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Journal of Magazine Media, Volume 12, Number 1, Fall 2010, (Article)

Published by University of Nebraska Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/jmm.2010.0005>

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**The Marathon Man of Design
At 81, Milton Glaser is still drawing and thinking**

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Milton Glaser hasn't slowed down.

The 81-year-old designer strolls into the conference room of his boutique design studio in the Murray Hill section of Manhattan—a tiny building that once served as the Tammany Hall Club House—with his shirt-sleeves rolled up for another day of work. The genial designer bristles only mildly when asked if he has any plans to slow down in the future.

“I think retirement is a scam perpetrated on the American public. I never understood why, if you enjoy what you do, why you'd want to stop. I mean, I can understand if there are physical limitations, if you're a coal miner or some physically demanding job, I can understand why you'd want to retire. But I can't imagine anything more awful for the rest of us.”

These days Glaser does seem to be enjoying himself immensely. Last year, in the East Room of the White House, he stood beaming as Barack Obama hung the Presidential Medal of the Arts around his neck.

Courtesy of The White House

“It was *great*. It was *great!* I was *thrilled*. I guess it *is* finally a marker that cannot be removed from your record. It's certainly the most significant award of any kind that I've ever gotten.”

Daniel van Benthuisen worked as a designer, an art director, and a director of design during a career of 29 years at Newsday on Long Island. In 2008 he was hired as an assistant professor of journalism at Hofstra University, where he teaches layout, design, and informational graphics.

The Presidential Medal sits on a shelf at one end of the conference room, sharing space with several of Glaser's design projects—labels he designed for Brooklyn Brewery, tableware he is creating for Alessio—along with other assorted knickknacks that have attracted his eye: an antique button salesman's display card and a pink handmade wooden toy telephone.

Glaser's work as co-founder and creative director of *New York* magazine in 1968 became a much-imitated template for city magazines here and abroad. His studio on East 32nd Street is in the same building where he and Clay Felker began *New York*. How did a magazine manage to launch from this smaller-than-a-brownstone building?

"Can you see a hundred people scrambling around this place?" Glaser asks, as incredulous at his own question as he is by the memory that answers it.

When Rupert Murdoch bought *New York* magazine in 1976, the magazine offices moved and Glaser stayed in the building. Eventually, the floor above Glaser went to Walter Bernard, the art director Glaser hired for *New York* magazine and with whom Glaser has partnered in many design projects over the years under the corporate name WBMG. As WBMG, the pair have designed or redesigned more than 100 magazines and newspapers. On the top floor is the illustrator, designer, author, and teacher Mirko Ilic. The three are good friends.

Glaser says he has drifted away from magazine design in recent years. He finds the depressed state of the industry a difficult milieu in which to work.

"The staffs are smaller. Everything is freelanced. Those staff who remain are so defensive, it's hard to introduce new ideas in an environment like that."

Nonetheless, he is still sought after. In January *The Nation* appeared with a new typographic cover format that Glaser brought about, a design that emphasizes content over display and is flexible enough for last-minute changes. And from all appearances he still enjoys doing cover illustrations for magazines as mainstream as *Newsweek* or as niche as *Print*.

The process of doing a cover, is it any different than doing a poster—or even a painting?

Well, everything is different and everything is the same. You always start with the same assumptions, with your audience. What is it you want to say? What's the best means of saying it? That is, I would say, a methodology as uniform as you can get, and it doesn't vary very much by medium or by particular, as fundamental as the design purpose is, so I would say ultimately the issue is of appropriateness and something that doesn't matter whether it's a beer bottle or a magazine cover.

When we talked earlier about drawing, it reminded me that in Italian the word for “design” is the same as the word for “drawing.”

That's an astute observation. They're inexorably linked.

Now at SVA (School of Visual Arts), for instance, we REALLY emphasize drawing for everyone. And all the major design schools have returned significantly to drawing in recent years, and it's understood as a fundamental skill that everyone needs. So there is very much that change.

People just began to get smarter, and they realized the penalty of not being able to draw. Because what happened was that it meant that in order to make something you had to look for it as an already existing object because you couldn't represent your idea even as a simplistic one. And ultimately how stupid do you have to be to not realize that you have to learn how to draw? At least to draw in order to produce. Incidentally it got confused with illustration. They thought you learned to draw so you could be an illustrator. That, again, is a stupid way to think about drawing.... There's not a way to become a form-maker without that skill. It was a devastating loss for many years.

Of course, you produce extraordinary things in the design world by finding things and with this collage sensibility, but it's an enormous limitation.

And it's a very narrow way to proceed.

Very narrow.

Courtesy of Milton Glaser

In your own work you seem to effortlessly glide between functioning as an illustrator, functioning as a designer, functioning as a product designer, or functioning as a communicator. Are you aware of these shifts when you make them in your work?

Well I never understood what the....

What the fuss was?

Yeah. If you became somebody engaged in the visual world in making things, you use the skills appropriate for making those things.

You've said in other interviews that you made a conscious effort to relearn drawing at one point.

