

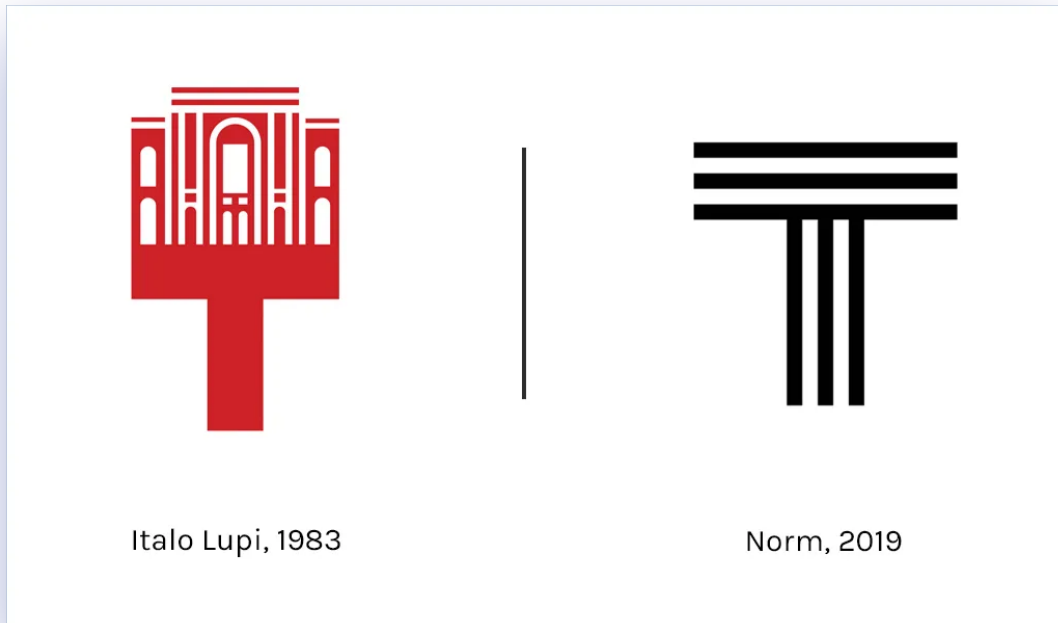
25 April 2020



A for Anything

by Benedetta Crippa

Ideologies of visual uniformity are rooted in patriarchy — and buyers of graphic design have yet to reckon with its effects



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Previous and new mark of the Italian design museum Triennale di Milano

In 2019 the Triennale design museum in Milan, the leading institution for design in Italy, presents a re-branding that moves from the pictorial red mark designed by [Italo Lupi](#) in 1983 to a ultra-minimal symbol composed of black perpendicular lines only. The designers most likely answered brilliantly to the brief — changing a pivotal institution's long-standing emblem is no easy operation. And yes, to represent the institution through an illustration of the building (in the previous mark by Lupi) may not be seen as particularly sophisticated. It is — obviously — less

“sophisticated” than using straight black bands that make a T and the number 3 at the same time (thus “Triennale”).

But while the language used by Lupi created a symbol that was distinctive, the level of abstraction and supposed neutrality of the new mark (consistent with the earliest, most acclaimed rules of logo design) can go on to represent almost anything, and it’s doing exactly that.

Around the same time, the Swedish organisation for violence against women **Kvinna till Kvinna** (‘Woman to Woman’) introduces a new logo moving from a figurative coloured illustration to 3 straight, parallel black bands. The symbols of Triennale and Kvinna till Kvinna bear a strong resemblance and show the decisive choice of a conceptual approach to form over an instinctive one; a rational understanding is preferred over emotional, intuitive readings, resulting in a form that is pure intellect. In both cases, the change is remarkably stark. In the reduced capitalised typography of Kvinna till Kvinna, even the crossbar of the letter A is dropped, giving life to a **military-like emblem**. In the Triennale logo, the red colour that distinguished the institution for half a century is also abandoned in favour of black; a choice reminiscent of the mark of the Center Pompidou in Paris, with its iconic red staircase rendered through black bands — a notable 42 years earlier.



Kvinna till Kvinna



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Previous and current mark of the Swedish organisation for violence against women Kvinna till Kvinna



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Bauhaus poster by Herbert Bayer, 1968. Note the “a” letters in the main title, and compare with the typography in the logotype of Kvinna till Kvinna.



Centre Pompidou

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Logo for the Centre Pompidou in Paris, designed by Jean Widmer in 1977.

