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The corporate trailblazers

To counter the market research driven approach of advertising agencies, designers in post-war Britain formed groups, offering a more holistic and co-ordinated design service than ever before.

During the late 1940s and early 1950s a small group of designers embraced the concept of 'design co-ordination'¹ in an attempt to unify the visual output of their clients. This shift in emphasis – favouring order over expression – represented a tipping point in the professionalisation of graphic design in Britain, helping to transform designers from individual commercial artists into business practitioners working predominantly in groups.

Design bodies

Attempts had been made to establish graphic design as a recognised profession from the beginning of the twentieth century.² Of particular note were the various design bodies formed throughout the first half of the century, including the Design and Industries Association (1915), the Society of Industrial Artists (1929) and the Council of Industrial Design (1944). Although these organisations had some limited success in their attempts to professionalise design, it wasn't until after the Second World War that significant progress was made. The burgeoning possibilities of post-war Britain provided the opportunity for graphic designers to establish themselves as the professionals they had long wanted to be. The appeal of such professional standing was the promise of a better status in society, not to mention the possibility of an improvement in designers' fees and salaries.

The first design groups

After the First World War, recognised individual designers and commercial artists had lost much of their work

1. 'Design co-ordination' is a term used by FHK Henrion and Alan Parkin in *Design Co-ordination and Corporate Image* (1967) and encompasses the notions of 'house style', 'corporate identity' and 'branding'. Although each of these terms has a particular emphasis (both historically and conceptually), they each describe a desire to create a co-ordinated company image, or visual identity.

to firms of advertising agents. This was due in part to the market research that advertising agencies had begun to offer. These additional services helped them to bolster their business propositions and win them new clients.

At this time a few select designers realised that by working together in groups they could offer a more holistic design service that would enable them to compete directly with advertising agencies for business. This service would pool together the knowledge and skills of the individuals within the group, allowing them to take on larger jobs beyond the realm of the individual artist-designer. One such designer to identify the opportunities of group practice was Milner Gray – one of the founding partners of the multi-disciplinary design group Bassett-Gray.

Bassett-Gray was among the first practising design groups in Britain, having been founded in 1921 by Gray and brothers Charles and Henry Bassett. They described themselves as a 'Group of Artists and Writers' and their aim was to 'steer a middle course between the stultifying influence of the commercial art factory on the one hand and the limited opportunities of complete isolation on the other'.³ The group contained a number of designers and artists, including painter Graham Sutherland. Designer Misha Black joined the group in 1933, signalling the beginning of a long association with Gray that lasted the rest of their careers.

In 1935 the group reorganised to become the Industrial Design Partnership. This formed the prototype for the Design Research Unit, formed in 1942 by Gray, Black

2. The term 'graphic design' is widely thought to originate from an article by the American W.A. Dwiggins, written in 1922. It was not widely adopted in Britain until well after 1948, when Richard Guyatt introduced the term within an educational context at the Royal College of Art.

