

Bradbury Thompson: Graphic Design as Artform

This legendary American designer discusses the methodology behind some of his most noteworthy projects.

By Todd Hays

Bradbury Thompson is one of this century's most distinguished practitioners of graphic design. He came to prominence in the 1940s through his work with the influential publication, *Westvaco Inspira-*

tions, and at 79 is still active.

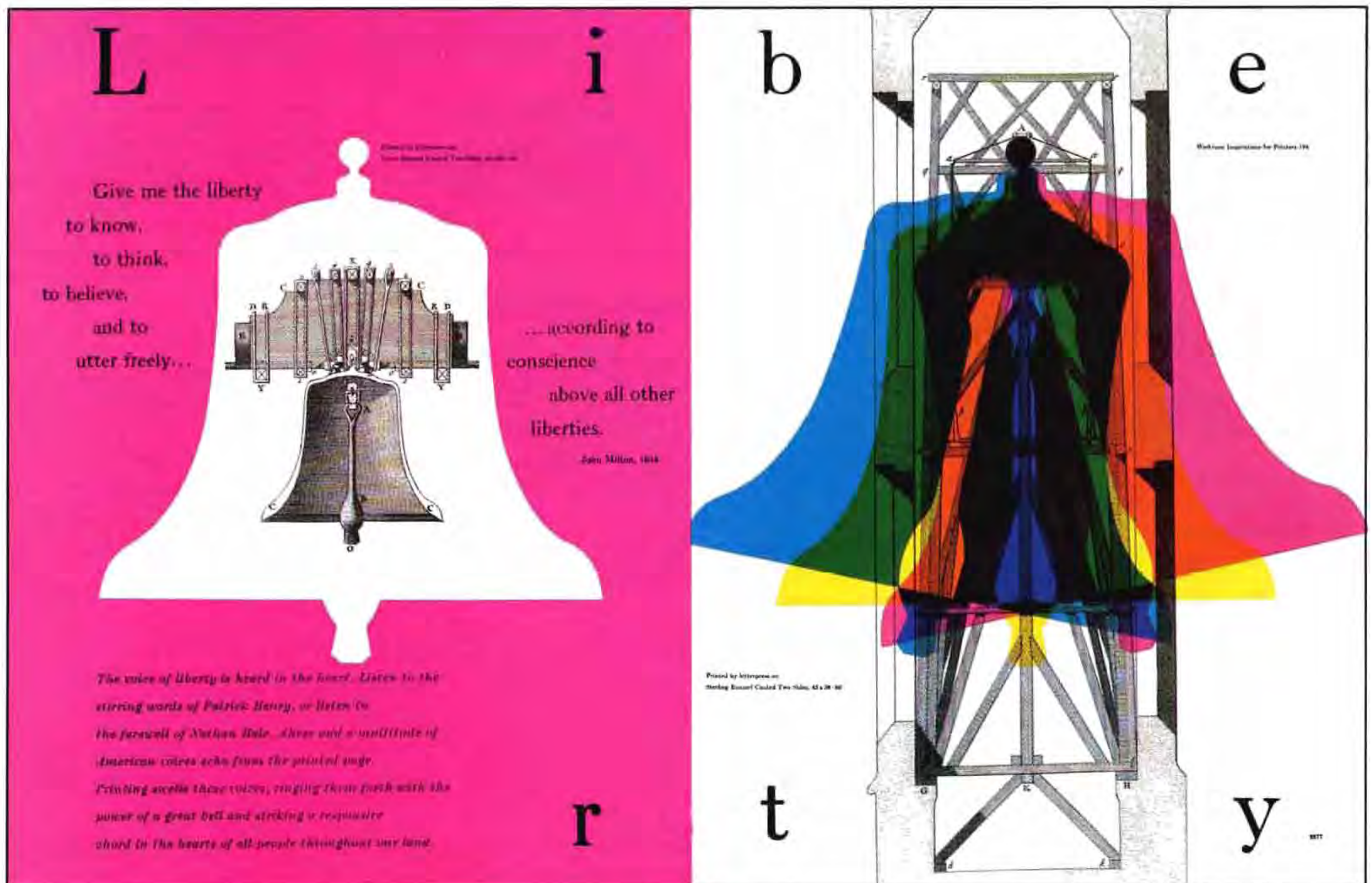
Working within limited budgets, Thompson pioneered new ways of working with the four-color process plates and the typecase. He combined these inventive print processes with modern art, photography, old engravings and letterforms used as graphic elements, thereby expanding the boundaries of the printed page. His classic layouts and typography have been a model to other designers.

Thompson's work has crossed all graphic disciplines. He designed the formats for *Mademoiselle*, *ARTnews* and some three dozen other magazines, including *Smithsonian*. He has also designed limited edition books, corporate identity programs,

trademarks and is a prolific stamp designer, with more than 100 to his credit.

Born in 1911 in Topeka, Kansas, Thompson studied economics at Washburn College in his hometown. In 1938 he moved to New York and became art director for the printing firm, Rogers-Kellogg-Stillson. The following year, he created his first edition of *Westvaco Inspirations* which he designed until 1961. He has also served on the Yale School of Art faculty for 30 years.

In the following interview Thompson comments on his fascination with magazines, his work for the U.S. government during World War II, the unique problems of designing stamps and his much lauded work on the Washburn College Bible.



SBS Even now, many people do not understand graphic design as a profession. What led you into graphic design in the 1930s when it was even lesser known?

Thompson Looking back, the thing that added as much to my involvement in graphic design was magazines. There was a drug store right in the neighborhood and in high school all the kids would hang out there. I can remember poring over all these wonderful magazines like *Vanity Fair*, *Vogue* and *Bazaar*. While my friends were sitting at the counter having a Coke, I sat over by the magazine stand.

