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Origin and dissemination of Swiss Graphic Design

Dorothea Hofmann
The Birth of a Style.
**The Influence of the Basel Educational
Model on Swiss Graphic Design**

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Die Geburt eines Stils.
**Der Einfluss des Basler Ausbildungsmodells
auf die Schweizer Grafik**

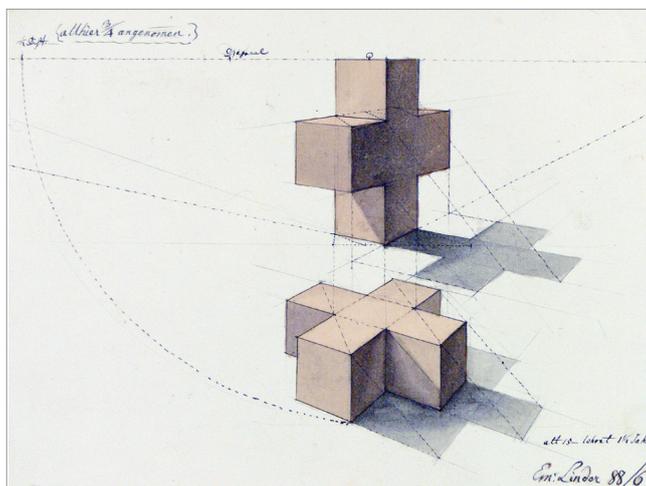
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In the second half of the 20th century, Swiss graphic design succeeded in causing quite a stir beyond national borders. Swiss Design and Swiss Style had become representative for high quality ground breaking graphic design that would shape a whole epoch with its love of precision, objectivity and reduction – and become a popular Swiss export with its innovative works.

The Basel education model of the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule, later known as Basel School of Design, was an important pioneer that led to the international breakthrough of new Swiss graphic design. Strict, yet undogmatic views coupled with a pragmatic attitude towards design issues, experimental audacity and a clear commitment to modernism triggered a broad graphic design movement reaching out from Basel to Europe and the USA.

Dorothea Hofmann tells the story of Swiss graphic design from a new perspective. Starting with a deliberate focus on Basel, she paints a differentiated picture of this national graphic design movement, which, in its complexity, overcomes the constraints of the Zurich constructive concrete direction with which Swiss Style has generally been associated until today. The author gives a detailed account of the movement's origins, which date back to the 19th century, discussing the development of graphic design education in Switzerland and coherently describing its breakthrough as an international style.

Former teachers and students of Basel Allgemeine Gewerbeschule who have contributed decisively to the international reputation of Swiss Design with their works are at the centre of this book: Hermann Eidenbenz, Emil Ruder, Armin Hofmann, Karl Gerstner, Gérard Ifert, Nelly Rudin, Pierre Mendell, Wolfgang Weingart, Kenneth Hiebert, Dan Friedman, April Greiman, and many more.



