Homage to Dick Hess

Interview at the Connecticut home of the late Dick Hess, co-inventor of Paint By Numbers and one of the 20th century's greatest illustrators and graphic designers

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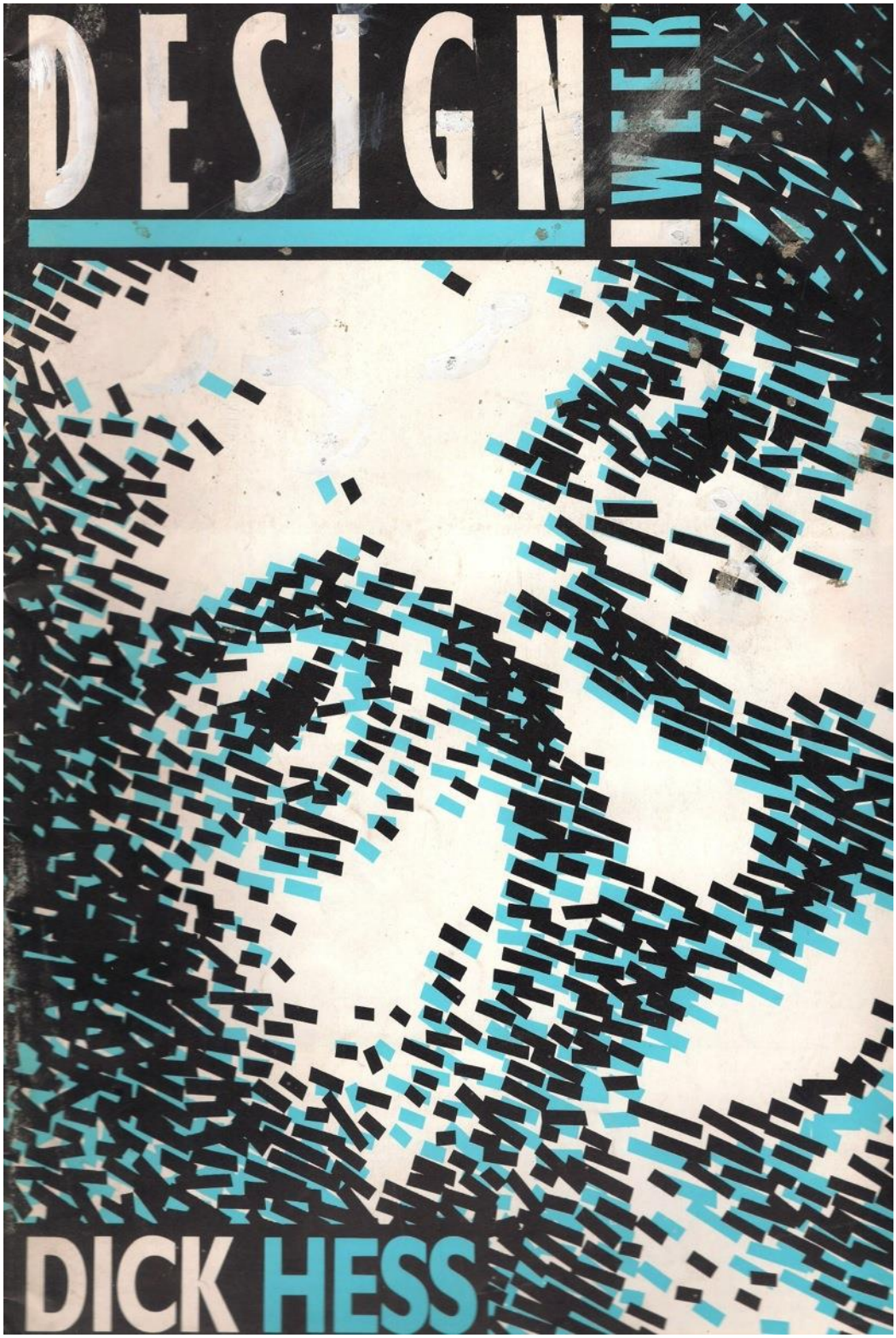
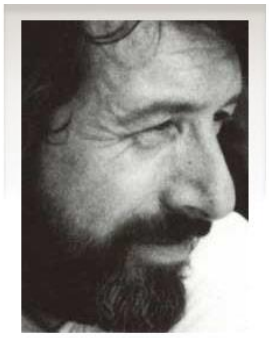
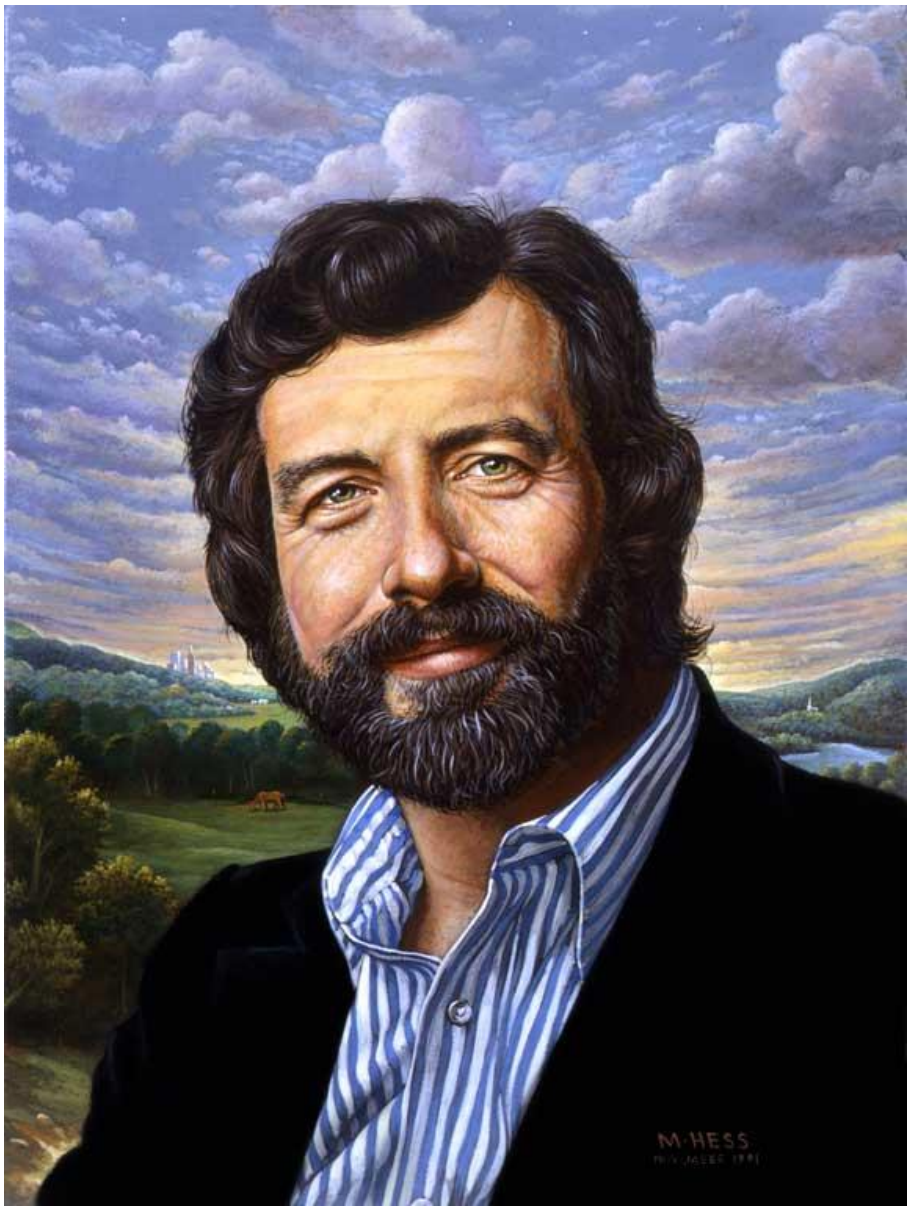