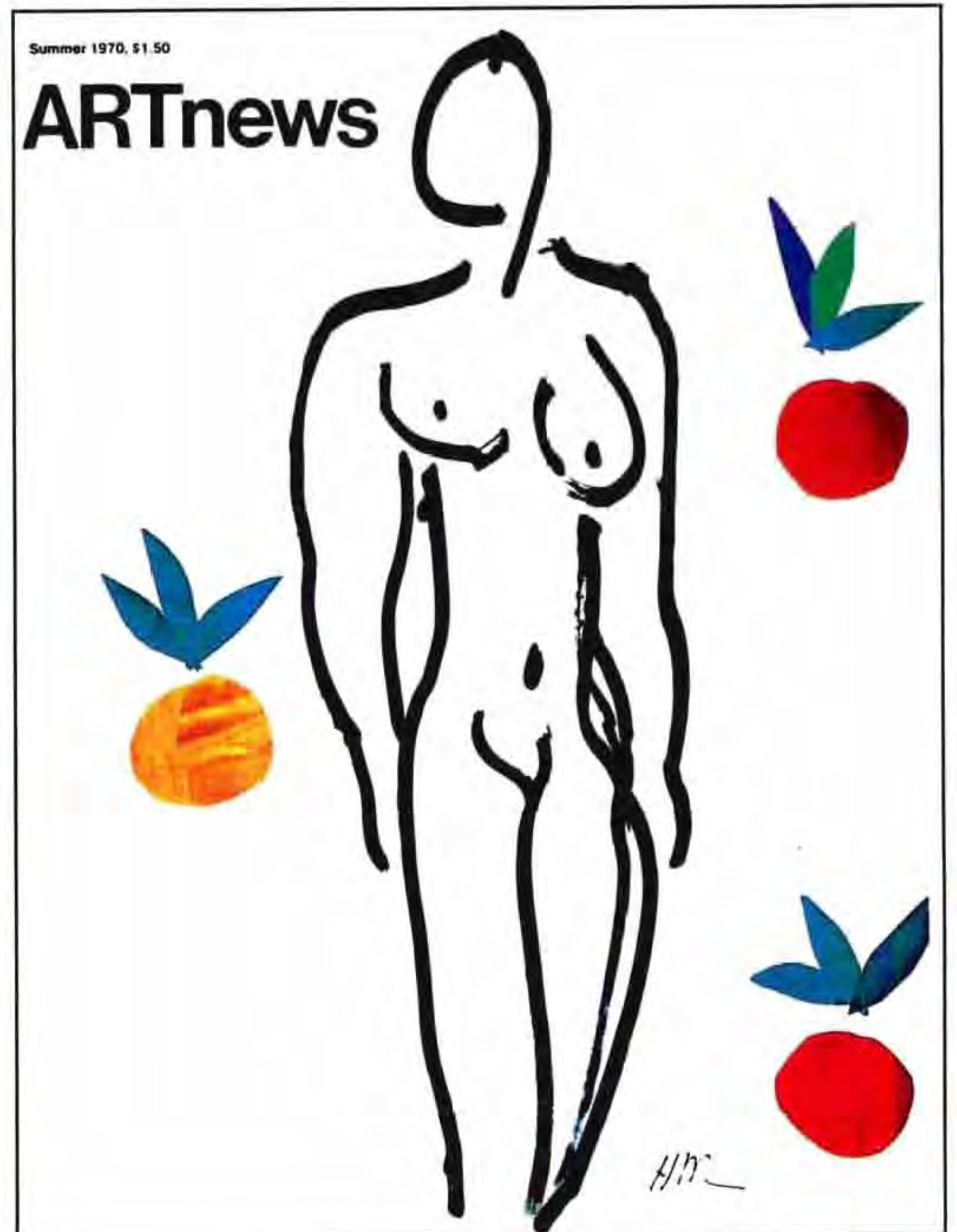
SBS Since there were few educational pro-

grams for would-be graphic designers during that time, is much of your training through experience?

Thompson Yes. I was just as involved in the process during high school and college as I am now. I was sort of a jack-of-all-trades. Working with illustration, editing, drafting, typography and layout throughout the design process gave me a good understanding of the whole art. I was also fortunate to have a printer just five blocks away. I was able to see projects go through the different stages of printing to the finished piece. Knowing the inside of reproduction made it possible to use the four-color process in creative as well as practi-

Liberty Bradbury Thompson's use of engravings and work with the four-color process plates helped expand the boundaries of the printed page. The engravings used in this 1953 design from Westvaco's *Inspirations* are from the French *Encyclopédia* of Denis Diderot (opposite).

Magazines Thompson has been fascinated with magazines throughout his career. He designed this cover for *Mademoiselle* (below), which he art directed for 15 years, with two titles and two photographs. His design goals were to intrigue a young woman interested in current fashion trends and, on the newsstand, to please the sales manager. For 27 years, Thompson was also design director of *ARTnews*. In this cover (also below), the sans serif title was especially compatible with the Matisse drawing.



cal ways. Understanding how the pieces all fit together gave me the ability to reorganize them in my later work.

SBS Going back to your days at the corner drug store, you singled out the fashion magazines as the ones you enjoyed. Why?

Thompson These were the magazines that presented the best of European and American art, while other magazines of the day made little or no use of fine art or the newer trends in typography. The art directors made fashion magazines sophisticated and exciting by being the first to incorporate the work of great artists and photographers like Edward Steichen.

SBS Magazines are a staple of your repertoire. In addition to original magazine designs, you've also worked on several redesigns of existing publications. How do you begin the process on such projects?

Thompson Working on magazines brings a great deal of pleasure. Often I would be called in when the publisher had criticized the division director because the revenue was down. Then the division director got after the editor in chief. And the editor in chief got after the managing editor. And the managing editor got after the art director. And the art director got after the production man. At this point I would be called in because it was time for a doctor. I would listen to the problems the group presented and then give them a way of all working together. We would make plans that they agreed upon and were appropriate. By listening to them I realized: I'm the doctor, diagnosing and providing a remedy.

SBS What kind of guidelines do you leave them with?