The reading of form is a versatile process. As form has the capacity to employ human senses both emotionally and rationally, encouraging the reader to seek for meaning, the task of the graphic designer is to explore and decide what readings could possibly be triggered, keeping different aspects of reading (and the reader) in mind. The sense of pleasure may emerge while we feel we 'got something' as in intellectually understood; as well as it may emerge when we are left with wonder, as in emotionally stimulated. The latter usually happens when form speaks through complex craft.

In the case of these marks any pleasure or recognition should derive, and unmistakably so, from their nature of riddles to be solved, visual puns to unpack to arrive at some sort of 'eureka' moment. Both implement a conceptual approach where shapes form a letter which then conveys meaning: an "E", or a "=" symbol for 'equality' in the case of Kvinna till Kvinna, a "T" and "3" for Triennale museum. Admittedly rather dull riddles, where any other element of distinctiveness — whether through colour, form, texture, flow, or perspective — is left behind.

These emblems refer to the same design tradition, the one that defined the 1960s in the work of graphic designers such as AG Fronzoni, Armin Hofmann and Massimo Vignelli, where many marks looked virtually the same and black straight bands were in **great fashion**. But while, back then, some visual uniformity might somewhat be explained by limitations in tools or agility in the design process, the reasons for such choices are harder to justify today. Both these marks, if used alone, could go on to represent almost anything, and they could actually be interchangeable. It almost seems as if a logotype is not a matter of creating communication and recognition any longer, but rather a subscription to a certain archive of references.



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The decorative, organic visual language of the newly born Triennale (then called Biennale) in the poster by Aldo Scarzella (1923) speaks of a stark contrast with the visual choices of the same institution one century later.

This seems to be the case for the mark of the Finnish Human Rights Center by the agency Werkling (2012), another striped icon closely related to the logo of Kvinna till Kvinna. The designers themselves offer a **confusing rationale** to this design. They refer to the symbol both as “a self-evident choice” to speak about equality, as well as “indistinguishable”, admitting it required attaching a distinctive typography and colour to arrive to a “unchangeable combination”. To further compensate for the lack of visual qualities, *“A visual pun was hidden in between the text logo and symbol: negative space creates a Finnish flag’s cross, giving the logo some extra meaning”*.

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MÄNNISKÖRÄTTSCENTRET
HUMAN RIGHTS CENTRE



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Logo of the Finnish Human Rights Center by Werklig, 2012

The embedding of visual puns at the expenses of aesthetic distinctiveness seems to be a path to value frequently chosen by designers and welcomed by clients. Perhaps because it allows to bring the discussion away from so-dreaded matters of taste (for which no self-sufficient rationale seem to exist yet), to the kind of level that amuses everyone. I can imagine this is how most meetings went about in debating the new Triennale logo. While formal qualities can become ground of endless discussion, intellectual challenges seem to create a more neutral and safer path to consensus.

However, these instances demonstrate that when universal recognition is attempted by sacrificing formal distinctiveness, what one ends up with is some sort of indistinguishable familiarity.

One could argue that we should look at the visual system as a whole, and therefore not judge by the logotype alone. But given the immense weight attributed to marks in visual communication globally, to underestimate the implications of their form would be shortsighted.

Marks are brands in a nutshell. In the majority of cases, they set the tone of the communication and play a key role in how the rest of a visual identity unfolds. They also function as the primary agent of representation of the brand — and as any graphic designer knows, they are usually the one element subject to most heartfelt deliberations for clients. When the new Triennale logotype was revealed, some urged to wait for the visual identity to be revealed as well. One year later, the website of Triennale Design Museum looks like this:



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April 10, 2020

Spectators holding tickets for FOG performances scheduled and canceled from March 8 to April 13 can be refunded with a voucher (by April 15). For more information write to biglietteria.teatro@triennale.org.

April 2, 2020

Based on the provisions of the Decree of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers of April 1, 2020, the closure of Triennale Milano will last until Monday April 13, 2020.

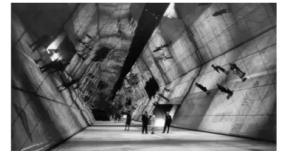
March 10, 2020

In view of the current situation regarding the spread of the Covid-19, the Fondation Cartier and Triennale Milano have decided to postpone the exhibition *Les Citoyens. Uno sguardo di Guillermo Kuitca sulla collezione della Fondation Cartier*. The opening at Triennale, initially scheduled for April 11, 2020, will be held later this year, on a date to be announced.

