

# glenn horowitz

ON STANFORD UNIVERSITY'S ACQUISITION OF THE HERBERT MATTER ARCHIVE

Interview by Steven Heller

Even in the so-called paperless age, graphic designers generate tons of paper annually. But in the precomputer era, one can only imagine how many artifacts a prodigious designer might collect. Swiss-born, Beaux Arts-educated Herbert Matter (1907–1984) amassed a huge number of sketches and drawings, proposals, letters, photos, and other materials from his life's work. He created classic posters, as for the Swiss National Tourist Office in the 1930s and '40s; memorable identities, as for the New Haven Railroad and furniture designer Knoll in the '50s and '60s; and a great number of photographs, including a book's worth of Alberto Giacometti's sculptures. This archive's value to scholars of design, commerce, Modernism, and more, is immense. Whether such a collection becomes a cultural treasure depends on an institution's willingness to invest the considerable financial resources and precious space necessary to preserve and catalog it. The majority of designers of Matter's stature have no place to deposit their life's work, yet last June, Glenn Horowitz, founder of Glenn Horowitz Bookseller, completed the sale of Matter's archive to Stanford University. Whereas Horowitz is known for his literary, historical, and art-related rare books and manuscripts, this is his first placement of a major designer's archive. This acquisition marks a milestone for graphic design and perhaps sets a precedent for future collections in major institutions. In this interview, Horowitz discusses the range and significance of Matter's material and the importance it will have in years to come.

**HELLER:** How were you introduced to the Matter archive? **HOROWITZ:** I met Alex Matter, Herbert's son, in East Hampton, New York, where I have a rare book shop and art gallery, and where Alex had a healthy percentage of his father's archive in storage. Initially, he sold us some drawings and photographs, which began a conversation about what else he had. It took my manager, John McWhinnie, about five minutes to grasp the magnitude of the collection and its commercial possibilities. Once we secured representation of the archive, we began to search for a logical buyer. Before doing deep archeology on the collection, John unearthed in it a small stack of material that illuminated Matter's relationship to Buckminster Fuller, whose papers our firm sold to Stanford in 2000. When we mentioned the presence of the Fuller papers to the curators at Stanford, they immediately asked for a first refusal on the Matter archive. That was in July 2003; from that moment on, we never discussed the collection with any other institution. **HELLER:** What would you pinpoint as the single most important factor in determining Matter's archive-worthy status? **HOROWITZ:** As we worked on the archive, it struck me that Matter's enduring merit was as the conduit between prewar European Modernism and the postwar expression of the movement in the United States. His application of high-art principles to commercial work highlighted a real evolution in the American esthetic consciousness. Couple that with his corporate work, publishing contributions, photographic enterprises—including his documenting of the works of notable artists, especially Giacometti and Calder—and, of course, unique and innovative design work,



and you have the makings of a canonical figure whose archive merits preservation in a major research institution. **HELLER:** Matter certainly stood on both sides of the art and commerce divide, but do you think that this archive will give him more credence as an artist/photographer in his own right, or does its value rest in his relationship with corporate clients? In other words, does the archive potentially alter his status as a historical figure? **HOROWITZ:** Without a doubt—to both questions. I'm not alone in believing that, before long, Matter's stature as a photographer will be in ascendancy. The range of his vision is breathtaking: fashion work, collaged and manipulated images, advertising work; it's a protean accomplishment. **HELLER:** How extensive is this archive? And how do you determine what is worth saving or not? **HOROWITZ:** The archive is vast, well over 50,000 items from all aspects and moments of Matter's career. There are over 15,000 drawings, 20,000 photographs, and hundreds of maquettes for projects both realized and unrealized. Matter was a profound preserver; whether by predilection or necessity, I don't know—I'd guess the sheer bulk of the archive reflects both of those elements. For example, the file for his corporate logo for Seagram contains multiple drawings