Thompson You have to provide a good manual that tells what kind of type, what style of type. Is it flush left ragged right? Is it centered headings? Whatever. I have always been very clear on recommending those things that were absolutely the best. You can't use anything better than flush left and ragged right. It's easier to make layouts, it's easier to set type, easier to read and more dynamic. The proper style is crucial. For instance, you can't read all cap words, you have to use upper and lower case. And if you want integrity, you use



M Stands for Men Overlapping shapes within the same letter help to create an exciting page in this 1953 design. To accompany asymmetrical graphics, the type is set in centered style on the left page, and is flush right and ragged left on the right page.

upper and lower case not only for the text but for the headings as well. That way it all has unity.

SBS What is your procedure for creating the design and developing the manual?

Thompson I meet with the client and listen to the problems and desires. Then I go home and first prepare, not a cover, not the more fun parts of the job, but rather the most fundamental, the most used, like a feature layout. That way they see the uses of heading type, captions, subheads, text, everything. Once I arrive at what is readable and what is appropriate, then I design the contents page, the cover, and so on. The cover should reflect the integrity of the typography inside. If you use Galliard inside you should use Galliard on the cover.

SBS Once you have finished a manual, do you feel like your job is done or would you rather work with the team for a few issues to make sure its members understand the essence of the design?

Thompson No, I would rather make a manual that is good enough and workable

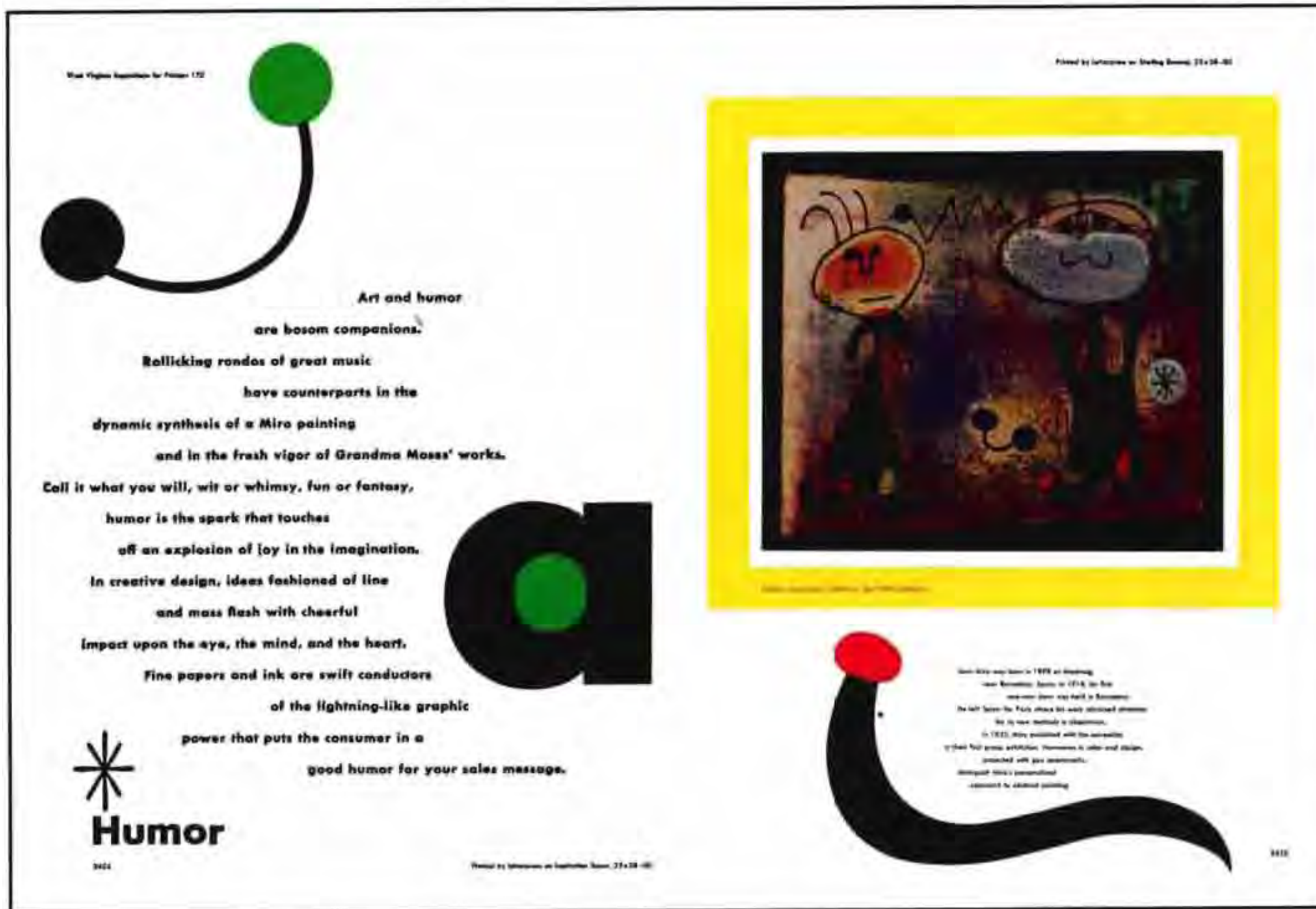
enough that they can carry it out on their own. I think the most important issue here is that everyone involved agrees on what you've provided them.

It's important to see it through the first issue, watch it and offer benevolent criticism of what's being done. If there is anything wrong after several issues, I may stay on for six months to a year.

SBS You seem to be very gifted at cultivating long-lasting relationships with clients, as your association with Westvaco demonstrates. What is the key to keeping a client satisfied for such an extended period? Does this become easier with time?

Thompson That's a very difficult question. I try to work with someone who is pleasant, easy to get along with and who is doing something that I enjoy. Equally as important is developing a relationship with a client—whom I would like to consider an associate—at the same time I am working on the project.

In fact, as that relationship develops, the better it becomes. As a result, you also begin to more clearly understand what the needs of the project are, and what is important.