Dick Hess, 1934-91. Like my father, he worked for J Walter Thomson and Benton & Bowles



Portrait of Hess by his son Mark, 1991. See http://www.hessdesignworks.com

Richard Hess comes to the front of the stage of the Odeon cinema in London's Leicester Square. Before him stands a large laundry basket. The 1,300 graphic design students cram the place with an expectant hush. Hess takes off the top of the basket and deftly launches two rubber-band birds, brightly coloured and wings flapping, high above the front stalls. The crowd goes wild and Hess – tall, craggy and delighted that his trick has come off – goes on to show slide after slide of incomparable work.

The occasion was this year's International Congress of Graphic Design Associations student seminar on 'metaphor and ambiguity'. The illustration Hess has done over the years – he is 55 – contains a fair amount of both: it is a brilliantly drafted mix of Rousseau and Magritte, cast in the upbeat language of American magazine publishing and the annual reports of giant US corporations.

But Hess is not just a prolific and, at times, wonderfully waggish illustrator, nor is he just a fine public speaker. He is also a superb art director and designer, able to work with some of America's most famous illustrators (Saul Steinberg, Milton Glaser) and with photographers of the rank of Art Kent. He has made films for Pepsi-Cola, AT&T, UPI and Corning; children's games for the Pressman Toy Company; and political posters for the grape-pickers of California. There seems, in short, very little he can't do in the world of design.

Yet, though British readers of *Time, Newsweek* and *New York* have seen his covers, few know the man. Hess has been a director of the American Institute of Graphic Arts, has won many awards in the US, and has exhibited as far afield as Paris and Tokyo. Only this year, though, will he have a one-man show in London. Between those admiring students in the Odeon and the respect of his peers in the small, elite *Alliance Graphique International* – peers such as Henri Henrion, who introduced his speech, or Mel Calman, who has organised his exhibition – ignorance reigns. Yet Hess is indisputably one of the greats.

Born of a milkman father and a secretary mother, Hess began his career by doing cartoons in class. 'It was good for getting girls', he says, somewhat abashed. Growing up in Detroit gave him, he recalls, 'a fine sense of labour politics'. His father was a union man and the murals of Diego Rivera 'were indelible childhood images – I still paraphrase them when doing labour themes'. Indeed, until a few years back, Hess would spend 10, perhaps 15 per cent of his time working on causes for free – a considerable feat, given that he can command up to $5,000 for a three-day stint to produce a cover for *Time*. 'I'm a social person', he notes, 'a socialist, but not organised – an egalitarian'.

At the age of 18, with no formal training behind him, Hess got his break in the shape of Max Kliner, a man who deliberately went bankrupt every 18 months. Kliner was, Hess smiles ruefully, 'a complete scoundrel', but he did do two good things. First, he gave Hess a couple of *Graphis* annuals, featuring the work of Henrion, George Him and other Europeans; these made a profound impact on Hess. Second, Kliner gave Hess a job with his Palmer Paint Company, a Detroit firm specialising in the manufacture of colouring books for children. The task for Hess? As part of a team of two, to translate into mass production a painting technique pioneered by John Genagy. That technique? Painting by numbers.

Hess, then, can rightfully claim to be co-author of a graphic medium that has entranced millions. He used, he says, to be ashamed to mention this episode, such are the vulgar associations of painting by rote. But now he has no need to be defensive. 'I still paint by numbers', he says, speaking figuratively. He still, too, collects old Palmer sets at flea markets, and points out that the company once had 50 artists on its books and is still going today. 'Some of those kits had 200 colours in them. I remember doing a Last Supper with 84 separate hues'.

During his stint at Palmer, a teacher and poster-artist, Richard Kozlow, recommended Hess to enter several art directors' awards. When he won first and third prize in one of them, he found himself approached by no fewer than seven ad agencies. He picked J Walter Thompson, becoming an art director in its Detroit office at the tender age of 21. His 24-sheet posters won him further awards, but he was fairly baffled by his luck. With characteristic modesty, he observes: ‘I didn't know anything but success – and I didn't know anything! Later, when I'd be stumped for an idea, I thought the dream was over’.

Then, one day, the chief of JWT in Detroit came into the studio and asked: ‘Who knows about film here?’ Hess, who liked movies, stepped forward – an impostor, as he freely admits. That move ensured a shift into making $30m-worth of TV commercials. In those days, they cost $10,000 or less each and, in the era before Ted Bates, were shown only two or three times.