March 7, 2020

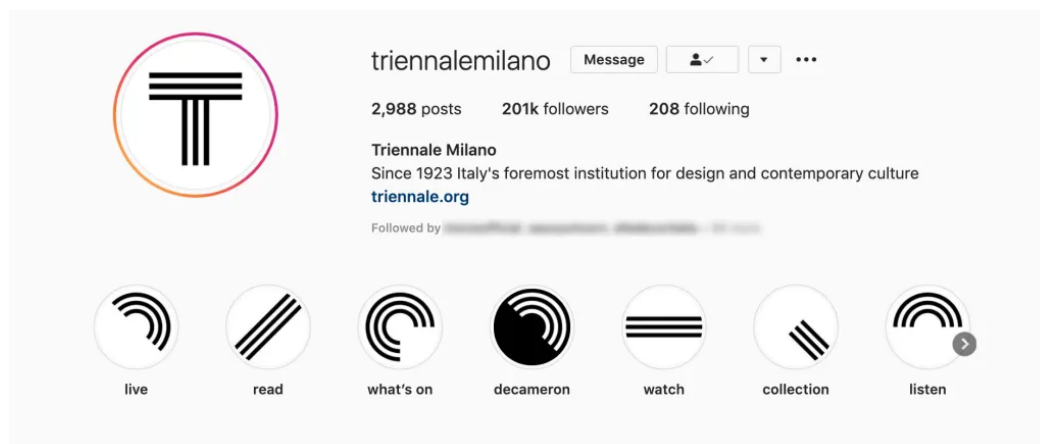
In compliance with the recent ruling of the Prime Minister's Office, we have decided to postpone FOG Triennale Milano Performing Arts Festival, originally scheduled from March 12 to June 4, 2020. The new dates will be announced shortly.

Collection and Archives →

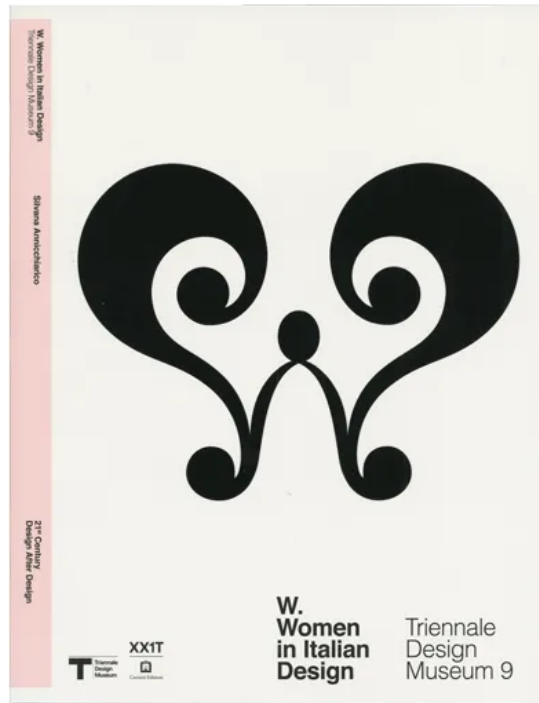


Caleidoscopio nella Sezione introduttiva a carattere internazionale, nel Salone d'onore

And from their social media account (April 2020) we get a glimpse of how the logo is being used as parent for derivative graphics that seem coming straight out of a book of most basic design exercises:



It is disheartening to see “Italy’s foremost institution for design and contemporary culture” choosing a visual language that catapults it 60 years into the past, saying very little about being foremost and certainly nothing of the inspirational, mesmerising visual variety the world of design is all about; choosing instead to fall back on ideas of quality that are outdated at best, dangerous at worst. Organisations such as these cannot afford to be stuck in a no-man’s-land between nostalgia and progress; so why do they believe this language is representative of their mission?



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Cover of “Women in Italian Design”, a publication by the Triennale Design Museum, curated by Silvana Annicchiarico and published by Corraini Edizioni, 2016. When curves are only used in connection with femininity, it is implied that the rest of the institutional communication is quite likely not about them.

This level of formal and conceptual austerity can hardly succeed in positioning these institutions as welcoming, forward-thinking entities, especially as it is connected to a specific history of violence. One of the most important tasks for us as visual designers is to be able to detect what form does intuitively; this we achieve through the ongoing comparison and archiving we do in our own minds of images, symbols, visual languages and their effects (constructed or otherwise). This core expertise goes hand in hand with carrying an awareness of what this “intuitively” is built upon, so that we are able to respond to different contexts and visual cultures, as well as moments in history.

