

DESIGNFOREVER JOURNAL

TEN DESIGNS THAT STUCK

DESIGNFOREVER EDITORIAL

Ten Designs That Stuck

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Most graphic design disappears. A poster comes down. A logo gets redrawn. A campaign ends on a Friday. A handful of designs do the opposite: they become the thing other people copy without asking. A metro map. A recycling mark. A heart where a word used to be. Once that happens, the original job — sell a city, fill an army, mark a shoe — is the least interesting part.

This is not a greatest-hits list of pretty work. It is ten artifacts that changed a rule. Each one has a date, a maker, a sourced fact, and a one-line reason it still runs. The longer history of type, posters, and the profession is already in [How graphic design changed the world](#). This is the short stack: [skim the table, then read the one that surprises you](#).

4M+

Uncle Sam posters printed 1917–18. Library of Congress. Flagg called it “the most famous poster in the world.”

750k

first printing of Beck’s Tube map, Jan 1933. Typical run then: 10–20 thousand. London Transport Museum.

\$35

Carolyn Davidson’s invoice for the Nike Swoosh, 1971. Nike, Inc. revenue, FY2025: \$46.3 billion.

#1

Ad Age, 1999: Volkswagen “Think Small” as the best advertising campaign of the 20th century.

#	Design	Year	The move
1	Uncle Sam, “I Want You”	1917	The stare that recruits
2	London Underground map	1931	Drop geography
3	Helvetica	1957	Neutrality as a product
4	Peace symbol	1958	A mark with no language

#	Design	Year	The move
5	Volkswagen “Think Small”	1959	Honesty as layout
6	Recycling Möbius	1970	Public domain on purpose
7	Nike Swoosh	1971	Motion, no word
8	Munich ’72 pictograms	1972	Wayfinding without translation
9	I ♥ NY	1977	A rebus anyone can steal
10	Obama “Hope”	2008	Street art as campaign OS

Ninety years. Ten defaults.

- 1917 Uncle Sam
- 1931 Tube map
- 1957 Helvetica
- 1958 Peace symbol
- 1959 Think Small
- 1970 Recycling symbol
- 1971 Swoosh
- 1972 Munich pictograms
- 1977 I ♥ NY
- 2008 Hope

Two clusters: the late-1950s language of protest, type, and ads — then the early-1970s language of ecology, sport, and brands.

Impact is not how it looked in the studio. Impact is whether a stranger can reuse the idea without the designer in the room.

1. Uncle Sam — James Montgomery Flagg, 1917

The move: **point at one person in a crowd of millions** .

The face started as a magazine cover. Flagg drew Uncle Sam for the 6 July 1916 issue of *Leslie’s Weekly* under the line “What Are You Doing for Preparedness?” When the United States entered the war in April 1917, the War Department changed the line to “I Want You for the U.S. Army.” The Library

of Congress: more than four million copies printed in 1917–18. Flagg used his own face. He later called it the most famous poster in the world.

It was already a remix. Alfred Leete's 1914 British poster had Lord Kitchener pointing with "Your Country Needs You." Flagg swapped a minister of war for a folk emblem and kept the finger. That is the design lesson, not the patriotism: a direct address, a single gesture, a sentence of five words. Every later "we want you" parody — army, band, brand — is still paying rent on that composition.

Why it stuck: **the viewer cannot look away from being chosen** . Peter Schjeldahl, writing about a later poster on this list, still used Uncle Sam as the American ceiling for political illustration.

2. The Tube map — Harry Beck, 1931

The move: **stop drawing London. Draw the network** .

Beck was an engineering draughtsman, briefly out of work, who sketched the Underground as a circuit diagram: horizontals, verticals, 45-degree diagonals. Geography shrank in the suburbs and grew in the centre. Interchanges mattered more than streets. The publicity office rejected it as too radical. He tried again. The first pocket map printed in January 1933. London Transport Museum: ordinary map batches then were 10,000–20,000. Beck's first run was **750,000 copies** . TfL's archive: he was paid 10 guineas.