Then, summoned by a three-page telegram and two airline tickets, Hess transferred to the NW Ayer agency in Philadelphia. They were, he says, ‘conservative frauds’, and he was always in trouble. ‘I ran a team of seven misfits and one ex-con’, he remarks. Nevertheless, it was at Ayer that Hess perfected a series of scenic posters for companies like Atlantic Richfield and cars like Plymouth and Dodge. Large and free of copy, they mimicked the landscapes in which they were set; in effect, too, they functioned as forerunners of the timber-strewn, naturalistic annual reports and employee magazines he was to do years later for Champion International Corporation, a multi-billion-dollar paper manufacturer.

After Ayer came directing spells in New York: first with Benton & Bowles, then at a small agency called Van Brunt. Then, in 1965, Hess opened his own consultancy in Manhattan, going on later to form a partnership with the delirious name Hess and/or Antupit. His clients included IBM, Xerox, General Foods, Du Pont and Pan Am. In 1966 he redesigned *Evergreen* magazine, and, in 1970, *Harpers*. At his peak, he employed 18 people. Those were heady days.

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Designed by Hess, illustrated by other greats (Tomi Ungerer, Peter Max, Paul Davis): February and October 1967, June 1969

‘In the 1960s, the movement came to us, and after 1966 I got into every kind of cause. Glaser used to have these dinner parties and, between him and Pushpin Studios and *Esquire*, it was the biggest set since the Algonquin writers: Gloria Steinem, Ali McGraw, Jimmy Breslin, Mike Nichols, Robert Benton. Tom Wolfe was one of them, but he worked too hard to be too involved’.

June 1967

Back at the Odeon Leicester Square, Hess shows magazine cover illustrations of Lyndon Johnson and Henry Kissinger, briefly noting: ‘I hate most of these people’. The remark is made without rancour, and in a matter-of-fact style; but clearly the Vietnam era has left its imprint on the man.