Modern Inspirations Thompson found inspiration in modern art and often used the forms of individual creators as graphic elements. In this Joan Miró inspired design, Thompson combines a reproduction of a Miró painting with some of the artist's calligraphic marks. The whole reflects the theme of humor.



Stamps Thompson is a prolific stamp designer with more than 100 to his credit. In the imaginative education stamp of 1980, he combined the inscription "Learning Never Ends" with a vivid Josef Albers painting entitled "Homage to the Square: Glow." Thompson also oversaw the popular Love stamp series. After working with Robert Indiana and Mary Faulconer, he designed his own stamp in 1984, stacking the word and using a heart in the shape of the "V."

SBS On the other hand, is it difficult to keep the work original and fresh when working with the same client for such extended periods of time?

Thompson Well, there's always that problem. You, as an individual, have to feel it's something you want to keep doing. I guess I always wonder if my work in these instances is becoming too methodical—there's always that human tendency. It's really up to the designer to keep the ideas alive and going in new directions.

SBS Where do you look for inspiration when starting a new project?

Thompson Everywhere, it's all around us. Even everyday symbols can be made exciting. My inspiration has come from people, from places—both ordinary and exotic. Other things like children's drawings especially hold such fundamental freshness.

SBS The mask you did for Westvaco in 1958 seems to have resulted from this kind of inspiration.

Thompson Yes. The idea for the mask came from a little girl bringing home a drawing of a big oval face, with a big oval mouth. And for the first time she put printed words in the mouth. That event planted the seed for the idea. I then developed the more creative typographic applications, which is always fun. It's a process of vision—being able to see things in a new way.

SBS One of the most intriguing publications that you've done is your Washburn College Bible. The project is both historical and innovative. How did it come about?

Thompson I was working as a consultant for Field Enterprises Educational Corporation which publishes World Book Encyclopedia. I designed a book for them called "Science Year." At the end of that project, the president of the World Book division asked me if I wanted to do a Bible. I did. I felt that I knew him and what they wanted well enough that I could do it on my terms, and they would be sympathetic to what I would do. That was in 1969.

I started the project, but in 1974 there was a big recession and the company decided not to publish it. I had put too much into the project to see that happen, so I

went out to find a publisher myself. It wasn't easy, but if you have a little perseverance it can result in great satisfaction. I kept going to different publishers; many of them would talk about it and discuss it, only to come back in three to six months and say: "We're not Bible publishers."

It was frustrating, but aid came from friends at my alma matter, Washburn College, which provided the money to buy the property and print it. The project was completed ten years later, in 1979.

SBS How is this book different from other Bibles?

