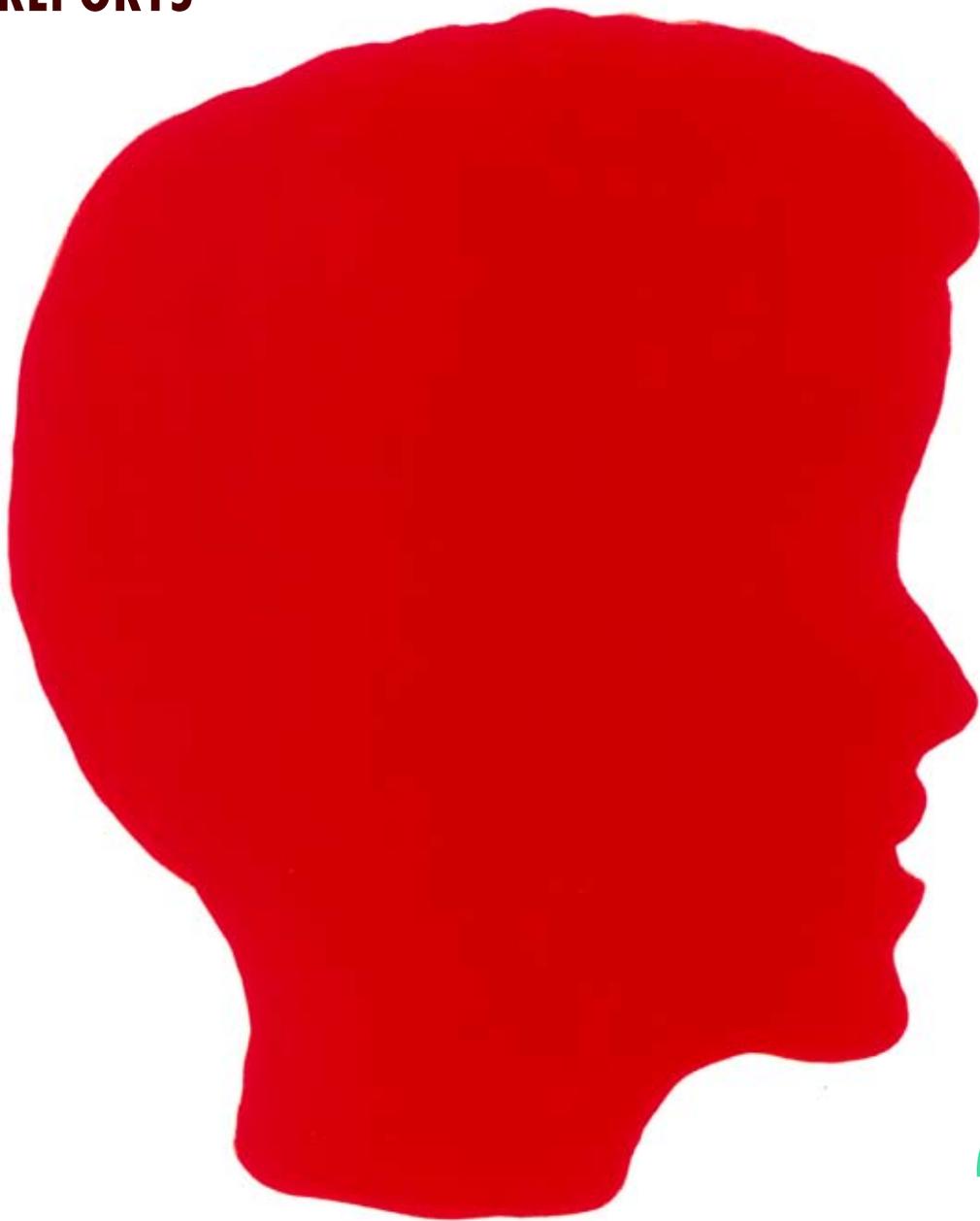


# GRAPHICS

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# AN OCEAN APART?

*How good are American annual reports? How do the best US 'annuals' compare to Britain's most creative output? Michael Evamy examines reports from both sides of the Atlantic.*



“Ours is better, right?” Mark Schwartz is not one of to hide his light under a bushel when comparing British and American annual report design. The first words on the subject from this award winning designer have the same swagger about them as many of the very best examples of US ‘annuals’. You just have to agree with him. American bad design is just as bad as British bad design in this particular field of endeavor, but take a look at the award-winning annual reports from both sides of the Atlantic and US designers have the edge.

