Visual design

Ninety-five things you need to know.
Told in Helvetica and dingbats.

Jim Krause

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INTRODUCTION

If I were to describe the intended tone of this book—both in terms of its text and images—I'd say it's meant to come across as concise, and also conversational; to-the-point, but not without its share of meandering anecdotes; and serious while still delivering hints of sass and humor. In other words, just the sort of passionate, focused (and sometimes playfully irreverent) tone you might expect when talking design or art with anyone who's similarly interested in creativity.

Visual Design is for designers, illustrators, photo-graphers, fine artists, and pretty much anyone else involved in creating art for professional or personal purposes. This is a book that's filled with highly usable and widely applicable principles of aesthetics, style, color, typography, printing, and—very importantly—the behind-the-scenes conceptual thinking that goes into coming up with layouts, illustrations, and photographs that are visually and thematically attractive and engaging.

The 95 topics covered in this book are offered at a rate of exactly one subject per spread, and each topic is presented through more or less equal parts text and imagery. Nearly all the book's content is delivered through a visual vocabulary of Helvetica and dingbats (typographic families of symbols, imagery, and ornaments). Which brings up the obvious questions, *Exactly why is this book's subject matter presented using Helvetica and dingbats, and why are there 95 topics?*

First off, there are 95 topics simply because the rounder and more complete-feeling number of 100 wouldn't fit into the 240-page format of this book. That's all. (But that doesn't mean anything important was left out: As any writer could tell you, there are always ways of combining two or more subjects under the umbrella of a single larger topic.)

As far as the Helvetica and dingbats go, to explain their role in *Visual Design* is also to explain and emphasize one of this book's primary goals—that of being able to offer artists a ton of highly applicable information without overly influencing the ways in which that information might be put to use. So here goes: Helvetica was chosen as the font for this book's text—and for nearly all of the words used within its images—simply because Helvetica is one of those very rare fonts that cannot only deliver a wide range of thematic conveyances (think, for instance of the elegant look of a headline set in the thinnest possible weight of Helvetica versus the commanding boldness of a block of text set in Helvetica Black), but it can also act as an almost invisible thematic component for a layout or illustration whose other visual elements are meant to set the piece's mood. Know many other fonts that can claim this remarkable set of qualities in quite the same way? I don't.

Dingbats and ornaments are used as the main visual element for the vast majority of this book's images for similar reasons: Because dingbats—like Helvetica—tend to convey themselves without a great deal of self-aggrandizing fanfare, and therefore are capable of adapting to a wide range of styles and moods within the layouts and illustrations they inhabit.

That's why Helvetica and dingbats have been used to deliver this book's informational, conceptual, and visual content: In order to spark inspiration and ideas in the minds of viewers without calling any more attention to these visual components than necessary. Also, on the level of visual entertainment alone, I hope you enjoy seeing the ways in which characters of the Helvetica font family—and those from a variety of dingbat families—have been used to uniquely illustrate this book's subject matter.

Just a couple more notes about the content of *Visual Design*—one regarding the depth of coverage seen throughout the book, and the other about the software mentioned in its pages.

Some of this book's topics—like those dealing with broad aspects of composition and aesthetics (primarily covered in Chapters 1 through 6)—are presented in considerable depth and completeness. Other subjects—such as typography and color—will themselves be topics that fill entire books in future additions to the Creative Core series. Naturally, the attention these large-scale topics receive in this book is abridged in comparison to how they will be covered in volumes of their own, but readers should still find that these subjects have been dealt with in a solid, practical, instructive, and enlightening way within the chapters of *Visual Design*.