Frank Pick called it "very convenient and tidy." Beck kept the map until 1959, was pushed off it, and died in 1974 still under-credited. Since 2001 every official Underground map says it is an evolution of his 1931 design. In 2006 a national contest voted it the second-favourite British design of the twentieth century. Every metro diagram that prefers topology to streets — New York, Paris, Tokyo, a phone app — is Beck's argument winning again.

Why it stuck: passengers do not need a true map. They need **the next decision** . That is also the rule behind a working template. See [Layouts that never break](#).

3. Helvetica — Max Miedinger and Eduard Hoffmann, 1957

The move: **make a typeface that looks like no one designed it** .

Haas in Switzerland wanted an answer to Akzidenz-Grotesk. Miedinger drew Neue Haas Grotesk in 1957. When Linotype took it international it was renamed Helvetica — Helvetia, Switzerland. The pitch was not beauty. It was usefulness: even color, open counters, a voice that could sit on a bank, a government form, a grocery, a protest sign, and not argue with the content.

New York's subway is the famous adoption story, with a footnote. Unimark's 1960s study for the Transit Authority (Massimo Vignelli, Bob Noorda) first specified a grotesque that was actually available in the U.S. — Standard Medium. The 1970 NYCTA Graphics Standards Manual is the system: information at the point of decision, not before, not after. Helvetica became the face people remember. A 2007 documentary later turned the font into a character. That is impact of a different kind: when the tool is famous enough to be the subject.

Why it stuck: institutions wanted **a voice that did not sound like a voice** . Neutral is a brand. [State your brand once](#) is the same problem in the other direction — pick the voice on purpose, then stop renegotiating it.

4. The peace symbol — Gerald Holtom, 1958

The move: **semaphore plus despair, no dove, no slogan** .

Holtom, a Royal College of Art graduate, designed a mark for the Direct Action Committee against nuclear war and the Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament. CND's own account: he brought sketches to a February 1958 meeting. The Christian cross was rejected as too loaded. What remained was the semaphore for N and D — nuclear disarmament — inside a circle. Holtom also described a figure with palms down, a gesture of despair against the globe. The dove was out: Soviet peace propaganda already owned it. Badges and the Aldermaston Easter march put it on the street the same year.

It left the British anti-bomb movement and became a global stand-in for “peace,” including causes Holtom never drew for. That is the risk of a good symbol. It is also the test. If a 12-year-old can draw it from memory, the design has left the committee.

Why it stuck: **it photocopies** . One color. No type. No licensing meeting. Protest graphics that need a lawyer do not travel.

5. Think Small — Helmut Krone and Julian Koenig, DDB, 1959

The move: **put the product in the corner and tell the truth** .

American car ads in the 1950s sold chrome and families. Doyle Dane Bernbach’s Volkswagen work did the opposite. A small Beetle on a large field of white. A headline that insulted the era: “Think Small.” Later, “Lemon.” Art director Helmut Krone. Copy, at the start, Julian Koenig. The logo often sat where a reader did not expect a logo. Krone disliked logos.

In 1999 *Advertising Age* named the campaign the best of the twentieth century. That is a trade-magazine poll, not a law of physics — treat it as the industry voting for its own turning point. The turning point was layout as argument: white space, a photograph that is not flattering, copy that assumes the reader is intelligent. The Creative Revolution is mostly this page.

Why it stuck: it proved a graphic can **sell by refusing the house style of its category** . Every later “ugly-honest” brand campaign is still in that white field.

6. The recycling symbol — Gary Anderson, 1970

The move: **three arrows, Möbius strip, no owner** .

Anderson was 23, an architecture student at USC, when the Container Corporation of America ran a student contest for a symbol to put on recycled paper products. It was also the year of the first Earth Day. More than 500 entries. The winner would be placed in the public domain. Anderson spent a day or two. He submitted three versions; the simplest won. A \$2,500

scholarship and a trip to the International Design Conference at Aspen. The jury included names like Saul Bass and Herbert Bayer.