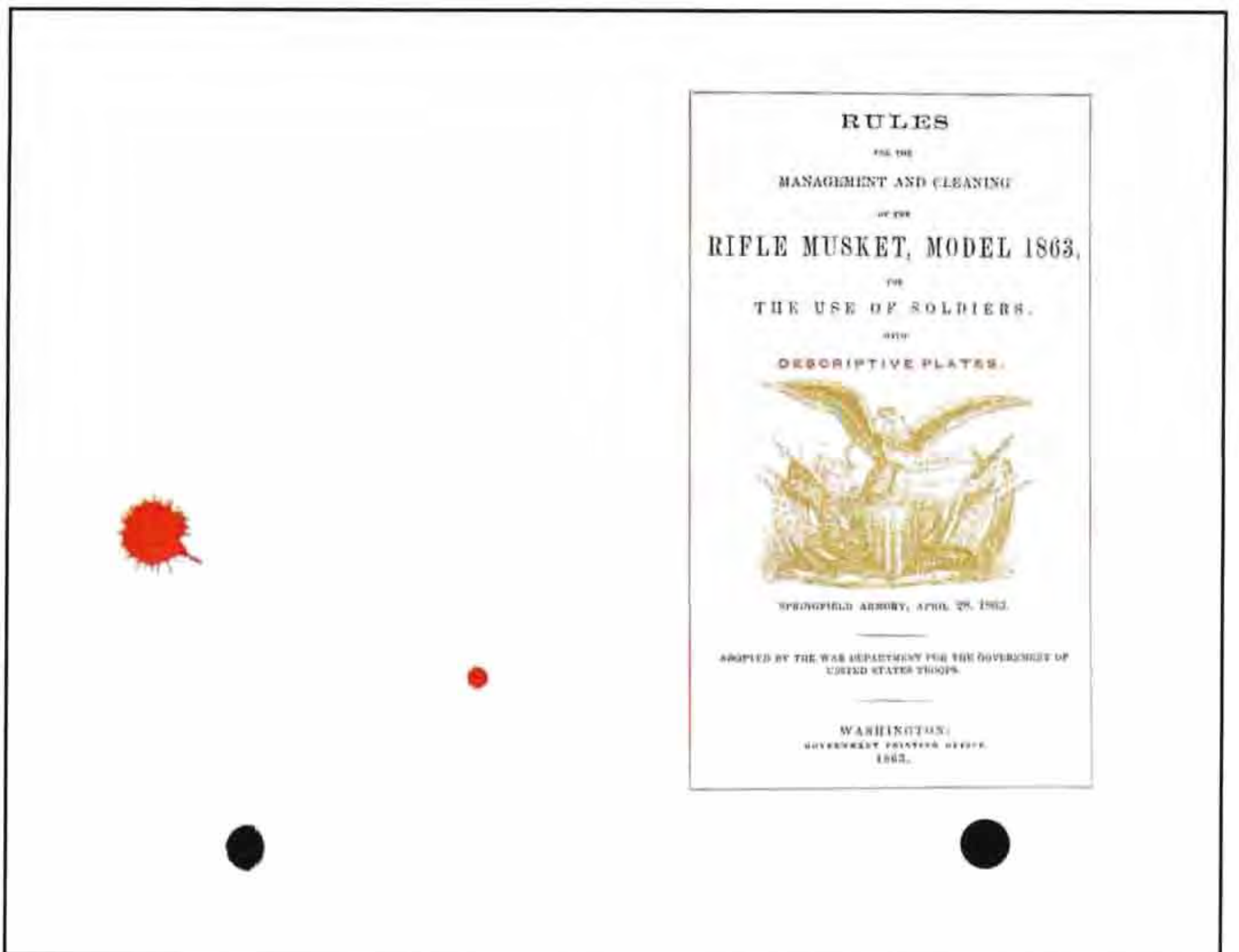
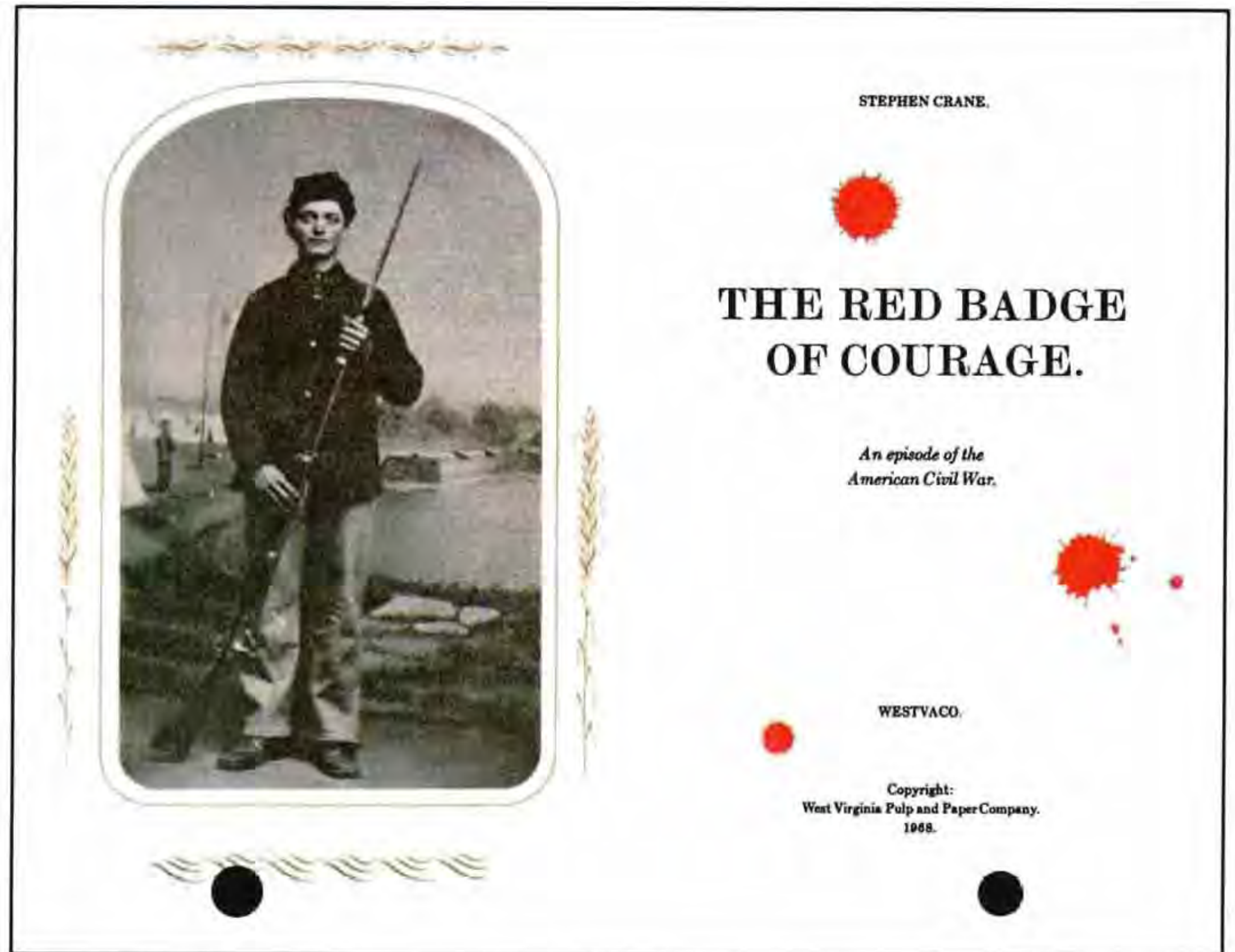
Thompson The visual assets of the project helped make it unique. In the front part of the book I was able to incorporate elements such as pages of older Bibles, like the Gutenberg, the First King James of 1611 and the Bruce Rogers Bible of this century. I also was able to enlist a Yale biblical scholar to write the preface for the book. And then, of course, there was the idea for printing the Bible in three volumes, each with an original screenprint created by Josef Albers. These, along with the 10 x 14-inch format and the hand-proofed, tipped-in works of art, selected by the director of the National Gallery, made it unusual. I was especially pleased because I was able to include in this Protestant, textual version many great works of art from the Catholic Italian Renaissance. I also realized that three-fourths of the Bible is the Hebrew Old Testament. I was happy to be joining all of these related, but disassociated religions and eras into one homogenous entity.

SBS One of the unique elements of the design was the incorporation of illustrations—somewhat unusual for a Bible.

Thompson Yes. That idea came in the hope that people who are interested in art will become interested in religion and people interested in religion will become interested in art.

SBS Why did you choose to set the type in the cadence of speech?

Thompson The idea of setting the type in phrases was so that one could really understand the language, similar to a minister speaking from a pulpit. It also seemed appropriate because the 1611 King James



The Red Badge of Courage The frontispiece with title page and a typical spread from the classic written by Stephen Crane. Thompson shows his inventiveness in the 1968 design by using a bullet hole (drilled through the book), and drops of blood (the red badges of courage) throughout the text pages. The photo and Civil War brochure cover lend an air of authenticity to the understated but typographically elegant book design.

Bible is from the time of Shakespeare and is full of eloquent speech. This typography treatment can also be read more easily.