This book was created using the same trio of software programs that most designers, illustrators, and photographers use to create their own works of design and art: Adobe InDesign, Illustrator, and Photoshop. In most cases, when these programs are mentioned, it is without a great deal of specifics in terms of what buttons to push or what pull-down menus to activate. Why is this? It's simply because software changes quickly and often, and the hope is that the information in this book will be of a much more long-lasting nature than is generally found when it comes to computers and software. So, if you come across a tip in this book about using such-and-such program to help you perform such-and-such task, I hope—if necessary—you'll be willing to open that program's Help menu to find out how the current version of the software handles these matters. (To me, this is really the best way of learning new things about software anyway—since it almost always leads to discoveries of other menu items and tools that may come in handy for other tasks.)

Finally, thank you for taking a look at *Visual Design*. This is my fourteenth book on subjects dealing with design, creativity, and digital photography, and its content is near and dear to the creative centers of my brain and being. I hope you enjoy it and find it helpful in creating your own personal and professional expressions of visual art.

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CREATIVE CORE
BOOK01

Visual Design is the first book in the New Riders Creative Core series.

The second book in the series (available now) is *Color for Designers*—a book that significantly expands upon the color-related information offered in Chapters 7 and 8 of this book.

A third title, *Lessons in Typography,* is due on the shelves in 2015. Keep your eyes open for more offerings from this series in the future.

Delivering Visuals

26 GRAPHIC SIMPLIFICATION

It doesn't take much to convey the idea of a star. Or a flower. Or a cat or a car. A few lines—straight and/or curved—could be all that's needed. Or maybe just a simple combination of basic shapes. You could always do more if you wanted, but when you get right down to it, it doesn't take much simply to communicate the visual essence of a person, place, or thing.

Simplified depictions of subjects are often used as elements within logos or informational graphics. Depending on how they're crafted, basic renderings of this sort might come across as utilitarian, fanciful, childish, crude, or elegant.

Apply everything you know about composition every time you work on a graphic image of this sort. Consider visual hierarchy, balance, flow, symmetry, asymmetry, color, and style. And, by all means, spend an adequate amount of time in the thumbnail stage when coming up with graphically simplified visuals—

there's rarely a good reason to turn on the computer before you've penciled at least a page or two of ideas worthy of digital attention.

Try this when developing the look of a simplified icon or graphic: Go too far. Oversimplify. And once you've gone too far and oversimplified your subject's form to the point where it's becoming difficult to identify, begin adding the details or embellishments that are needed to convey the look and the stylistic feel of whatever it is you're depicting.

