent and vision.



Clockwise from left: *Priester* poster; (Inset) Lucien Bernhard; Hishikawa Moronobo, *Young Man with Two Courtesans* (1682); Katshushiko Hokusai, *South Wind, Clear Dawn* (1832); Beardsley's illustration for Oscar Wilde's *Salome* (1894); Bernhard's *Stiller* (1909)

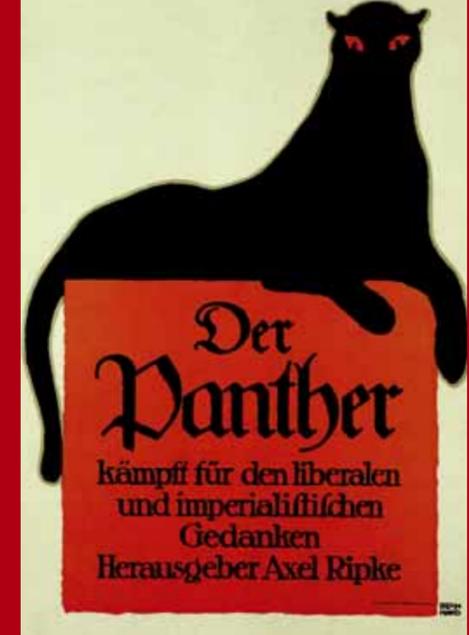
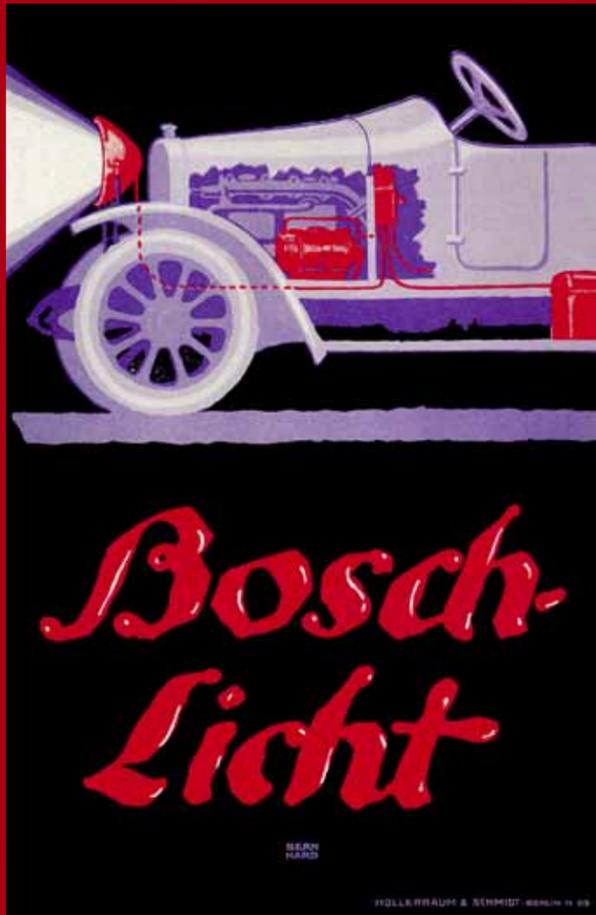


Minimalism is today a catch phrase that slips off too easily from the lips of designers in bar talk and academic fringes. In architecture, the trend is often assumed to have begun with Mies van der Rohe's work, particularly his transparent buildings like the glass skyscrapers, the Barcelona Pavilion and Farnsworth House. The ever-popular Barcelona Chair reminds us of this assumed legacy. Mies also said that less is more; but did the aesthetics of minimalism really begin with him?

Scholars postulate that Japanese ukiyo-e (translation: pictures of the floating world) prints, which were popular in Europe and North America in the late 19th century, had something to do with the change of aesthetic taste. The austere flat graphics of the woodblock prints seemed more appropriate to an industrialized culture than the floral and usually busy aesthetics prevalent in European and American graphics. Ukiyo-e prints were simple yet beautiful: they seemed a product of an advanced culture with heightened aesthetic sentiments.