The US business community is conditioned to a high standard of visual communication. The tradition of for innovation in business publications goes back to the mid-1950’s, when Paul Rand, with landmark work for IBM, and pioneers such as Herbert Matter (for Knoll and the Hew Haven Railroad) and Robert Runyan (for Litton Industries) redefined the genre. They took what had been cast as a sober financial document and turned into a powerful communications tool. In parallel, Fortune magazine under art director Will Burtin, treated the business community to new levels of graphic invention, having commissioned covers from artists such as Fernand Leger and Diego Rivera in the thirties, and going on to develop constantly fresh and engaging ways of presenting dry data and commercial information in charts and diagrams.

Dating from the same period is the Mead Show, the premier arena for annual report design. Today, selection for the show is one of the world’s most sought after design accolades. The Mead Corporation, a paper manufacturer, awards no first prizes or gold medals, but sets a quality threshold for entrants to aim for. Anything with its head above that high-water mark gets into Mead’s annual traveling exhibition and its catalogue. In 1994, the company held its first Annual Report Conference, dedicated to ‘strengthen the process through which great annuals are produced’.

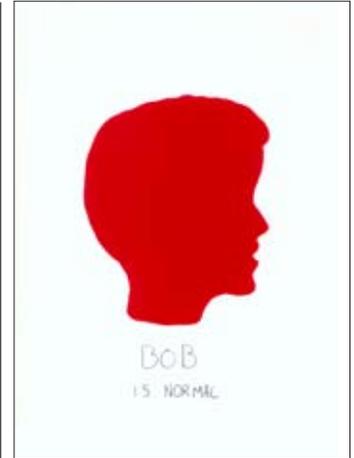
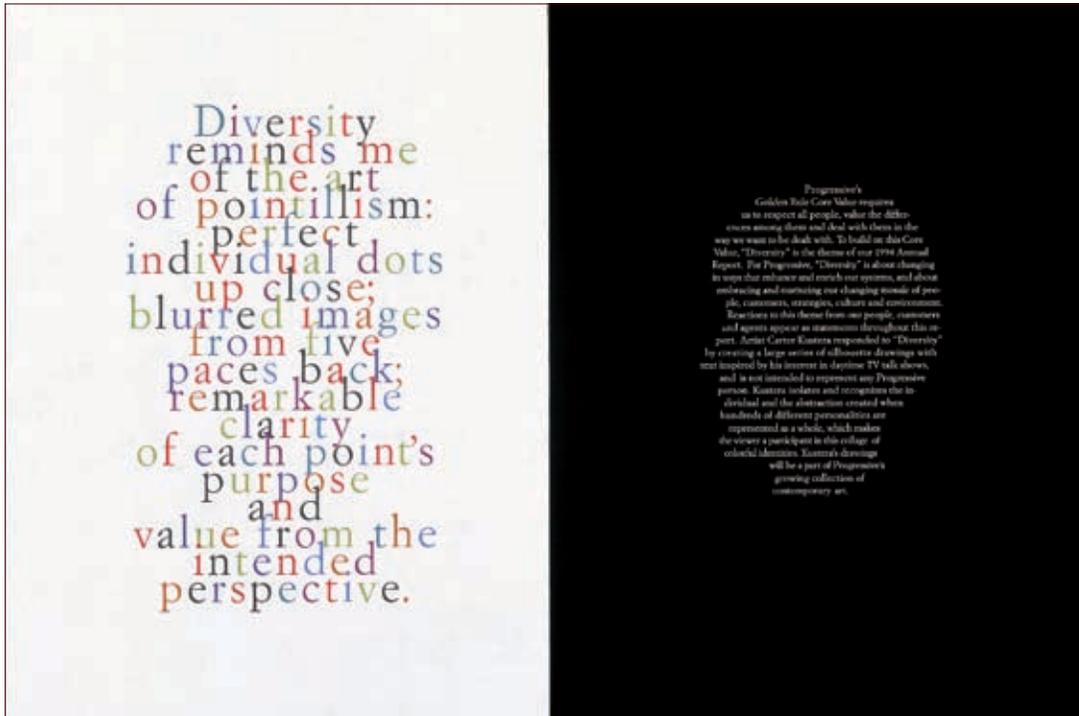
The recognition for what is recognized in the US as a highly specialist skill encourages adventurism in design. Perhaps one or two of the finalists could be accused of designing purely to get into the show, or to impress their peers. But only one or two. The majority would impress all their audiences: financiers, institutions, corporate rivals, shareholders, journalists, the CEO’s family, idle bystanders in business libraries... What distinguishes the very best in the genre, what makes them communicate, is the unity between idea and execution. It is something British designers recognize, but which they are seldom in a position to realize.