I had to do that. You know, when I was in high school.... I also went to the Art Students League. I started at 12 years old with the Soyer brothers, and I *thought* I had the reputation of being a pretty good draughtsman, and then I went to Cooper Union. I continued. I was focused more on illustration there, and I also had the reputation of being able to draw pretty well. When I got my Fulbright, I went to Italy. I began to really look at drawing, and I really didn't know anything. So I started all over in Italy. I started to learn to draw all over in academic drawing .

Is that when you studied with Morandi?

I studied with Morandi, but in addition to that, I took classes in drawing from casts. In the old, pathetically academic way. But you know it's exercise. You know, you've just got to learn how to draw accurately so you don't have to struggle anymore.

Do you draw every day?

No, but I drew all this weekend.

So it's a form of meditation as well as a form of thinking.

Well, it's all of that. As you know, I wrote *Drawing Is Thinking*. It's all of that. I don't want to fetishize it, but what happens with the brain is that the more you do something, the more deep those impulses become, and I've been drawing or making things or designing every day

Courtesy of Milton Glaser

of my life. I mean literally for—I guess—over 60 years. So those impulses are very deeply ingrained. Which is why I have to say—and this may be arrogant—I don't think I've lost any of my skill. I still design faster, and I think at a very high level of quality. I've never stopped.

You also spoke in some contexts about seeing in drawing that you feel as though you don't really know something until you've drawn it.

Well, it's a quote that.... There's a little book on drawing that the school just published. And I tell the story. I was sitting across from my mother. I must have been 15 or 16 or so, and I decided to do a drawing of her, and I realized that I had no idea what she looked like.

Like many things in life, you develop an immunity to things, and suddenly one day you say, "I think I'll draw that," and you say, "Oh my God!" And you realize that their image had become fixed in your mind 20 or 30 years ago. And that is so characteristic. You never see anything that's in front of you unless the interest shifts. If I were looking at this glass of water, I see something vague, but if I decide to draw this, I see the planes on the glass, I see the highlights, I see that it disappears at one point and reappears, because you have to pay attention.

And the word I always use from Buddhist thought is "attentiveness." And that is—to continue that idiom—art that makes you attentive, not for any other reason than because you have to pay attention. Something's a work of art, presents a contradiction between what you think you've seen and what you've seen, and suddenly you become aware of what reality is. That purpose is for me the highest purpose of art, and as such it's a mechanism for survival. And you can understand why attentiveness helps you survive.

You famously said some years ago that designers should not use computers. Would you care to revise that statement?

Yes, I would revise that. Designers can use computers, of course, but they shouldn't use them until they're at least 40 years old.

If I design...we're doing a project for Alessio tableware...If I design a pitcher, I have to have an idea what its form is. I have to show myself. I mean you can go find a pitcher online and change it, but that's not the way the mind works. You want to do something that hasn't been done before. The hand and the brain are much superior to the computer.

Can you separate the artist from the man?

The word "artist" is provocative and confusing to people. What is an artist anyhow? When someone asks you what do you do and you say you're an artist, what are you talking about anyway? And then you go to an art show and there's not a single piece of art there in the room and you have a hundred people there making things that don't rise to the level of art.

And again, there's a line at which art exists. That line is the creation of attentiveness, and if it moves you to an understanding of what is real, it's art. If it doesn't, it's something else. And, of course, poets are artists; writers are artists; everybody is an artist if, in fact, their work does this thing which is essential for our survival.

And I'm interested, my mind connects with words as much as it does with imagery. The thing that I guess is most interesting is my ability to make unconscious connections between things not necessarily connected before and a lack of sort of isolating these experiences from one another and saying, "Well that's art, that's not art, and this is such and such." That is not useful. Part of it is just a sense of comfort with ambiguity.

I read a wonderful book called *Being Wrong*. How difficult it is for certain people to admit they're wrong, why both societies and individuals live their lives so that if they lose certainty, they get disorganized and confused and frightened.

Like a loss of confidence?

Well, even more profound: a loss of self. They feel they don't exist if their beliefs are threatened. And cultures are that way. The Muslim culture— If somebody converts from being a Muslim to a Christian, the punishment is much more profound, so threatened is the belief system.

What do you do when you have your weeklong intensive with the students from the School of Visual Arts? How do you challenge them? Do you have a routine, or is it different every time? They're with you for a week for seven hours a day, and you said you have 28 of them.

It's a lot, and they come from all over the world, but it's really a design. It's a system.

It's always the same. I have a very specific routine. It really is brainwashing, and it really takes advantage of the ones who first think that I know everything and come to me with that kind of obedience and hope. They always have the same objective, which is they want to be more creative. And so they want a fix. And they think they want to learn the tricks and the secrets. And they want to learn techniques.

And my role is very different. What I want them to learn is where they are. I want them to learn what they believe and to challenge all their assumptions about what they believe. Because no one can change within the framework of their own beliefs. So I have to break them down and make them believe that what they believe may not be true and *that* I don't even know.

They are transformed by a series of challenges and by the success of their work. Incidentally, these relationships last a lifetime. They work in community and everybody does their part and everybody succeeds in doing this. But they learn in these projects that democracy goes out the window. That you don't allow for dissent. That dissent is basically eliminated. And they realize that (a) their capacity for work is much greater than what they

thought it was and (b) that they became totalitarian in order to accomplish a great amount of work in a short period of time and so they get some understanding of how culture works.