



**Design  
Icons series**  
Every month we speak to a  
legendary creative talent

#### Milton Glaser

—One of America's most prominent graphic designers, Glaser was born in New York in 1929 and attended the city's prestigious High School of Music and Art before completing formal training at Cooper Union School of Art and Bologna's Academy of Fine Arts. He founded Push Pin

Studios with Seymour Chwast in 1954, and *New York Magazine* with Clay Felker, in 1968, on which he was design director until 1977. Now principal at Milton Glaser Inc, he's the author of several books including *Art is Work*, *Drawing is Thinking* and *Milton Glaser: Graphic Design*. [www.miltonglaser.com](http://www.miltonglaser.com)

# Milton Glaser

“I realised you could create life through the vehicle of a pencil. That sense of miraculousness has never left me.” The cultural legend talks making design history with **Graeme Aymer**



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→ In his 80 years, Milton Glaser has seen a lot of design and fielded a lot of questions. As such, he's measured, reflective and questioning in conversation. In fact, when speaking to him you're reminded that he's a teacher as well as an artist and that you still have a lot to learn, whether it's about the importance of the history of art, what makes a good designer or exactly why he loves New York.

**Computer Arts: Did you have a 'eureka' moment in terms of wanting to draw for a living?**

**Milton Glaser:** I did. In fact, it's something I try to elicit from my classes because it's important to understand, if you're a practitioner, what it is that brought you to that perception and why it remains in your consciousness afterwards. When I was five years old, a cousin of mine came to take care of me, and he had a paper bag with him and he said, "Would you like to see a horse?" I said, "Yes," so he reached into the paper bag, pulled out a pencil and drew a picture of a horse on the side of the bag. Now, I'd never seen anyone actually draw anything resembling what was being talked about, because I'd only seen drawings being done by kids my own age.

I remember this: as he drew this picture, I was so astonished that I nearly fainted. In that moment, I realised you could create life through the vehicle of a pencil, and that sense of the miraculous has never left me.

**CA: Is there a piece of advice that you received early in your career to which you still refer today?**

**MG:** When I was in junior high school, considering my future – I was only 14 at the time – I had a science teacher who encouraged me because I was very good at science. He thought I should go to a famous high school in New York called Bronx High School of Science, but I was thinking of going to the High School of Music and Art. I decided to take the test for the High School of Music and Art, and I passed. I was walking in the hallway and my science teacher came walking in the opposite direction. He saw me and said, "I want to talk to you." He took me into his office and I was terrified because I felt I had basically betrayed him, in a sense. He told me to sit down, then he bent over and reached into his desk and pulled out a box of French Conté crayons and said, "Do good work." I still feel every day that one of the things propelling me onward is this blessing I got when he said, "Do good work." I have to say, if I had to give anyone else a piece of advice in a very simple-minded and fundamental way, that would be it.

**CA: Do you give that advice when you're teaching?**

**MG:** Let me tell you something about teaching: it's not what you say, it's who you are. The class immediately recognises the meaning of your life and commitment – you can blab for hours at a time and be

**01 Backwards glances:** Glaser's past pieces remain as **relevant as ever**, with his historic artwork forming the basis of New York's School of Visual Arts' ongoing subway campaign

unconvincing to a student who sees through it, or you can be something and transmit passion, dedication and interest to others. That's fundamentally what teaching is about.

**CA: When you look back at your body of work, what are the pieces that stand out for you – is there anything you particularly enjoyed?**

**MG:** Be clear on this: enjoyment has nothing to do with accomplishment or level of performance. Enjoying it is one thing, and I have to say that most of the things in my life I have enjoyed. But I also think what is so significant about my life is that I've been able to sustain my interest over such a long period of time. I've never got bored with most of what I've done.

**CA: What are you seeing – in terms of design – that's exciting to you at the moment?**

**MG:** I don't know what excitement means when you look at something, and I've never spent too much time looking at the field as my criteria for what I should be doing. I've been interested in history, anthropology and other cultures. Of course, you have to speak to some degree about the context of the work that's being done around you but you also have to transgress and invent your own vocabulary. So I can't say that I'm overwhelmed by the work that's going on at the moment – but I've seen too much of it. I've always thought that if you don't understand visual history, you basically can't invent very much that hasn't already been done.

**CA: Is there enough understanding of the past these days?**

**MG:** Well, the field itself is dominated by fashion and by the idea of selling stuff, so you have to be concerned with what's currently being done, and the economy is based on the idea of change and new styles, and this year's whatever. Unfortunately, that's not the real basis for serious work. If you're more serious about it, you have to be more concerned about durability and ideas that go beyond the moment, so I think the best designers around are always designers that have had a kind of broader look and don't change with the prevailing wind. If you find that all you're doing is copying what is already being done, you'll have no →



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## The essential Milton Glaser

Some of the designer's finest creative moments

### 01 Bob Dylan poster

Capturing the spirit of Dylan without relying on his voice is no simple task. However, Milton Glaser's illustration for a poster accompanying the singer's 1967 *Greatest Hits* simultaneously captures Dylan's shrouded mythology with the vibrant, convoluted magic of his ideas.

