

EVOLUTION STEVEN HELLER

CLIP ART NEVER DIES



What came first, clip art or graphic design? The answer to this riddle depends on the precise timing of the origins of graphic design. If, as asserted in graphic design history textbooks by Philip Meggs and others, it started with Gutenberg's printing press, then clip art came much later. If, however, graphic design as we know it is a byproduct of the rise of mid-19th century commerce and commercial advertising, then clip art started long before—around the late 18th century, give or take a century. Almost as long as there has been “commercial” graphic design, there has been clip art, images created independent of a specific purpose for use by anyone for anything, at any time.

Clip art was not immaculately conceived. Late 18th and early 19th century print shops acquired engravings and woodcuts from graphic arts businesses, among them type foundries, which specialized in making generic images to fill a need (or holes on a page). One of the most common was the ubiquitous pointing finger. Clip art could also be more detailed. Currier and Ives, for instance, created vignettes and tableaux that were

both general and specific scenes that could be inserted into magazines, posters, and newspapers. But most early clip art was simple signs, symbols, and representational pictures that either decorated or illustrated text, be it editorial or advertising.

By the late 19th century, clip art was offered for sale in type-foundry catalogs, and also in sample specimen brochures by dedicated clip art or “cut” businesses, including Cobb Shinn (1887–1951), an artist who established a national reputation. Shinn lived in Indianapolis where he took art classes at the YMCA and in 1907 enrolled in the John Herron School of Art. He began producing greeting cards and postcards as early as 1907. His most popular images included novelty cards featuring racing cars, children, and Charlie Chaplin. His clip art offerings, issued through colorful monthly catalogs, provided a range from patriotic iconography to goofy-looking cartoon characters.

As demand increased for inexpensive and free artwork, many art studios entered the fray. Even the young Paul Rand in the 1930s churned out scratchboard

stock illustrations for Metro Associated Services. Some of his anonymous cuts are doubtless included in copyright-free anthologies, of which many were published from the 1940s through the 1980s.

In the 1920s Dada and Surrealist designers used the common printer's cuts in their typographic concoctions. Similarly, during the 1960s alternative (Dada-inspired) media, proscribed by very low budgets, made frequent use of wood and metal engravings in comic collages. Clip art was even touted by Abbie Hoffman in *Steal This Book*, a precursor to today's DIY aesthetic.

In the 80s, Charles Spencer Anderson took ownership of segment clip art. Rather than simply go to the collective well and use the cuts for the occasional job, in his first book, *Old Advertising Cuts from A-Z* (1989), he laid a prospector's claim to the copyright-free stock art of the 20s, 30s and 40s, and by photographically distorting them made them his own artworks. No longer open source, these cuts became licensed commodities, not unlike what they started out to be when produced by cut businesses for fun and profit.

DESIGN MISSION

A good designer is more concerned with the process of “that winding, potholed road he embarks upon every time he gets a new job,” than the end result say the curators of “**MANIFESTO**.” This ongoing collection of statements from renowned designers has been translated into a traveling exhibit and a 116-page “small design bible.” Check it out at manifestoproject.it.