The combination black on white carries the highest contrast for the human eye; it is the sharpest we can read. It also happens to be a key element in modern western graphic design history, considered the most neutral because interpreted as pure, the result of a process of refinement and catharsis, where all that is unnecessary is left behind. There we find the core, the essential, the substance of things: what “*really matters*”. This opposed to color, texture and decoration, which in this narrative remain cosmetic efforts, mere embellishments that can never reach the pure perfection of the black on white symbol. Black on white is also the most distant combination from nature, a pure abstraction. So goes for the sharp, straight line, the

fastest connection between two points — opposed to the un-precise, erratic nature of curvy lines.

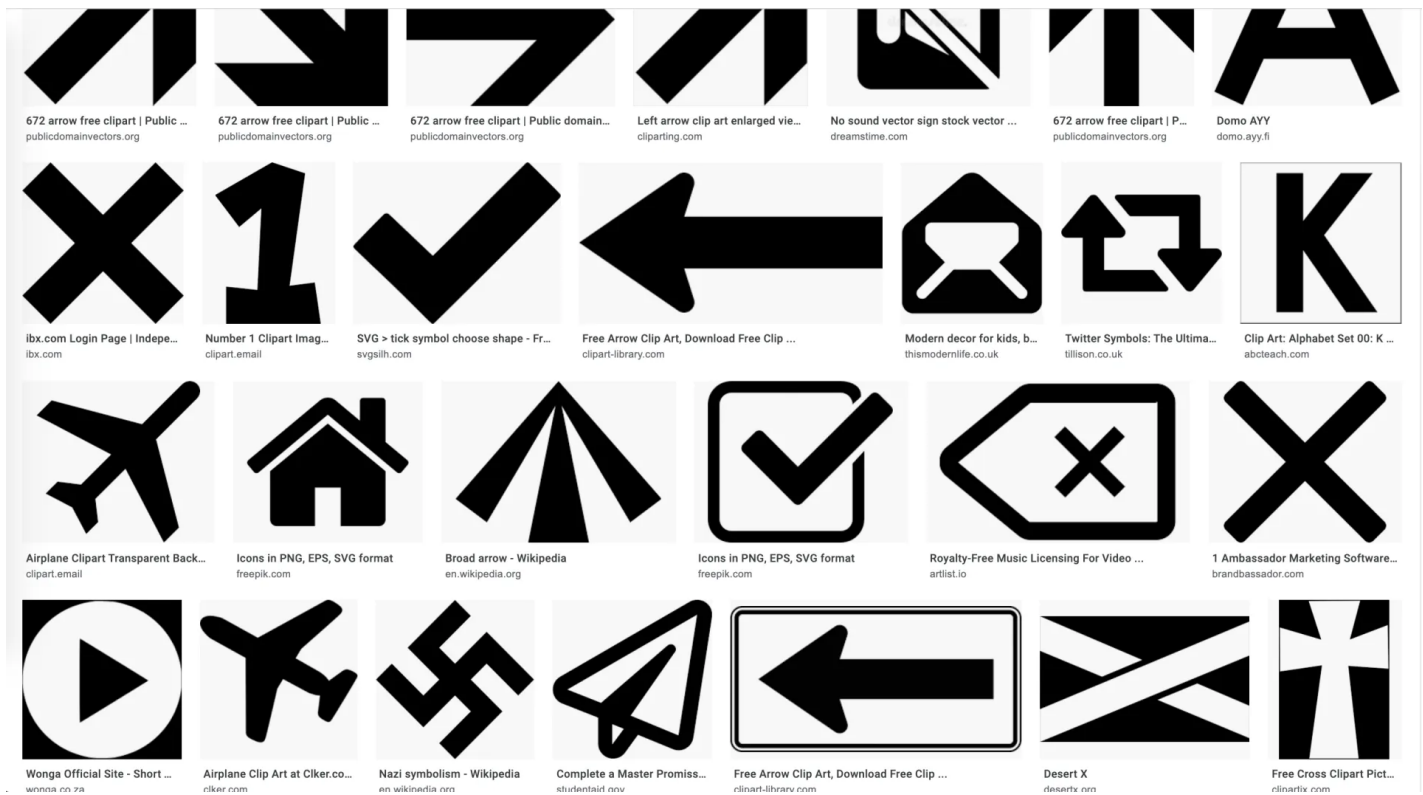
Abstraction is historically linked to technology, linked to white man, linked to culture and progress, authority and reason; **while figuration, roundness and nature are linked to woman, emotion and unreason.** Design history is a testament to such interpretations of reality, where most of women's efforts in design production have been downplayed as 'craft' and their value remains largely unrecognised — and kept at arm's length within ethnographic museums as 'decorative arts'.