May/June 1979

May/June 1966

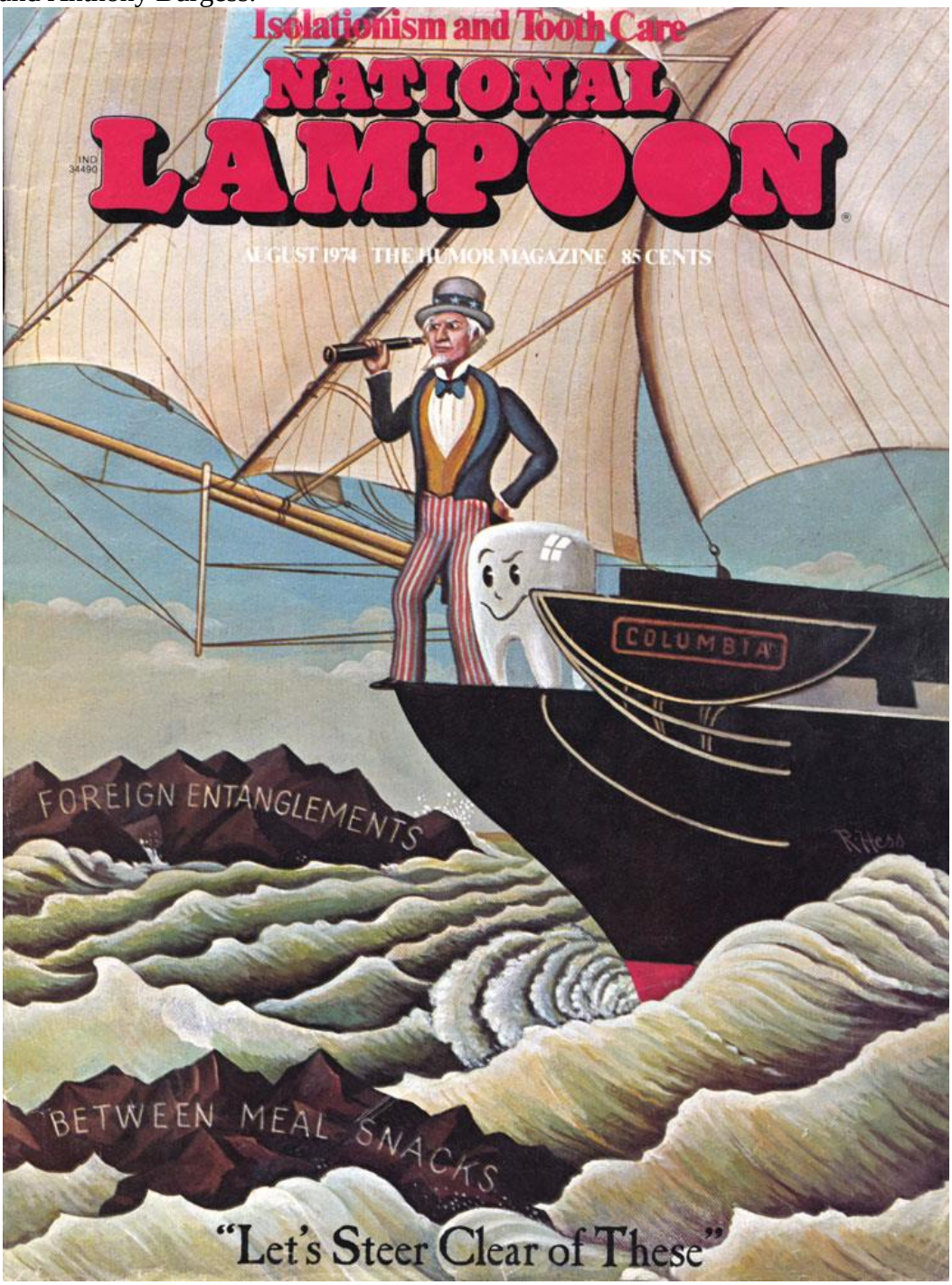
Franklin Typographers poster, 1975

‘I'm still in touch with the Jewish Communists who wrote and worked around the theatre on the Lower East Side in the 1960s’, Hess says. But he is scathing about people who have drifted to the right: ‘In heaven, I want to be the angel who knows who the turncoats are’.

One of the most bizarre covers from that period was that for the June 1967 issue of *Esquire*. On it, Hess returned to his paint-by-numbers days to caricature LBJ, filling in the colours only around a beaky nose and self-satisfied smile. With John Lennon or Robert Mitchum for America's *TV Guide,* a big Hess client, or with *The Snow Queen,* a Narniaesque children's book, Hess’s portraits reveal a deep humanity. But with Johnson, Kissinger, Nixon, Reagan and Teddy Kennedy (for the *Washington Post Magazine),* there is a lurid fleshiness about the illustrator's work which well conveys evil on a grand scale.

By the early 1970s, Hess was working with illustrator Jean-Michel Folon on *Interface,* a magazine for Babcock & Wilcox. Folon, Glaser and Britain's Ronald Searle collaborated with him on *Vista,* a United

Nations magazine, while *TV Guide* gave Hess more than 30 covers to do. There were record covers for CBS, film titles for Brian de Palma *(Sisters,* 1973), and book covers for the likes of Barbara Tuchmann and Anthony Burgess.



