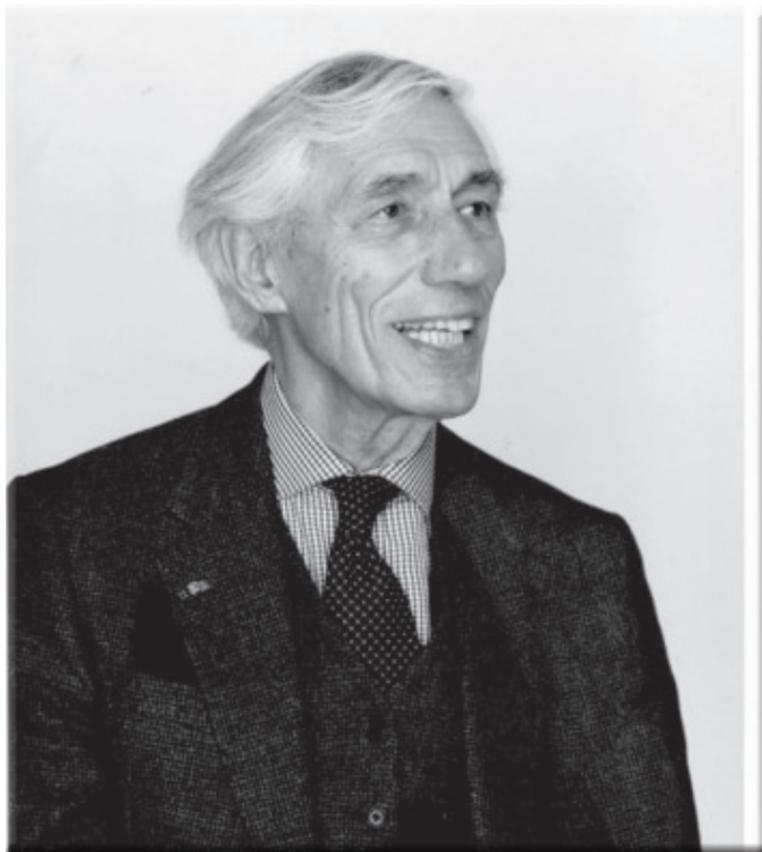


Total Designer

Interview by
Stephanie Orma

Must See Exhibit

Exhibition Wim Crouwel: A Graphic Odyssey
Don't just look at Wim below, go see his exhibit through July 3 at the Design Museum (designmuseum.org) in London.



On the occasion of a new retrospective of his work, the legendary Wim Crouwel reflects on his six-decade career.

Wim Crouwel is one of those hardy souls seemingly immune to self-doubt. That's easy enough now, with Crouwel's place as one of graphic design's most influential practitioners secure. But his groundbreaking work has not always been universally admired, and in the 1970s it elicited strong criticism for being "too modern." Instead of faltering, however, Crouwel's belief in his ideas and aesthetics only grew stronger. His highly structured approach to design and typography captured the essence of the emerging computer age, bringing a new modernity to catalogs, posters, stamps, and even the phone book. This spring, the grid-loving Dutch legend is being celebrated with major retrospective at the Design Museum, in London. The show highlights such career milestones as his work for the multidisciplinary studio Total Design (where he was a founding partner), his instantly recognizable visual communications

for Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum, his type-driven prints and poster, and his lesser-known three-dimensional exhibition designs. Shortly before the retrospective opened, the writer and book designer Stephanie Orma spoke to Crouwel about his influences, his thoughts on typography in the digital age, and his advice for the next generation of graphic designers.

