



Leonardo

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Source: *Leonardo*, Vol. 1, No. 2 (Apr., 1968), pp. 151-154

Published by: [The MIT Press](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1571952>

Accessed: 25/09/2013 15:18

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ARTISTS AND THE TRAVELER*

Lowell K. Bridwell**

Abstract—*The author discusses the need of producing a more effective, faster and more attractive means of enlightening and assisting the traveler. He places the subject in historical perspective and links it to other areas—art, science and technology. Artists for long years have been concerned with travelers whether they went by carriage or coach, clipper ship or river boat, streetcar or railroad train, as well as with the landscapes, road views and mountain scene the travelers saw.*

He points out the influence artists have had on architecture, printing, furniture and other everyday objects, and on the design of airplanes, automobiles and trains. The interest of the contemporary artist in various aspects of today's life is manifested by Op, Pop and Kinetic art. Artists should therefore be of help in the field of transportation graphics.

The U.S. Federal Highway Administration is establishing a Task Force of experts from various fields to unify and lend direction to the forces of change in transportation graphics as they influence highways. The Task Force will move forward on the premise that the alliance of artist, scientist and technician can bring a new dimension to highway communication, built upon the more traditional skills of other specialists.

The Transportation Graphics Symposium held at the Museum of Modern Art in New York was devoted to ways of improving traveler information. The broadest possible view of the subject was taken, placing it in historical perspective and linking it to other areas—art, science and technology—to which it must be intimately related.

In these fast changing times, it is no longer adequate to speak of traveler information in the outmoded terms of the venerable roadside sign. We must seek a higher level of communication. In the same way that the Department of Transportation has been established to coordinate all types of transportation into a unified whole in terms of today's and tomorrow's world, so we must coordinate different disciplines and talents to produce more effective, faster and more attractive means of enlightening and assisting the traveler.

Before the beginnings of the modern era, the vast majority of mankind never went beyond a handful of miles from their home communities. Travel was mainly confined to lords and ladies and their retinue, armies on the move and adventurers and pilgrims. Then, slowly, as commerce and industry spread, the ordinary man began to move from place to place. The traveler became a popular figure in the life of

the times and was so pictured by artists who often painted him and what he saw.

In the pioneer days of our West, wandering artists visited outlying settlements where, besides painting crude sketches which served the same function as today's snapshots, they also produced identifying placards for stores and taverns, highways and trails. These signs mainly used illustrations and symbols because of the widespread illiteracy. Some travelers painted views of the countryside as they passed through it—the picture postcards of those days—but their halting efforts led to the schools of American landscape painting that followed.

Artists have for long years been concerned with the traveler—and means and places of travel—both as subject and as client. A century ago Currier & Ives, the printers, found travel was one of their most popular themes. Their sentimental prints showed streetcars and railroad trains, clipper ships and river boats, carriages and coaches, as well as landscapes, road views and mountain scenes, which were eagerly bought to hang in everyday homes. Today they are collector's items and provide an eloquent and accurate history of the transportation of the period.

Illustrating the universality of this theme, over a century ago, the master Japanese artist Hiroshige produced a classic series showing the many posting stations along the Tokaido road—the 323 miles from Kyoto to Edo (ancient name of Tokyo)—depicting each stop along this very popular roadway with its inns and eating places, Samurai and pilgrims,

*Presented at the Symposium "Transportation Graphics: Where am I Going? How do I get There?" The Museum of Modern Art, New York, N.Y. on 23 October 1967.

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priests and merchants, roadsides and landscapes. These views are still highly popular with all classes of Japanese and were among the great Japanese art works which have had such a profound influence on Western art down to this day.

In our modern era, popular art has pictured the daily life of the ordinary individual as he went about his routine tasks. Often what we now consider significant art was viewed at the time of creation more mundanely as decorative or useful, but nothing more. Today it is eagerly sought after. Every issue of the historical magazine *American Heritage* carries illustrations of these items—pottery and other household utilities, playing cards and children's toys, coffee cups and cosmetic boxes—now prized and valuable possessions of collectors and museums. Of course, let us not forget the antiquarian, professional and amateur, who avidly search out for admired display the very items that our forefathers tossed into the attic and forgot about. Who would dare argue today that those master workmen who produced Hepplewhite chairs and Wedgwood china were not artists? The other side of this coin—that the practical of an earlier time becomes the art of a later era—is the art produced by the genius and converted by his fellows to practical uses affecting everyday life.

The artist Mondrian is often cited as an example of this process. As one of the first to deal with non-figurative abstractions and geometric forms, the patterns that he created greatly influenced many designers with pleasing results in many widely different areas—most striking in the fields of architecture and of fashion. In this way, art spread beyond the canvas to penetrate every facet of human existence.