August 1974

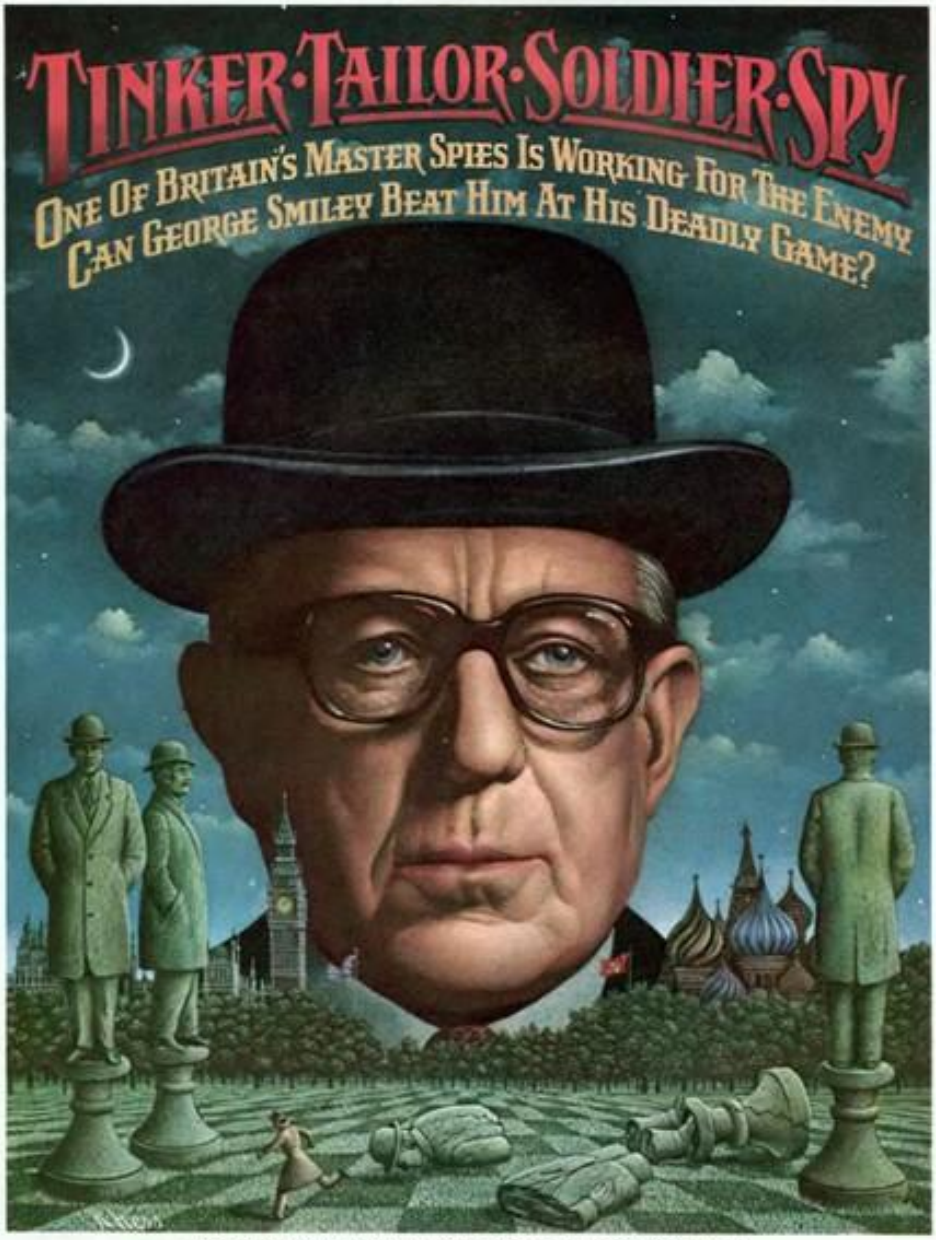
Hess illustrations show a love of lush, green vegetation, a weakness for clear blue skies studded with clouds, and a fondness for surrealistic puns. What governs his style?

'I owe a debt to Magritte simply because his is a very useful voice to use if you want to carry messages. Magritte himself maintained that his stuff was meaningless, but I think he was wrong. The trick is to add depth, so that your work bears repeated viewing – to have the immediacy of, say, Hemingway, but also the longevity of great art.

‘I work with acrylics and/or oils: even I can't tell the difference. Each piece is done at twice the size it is printed. The sad thing is that, nowadays, you can't hope to have the kind of relationship Norman Rockwell enjoyed with the editor of the *Saturday Evening Post.* Most editors are assholes – you just get to deal with art directors on lots of different magazines, and they're constantly changing jobs. The new breed of art directors is militantly stupid about the history of graphic design. They care only for apparent results; there's no passion, no erudition’.

Hess has continued to do covers through the 1980s, even though *Time* has recently stopped employing caricaturists. He has done important booklets for *National Geographic* and the island of Barbados, and he also designs AT&T's *Staying in Touch*, a consumer newsletter that reaches 50 million American homes. Among his influences he rates Henri Wolf, Bradbury Thompson and Paul Rand highly; also, he loves old copies of *Future* and *Du*. ‘Whenever I get stale or dyspeptic’, he relates, ‘I go back to them. They're designed in a painterly way – they don't violate the Swiss grid, but they aren't enslaved by it either’.