About the author

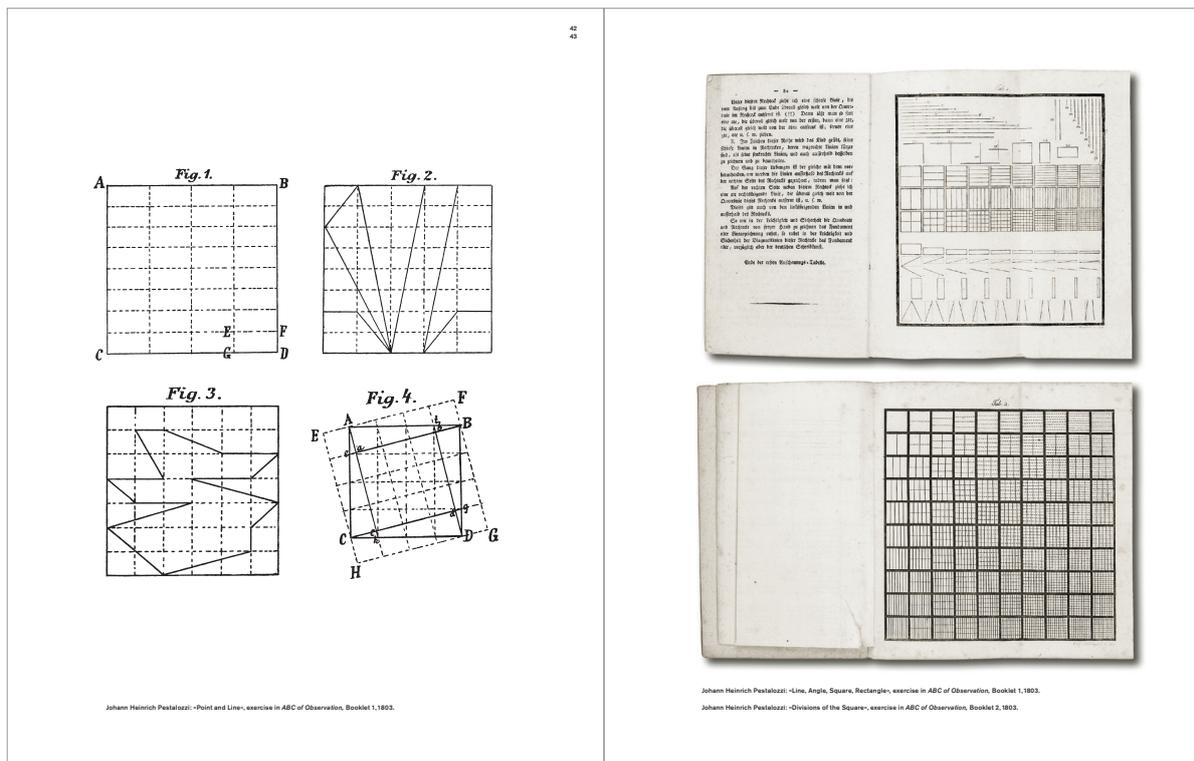
Dorothea Hofmann (1929–2023) trained as a graphic artist at the Basel Allgemeine Gewerbeschule in the 1940s and 1950s. She was one of the first students to have passed through the famous Basel education model from start to finish and therefore knows most renowned protagonists of Swiss Design and Swiss Style personally.

She has undertaken numerous educational trips to Italy, Spain, France, Holland, Mexico, Guatemala, Egypt, India and the USA. Moreover, she has taught at Yale University School of Art, New York Studio School of Drawing, Painting and Sculpture, Atlanta College of Art, Museo de Arte Contemporaneo de Oaxaca in Mexico and the National Institute of Design in Ahmedabad, India, amongst others. Many national and international exhibitions.

Dorothea Hofmann and Armin Hofmann, who have been married for over 60 years, lived in Lucerne.



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of the Schweizer Grafik

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**Multiplicity
of Styles**

The terms *Swiss Graphic Design* and *Swiss Style* are catch-all designations that have been in use since Switzerland emerged as a beacon of modernism for English-speaking audiences and readers. This chapter is an overview of five directions that define the genre of the «Schweizer Grafik». The German term implies nuances beyond its literal translation «Swiss Graphics».

The period begins just after the turn of the twentieth century, when social upheaval throughout Europe as reflected in art, design and related fields, triggers a new worldview teeming with unprecedented fervor. Within Switzerland, interdisciplinary teaching, faculty exchanges, international communication, travel and study abroad, pave the way for an eruption of contrary viewpoints and a multiplicity of visual styles. This pluralism, however, is underpinned by a common thread: the educational concepts and curricula firmly rooted in Switzerland have incubated during previous decades.

«It is a distinguishing feature of twentieth-century art that a uniform style does not predominate over individual movements, but rather that different, often contradictory stylistic concepts coexist – realistic and abstract, constructive and expressive, rational and idealistic...»