He thought it might last a season. It became the default for “this loops.” Plastics later borrowed the arrows and added resin numbers — a different, messier story. The original brief was paper, and the original gift was the lack of a trademark. A symbol designed to be copied will be copied. That was the point.

Why it stuck: CCA paid for a mark and then **refused to own it**. Most identities fail in the opposite direction.

7. The Swoosh — Carolyn Davidson, 1971

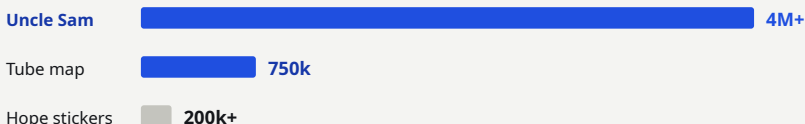
The move: **a stripe that means speed when the word is gone**.

Phil Knight was teaching accounting at Portland State and paying a design student \$2 an hour for charts. Blue Ribbon Sports needed a “stripe” for a new shoe line. Davidson drew several. Knight picked one: “I don’t love it, but it will grow on me.” Invoice: \$35 for 17.5 hours, per the company’s count. Trademarked 18 June 1971. The Nike Cortez wore it in 1972. By the mid-1990s the wordmark could fall off. The curve was enough.

Nike, Inc. reported **\$46.3 billion** in revenue for the fiscal year ended 31 May 2025. That number is not “because of a logo.” It is what a logo looks like when a company outgrows language. The Swoosh is a case of brand stated once and then worn on every surface until type is optional.

Why it stuck: it is one gesture. It reads at a mile and on a sock. **\$35 of drawing, decades of not redrawing it**.

How fast a graphic saturates



LOC (Flagg, 1917–18); London Transport Museum (Beck, Jan 1933); Sticker Robot / campaign reporting (Fairey)

Hope's sticker count is smaller and later — and it still filled a country, because the unit of distribution had become the internet plus vinyl, not only lithography.

8. Munich pictograms — Otl Aicher, 1972

The move: **a grid that speaks when the visitor does not**.

Aicher, Ulm School, was design commissioner for the Munich Summer Games. The brief was political as well as graphic: a West German Olympics that would not look like 1936. He spent six years. He consulted Masaru Katsumie, who had led Tokyo 1964's earlier pictogram work. Then he built a stricter system: a square grid, a bright palette, stick figures for sports and services that a multilingual crowd could follow without a sentence.

The Games are remembered for terror as well as sport. The pictograms outlived both. In 1974 the U.S. Department of Transportation, working with AIGA, issued a related symbol set for airports and stations. Those DOT pictograms — toilets, phones, baggage — are now so ordinary they feel like physics. They are not. They are Aicher's argument: a public is a mix of languages, so the sign cannot be a paragraph.

Why it stuck: it is a **kit, not a poster**. Kits scale. Posters date. That is the split this journal keeps making between a picture of a layout and a working document.

9. I ♥ NY — Milton Glaser, 1977

The move: **replace the verb with a shape everyone already knows**.

New York State was trying to sell tourism while the city looked unlovable: fiscal crisis, crime, the 1977 blackout. Deputy commissioner William Doyle hired Wells Rich Greene for the campaign and asked Glaser for a mark. He sketched the stacked I, heart, NY in a taxi, in American Typewriter, and compared it to initials carved in a tree. MoMA holds the presentation board. He did the work without a fee. The state still owns the trademark. After 11 September 2001 he added “More Than Ever.”

The campaign had a jingle and celebrities. What survived is four characters. Glaser may have been, as he said, subliminally next to Robert Indiana’s *LOVE*. The difference is civic: a government needed a feeling it could print on a shirt. People who had never been to Albany still wore the rebus. That is why every town now has an I ♥ knockoff. The design taught the world a grammar.