What was different about *ukiyo-e* prints was their use of suggestive graphic interpretations to capture the essence of the subject rather than detailed depiction, as was the case with Western illustration. However the transition from *ukiyo-e* to minimalist aesthetics was a convoluted and gradual one. Stylized distortion of visual representations first appeared with English Art Nouveau in the late 19th century, particularly with the work of Aubrey Beardsley, while elsewhere in print illustration, realistic representation was still the accepted norm. Walter Crane, a contemporary critic, complained that Beardsley had mixed the medieval spirit with a weird "Japanese-like spirit of devilry and the grotesque," which to Crane seemed to "fit only in the opium den." Although Beardsley lived a short life, expiring at the age of 26, his influence was to spread quickly throughout Europe and North America.

Although stunning Art Nouveau illustration developed in France, America, Belgium and Germany during this period, it was the early 20th century influences of Cubism and Constructivism that influenced the aesthetics of print communication, which still prevails today, particularly with advertising posters. With the emergence of Modernism in the 20th century, print illustrations, together with painting, sculpture and architecture began to have a critical, questioning edge about them. Direct and detailed representation was just not clever enough. Communication had to be persuasive rather than pretty. Posters began to



Clockwise from far left: Bernhard's *Bosch Licht*; Bernhard's *Wybert* (1921); Bernhard's *Der Panther* (1914); Bernhard's *Manoli Dandy* (1914); Octagon Creative's Managing Director Melisa Wong with En. Hasnul Jamal Saldon (center), Director of Museum and Gallery USM, Penang, and Dr. Volker Wolf, Director of Goethe Institute; Bernhard's *Manoli Abbas Extra Fein* (1912); Bernhard's *Manoli Zoo* (1913)

take on expressive, symbolic images and were organized in a manner that was effective rather than beautiful for its own sake. The result was a distillation of energy, capturing the attention and imagination of the observer.

Around this time a flat-color, reductive design school emerged in Germany known as "Plakatstil" or poster style. Lucien Bernhard was then supporting himself (unsuccessfully) as a poet in Berlin, when he saw an advertisement for a poster contest sponsored by Priester matches. Bernhard, who had excelled in art in school, decided to enter the contest. His first design showed a round table with a checked tablecloth, with an ashtray holding a lighted cigar, and a box of matches. He thought at first that the image was too bare, so he painted scantily clad dancing girls in the background.

Later, during the course of the day, he decided that the image had become too complex and painted out the dancing girls. And when a friend dropped by and asked whether it was a

poster for a cigar, Bernhard decided to paint out the cigar. Without the dancing girls and the cigar, the tablecloth and the ashtray stood out too prominently, so Bernhard painted them out as well. What was left was a pair of matches on the bare table. He then hastily painted the word *Priester* in blue above the pair of matches, with nothing else to show except a dark background. He wrapped the poster and sent it off just in time to have it postmarked before midnight to beat the deadline.

Bernhard's submission was at first rejected by the jury, but was rescued from the trashcan by a tardy juror, Ernst Growald, who convinced the other jurors of the merit of Bernhard's image. The poster became the now famous *Priester* poster, which reduced communication to two matches and a word. The message was effective and powerful, minus all the peripheral frills and decoration.

Bernhard was to repeat the formula time and again in the next two decades, designing over 300 packages and posters for dozens of products, and becoming a highly successful illustrator in the process. The poster for *Stiller shoes* (1912), which uses flat, austere graphics, exemplified the style of Bernhard's poster illustrations.

The accidental first poster rescued from the trashcan had gone on to change advertising and graphic design. Visual communication would never be the same again.

The Penang exhibition once more demonstrated the timelessness and effectiveness of this all-but-forgotten master, and his reductive, minimalist visuals, which almost single-handedly ushered in the modern age of graphic design. 