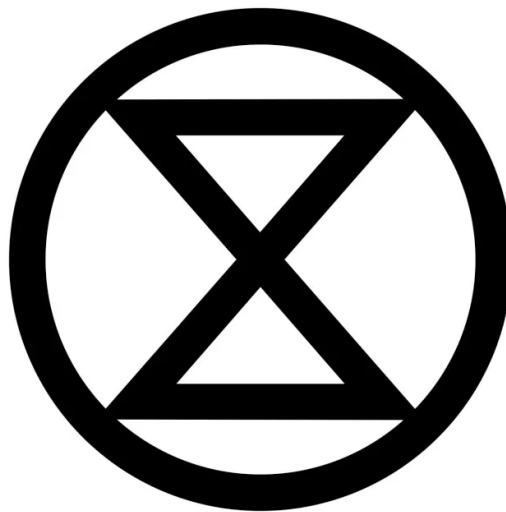
Logo of Women's History museum in Umeå, Sweden, 2019



The logo of **Women & Environments Magazine**, one of the longest surviving feminist magazines in Canada, by Elizabeth Forrest, ca. 2000.

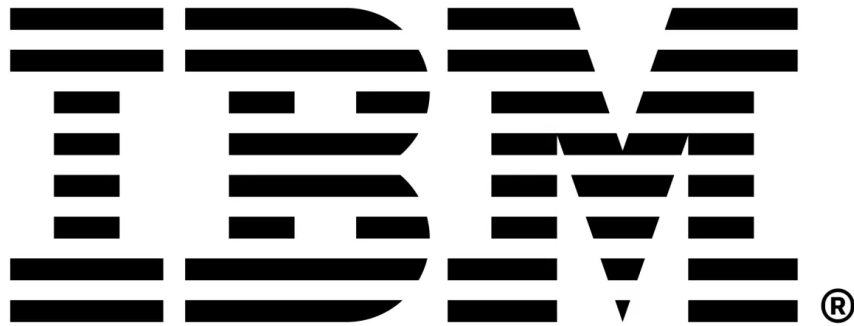


A Google Image search of similar images to the logo of Umeå Women's History museum. Given any image, the Google engine is programmed to suggest similar images to the one used as a source, based on images shared globally. Notice the third logo of the last row.



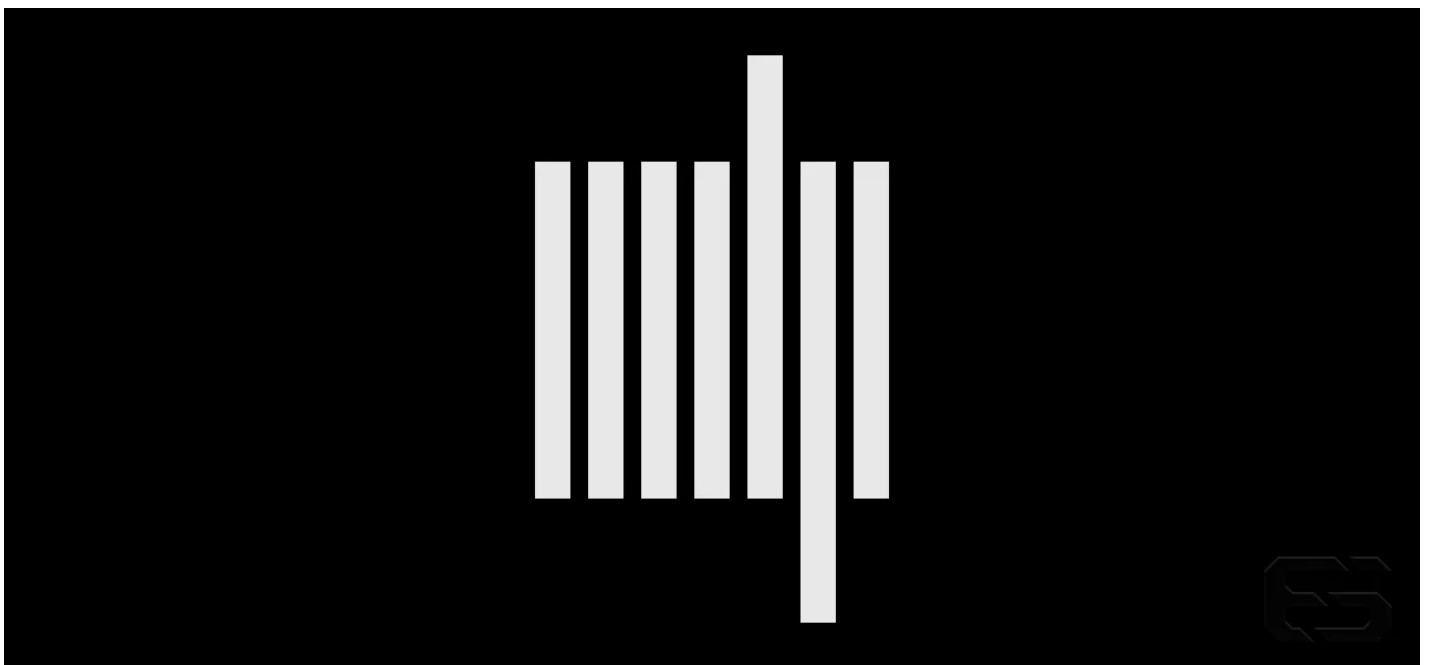
The **Extinction symbol** (ca. 2019, attributed to London-based artist Goldfrog ESP), designed to reference the threat of extinction caused by climate change and used internationally by environmental protesters. It is also the mark of choice by the environmental movement Extinction Rebellion. According to Wikipedia, the symbol has been called “this generation's peace sign”.

