Milton Glaser, Graphic Designer Who Shaped Visual Identities of Countless Brands, Dies at 91

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19 hours ago
Milton Glaser, the designer and commercial artist whose seven decades of output included the legendary “I ♥ NY” logo, died of a stroke on Friday. He was 91 years old.

A prodigiously gifted artist, conceptual thinker and intellectual, Glaser personified the field of postwar graphic design. Combining a wide range of artistic influences and brightening them with whimsy and humor, Glaser was “a modern renaissance man,” in the words of his firm. In a fickle and competitive field that’s perennially discarding yesterday’s look, Glaser enjoyed an uncommonly long career producing pieces that were influential in their day and have enjoyed a lasting influence.

Glaser’s famous ‘Bob Dylan’s Greatest Hits’ poster from 1967.
Michael Ochs Archives/Getty Images

He determined the commercial dress of brands from Olivetti typewriters to Grand Union supermarkets and from Brooklyn Brewery to Vespa scooters. He designed over 400 posters, ranging from the psychedelic silhouette of Bob Dylan for his 1967 greatest hits LP to the one for Mad Men’s final season in 2014. Having touched most every commercial platform from store design to print advertising, Glaser’s work is nearly too voluminous to list. His hand could be seen everywhere from the Sesame Place amusement park to Philadelphia’s Franklin Mills Mall. His client list included Target, Coach, JetBlue, Bread Alone Bakery and even the Trump Organization, for which he designed a trapezoidal gold bottle for Trump Vodka in 2005.

Glaser was also a giant in the publishing world, contemporizing the look of scores of newspapers and magazines, most notably New York, which he co-founded in 1968 with the editor Clay Felker. In the years immediately following the 1979 launch of Adweek, Felker would join this magazine's masthead and, working alongside designer Walter Bernard, Glaser's artistic swagger would be visible on these pages, too. Adweek's special reports and its Portfolio series—a directory of vendors that circulated throughout the carpeted corridors of Manhattan's publishing and advertising firms—would be among his creations.

In those years, Bernard would recall how popping in and out of Glaser's office to disrupt his work never annoyed him, but actually seemed to stimulate him instead. "The trick is to operate by interruption," Glaser said. "Don't fight it. Don't be annoyed by it. Welcome it. You will get more accomplished each time and your capacity for dealing with problems will increase."

Some of Glaser’s work for Adweek during the 1980s.
Photo: Matthew Klein; Illustration: Milton Glaser

The son of Hungarian immigrants who ran a Bronx dry-cleaning shop, Glaser was born in 1929 and, after discovering a facility with modeling clay during a childhood illness, decided to pursue art as a career. He attended Manhattan’s legendary High School of Music & Art and, after failing to get into the Pratt Institute, enrolled at the Cooper Union. He founded Push Pin Studios in 1954, alongside some of his college classmates, making a name for himself as an illustrator for record albums and the emerging world of TV advertising, among other media. In 1974, when his name and reputation had outgrown that studio, Glaser founded his own—Milton Glaser, Inc.—whose headquarters in a four-story Beaux-Arts building on East 32nd Street would be the creative

locus for the remainder of his life’s work.

Some 44 years after it was created, Glaser’s most famous logo is still everywhere.
Christina Horsten/Picture Alliance via Getty Images
In 1976, as New York City reeled from job losses, population loss and a soaring crime rate, a desperate New York State Department of Commerce decided to fund a campaign to encourage tourism—a tall order indeed. The ad agency Wells Rich Greene produced the slogan “I love New York”; Glaser would be tapped for the graphic treatment. Told that the campaign would run for just a few months, Glaser dashed off a treatment in the back of a taxi. All he could find to work with was a red crayon and the back of an envelope. But the logo he drew—I ♥ NY—would go on to become one of the 20th century’s most iconic

pieces of commercial art. To this day, souvenir stands across the city continue to sell everything from hoodies to mouse pads imprinted with that logo. In later years, Glaser remained a good sport over the fact that this work—which he never sought to copyright—had paid him no royalties.

New Yorkers would relish in Glaser's work again in 1996, when he joined an all-star team working on the $25 million renovation of the Windows on the World restaurant, located on the 106th and 107th floors of the World Trade Center's North Tower. Glaser designed everything from the lighting fixtures to the carpets and menu. The New York Times praised Glaser's "stunning logo" and his "jazzy décor." Units its destruction during the 9/11 attacks, Windows was the highest grossing restaurant in the United States.

Shortly after turning 90, the U.K. publication Creative Review asked Glaser to talk about the sheer breadth and scope of his work. "One thing that occurs in a professional life is that you become a specialist and you do one thing, and they're doomed to do it forever until you lose interest in it," he said. "I've tried hard not to fall into the trap."

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