The ability to produce quality graphics of this kind is expected of most professional designers. If you do not yet consider yourself talented in this area, practice. On your own and for fun. That way, when you're asked to come up with a graphic simplification in a potentially stressful on-the-job situation, you'll be able to work with a good measure of confidence and with a few tricks already up your sleeve.
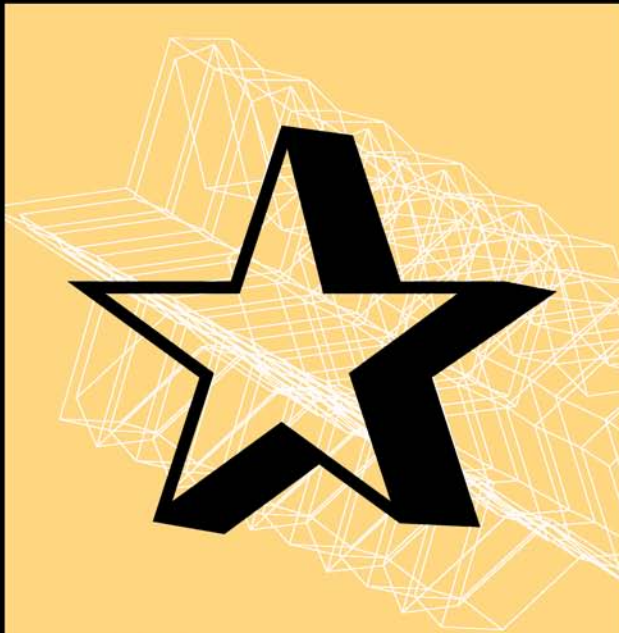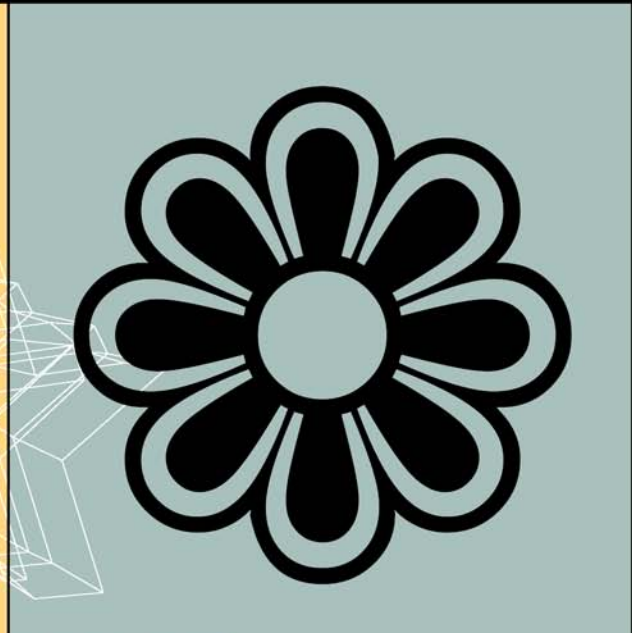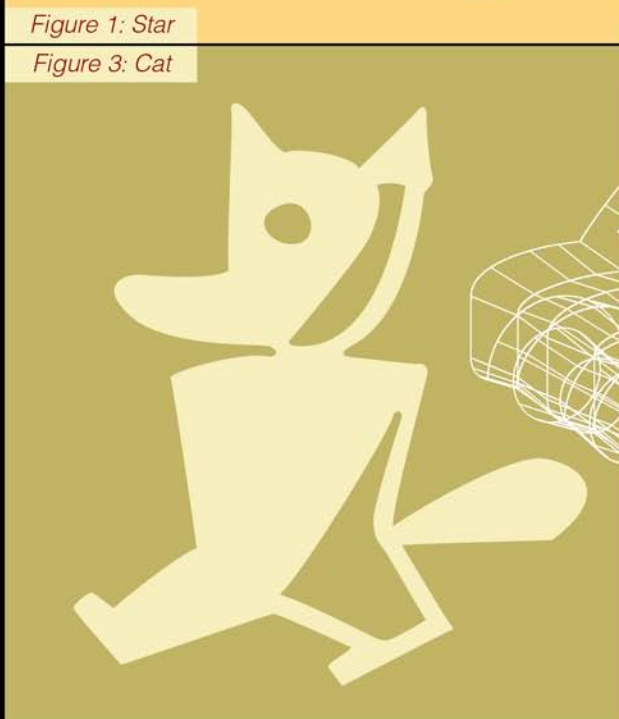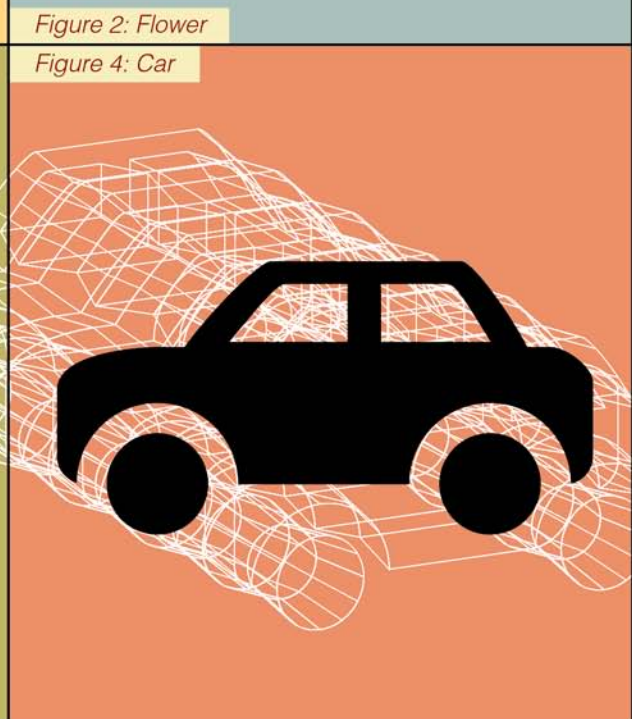
Figure 1: Star

