1.6: International Typographic Style

International Typographic Style (ITS), also known as the Swiss Style, emerged in Switzerland and Germany in the 1950s. ITS became known for design that emphasized objective clarity through the use of compositional grids and sans serif typography as the primary design material (or element).

Guiding Principles

ITS was built on the shoulders of the ‘less is more’ ideal of the German Werkbund and the Bauhaus school. But its pioneers pursued ideologies that had much more depth and subtlety. Ernst Keller, whose work in design spanned over four decades, brought an approach to problem solving that was unique. His contribution to design was in defining the problem. For Keller, the solution to a design problem rested in its content. Content-driven design is now a standard practice. Max Bill, another pioneer, brought a purist approach to design that he had been developing since the 1930s. He was instrumental in forming Germany’s Ulm School of Design, famous for its ITS approach. The school introduced Greek rhetorical devices to amplify concept generation and produce greater conceptual work, while the study of semiotics (creating and understanding symbols and the study of sending and receiving visual messages) allowed its design students to understand the parameters of communication in a more scientific and studied way. At this time, there was also a greater interest in visual complexity. Max Huber, a designer known for his excellent manipulation of presses and inks, layered intense colours and composed chaotic compositions while maintaining harmony through the use of complex grids that structured and unified the elements. He was one of many designers who began using grids in strategic ways. ITS design is now known for its use of anchored elements within a mathematical grid. A grid is the “most legible and harmonious means for structuring information” (Meggs & Purvis, 2011, p. 355). Visual composition changed in many ways due to the grid. Design was already moving toward asymmetrical compositions, but now even the design of text blocks changed — from justified text to aligned flush left, ragged right. Fonts chosen for the text changed from serif fonts to sans serif, a type style believed to “express the spirit of a more progressive age” by early designers in the
movement. Sans-serif typefaces like Helvetica, Univers, and Akzidenz Grotesk were favoured because they reflected the ideals of a progressive culture more than traditional serif fonts like Times or Garamond. ITS balanced the stabilizing visual qualities of cleanliness, readability, and objectivity with the dynamic use of negative space, asymmetrical composition, and full background photography.

**Photography**

ITS did not use illustrations and drawings because of their inherent subjectivity. Photography was preferred because of its objective qualities, and was heavily used to balance and organically complement the typography and its structured organizational grid. Often the photograph sat in the background with the type designed to sit within it; the two composed to strengthen each other to create a cohesive whole. ITS refined the presentation of information to allow the content to be understood clearly and cleanly, without persuading influences of any kind. A strong focus on order and clarity was desirable as design was seen to be a “socially useful and important activity … the designers define their roles not as artists but as objective conduits for spreading important information between components of society” (Meggs & Purvis, 2011, p. 355).

Josef Müller-Brockmann, another one of its pioneers, “sought an absolute and universal form of graphic expression through objective and impersonal presentation, communicating to the audience without the interference of the designer’s subjective feelings or propagandistic techniques of persuasion” (Schneider, 2011). Müller-Brockmann’s posters and design works feature large photographs as objective symbols meant to convey his ideas in particularly clear and powerful ways.

After World War II, international trade began to increase and relations between countries grew steadily stronger. Typography and design were crucial to helping these relationships progress — multiple languages had to be factored into a design. While clarity, objectivity, region-less glyphs, and symbols were essential to communication between international partners, ITS found its niche in this communicative climate and expanded beyond Switzerland, to America.

ITS is still very popular and commonly used for its clarity and functionality. However, there is a fine line between clean and simple, and simply boring. As the style became universal, its visual language became less innovative and was perceived to be too restrictive. Designers wanted the freedom to be expressive, and the culture itself was moving from cultural idealism to celebratory consumerism. ITS can be a very successful design strategy to adopt if there is a strong concept binding all of the design components together, or when there is a vast amount of complexity in the content and a visual hierarchy is needed to calm the design to make it accessible.