### 02 I ♥ NY

'I heart' NY' seems ubiquitous and eternal today but, in fact, it was designed by Milton Glaser in 1977 for the New York State Department of Commerce in a moment of inspiration during a taxi ride through his beloved city. So universal is it that 'to heart' has now become a verb, colloquially speaking.

### 03 Louis Armstrong, *Butter and Eggman*

When it comes to jazz trumpet, there are few as recognisable as Armstrong. Glaser's 1995 portrait for the cover of the *Butter and Eggman* compilation is highly impressionistic, capturing the passion and joy with which Armstrong approached music.

### 04 Olivetti poster

Glaser's 1993 poster promoting Olivetti's Quaderno laptop is an example of the artist subverting the rule. That is, just because a poster is flat and rectangular that doesn't mean that the featured image needs to be. A simple trick of perspective gives the poster a convincing illusion of depth.

### 05 School of Visual Arts poster

What is art? Glaser's 1996 poster for the School for Visual Arts'Art Is ...' campaign grapples with the difficulty of that question. Art is shadowy, it's surreal, it's wherever you look. It's whatever you want to make of it.

02 Glaser at the offices of **Milton Glaser Inc.**, whose work continues to fill the streets and galleries of New York. A recent piece is an 18-foot kinetic sculpture for the city's School of Visual Arts Theatre



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The fundamental question is has the accumulated work added to the health of the culture or have you been harmful? ●●

→ position in the field. You'll have nothing to offer and, after 20 years of doing it, you're nowhere.

**CA: How do you see yourself – artist, graphic designer, illustrator? Does it matter?**

**MG:** It depends on what you mean by 'matter'. Historically, it doesn't matter. History makes a judgment of what you do and that's quite independent of this week's typeface. When I look at Toulouse-Lautrec, it doesn't matter whether he was a poster designer or a painter; he was an artist working within a particular medium.

**CA: How important is New York City to your work?**

**MG:** I've often thought about it and I can't imagine a life, for me, outside of the city. I would have found another way of being in the world and doing work, I'm sure. All I know is the nature of this city: its complexity, its diversity, that it offers so many opportunities for learning and the fact that it's so contradictory.

New York is not the most beautiful of cities. It changes all the time. It's not a city that imposes its vision on people who come in; they impose their vision here. Everything is open, everything is up for grabs, everything is to be questioned. That aspect of not accepting anything as being ultimate or final truth seems to me a source of great vitality, energy and options for people. Anything can happen here and that, of course, creates a very different environment than a culture where very little can happen.

**CA: What is your relationship to digital technology?**

**MG:** I have an 'arm's length' relationship to it but I'm also mad about what you can do with a computer. I love working with other people on the computer, sort of like dancing. It's a way of working collaboratively that's never been done before. It's a great medium for extending ideas. But you have to come to it with an existing sense of form. If you don't have form and understanding of visual phenomena and don't understand how to draw, from my point of view, it's a very mischievous instrument because it forces you into patterns that it imposes.

Incidentally, in teaching, I find a lot of students beginning to resent the computer as too powerful to use without thinking. They now describe it the same way; they say, "Before I start to do anything, I make notes and sketches and draw because otherwise the computer dominates everything I do." I think that's an interesting perception. I also think it's true.

**CA: How do you feel about being featured as a 'design icon'?**

**MG:** The most important thing in design, it seems to me, is the consequence of your action, and whether you're interested, fundamentally, in persuading people to do things that are in their interests. The fundamental question I always ask is: has the accumulated work actually added to the health of the culture or have you been harmful? It's a question I ask my students. A week or two ago, I gave a class of 28 the question of whether they would be willing to do something that would ultimately cause the user's death, referring, among other things, to cigarettes. I was surprised that five were willing to do that. On the other hand, no one in the class was willing to work for a company that employed child labour, so you realise that the ethical nature of the field is very peculiar. Sometimes ethics are entirely based on status or what's hot at the moment. I think one of the things you use to evaluate the meaning of your work is whether you have obeyed the Hippocratic injunction 'Do no harm.' I think that's a very desirable description of an attitude that would be beneficial.

**CA: What's next for you and the company. Where are you heading?**

**MG:** Good Lord! I'm heading straight for the grave. I'm 80 years old, for God's sake! You cannot anticipate an endless career. I just come in here and try to do a good day's work enthusiastically, and not think about where I'm going.