Figure 2: Flower

Figure 3: Cat

Figure 4: Car

27 BUILDING WITH SHAPES

One effective—and surprisingly fun—way of coming up with a graphic simplification of a person, place, or thing is to build your subject using a visual vocabulary of basic shapes: squares, circles, rectangles, ellipses, triangles, stars, and/or polygons.

Building illustrations or icons of real-world subjects using basic shapes can lead directly to usable results or it could provide a strong start toward an image that departs from a purely shape-based structure.

Abstract icons, too, can be developed very effectively using basic geometric shapes—especially when tools like those found in Adobe's Pathfinder panel are involved (available through Illustrator and InDesign).

The Pathfinder panel offers the tools-of-choice that many designers turn to when creating either representational or abstract icons from basic shapes. If you aren't already familiar with these tools, become so. And do it as soon as possible. Pathfinder tools give the designer a fantastic range of options when merging, subtracting, or finding interesting intersections between shapes. You can use Pathfinder tools to sculpt both simple and complex renderings from shapes of any kind.

On a related note, you can create intriguing and attractive visuals by forcing graphically depicted subjects to fit within—and to conform to—a geometric shape. Challenge yourself, for example, to develop an icon of a thing or an animal that fits neatly into a circle, an ellipse, a square, or a triangle. Designers often do this when crafting logos: Take note of examples of this kind of thing when you come across them and gather ideas for your own work.

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Representational *figures*

Non-representational *figures*

28 THEMATIC IMAGERY

Whether you realize it or not, every logo, illustration, or image you create emits conveyances: intangible themes like strength, creativity, order, precision, antiquity, and grace.

It's important to avoid letting these thematic conveyances happen willy nilly. Take control: Identify the themes you want your logo, layout, or illustration to deliver to its target audience and then get down to business creating a piece that not only looks good, but also accurately conveys the abstract inferences you're aiming for.

In the graphic arts, themes could be thought of as descriptors you would like to see associated with the company, person, product, or message your creation is connected with. Six such descriptors are listed in this column's first paragraph. Here are some more: elegance, brawn, gentleness, hi-tech, depression-era, futurism, fragility, exuberance, speediness, solidity, efficiency, casualness, urbanity, childishness, orderliness, retro-kitsch, and back-to-nature.

Half the battle, when it comes to identifying and delivering meaningful thematic conveyances, lies simply in acknowledging that these abstract entities exist and that they are crucial components of any effective work of design or art. Once this has been taken care of, it then becomes a matter of accepting your responsibility as a designer and finding ways of giving form to these non-tangible conveyances through well chosen typefaces, colors, and imagery—as well as through canny choices involving the compositional and stylistic appearance of your creation.

Write down relevant themes the next time you begin a design project. Come up with lists of on-target adjectives and use these lists to help judge the visual and stylistic choices you make while working. Not only will this streamline decision-making processes as you explore options, it will also help you come up with a legitimate rationale for the content and the appearance of your logo, layout, or illustration—a rationale that your client might enjoy hearing.

ink splat historical figure eye

en signature hand lettered

encil desk lamp hand

ewriter desk pencil sharpner

notebook silhoue speaking bubble

bookends

ookshelf graffiti calligra

per briefcase image

shoulder bag cartoon

ink book

WRITE NOW!