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Finding His Voice

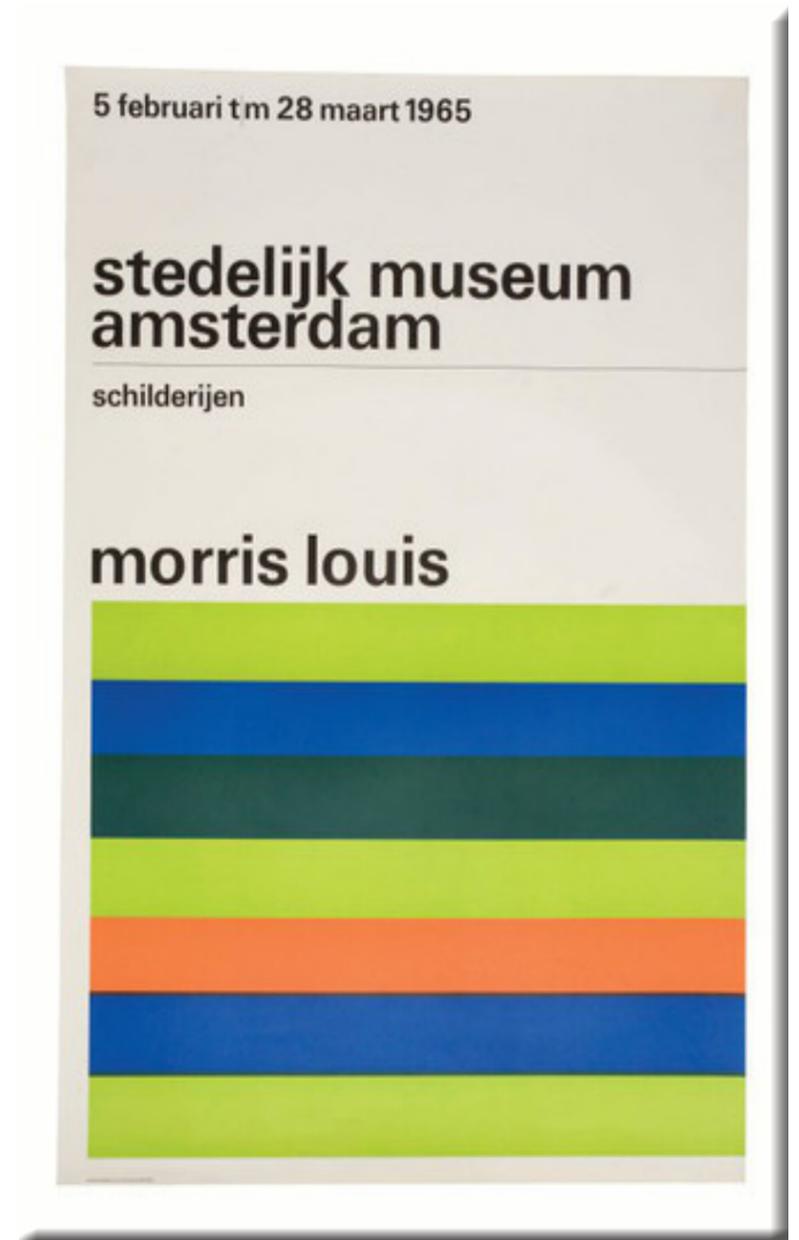
Q: Congratulations on your retrospective. Now that you have this opportunity to look back over your career, is there particular work you're most proud of?

A: I must honestly say, I'm most proud of the work for the Stedelijk Museum, in Amsterdam. They were a great client and allowed me all the freedom to take chances. In that body of work, one can see my development most clearly. In the 1950s, I struggled to find my own way. But in the '60's, 70's and 80s, I really found and developed my design voice. I became clear on what typography and typefaces I should use, whether I should work within a grid or without, et cetera. I never repeated the work of the artists in the show or the direction of the exhibition. Rather, I always tried to express the ideas through my type and poster designs. I'm very proud of that selection of work, which consists mainly of the posters and catalogs I created for the museum up until 1985.

Current Work

Q: I understand you're still practicing as a designer. What are you working on these days?

A: I'm now 82 and still practicing, although not as much as I used to. I'm currently working



on an stallation design for the Amsterdam Historical Museum. They're doing a new gallery installation on 17th-century paintings, so I'm doing the interior design for the show. And I'll be doing three or four more gallery designs for them soon. I also just finished designing a book for Phaidon on Gerrit Reitveld, one of the most famous architects in Holland from the Style (De Stijl) movement.

Sometimes I think I want to stop designing-but I never can. I discovered the computer late in my life, and it's a wonder machine, so I can do my work much quicker now.

Stedelijk Museum poster designed by Wim Crouwel.



Recent Book
Design from
Wim Crowel.

Influence of Computers

Q: What do you think about the computer's influence on typographic design?

A: In 1967, I designed the typeface new Alphabet, which gave typographic erection to the first generation of computers and digital typesetters. But computers have developed so much that New Alphabet makes no sense anymore--it's now an antique thing. I'm very jealous of young designers who can now do everything on the computer today with all their programs. On the other hand, the computer makes it much more difficult for them to find their own way, stand out amend other designers, and create recognizable work. In my time, it was much easier to differentiate from other designers, since our possibilities were limited. Within those limitations you could be quite strong.

Recognition

Q: So you think a designer's work should be recognizable? You've said in the past that you never wanted people to look at your work and think of you.

A: I'm conflicted on this. I love work you can spot from a distance as coming from a particular designer. At the same time, I think the designer should never show himself too much. He should be behind the work he is crating because the message is number one. But as I said, I'm double about this because my work is sometimes very recognizable and sometimes may even stand in the way of communication.