Why it stuck: **if you can copy it in a cab, the public can copy it on a T-shirt**. Complexity does not become folklore.

The designs that travel are the ones a non-designer can reproduce from memory. Everything else needs a brand guide and a budget.

10. Hope — Shepard Fairey, 2008

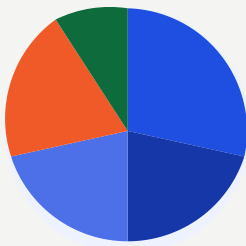
The move: **a street poster that the campaign could not afford to ignore**.

Fairey, known for Obey Giant stickers, made a stencil portrait of then-Senator Barack Obama in a day from an Associated Press photo by Mannie Garcia. First word: Progress. Then Hope. Red, beige, blue — close to the official campaign colors Sol Sender’s team had set. It went up as a street poster, then stickers and shirts. By July 2008, Sticker Robot had printed more than 200,000 vinyl Hope stickers, about three-quarters given away. The National Portrait Gallery acquired the hand-finished collage in January 2009, unusual because the Gallery usually waits until a president is leaving.

The AP later sued over the source photograph. That fight is real and it matters for how images move now. It does not cancel the graphic's job. *The New Yorker's* Peter Schjeldahl called it the most efficacious American political illustration since Uncle Sam. A century after Flagg, the finger had become a three-color face and a four-letter caption. Distribution had become the crowd.

Why it stuck: it looked like a movement before it was official, so the official campaign **had to catch up to the graphic**. That is a new power: design that does not wait for the client.

Not a style. Five jobs.



- Wayfinding · 3 · Tube, Helvetica, Aicher
- Civic identity · 2 · Uncle Sam, I ♥ NY
- Protest · 2 · Peace, Hope
- Commerce · 2 · Think Small, Swoosh
- Environment · 1 · Recycling

Count is this list, not a ranking of the whole field.

The through-line is not a look. It is a job the public still needs done: find the train, join the army, mark the bin, name the city, move without a paragraph.

What they share, if you only remember one screen

They are simple enough to redraw. They solve a decision, not a decoration problem. Most were cheap at the point of invention — 10 guineas, \$35, a student contest, a taxi sketch, a day of stenciling — and expensive only in the decades of not replacing them.

They are also, almost all of them, **systems pretending to be pictures**. Beck's map is a rule for adding a line. Aicher's figures are a grid. Helvetica is a kit of letters. The Swoosh is a rule for where motion sits on a shoe. Glaser's heart is a grammar ("I ♥ x"). Anderson's arrows are a license to repeat. The ones that look like single posters — Uncle Sam, Think Small, Hope — became systems the moment other people could parody them.

A picture of a layout is easy to generate. A default that other people will live inside is still the scarce object.

That is the live problem in 2026, which we already wrote as labor in [The boom heard around the world](#) and as a profession in [Graphic design in 2027](#). Models will give you a thousand Uncle Sams. They will not decide which finger is the one a country keeps. Working documents — brand tokens, templates that reflow, marks you do not redraw every Tuesday — are how a studio stays on the scarce side of that split. The catalog we keep for that job is the [marketplace](#).

Sources

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- Transport for London, “Harry Beck’s Tube map”; TfL Corporate Archives Research Guide No. 24 (10 guineas; 45/90-degree rejection).
- London Transport Museum, “Transforming the Tube map: Harry Beck’s iconic design” — first printing 750,000 in January 1933 versus typical 10,000–20,000 batches; credit on maps since 2001; 2006 British-design vote (second).
- Haas / Linotype history of Neue Haas Grotesk (1957) renamed Helvetica for international release; Unimark / NYCTA Graphics Standards Manual (1970) and Vignelli’s later account that Standard was used before Helvetica was widely available in the U.S.
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- *Advertising Age*, 1999, “The Advertising Century: Top 100 Campaigns” — Volkswagen “Think Small” at No. 1. DDB: Helmut Krone, Julian Koenig.

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