SBS An aspect of your work that is not often mentioned are the magazines you designed for the U.S. government during World War II, *Victory* and *USA*. What were the goals of the magazines?

Thompson Both of them were to be delivered into occupied countries and dropped behind enemy lines. The primary objective was to show our country in a positive light and to reinforce the idea that Americans are hard-working, interesting people, just like the people behind enemy lines.

Victory was designed as a bold, lively publication. I designed it on the essential pattern of *Life* magazine, but I did it my

way. I used flush left, ragged right type throughout, rather than centering copy like *Life*. I wanted a more contemporary feeling. The text type in *Victory* was Bodoni with a sans serif for headings—very lively. It was an entertaining, large format picture magazine. After all, the publication was done before television, and magazines were the source for visual information and news.

USA magazine was a condensational format, much like *Reader's Digest*. It was designed to be a very bookish publication, so I used a lot of woodcuts and engravings to give it a warm, precious quality. I used nothing but Garamond throughout, and for the heads I used the italic because of its nice, swash characters.

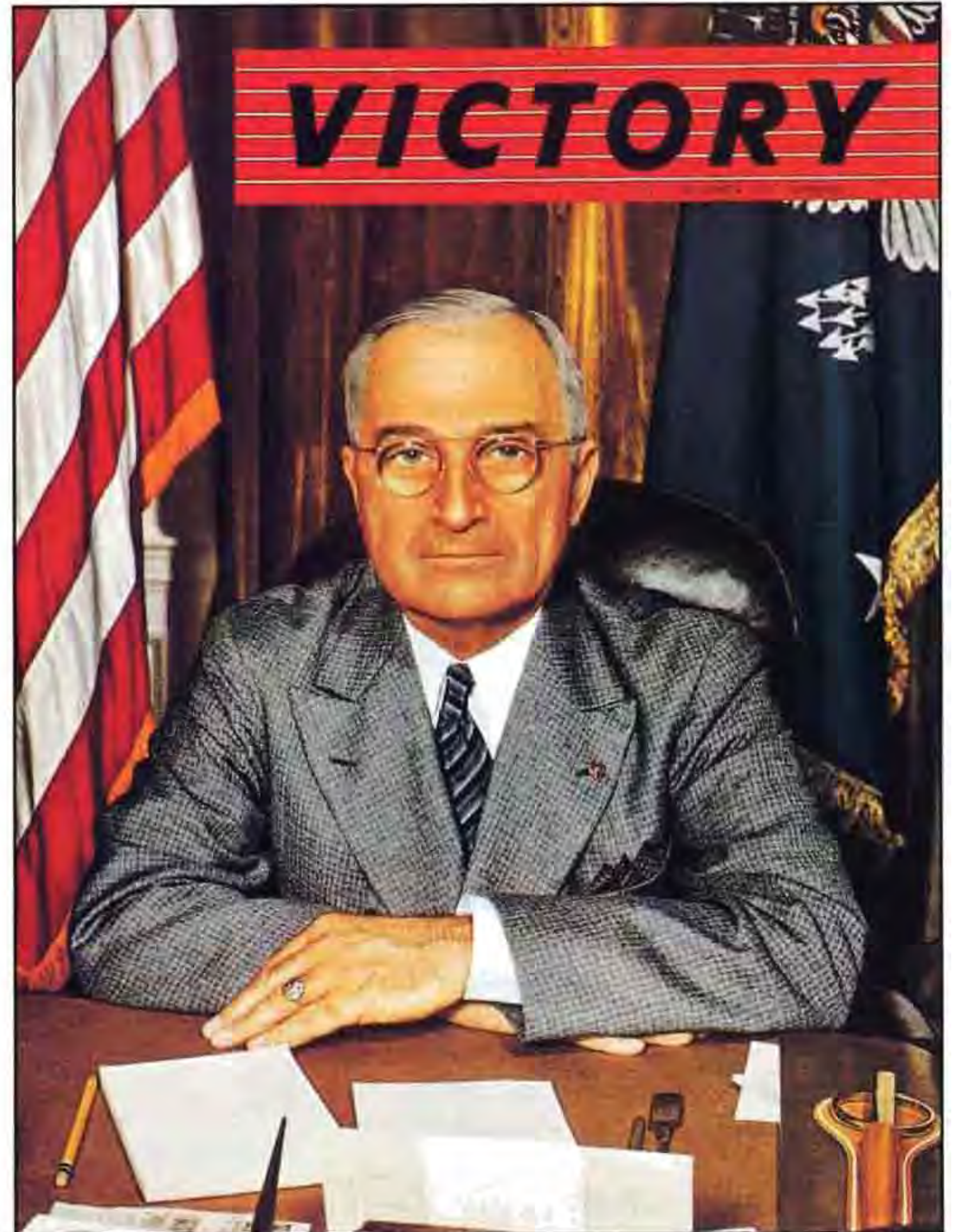
SBS What sort of design process was in-

involved in these publications?

Thompson Much like the process at *Life*, which was introduced by Tobias Moss. The editor and I would stand around the drafting board, and I would design the layouts as he stood there. This proved to be an invaluable technique. It was a process of producing things quickly and efficiently. Much better than working without talking to somebody, going off by yourself and doing some work, and later having to go back and change it all after reviewing it with the editor.

SBS Did the patriotic fervor of WWII influence the project?

Thompson It created a sense of urgency, almost as if we were in the army. It also



USA and Victory Covers These two widely different magazines designed for the U.S. government during World War II (1942-45) were directed to many nations in several languages. *USA* was a small digest, *Victory* a large picture magazine. Thompson designed the publications with the editor at his side, a process similar to what took place at *Life* magazine.

created an unusual typographical problem. These were unique publications in that they were multilingual. Both publications had to be designed on simple practical terms so that the areas of text that I used for the English could be utilized when that same text was translated into German, French, Italian, Chinese and the many languages of the Middle East. We had translators on staff, and I saw to it that the design was carried out with the best type possible. It was a good experience. You found that it takes the German language many more words, longer words, to say what can be said with a few in English.