Advice

Q: What about advice--any words of wisdom for the next generation?

A: Keep your radars turning so that you pick up on everything that's happening in the world of design, and then find out what interests you most. Then try to find out how you should do it yourself. Developing your personality is a very important thing in design. As long as I've been a teacher at universities and art schools, I've always encouraged my students to follow their own hearts--but be very clear and sure that it's the part you want to follow.

Likewise, I've always told my students they should find out themselves if there's a difference between art and design. I've seen so many graphic-designer colleagues who really want to be artists, and often they're very unhappy. They feel they're neither good designers nor good artists. So I think if you want to be happy in your life, you should differentiate and find your way. Don't divide your time between the very difficult field of art and the very difficult field of design.

Transition to Profession

Q: You attended art school yourself, in the Netherlands. How did you get from there to design?

A: When I started art school in the '40s, it was a very general art education with painting, sculpture, and decorative arts--very old-fashioned. When I finished school, I didn't know

what to do, so I started painting--primarily because I was taught as a painter. Then I had to go into the military service for two years, and I couldn't do anything but just think about what I wanted to do in my life. After, I got a job for an exhibition company in Amsterdam. I had never designed any exhibitions in my life. But within a year or two at the company, I learned what it was to make exhibitions. I also found out I didn't know anything about typography. So I went to evening classes at the Amsterdam art school (now Gerrit Reitvelt Academie) and studied typography. Those years were very important--it was through those classes and through looking around that I gathered my knowledge about typography and design.

Profound Influence

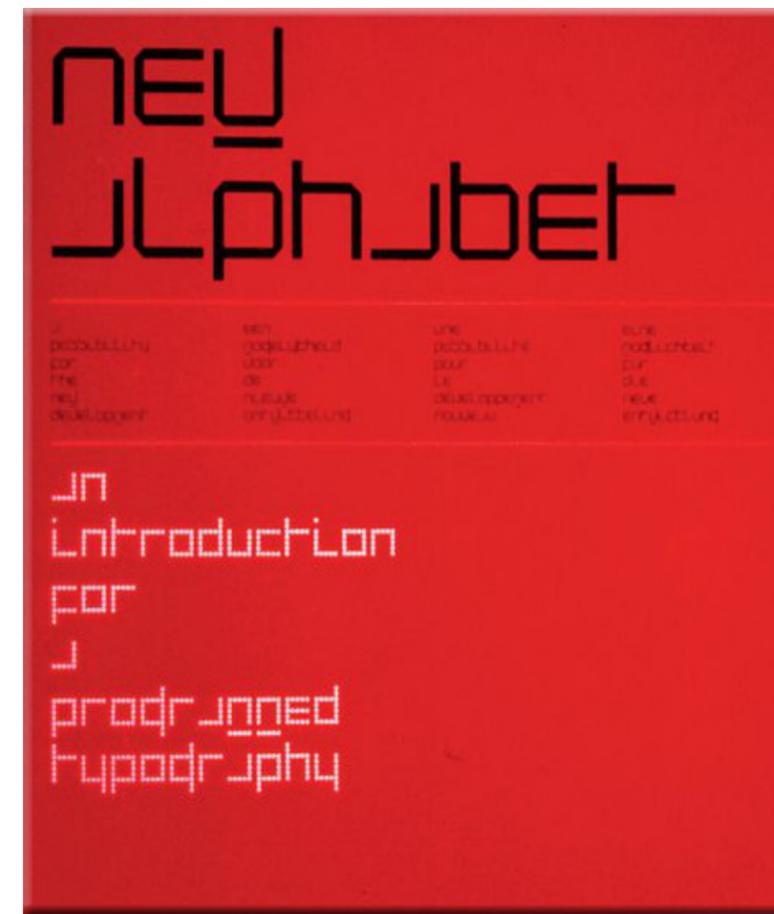
Q: What or who has had the most profound influence on your work as a designer?

A: My work has been influenced more by architecture than my anything else. I had an interest in it right from my childhood, and I was so lucky that my art school was one of the first modernist buildings in Holland. That's



Top:
Wim Crowel designed the New Alphabet typeface in 1967.

Bottom:
Museum Fodor poster designed by Wim Crowel.



also why I've been interested in creating three-dimensional work throughout my career, I think. I've always said that I want to be an architect when I come back on this earth.

Orma, Stephanie. "Total Designer." Metropolis Magazine. Volume 30 Number 10. New York, NY: Bellerophon Publications Inc. May 2011, Pages 48-50.