DOWNTOWN WRITERS' GROUP

literary a

realistic illustration

ghtbulb person circular desig

line drawing abstract

ylized eye-catch

decisive sp

archival draw

29 EFFECTS

Eye-catching special effects were once only available through time-consuming darkroom magic or the hands of a skilled illustrator. These days—thanks to the digitization of art media—things like drop-shadows, transparency effects, and dimensional treatments are each just a menu selection away. And those are just the tip of the digital effects iceberg.

It's rarely mandatory to apply effects of any kind to a layout's components (or to a layout as a whole) but effects are often worth considering. Sometimes, just the right special effect turns out to be exactly what's needed to add a perfect finishing touch to a composition's visual impact or its conceptual message.

Learn about the effects available through programs like Photoshop, Illustrator, and InDesign by playing with them. For most visually oriented people (designers, illustrators, and artists included) there's simply no better way to become acquainted with digital effects than by opening a document (a blank document, a photo from your hard drive, a custom-made illustration—it's up to you) and freely exploring your program's offering of special effects. The lessons learned during this digital playtime will almost certainly come in handy—and probably sooner than later—for real-world on-the-job projects.

All special effects are subject to the whims of fad and fancy—every bit as much as typefaces and color schemes. Drop shadows, for instance, regularly cycle in and out of favor among both designers and audiences. And not only that, but even when drop shadows seem especially popular, it's generally only a few specific styles of drop shadows that seem to have the full approval of better designers and more discerning viewers. If you pay close enough attention to the work of leading designers, it won't take long before you see the truth in this. Same goes for things like transparency illusions, shine and shimmer effects, and emboss and bevel treatments.

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eberg

30 REPRESENTATIONAL ART

Depictions of reality can be delivered straight up, as in the case of a tightly rendered illustration or a photograph.

Reality-based visuals can also be presented through stylized imagery. This is probably the widest (and most varied) category in which visuals can be placed—a category that includes contemporary modes of illustration and photography, impressionistic fine-art paintings, and era-based graphic depictions (think: flowing art nouveau designs from the 1930s, bold Soviet poster imagery from the 1950s, psyche-delic album covers from the 1960s, and so on).

Depictions of reality can also be altered in ways that ensure the delivery of conveyances like surrealism, fantasy, humor, horror, or mystery.

Digital photography and image-altering software has made it easier than ever to create visuals of genres like these using the computer, though some artists still prefer to create their conveyances of altered reality using old-school media like paints, pencils, and inks (or the digital equivalents of these traditional tools).

Are you rendering a particular subject for the logo or layout you're working on? If so, don't settle on a specific approach until you have considered your options. Look through illustration and design annuals for ideas. Look through art history books, too. Even the best illustrators regularly survey material outside their own portfolio for ideas and inspiration.

Do you possess the skills necessary to illustrate your subject as you see fit? If *yes,* then go for it. If *maybe*, then how about taking a stab at it and possibly spending some time off-the-clock teaching yourself the required skills? If *no*, then start looking for an illustrator who can pull it off for you— budget permitting.

31 PHOTOGRAPHY

In case you haven't already noticed, good designers often make good photographers. Good designers have an acute eye for composition, are able to see the aesthetic and communicative potential of subjects as unalike as a crumpled piece of paper and a setting sun, and—in many cases—also possess a strong and practical understanding of Photoshop.

Advice: Learn by doing. Make a habit of keeping a pocket digital camera on hand and taking pictures of the people, places, and things that catch your eye and prick your interest. And, very importantly, aim for a wide variety of photographic outcomes by exploring your camera's buttons, features, and settings. Also, needless to say, put your savvy sense of composition to good use by seeking points of view that will record every subject and scene you shoot in an intriguing and attractive way.

Once you get in the habit of regularly snapping good looking photographs, your stash of ready-to-use images will grow quickly. Designers with a strong cache of photos invariably have several favorites within their collection—photos that are just waiting to serve as foundational images for works of design or art. A strong stockpile of photos also will provide attractive options for layouts in need of anything from a colorful backdrop image of flowers to a featured shot of an emotive downtown scene.