And while it is not the color black, per se, that carries violence — although in western visual history it has been chosen by some of the most violent groups to represent their mission, together with a certain kind of red; and even though the straight line does not exist in nature, and remains what is most distant from the human body and its gestures, the straight line is not violent in itself either. But when straight lines, sharp edges, perpendicularity, black and white, abstraction and intellectual exercise are combined to firmly exclude everything else, they carry a specific history, as well as feeling with them. They become cold-hearted, elitist, even intimidatory entities, and these values are directly transferred to the brands they represent. Overall, the visual landscape they build is predictable and of unexciting uniformity, to put it mildly.



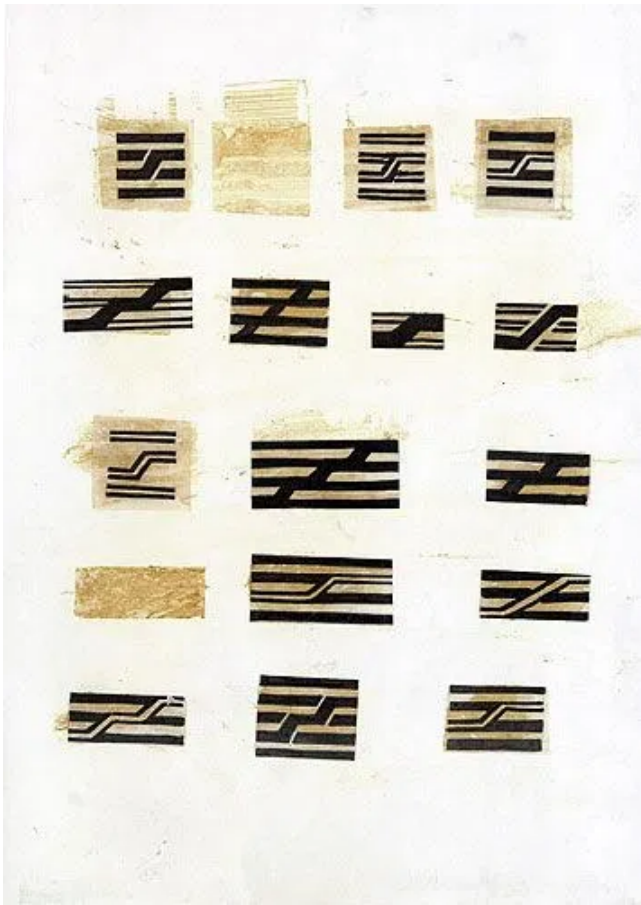
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IBM's 8-striped logo by Paul Rand, 1972. Rand made several versions of the logo, the first one being from 1956. Bars were added in 1966.