The Bauhaus school that began in Germany further emphasised the functional. It was not enough for a table to simply stand by itself and be useful; it had to do something else. Not only must it serve a practical end, but it had to be a work of art, even if in minor key. If a building, it not only stood, but it had to please the eye. If printing, it had not only to read more easily, but to look attractive. Thus was consummated a merger of function and beauty which are now inseparable. These principles, of course, have spread to all modes of travel—to airplanes, to automobiles, to steamships and railroad trains.

The pendulum swung away briefly in the art of the abstract expressionist. The Jackson Pollock drip school denied images and broke away from geometric art. But, with Pop and Op, we are now back to realism with a vengeance. Pop cannot be more closely related to our daily lives, dealing as it does with our advertising culture, with the comics, television commercials, soft drink bottles, cereal boxes and everything else in daily use. Op, for its part, produces optical illusions, using sophisticated scientific principles to shock and startle the viewer.

Science is becoming the handmaiden of many aspects of modern art—or is it the other way around? In any case, they are moving in harmony. I have

noticed layouts in magazines showing a collection of highly magnified photographs of anything from cells to satellites, interspersed with artistic designs in similar detail, and being challenged to tell them apart. The task, as those of us who have tried it know, is very difficult.

This movement is being accelerated. Just a few weeks ago, in New York City, a leading modern artist and an electronics engineer got together to form an organisation of artists and scientists in a working alliance to bring, as the *New York Times* said, 'modern technological tools to the artist for creating new art forms and fresh insights and viewpoints to the engineer for creating a "people-oriented" technology.' Most significantly, contributing financially to this alliance are a number of large corporations and labor organisations. Taking a leading part in this group is the artist Robert Rauschenberg, who has in mind a project for which he is seeking technological guidance. He is trying to picture a room that would be responsive to the weather, to people looking at it, to traffic, to noise and to light. This he calls the art of the future.

Other artists are heading in similar directions. There is a particularly interesting school called luminal art which proposes a modern use of light in art—not in its traditional role of reflecting light and shadow and giving an impression of form and color, but artificial light using the incandescent bulb, the fluorescent tube and the slide and movie projector. Some of these artists have Ph.D.'s in physics, or have worked as display artists or rocketry engineers. One was attracted to luminal art while waiting at a railway station where he became fascinated by railway signals. He was struck by how dramatic these signals were, and how necessary a part of our century. He puts together odds and ends of old tanks, trucks, and planes to form cryptic beacons and panels of flashing colors.

More controversial is the so-called 'junk sculpture' where the fruits of our industrial civilization—old cars, metal shapes and pieces of anything at all—are painted, crushed, hammered, distorted and built into forms expressing to the artist a reaction to modern life.

I cite these developments to express confidence that the time has come when the artist is once again immersing himself in his times, to use his talents to help produce more effective instruments of daily life that may be recognized as works of art as well. Today, he has the help of the vast resources of science and technology to lead him into fields unexplored and unimagined at present.

Certainly the field of transportation graphics should claim those men of talent and genius who wish to penetrate as deeply as they can into the core of modern existence. One of the basic keys to today's man is travel . . . movement . . . mobility. Day after day, day and night, millions move from place to place by car, bus, subway, plane, train, ship. In the United States 90 million cars move almost every single individual over roads known and unknown, mile after mile after mile. The questioning

traveler needs help how to get where he is going as conveniently and as safely as possible.

To guide him, we need more than sign painters to tell him . . . stop . . . go . . . next town 20 miles . . . warning—curve ahead. These are not good enough to meet our modern needs. Our accident figures attest to that, as do the drabness and uninspired character of these utensils. We must harness the kind of talent that labors to produce eye-catching commercials on television, the intriguing ads in our popular magazines, and striking uses of contemporary graphics techniques—based as they are on the latest movements in art and science.

Transportation graphics in our day must provide necessary information, using the latest scientific techniques for effective communication, in an art form that is attractive to the viewer. Scientists and engineers, commercial artists, and designers use their abilities to perfect the most efficient and attractive products for the home—television and hi-fi, refrigerators and washers, new forms of heating and cooling, new shapes and uses of furniture. We must stimulate them to work together to produce a new type of transportation graphics to suit our modern age.

At one end of the scale, help is needed by the motorist at a strange and busy intersection, staring bewildered at a number of different directional signs that he can't possibly absorb, wondering if he will be late for an appointment. New York's Mayor Lindsay toured his city's streets recently and commented on traffic signs that are so confusing a motorist can be charged with a traffic violation while stopping his car to understand them.