3. Avril Blake, *Milner Gray*, London, Design Council, 1986, p.8.

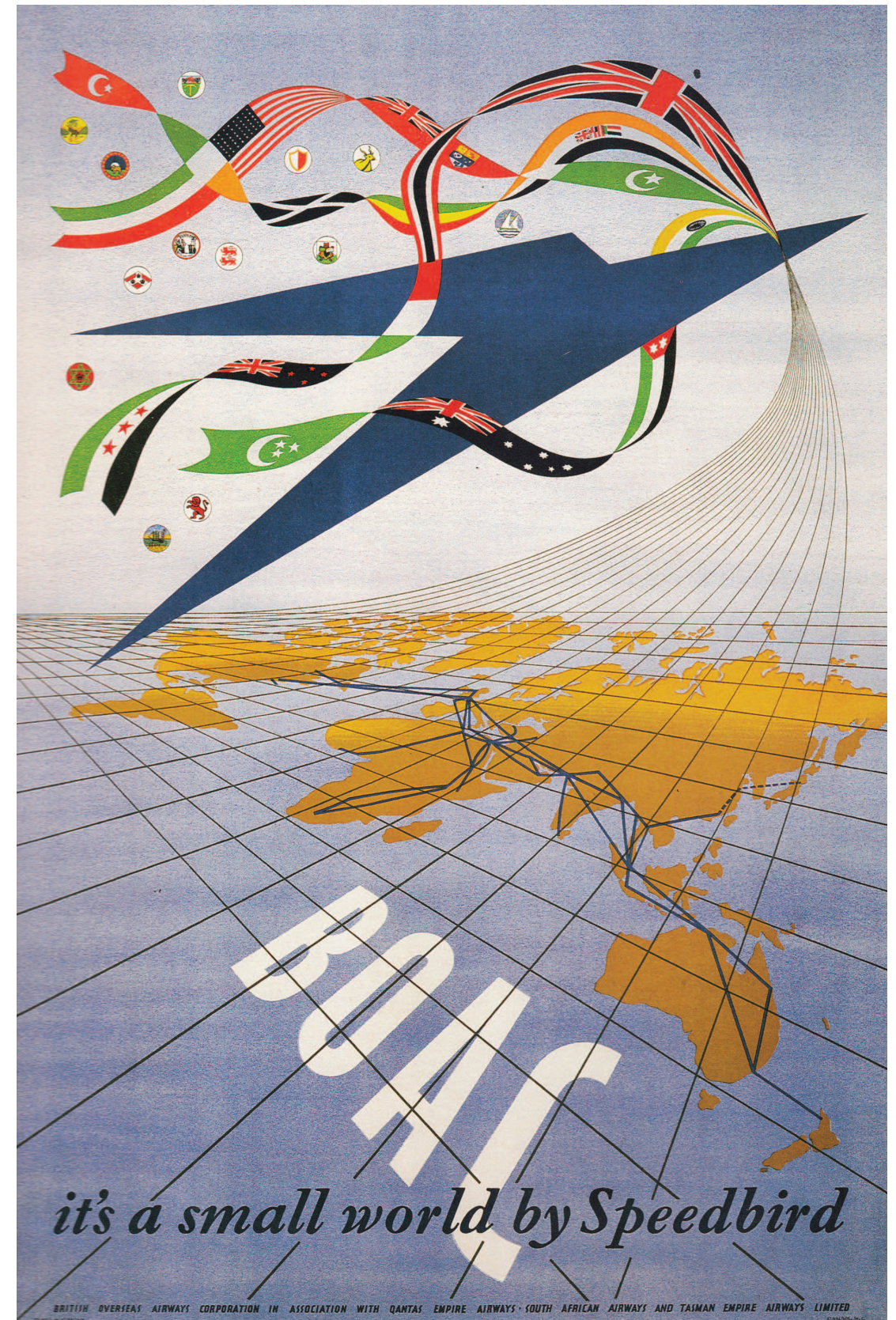


Figure 1: BOAC Speedbird poster; FHK Henrion, BOAC, 1947.



Figure 2. Ilford packaging and stationery, Design Research Unit, 1946.