Willy Rotzler, Fritz Schärer, Karl Wobmann: *Das Plakat in der Schweiz, 1900.*

Although this complex development of antithetical concepts and multiplicity of styles can be understood by comparing independent design directions, taken together they reveal the core of the Schweizer Grafik, trace its development and contextualize its diversity.

3.4 Five Directions of the «Schweizer Grafik»

The Basel School

The five directions of the Schweizer Grafik, individually described in the sections to follow, eventually influence each other, mainly through teachers and personal contacts between the Kunstgewerbeschule Zürich and the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel.

- The Basel School
- Young Generation
- The School of Ernst Keller
- Photography in Zurich:
- Hans Finsler's Photography Course
- Herbert Matter's Photomontage
- Concrete Artists

Formal and stylistic characteristics in graphic design parallel the history of fine art and architecture with one conspicuous distinction which is the application of letterform. Each direction of the Schweizer Grafik integrates letters in varying ways as an element of design: as straightforward text for information, in combination with an image, as a self-referential character (the single letter or number), or as a word-image. The more «realistic» orientation of **The Basel School** results in a completely different expression compared to **The School of Ernst Keller** in Zurich, where the use of hand-drawn lettering predominates. The **Young Generation** in Basel, emphasizing the abstract combination of type and image, can be contrasted with **Hans Finsler's Photography Course** in Zurich, where the form of the object and its materiality dominate.

Herbert Matter's Photomontage is unique; his overlapping imagery is anchored by words or titles, which define the degree of foreground and background tension. Finally, the **Concrete Artists** (differentiated from the abstract artists) use type essentially for information with an overriding preference for sans-serif typefaces.

The Basel School

The direction of the Basel School begins with the founding of the Fachklasse für angewandte Kunst at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel in 1915. The painter, graphic artist and poster designer, Niklaus Stöcklin plays a central role in this development and will also shape the graphic direction of the Young Generation. Stöcklin, a former pupil of Burkhard Mangold, is regarded as a cofounder and a leading Swiss representative of Neue Sachlichkeit and Magic Realism. The latter is an art movement that, unlike Expressionism or Abstract Art, does not reject realism in painting. Magic Realism exaggerates the mundane through its fidelity to detail, thereby bestowing a supernatural effect. Whereas the poster art of Burkhard Mangold still shows traces of Art Nouveau, Stöcklin's work shows



3.4 Five Directions of the «Schweizer Grafik»

Young Generation

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Young Generation

At the beginning of the 1920s, a vibrant young designers' collective commits to a new dynamic in graphic design and typography. The Young Generation is an offshoot of the Basel School that will significantly impact the Schweizer Grafik.

The designers of this direction are linked to the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel through their training and work but they form a countermovement to the meticulous rendering of objects characteristic of the Basel School. Simplification of form and clear objective typography replace detail and complexity. Among others, the Young Generation includes Helene Haasbauer-Wallrath (1885), Robert Stücklin (1889), Niklaus Stöcklin (1896), Ernst Mumenthaler (1901), Theo Ballmer (1902) and Ernst Keiser (1894), founder and director of the *Basler Werkstätten für Kunst und Gewerbe* [Basel workshops for arts and crafts].

The works of the Young Generation set a precedent for the design of rigorous type forms. Helene Haasbauer-Wallrath, for example, born in Basel, attends various courses at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule and studies under lettering artist Rudolf von Larisch in Austria. Influenced by von Larisch's turn-of-the-century viewpoint that emphasizes the graphic impact of rhythm in letter design, Haasbauer-Wallrath designs block letters, or sans-serif capitals, especially created for her posters.

Robert Stücklin is known for posters with large-format letters and numbers cut in linoleum. Through his teaching at the Allgemeine Gewerbeschule Basel, he influences the entire following generation. Niklaus Stöcklin's autodidactic background in the art of lettering is augmented by his studies in Basel, where he learns to draw type forms under Paul Kammüller.

© Niklaus Stöcklin: PKZ [Paul Kahl Zürich, gentleman's attire], poster, lithography, 1924.