Nick Austin a founder of corporate literature specialists Stocks Austin Sice, is one of the few British designers to have made it into the Mead Show (while he

was Michael Peters). SAS has assembled a collection of the finest of Mead finalists, and Austin is planning a fact-finding trip to the US to pinpoint key differences in the management of the design process. There, he will test his hunch that status of designers is more widely seen as one of consultant, rather than supplier. In Britain the majority of clients for annual reports are company secretaries, who treat it as an annual chore, rather than an opportunity. In the US corporations appear more fastidious about getting the product right, and will make sacrifices that British design consultants dare not ask of their customers. “We’ve done a few shoots in the States for annual reports,” says Austin, “including one for Blue Circle last year. We had to organize tugs and barges to all be in the right place at the right time, with the photographer on board. They were brilliant, really enthusiastic. They loved getting involved. Here it would be,” Austin sucks through his teeth— “Ooh well, you can only have the boat for half an hour...”

Is Austin a classic victim of the grass-is-always-greener syndrome? Apparently not. According to Mark Geer of Geer Design in Houston, a multiple Mead finalist with clients such as South Texas College of Law and Houston Public Television, designers do get the ear of senior staff and thereby win more leverage from clients. “It’s always imperative for me that I deal with the

*The images on this page are taken from Nesnadny + Schwartz’s report for the Progressive Corporation. The report won best of show in this year’s Mead show.*



senior decision-maker. I don't rate myself as a great salesperson but I feel like I'm going to do a much better job than someone in middle management whose primary objective is not to get fired."

The wisdom among US designers is that the simpler the central theme of the report the more latitude it allows for graphic expression. "If what you do seems like a logical manifestation of an idea, they don't focus on the specifics," says Geer.

The series of reports by Nesnadny & Schwartz of Cleveland for the Progressive Corporation - an insurance company - demonstrate precisely the craft of isolating a uniqueness in the clients' business, often in a single word, and then communicating it in uncompromising but totally focused fashion. The theme of the latest edition is 'diversity', supporting Progressive's 'ongoing efforts to embrace... the ever-changing collage of its people, customers, strategies, ideas, future and culture'. New York artist Carter Kustera responded with dozens of colorful silhouettes of staff and customers, with bizarre captions such as daytime TV Queen Ricki Lake might use to describe her guests. The report beat 1000 entries to win Best of Show in the Annual Report 100 Awards in July.

"We don't work with commercial photographers," announces Schwartz with considerable pride. "We don't work with commercial illustrators. Ever. On

Progressive we work with fine artists working in many different media who have no commercial vocabulary, and as such we look at them as collaborators, not as somebody to art direct. We give them a huge amount of lead time."

Where British clients want to express permanence and stability in their literature, US corporations, perhaps because they are not burdened by having to satisfy the visual traditions of a centuries old financial district, are more contemporary and irreverent in their depiction of themselves. Take the award winning 1993 annual report of a British insurance company, the Prudential, whose title, 'Planning for the Future' was expressed on the cover by a photograph of a neat stack of previous years' annual reports.

"The annual report by definition is about old news," says Schwartz. "There's nothing exciting about old news. What's exciting is where you're going, not where you've been. We try to emphasize to our clients that their annual is to look forward, not backwards. There's the obligatory financial statement for the analysts, the shareholders, for the securities agencies and for the government. But the opportunity exists at the front of the book. What are you going to say? Who are you going to be? What do you want to be?"

Where, in the US, the annual report follows editorial rules - varying the pace, entertaining, informing - the British

format is formulaic: chairman's statement and photograph, managing director's statement, financial director's statement and photograph etc. The language is utterly predictable. The sign off from the CEO of Progressive in 1994 was 'Joy, love and peace...Peter Lewis'. Squirm-inducing it may be, but it indicates how out-of-touch British executives are in their Management Today-style gritty portrait. Schwartz: "My question every time is, 'Who cares?' Is there really a shareholder, is there really an analyst out there who is going to make a decision to invest in a company based on bad information. The people in the report will look great to their friends or spouse, but are they producing an annual report for an audience of twenty five? Who cares what they look like? It's a waste of space."