Another thing that you can do with your digital camera is collect abundant photos of visual texture (see Visual Texture, page 102). You can shoot excellent representations of visual texture using subjects like an aged cement floor, a wall with cracked and peeling paint, a frost-covered windshield, or a drawer full of colorful buttons. You can then use these photos of visual texture as effective backdrops for layouts, illustrations, and Web pages.
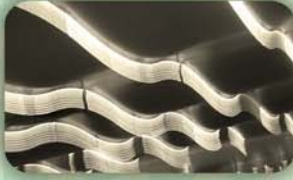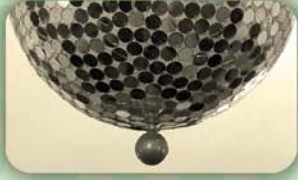
32 CROPPING AND CONTAINMENT

Be sure to consider different ways of placing and containing the illustrations and photos that you add to layouts.

Images can be bled off the edges of a page, inset from a page's extremities, bordered by a line (thin, thick, black, white, colored, etc.), confined by an illustrated frame, enclosed with text, or wrapped with a decorative pattern.

The perimeters of photos and illustrations can also be darkened, blurred, or roughened as a way of establishing and emphasizing their outer edges.

Consider cropping, too—especially if you're working with photographs. Cropping can be slight or it can be severe, cropping can zoom in tightly on an image's essential component(s), or it can be applied in ways that leave areas of excess space within a scene (space that might or might not be filled with compositional elements like typography, graphics, or other images). Try several options before deciding what's best: Cropping can significantly affect the way any image presents itself.

If you're a designer who likes to shoot your own photographs (as mentioned on the previous spread), you'll be tempted to aim your viewfinder in ways that produce shots that are beautifully—and *tightly*—composed. Unfortunately, this otherwise good habit will allow few choices when it comes time to fit your photo into a layout that is calling for images of very specific proportions. The solution? *Shoot wide*: Pull back slightly from what you consider to be your shot's best composition and allow a bit of breathing room around its central area of interest. This excess room will increase your options when it comes time to crop the photo to fit within layout-specific spaces.
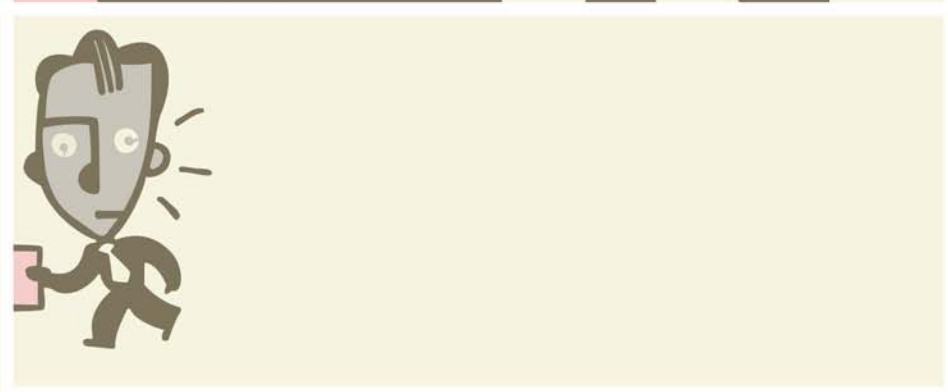
33 OBJECTS AS WINDOWS

Who says

only standard shapes

like rectangles, circles, and

triangles are fit to hold images or text?

What about using a freeform shape, a silhouette, or

a typographic form to hold a photo, an illustration, a

graphic, a pattern, a block of text, or an entire layout?

A potential for intriguing interaction exists when

shaped containers such as these are used as

holders for visual content: The container and

the content could agree in terms of thematic

conveyances—or they could intentionally oppose

one another in order to convey notions of humor,

silliness, or editorial-style commentary.

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