for three highly accomplished designs, none of which were incorporated into the executed image. Everywhere in the archive, one encounters that sort of scholarly trail. **HELLER:** Is it your job as representative to delve into the morass, catalog everything, and then edit? Or do you leave this prioritizing to scholars? **HOROWITZ:** In preparing a preliminary catalog, we were blessed to work with the design scholar Jeffrey Head, who has written extensively on Modern design and on Matter. Mr. Head organized the archive into a manageable narrative, one that would allow the folks at Stanford to understand what we were dealing with. However, the final organization of this vast trove will fall to the curators in Palo Alto. The process will take years, I suspect. **HELLER:** What is this narrative, exactly? **HOROWITZ:** “Narrative” may be too literal a tag for what Mr. Head created, but I think it’s a useful way to understand his labors. Fundamentally, he extracted order and coherence out of chaos. The voluminous, box-list narrative he wrote provides a telescope into the universe of the vast collection. His work doesn’t really illuminate what is known about Matter as much as it maps the phenomenology of the collection. **HELLER:** Did you find many surprises? **HOROWITZ:** The real work of discovery will only commence once the archive is fully described. Matter’s friendships were innumerable, criss-crossing disciplines. One of the most stirring aspects of this project was to see how many creative figures Matter knew and how many he touched and influenced. **HELLER:** You mentioned Fuller, Calder, and Giacometti. As a professor at Yale for many years, Matter was also associated with the masters of modern design, including Paul Rand. Can you tell me of some others who are represented in Matter’s papers, and the relative importance of these documents on the study of Modernism? **HOROWITZ:** Beyond the traditional method of linking Matter with specific figures, such as Eames, Bertoia, and Alvin Eisenman through correspondence, one of the unorthodox elements of this collection is how Matter’s photo-

graphs also document his friendships. In addition to the images that record his work with Eames and Florence Knoll, Matter photographed Franz Kline, Jackson Pollock, Fernand Leger, A.M. Cassandre, and Hans Hoffman—a sort of “murderer’s row” of Modernists. I think it’s also mouthwatering that many of the photographs record the work processes of his friends and, in some



**This page and previous:** Herbert Matter’s posters for the Swiss National Tourist Office. Images courtesy of Department of Special Collections, Stanford University Libraries.

cases, that were lost to history by either being painted or destroyed. **HELLER:** What is required to sell an archive of this magnitude to an institution? **HOROWITZ:** The skill most necessary to sell an archive of this scope and nature is patience. The size of the deal requires the acquiring institution to achieve a consensus amongst interested internal parties as to the efficacy of the purchase. Also, as the seller, you must be able to frame the collection within a greater scholarly context and prove to the buyers that if they bite, researchers will flock to their door. It’s also

helpful if the institution can be made to see that an acquisition will permit them to build on existing strengths. I believe the Fuller collection inspired the curators at Stanford to push for the acquisition of Matter; both conceptually and practically, they fit nicely, and Stanford could therefore perceive an added merit to what they already saw as an attractive opportunity. **HELLER:** Do you retain any relationship to the material? Does Matter’s son, Alex, have any rights to the material? **HOROWITZ:** Well, I remain close to my colleagues at Stanford; we’re already involved in dialogue about two other collections, albeit both smaller. Alex Matter, on the other hand, will have lots of communication with the curators about the archive. He, of course, retains copyrights, though he’s assigned Stanford the right to exploit the material for educational purposes of all kinds. It’ll be interesting to see how his relationship with Stanford evolves. In my experience, soon after an heir has found the right repository for the papers entrusted to him or her, they begin to drift away from the material. They’re relieved, I think, to have fulfilled their responsibility, and it’s time to move on. **HELLER:** How will the archive be made available to scholars? **HOROWITZ:** I’m not entirely sure that even Stanford knows yet. They intend to digitize as much as they can for implementation on their Web site, and they’d love to maintain a friendship with Mr. Head and have him mount an inaugural exhibition. But an untapped archive is an organic entity, and the tending of it is always evolving. **HELLER:** Do you have your sights on more designers or photographers to archive? **HOROWITZ:** Over the past years, our firm has tried to stretch the bounds of archival transactions, moving institutions away from the traditional realm of literature and history. How far we can go with archives of designers and photographers remains an open question. At the moment we’re representing the estate of the Japanese filmmaker Akira Kurosawa, the Israeli photographer Micha Bar Am, and the folk singer Judy Collins. The frontier remains untamed. ●