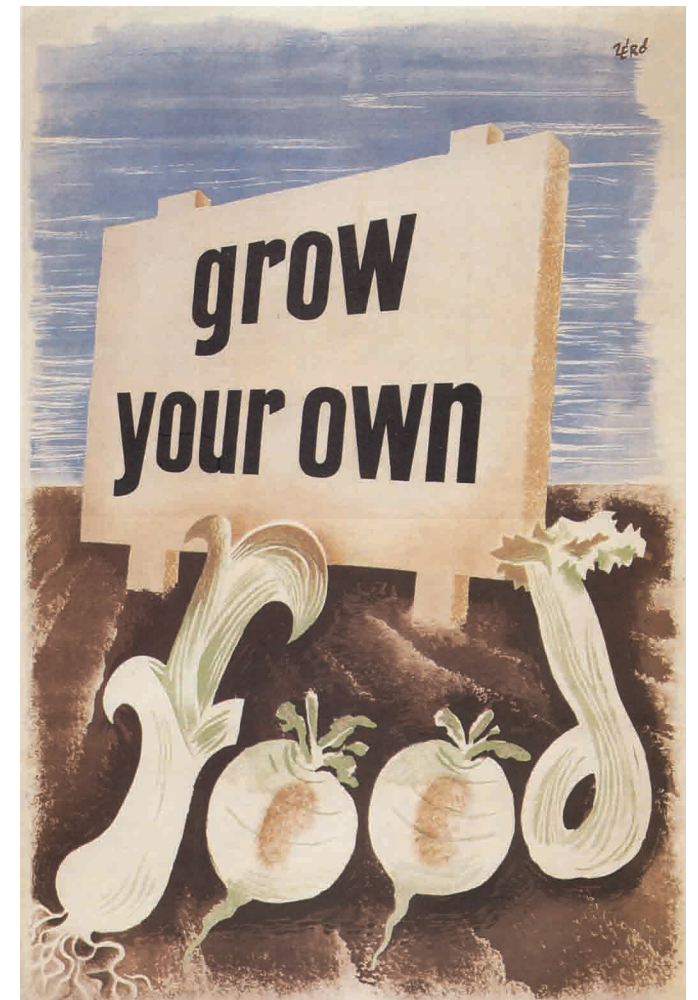
Figure 4. 'Four Hands', FHK Henrion, the Ministry of Information, 1943.

Figure 5. 'Eat Greens for Health', Hans Schleger (Zéró), the Ministry of Agriculture, 1942.

Figure 6. 'Grow Your Own Food' poster, Hans Schleger, the Ministry of Food, 1942.



Figure 3. British Rail Corporate Identity manuals, Design Research Unit, 1956–66.



and advertising entrepreneur Marcus Brumwell. DRU (as they were commonly known) set the precedent for other design groups to follow. In 1946 they completed what could be considered the first comprehensive design co-ordination programme in Britain for the photographic company Ilford (Figure 2). Their relationship with Ilford lasted until 1966 and spanned two separate design schemes. They went on to work with various high-profile clients including Austin Reed, Dunlop, London Transport and the Watney Mann Group. But their design programme for British Rail (1956–66) was perhaps their most seminal work, described at the time as 'the largest

and most complex of any attempted in this country'.⁴ It included the design of locomotives, hovercraft, freightliner containers, car ferries, station names, signing and uniforms (Figure 3).

The influence of émigrés

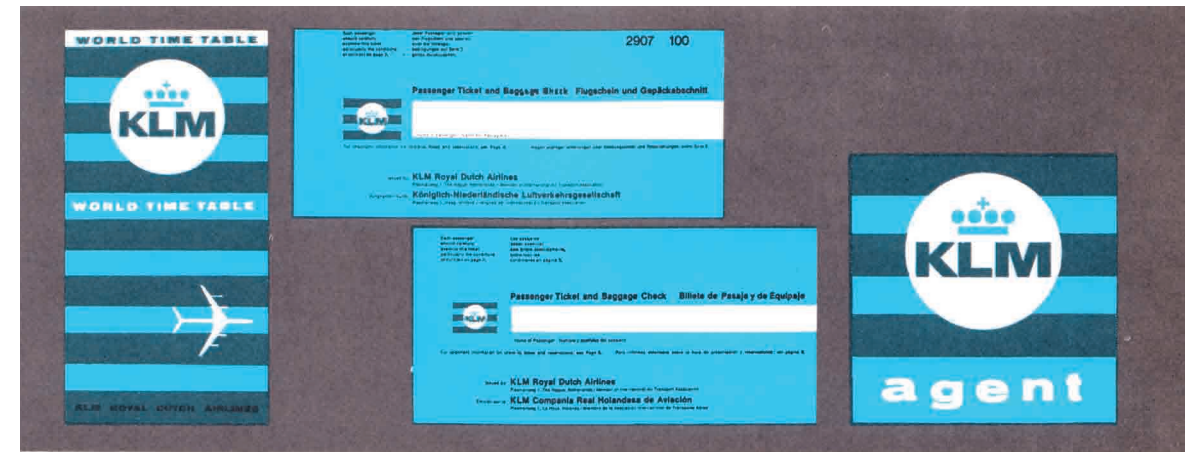
Whilst DRU had been formed by a group of various individuals who might best be described as 'Industrial Designers', the two key design groups that followed shortly after – Henrion Design Associates (1951) and Hans