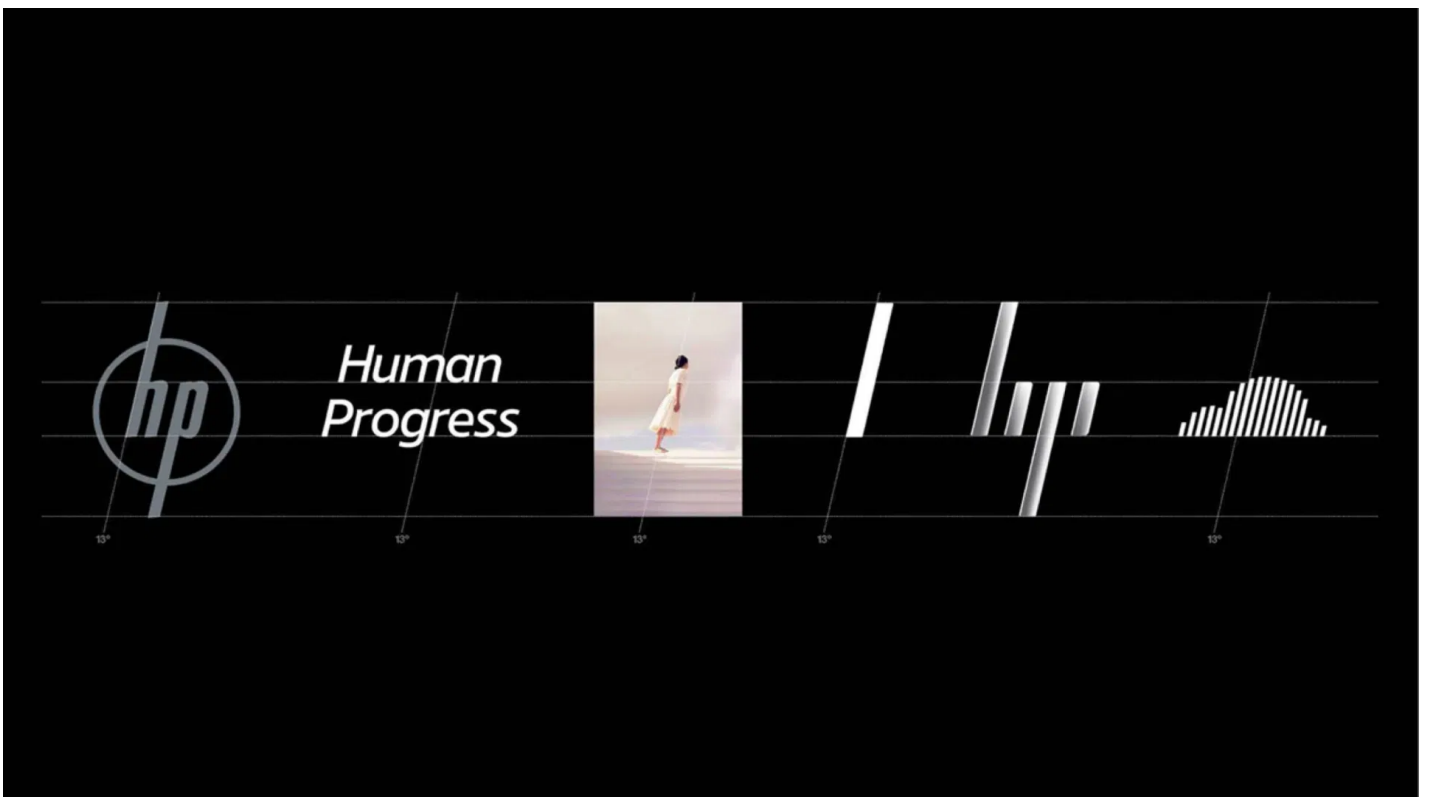
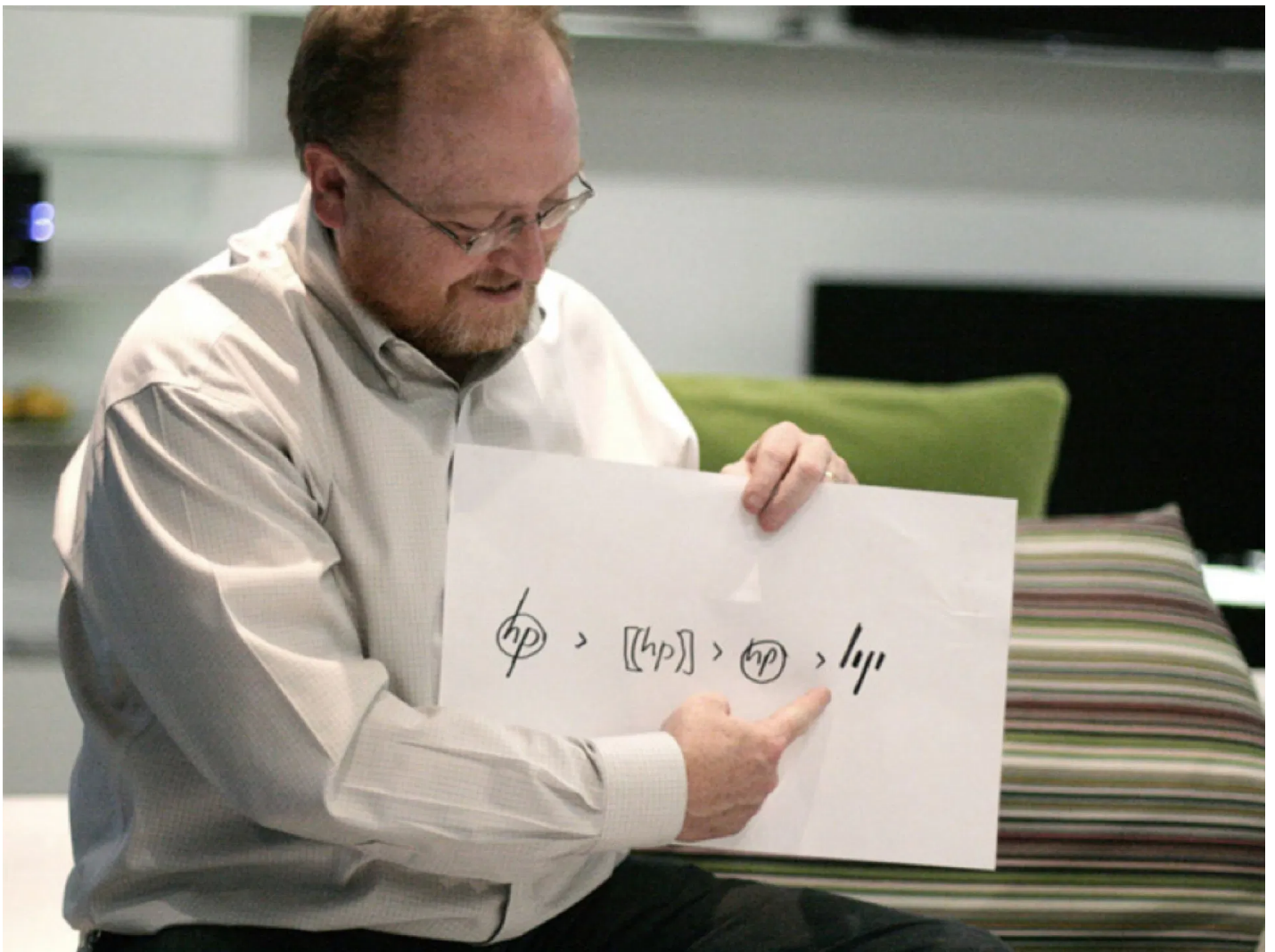
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Muriel Cooper's MIT Press logo, 1964