SBS You've designed over 100 stamps, probably more than any other designer. What are some design problems you face?

Thompson A stamp is something like a poster. You have to make it very simple, clear, direct and for a small space, while a poster has to be strong, simple and big so it can be viewed from a distance. Stamps are viewed solely at close range. I never think about how many people will see my stamps. Design is just design, whether for a few people or a million.

SBS Is it a difficult process working with such a huge client as the U.S. government?

Thompson It's not as though you have some huge bureaucracy to please. It's much like any other project. In the case of the post office there is a pleasant committee, including the Postmaster General, that serves as the client.

SBS Has the process changed at all over the years?

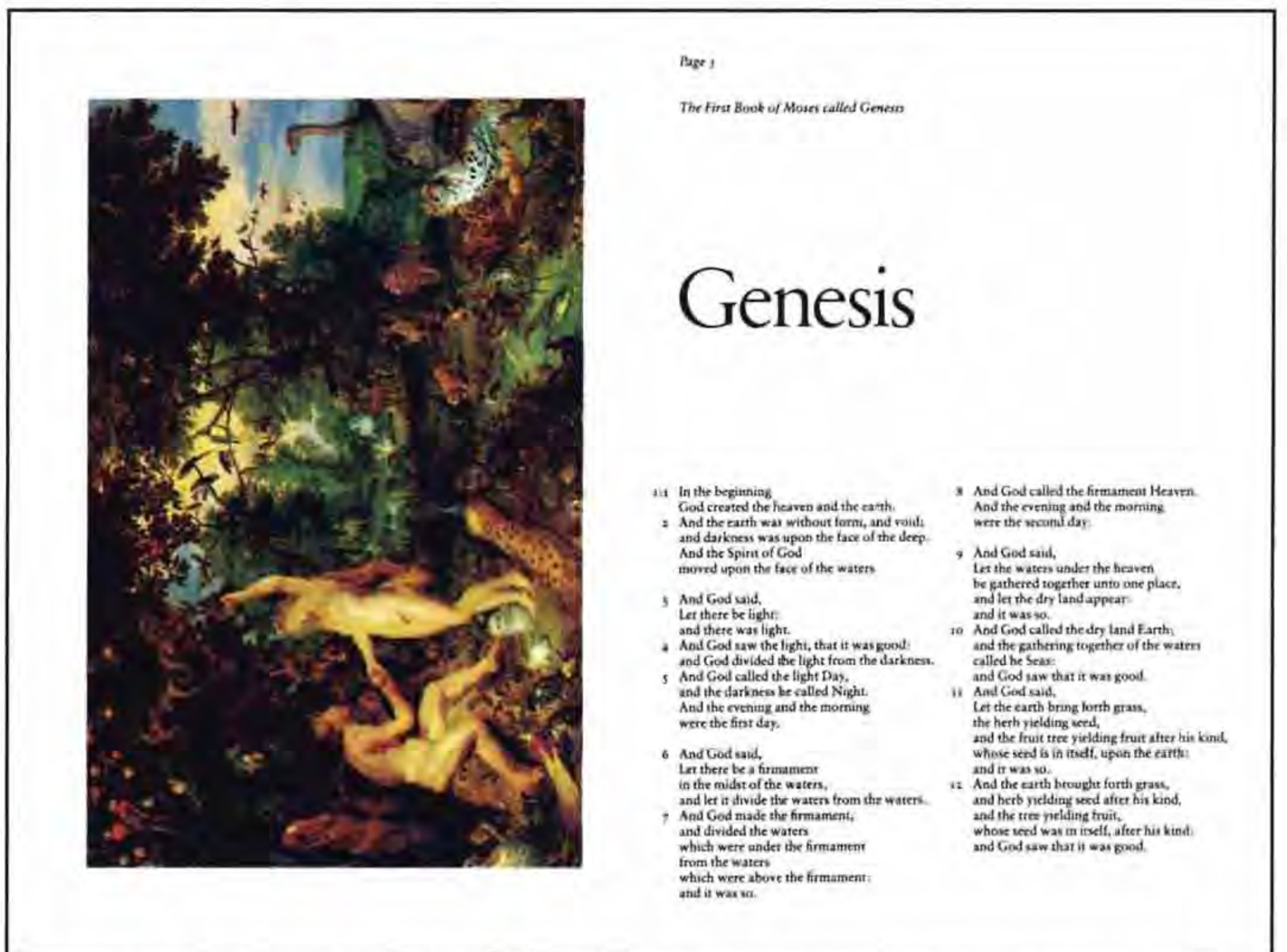
Thompson No, not really. I suppose the most interesting aspect of the process now is that I do much of it via my fax. I'm able to conceptualize designs at home, fax that to an artist and to the postal staff, then we all get on the phone and talk through it.

SBS You've spent a lot of time innovating new ideas and processes throughout your career. Is this a constant and conscious effort on your part?

Thompson It certainly is fun doing something that is yours, something that touches people and has a certain originality and



Westvaco Mask In this imaginative design inspired by a child's drawing of a large oval face with a large oval mouth, Thompson uses two symmetrical letters for eyes. The letter "S" fortunately produced a winking eye that animates the page. As was intended, type is used to visually suggest an idea, in this case primitive art.



Washburn College Bible One of Thompson's masterpieces, the three-volume, 10 x 14-inch Washburn Bible, contains original screenprints by Josef Albers, along with hand-proofed, tipped-in works of art including those from the Italian Renaissance. A spread from Genesis shows how Thompson set the typography in the cadence of speech. The painting is "Adam and Eve in the Garden," 1620, by Peter Paul Rubens and Jan Brueghel the Elder.

joy about it. I want my work to have the ability to teach people. It's important that projects do something for somebody. These are important factors if you want your work to go out into the world and reach others.