4. John and Avril Blake, *Practical Idealists*, London, Lund Humphries, 1969, p.110.



Figure 7 (left): Redesigned KLM logotype, Henrion Design Associates, 1961.

Figure 8 (opposite, top): KLM example applications, Henrion Design Associates, 1961.



Schleger & Associates (1954) – were formed by individuals known predominantly for their work as poster artists. Designer Ken Garland lists Henrion and Schleger – along with Abram Games – as the ‘top trio’ of British poster design.⁵ Both Henrion and Schleger were German émigrés settling in Britain in the 1930s, and they each built a strong reputation with their posters for clients such as London Transport, the General Post Office and the Ministry of Information (Figures 1, 4–6).

Henrion and Schleger had each gained experience with design co-ordination prior to the formation of their design groups. Schleger worked with knitwear business W. Raven & Company on a design programme from 1946 through to 1950, whilst Henrion completed the first of his many design programmes for the paper company Bowater in 1949. The adoption of these design co-ordination programmes signalled the beginning of a dramatic change in the way that design objects were conceived. It was a move away from the individual object created in isolation, and towards the comprehensive alignment of a company’s entire visual output.

It is interesting to note the career path of Abram Games, the third designer who completed Garland’s ‘top trio’ of poster design. Around the middle of the century, Games created designs for two of the most prestigious identity jobs in Britain: the first BBC ident (often referred to as ‘Bat’s wings’) and the Festival of Britain logo. But in subsequent years Games seems to have veered away from the business opportunities presented by design co-ordination, focusing primarily on one-off designs in the mode of an individual craftsman.

Meanwhile Henrion and Schleger continued in their efforts to inaugurate design co-ordination in Britain, with high-profile programmes for both domestic and international clients. Henrion’s client list included Blue Circle Cement, British European Airways, C&A, KLM, the London Electricity Board and the Post Office, while

Schleger worked with the British Sugar Corporation, Edinburgh International Festival, Finmar, Jaeger and Mac Fisheries.

Over time, an increasingly large proportion of their work became focused on design co-ordination programmes. But this unification of their clients’ design output came at the expense of the one-off designs that had forged their early reputations.

Design as a science

Whilst advertising agencies had used market research and consumer psychology to substantiate their ideas, designers’ work must have seemed somewhat frivolous in contrast. As a consequence, designers began to adopt a more ‘scientific’ approach to their work to support the presentation of their ideas to clients. FHK Henrion’s design programme for KLM was an early exemplar of this scientific analysis within graphic design (Figures 7 and 8). Henrion conducted various tests in order to prove the effectiveness of the redesigned KLM logotype (Figures 9 and 10). One such study simulated the logo moving at high speed (Figure 10). This was intended to show the clarity of the new logo in comparison to the original design. Although not highly scientific, Henrion’s tests were effective in persuading KLM to go ahead with the new proposals. Henrion explained that under poor viewing conditions the logo became ‘more crown like’ as a result of ‘the perceptual processes discovered by gestalt psychologists’.⁶ The KLM crown logotype remains in use today, unchanged 50 years after its original creation.