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Jean Widmer, preliminary study for the logo of the Centre Georges Pompidou, 1974-77



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Moving Brand's thought process in the creation of the new HP logo, 2011

Even though this visual language has been exported and enforced globally as *the* benchmark of “good design”, Switzerland and Scandinavia are where its grip still emerges the most. Today, these regions are arguably the greatest carriers of the purist tradition in visual communication and its links to ideas of white and male superiority; an ideology still so very dominant that websites and graphic design from these regions are often indistinguishable, with little signs of change.

What all these marks share is the attempt to position themselves as carriers of a kind of quality that rejects all that is distinct and complex. Indeed, *“quality, not vintage or vanity, is the determining factor”* in the success and endurance of an emblem, in the confident words of Paul Rand (who designed the famous IBM striped-logo in 1966). However, when specific ideas of formal quality build a landscape of disheartening uniformity, vanity might be something worth considering, after all.

And these developments show the urgency of going back to a discussion of what form *does*. Not only of how witty, ‘well’ designed, efficient, printable, logically constructed, impeccable and pure form can be, but especially of what visual landscapes it builds, what emotions it evokes, what it inspires in us. We cannot escape the emotional reading of form, so the advantages of limiting our relationship with it to an intellectual one remain unclear, if any at all exist. What happens when our reality and dreams are represented by black bands — and how are they transformed by them?

Further reading

[Four Counter-Narratives for Graphic Design History](#), by Aggie Toppins

[You could almost do anything](#), by Eli Schiff

[The Takeaway Effect](#), by Rick Poynor, on Print Magazine

[The Values of Color](#), by Adam Nathaniel Furman, on Saturated Space

Thank you to Anja Neidhardt, Maya Ober and Johanna Lewengard for their precious editing support. We are proud to publish this text on April 25, Italy’s yearly celebration of liberation from Nazi occupation.

Images are used for educational purposes only and belong to their respective owners. We could not trace the logotype of Kvinna till Kvinna back to its designer, if you are the author and wish to be credited, please contact us.

This article was updated 2 weeks after publication to include the mark of Women & Environments Magazine and the Extinction symbol.

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✦ branding, design history, graphic design, modernism, visual austerity

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