SBS Cutting-edge designers are now using

a new array of tools, including computers, to come up with new techniques and processes. What impact do you see computers having on graphic design?

Thompson Computers can certainly produce some new designs and new ways of creating. But in the end, I feel it's still the

idea. Isn't it? What you have in mind when you want to make your statement is what's important.

I think there is a danger when new things happen. For instance, there are so many typefaces available now. Forty to fifty years ago it was a great thing for a new typeface to come out. Now they're everywhere; you can get everything you want and get it so easily. As a result, I think there is quite a tendency to use too many typefaces without purpose. I don't mean to criticize at all, but that is what's happening. Back in the 1880s the tendency was to use many typefaces together. It doesn't achieve the purpose of typography—to communicate and to teach.

SBS Do you think the computer and its access to so many different typefaces runs the risk of sending designers back 100 years?

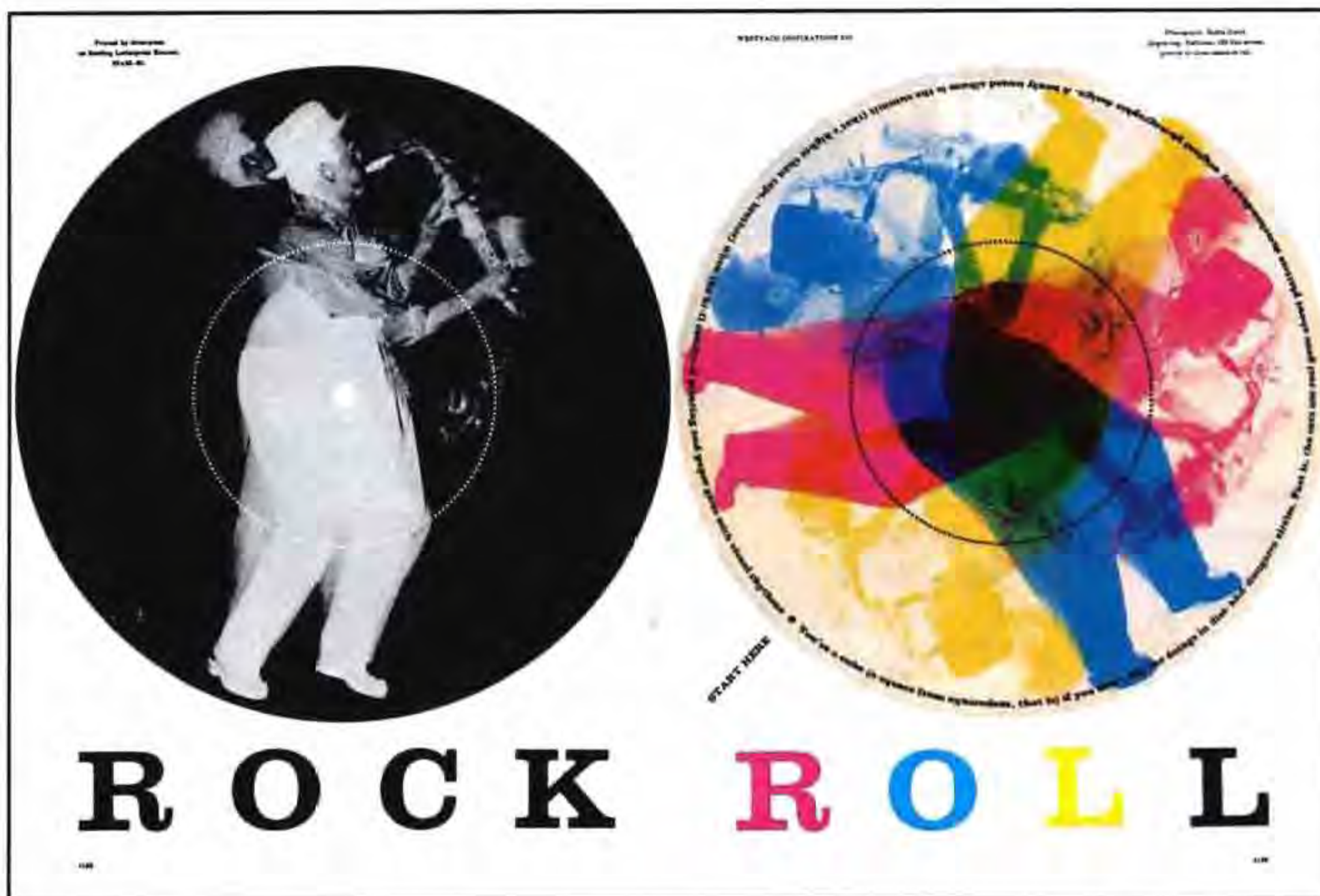
Thompson Well, not that. But there is such a temptation when you have five typefaces, to use five typefaces. By so doing, you lose the integrity, clarity and beauty of using just one typeface well. I fear people feel they can make something look new simply by using a number of typefaces.

SBS Your work is often imitated. Do you think this is the finest form of flattery?

Thompson It's certainly more of a pleasure than a disappointment. The idea of other people reacting or interacting with my work tells me that the work is doing what was intended. People are important in everything that all of us do. This is something that we graphic designers need to keep in mind.

SBS After your long and venerable career, what observation or advice can you offer graphic designers?

Thompson I feel it is important to instill the idea that graphic design is the fusion of word *and* image. The graphic designer needs to experience the varied intricacies of both and be able to join them in one statement with integrity. ■



Rock and Roll An example of Thompson's technical inventiveness, this 1958 design gives the illusion of color in motion on the whirling record. Instead of process plates, just one halftone plate was printed with three process inks and on three different angles to avoid a moiré pattern.



Symbols, Letters & Papers Thompson's most recent design for Westvaco Corporation is the upcoming *Symbols, Letters & Paper* collector's edition, which explores the use of mankind's universal symbols.

Todd Hays is a Pasadena, Calif.-based writer and public relations consultant who currently works with April Greiman and the Los Angeles chapter of the AIGA.