Design Research Unit were another early exponent of this more analytical and systematic approach to design,

5. Ken Garland, *Word in Your Eye: Opinions, Observations and Conjectures on Design, from 1960 to the Present*, Reading: University of Reading, 1996, p.22.
 6. Mike Hope, FHK Henrion (interactive compact disc), FHK Henrion Archive and Research Library, University of Brighton, 1989.

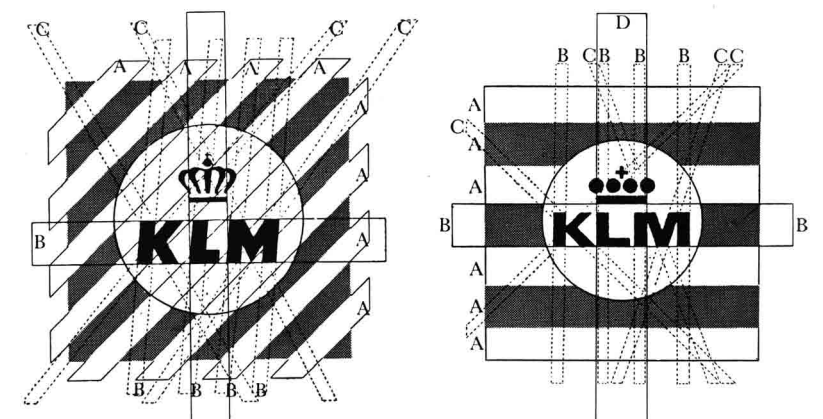


Figure 9 (right): Analytical comparison between original logo (left) and redesign (right), Henrion Design Associates, 1961.

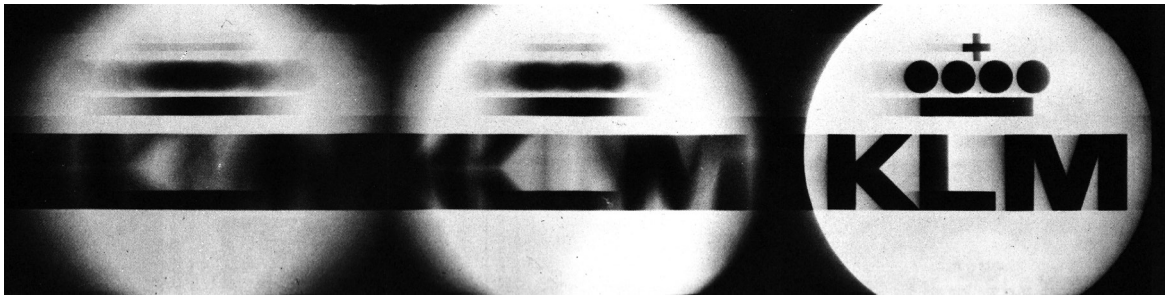


Figure 10: Testing the redesigned logotype to demonstrate its clarity, Henrion Design Associates, 1961.

as the component parts of their company name suggest. Milner Gray had proposed a three-part structure for the company that embraced the functions of design, research and administration. According to Avril Blake, 'Bassett Gray taught Milner that there were two stages in solving design problems, the second was the personal, intuitive creation of the drawing or artefact, the first, equally important, was analytical and objective.'⁷ This emerging 'analytical and objective' emphasis on design was partly responsible for the considerable growth of design management after the war.