Driving at high speed, the automobile traveler requires yet a different type of communication. What may be suitable at a downtown intersection has a different effect when passed at 60 miles per hour.

We are now investigating some interesting developments that show great promise—three dimensional signs, electronic signs and non-verbal signs that seem to move, using a plastic material which changes in appearance as the angle of view changes, thus creating the effect of motion. The light-motion work of artist/scientist Frank J. Malina, which I saw recently in Paris, exemplifies techniques in which we are greatly interested. For merging lane signs, an application of such techniques might have two lanes on a sign appear as two streams of light flowing into a single channel. These are good beginnings, but only beginnings. We need more.

I have no doubt that developments beyond imagining are forthcoming in transportation graphics. Just as space and rocketships have progressed to reality from their science fiction stage a few years ago, transportation graphics is moving from imagination to the laboratory and the studio, to emerge in forms that are only dreamed of today. In fact, the movement is so rapid that we in the Federal

Highway Administration (FHWA) are creating a new Task Force to unify and lend direction to the forces of change in transportation graphics as they will influence highways.

The Task Force will include representatives not only from within the FHWA, but also from highway design, graphics, signing and other disciplines and creative fields. It will be charged with pulling together and analyzing the impressive scope of work already being done in the field of highway signing and directional technique—and then recommending ways to coordinate that work and translate it into applied results. Among other things, the group will be asked to consider:

—The results of a current project, being conducted for the Federal Highway Administration by Bolt Beranek and Newman, to test and evaluate the effectiveness of national and international traffic control signs and systems. This study, being conducted primarily from a human factors standpoint, will provide us with an invaluable basis for moving toward improved highway graphics techniques and applications.

—Existing standards and practices of State highway departments, municipalities, airports, ports, multipurpose residential and industrial complexes, parks and other entities using road signs within their boundaries.

—Non-highway graphics developments and applications which may offer lessons to highway signs and control systems.

—Impact of the Highway Beautification Act of 1965—particularly its control of outdoor advertising—upon the directional needs of motorists and of those who provide facilities for food, rest and fuel along our national highway network.

—The outlook for growth of audio-based communications systems in lieu of, or supplemental to, visual systems such as roadside signs. We must recognize that the driver's vision, already exposed to a dangerously high level of competition from the demands of driving and also from highway signs and symbols, must be relieved rather than further burdened. So, the Task Force will be directed to consider current and planned research projects of the FHWA and others embracing such concepts as route guidance systems employing radioed or prerecorded messages; audio-based passing aid systems for drivers on two-lane roads; freeway ramp merging controls using audio or visual techniques, or a combination of both, and audio systems for informing drivers and passengers of food, gas, lodging and rest area locations.

Our Task Force will be moving forward on the premise that the alliance of artist, scientist and technician can bring a new dimension to highway communication, built upon the more traditional skills of other specialists—the designer and the psychologist, the graphic arts expert, the engineer and the administrator.

Les Artistes et le Voyageur

Résumé—L'auteur parle de la nécessité de trouver des moyens de renseigner et d'aider le voyageur, qui soient plus efficaces, plus rapides et plus attrayants. Il situe son sujet dans une perspective historique, et le relie à d'autres centres d'intérêt: l'art, la science et la technologie.

Il y a longtemps que les artistes ont pris comme thème les voyageurs, que ces derniers empruntent leurs propres équipages ou des voitures de poste, de fins voiliers ou des bateaux à aubes, des automobiles ou les chemins de fer; ainsi que les paysages que ceux-ci découvraient le long des routes ou dans la montagne.

L'auteur souligne l'influence que les artistes ont eue sur l'architecture, sur l'imprimerie et autres objets courants, et sur le profil des avions, des automobiles et des trains. Op Art, Pop Art et Art Cinétique sont des manifestations de l'intérêt que porte l'artiste contemporain aux divers aspects de la vie d'aujourd'hui. C'est pourquoi les artistes seraient d'une grande utilité dans le domaine des panneaux de signalisation routière.

Aux Etats-Unis, la Federal Highway Administration (l'Administration Fédérale des Routes) crée actuellement un groupe d'étude composé d'experts de disciplines diverses afin d'unifier et d'orienter les tendances nouvelles en matière de panneaux de signalisation, puisque ces panneaux ont une influence sur les routes. Le groupe d'étude partira de l'hypothèse selon laquelle l'alliance de l'artiste, du savant et du technicien peut apporter une nouvelle dimension à la circulation routière, établie à partir des connaissances plus traditionnelles des autres spécialistes.