

Modern Magazine Design



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A neat history of regular interval publishing., April 18, 2004

By Robin Benson - See all my reviews

(REAL NAME)

I got this wonderful book in 1992 and I've recently re-read it and I still think it is the best survey of magazine design. Magazines (and newspapers) are rather unique in their design because the words and the visuals are so tightly connected. Other areas of print design can be taught in design schools but to adequately cover publication design schools would have to employ sub-editors and other wordsmiths, not a very practical solution! Bill Owen's book is not a how-to manual but a good solid history in words and thankfully plenty of covers and spreads.

This design history starts in the early years of the last century but to my mind the story really comes alive in America during the Thirties and Forties. Great titles like Fortune, Harper's Bazaar, Glamour, Vanity Fair and others had publishers who realised the importance of strong visuals and having a good Art Editor. During the Fifties and Sixties a whole raft of talent was creating stunning looking magazines. My favorites were Otto Storch on McCalls (the things he could do with Baskerville Old Face were just amazing) Herb Lubalin and his rather short run on the Saturday Evening Post in 1961 and Willi Fleckhaus on Twen (a stunning looking German monthly that made a design virtue of black pages and a condensed typeface called Schmalfette Grotesk. A German book devoted to this very influential title is 'Twen, revision of a legend' by Michael Koetzle, ISBN 3781404382).

The text has plenty of spreads (in color) and in the latter part of the book the pages are filled with these and long captions. The survey ends about the late Eighties so it does not cover a lot of the contemporary US and European publications. Editorial design in so many of these, it seems to me, is a bit of a free-for-all because it is so easy create something using the latest software.

If you are interested in the history of magazine design over the last few decades Owen's book is the one to get. A book that covers the history of one corner of the magazine business, the weekly news titles, that I found fascinating is 'Kiosk: A history of photojournalism' by Robert LeBeck (ISBN 388243791X) and I particularly liked it because it has hundreds of spreads, rather than just individual photos, from the great weeklies like Life, Stern, Paris Match, Picture Post and others.

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