As business manager, Dorothy Goslett was a key member of DRU from the outset. In her 1961 book *Professional Practice for Designers*, she asserts the importance for designers to be practical businessmen if they are to turn their ideals into reality. The dual role of designer-businessman seems to have been one that FHK Henrion relished throughout his lengthy career. In contrast, Hans Schleger seems to have been a somewhat reluctant business person, preferring to keep his studio small and his identity programmes more low-key. Fiona MacCarthy suggests that: 'If Schleger's early supremacy in corporate identity was to be eclipsed as the profession of design management expanded over the next decades, this was



Figure 14. Gleem poster artwork, FHK Henrion, 1959.

because he regarded himself primarily as an artist, refusing to transform himself into a businessman.'⁸

So while Henrion's work focused on systematic manuals for the application of rigid consistency across various applications, Schleger seems to have been more relaxed, establishing firm foundations for his design co-ordination programmes, before allowing them to evolve in response to the demands of each specific application. Schleger's work for Edinburgh International Festival is a case in point. A logo was created that featured two birds positioned within a depiction of Edinburgh castle (Figure 11). This logo was initially applied with great restraint, building up a recognisable visual impression across a range of applications. But over subsequent years, it was employed in increasingly diverse ways. The birds that had originally been depicted within the confines of the castle were now free to create more open and dynamic illustrative compositions (Figures 12 and 13). In the words of Schleger's wife and colleague Pat: 'we began to let the birds out of the castle'.⁹

Schleger's work for Edinburgh International Festival demonstrates the fluidity of his approach to design co-ordination. This mindset enabled him and his associates to combine the best of both worlds: fusing the consistency and coherence found in Henrion's work, with the virtuosity of one-off designs.

The end of the ideas poster

Whilst these emerging design groups had been campaigning for the importance of design co-ordination, designers like Games continued to work as independent artists creating predominantly one-off designs. This was in strong contrast to Henrion's work for KLM which exhibited such rigorous, slavish consistency across a variety of design applications.

In 1959, Henrion created a poster for a Proctor and Gamble toothpaste called Gleem (Figure 14). The work

7. Avril Blake, *Milner Gray*, London: Design Council, 1986, p.15.

8. Pat Schleger, *Zéro: Hans Schleger, a Life in Design*, London, Lund Humphries, 2001, p.17.

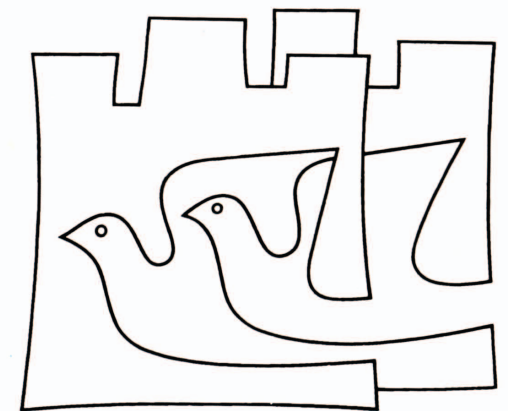
9. Pat Schleger, *ibid.*, p. 200.

10. Mike Hope, FHK Henrion interview (video clip), FHK Henrion Archive and Research Library, Brighton, University of Brighton, 1989.



Figure 11 (right): *Edinburgh International Festival logo*, Hans Schleger and Associates, 1966.

Figures 12 and 13 (above): *Edinburgh International Festival posters*, Hans Schleger and Associates, 1973 (left) and 1975 (right).



was commissioned by advertising agency Erwin Wasey. When Henrion presented it to them, their response was rather unexpected. In his words:

When I showed it to them, they said it is much too good for us, we don't want it. I said, I beg your pardon, what do you mean? Well, what we need is a poster which is part of a total campaign in the press and on television. So in the press and on television we have certain actors using Gleem toothpaste and on the posters we want the same thing ... I realised it was the end of what I called the ideas poster.¹⁰

There was a distinct irony in the situation. Henrion had been one of the key protagonists in the promotion of design co-ordination, yet he seems to have been somewhat dismayed by the effect it had had on his beloved ideas poster.

David Preston is a graphic designer and typographer. He lectures regularly at Central Saint Martin's College in London. His research interest in the history of corporate identity stems from his BA thesis on the designs of FHK Henrion – during which he helped to catalogue Henrion's posters in the designer's Hampstead studio.