Today Dick Hess lives with his companion, Susan, in a great, cavernous house in Connecticut. The surroundings are very green, but the deadlines – courtesy of Federal Express and a fax machine – remain exacting. But for us Brits, at least, the waiting is over, and the long-overdue deadline for having an exhibition of Hess's work in this country has finally been met.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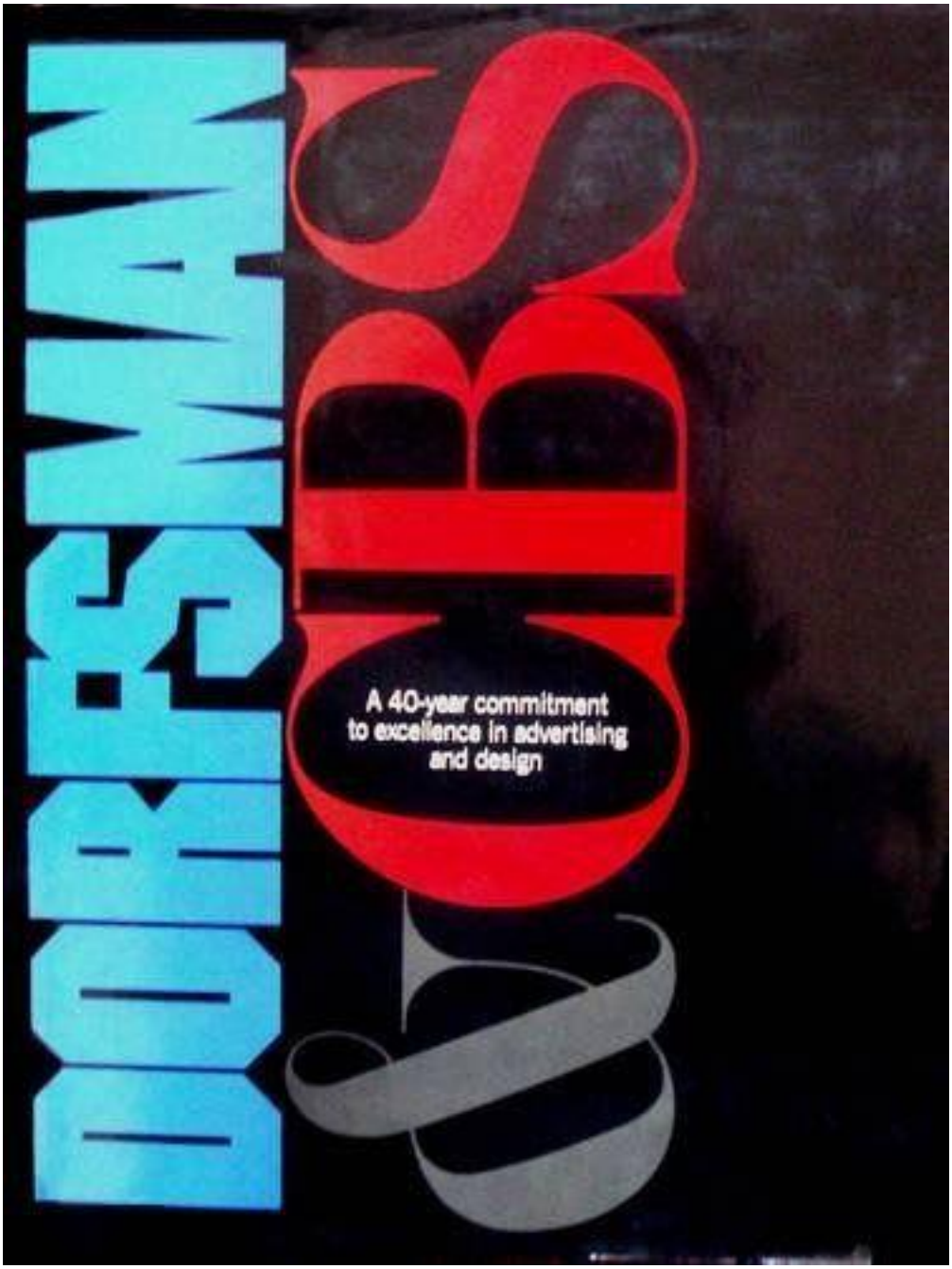
CAN GEORGE SMILEY BEAT HIM AT HIS DEADLY GAME?
Alec Guinness is George Smiley in John le Carré's thriller
On Great Performances, Monday evenings, September 29-November 3 on PBS
EXXON

29 June 1980



Tribute to Lou Dorfsman, the great chief of design at CBS. Co-written by Hess and Marion Muller; Rizzoli, 1987

6 July 1987