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RUTH ANSEL: AN INNOVATOR IN GRAPHIC DESIGN

by Jenna Naccarato

As the youngest co-art director of *Harper's Bazaar* in the '60s, art director of *The New York Times Magazine* in the '70s, and *House & Garden* and *Vanity Fair* in the '80s, American graphic designer Ruth Ansel has created numerous iconic designs throughout her remarkable career. Guiding the way for today's female graphic designers, Ansel was the first woman to lead the art departments at *Harper's Bazaar*, *The New York Times Magazine* and *Vanity Fair*. (Nelson, 2010). While she is greatly admired for these reputable titles, they are only part of her many achievements in innovative design. ("Ruth Ansel: Biography", n.d.). Throughout her career of almost 50 years, Ansel has collaborated with photographers, illustrators and artists including Andy Warhol, Richard Avedon, Annie Leibovitz and Peter Beard to produce some of the most unforgettable designs, layouts, covers and photography ever published in magazine. (ADC, 2011). Joining the graphic communication industry with a young and fresh mind, and without an educational background, Ansel challenged the standards of magazine design by creating original and artistic designs that sparked conversations around art, fashion and society. ("Ruth Ansel: Designer of the Times, n.d.).



Figure 1. Ruth Ansel. ("Hall of Femmes", 2010).



Figure 2. Jean Shrimpton on the cover of *Harper's Bazaar's* April 1965 issue, designed by Ruth Ansel and photographed by Richard Avedon. (Mooallem, 2017).

Born in 1938 in New York, New York, Ansel was just 24-years-old when she became the co-art director of *Harper's Bazaar* in the '60s. In a 2005 interview with New York-based graphic designer Bonnie Siegler, Ansel explains how she did not expect her parents to support her in her early 20's, so she began seeking job opportunities related to art. "Around that time I met and eventually married the accomplished designer Bob Gill," Ansel said. (Siegler, 2005). She discovered the concept of graphic design during her relationship with Gill, which soon after ended in divorce. Looking for work and adventure, Ansel travelled to Europe where she worked for a short amount of time at Studio Boggeri in Milan. "Milan was gray, and it was one of the coldest winters ever. So, I hopped on a train to Rome, looking for the sun," Ansel said. Unable to find work in Rome, Ansel found herself struggling to buy necessities. "I wasn't becoming a famous title designer, and my Italian was lousy. But I had a hell of a time in London, Paris, Spain, and Italy, discovering that my adventurous spirit was alive and well," Ansel said. (Siegler, 2005).

Circa 1961, Ansel was a young dreamer who lacked ambition but had a love for movies and magazines. Looking to *Harper's Bazaar* as a potential place of employment, Marvin Israel, the publication's art director at the time, was looking for an assistant. With her portfolio in hand, Ansel went to an interview with Israel and was eventually hired. "I knew nothing about Marvin but found out afterwards that he liked the idea that my work came from an outsider's point of view. That I never studied graphic design appealed to his subversive nature," Ansel said. (Siegler, 2005).

In 1962, Israel adored a photo that resembled Diana Vreeland, and thought it would be the perfect photo for a cover. However, the editor-in-chief at the time detested it, and even thought the photo was of a man in drag. Israel expressed how furious he was with her opinion, which resulted in the editor-in-chief firing him.

IN THE DISTANT GALAXY OF ALPHA CENTAURI, ON THE PLANET RADIANTA, THE EARTH GIRL RECONNOITERS. SHE WILL CONQUER THE CRUEL DICTATORSHIP OF SALLOWAXOS WITH HER BEAUTY...

TO ENCHANT THE ASTEROIDS, to cause Martians to surrender, the earth girl, Ultima (naturally), leans upon her glorious galaxy of Ultima II cosmetics. Their texture—as vaporous, as weightless, as rarified as the very atmosphere of outer space. Their delicate, almost transparent colors—madly celestial delights. “Why blast off to the moon wearing anything less?” asks Ultima, modestly, crooning over the creamy, seductive splendor of her Pewter eye shadow bounded with pale Snowfrost; her Aurora Beige Creme Foundation; glowing Tawny Peach Blushing Creme; Aralia Red #5 lip stick—as yet another meteor flashes by, unnoticed. All by Revlon.

Meanwhile, back at the space station, our young lady astronaut (below), unwilling to discard her precious earthling chic—cuts out in a straight silk dress, futuristically designed in sections of white, black and pink—enough to send any solar system into a spin. By Bill Blass for Maurice Rentner, in Chardon-Marché silk crepe. About \$190. At Bonwit Teller; Julius Garfinkel, Washington; Gus Mayer. Pink stockings by Berkshire. Gustinettes slipper-shoe.

RICHARD AVEDON



THE GALACTIC BEAUTY TO THE RESCUE ...



Figure 3. Jean Shrimpton in *Harper's Bazaar's* April 1965 issue, designed by Ruth Ansel and photographed by Richard Avedon. ("The Richard Avedon Foundation", n.d.).

("Ruth Ansel: Designer of the Times, n.d.). Taking over for her now predecessor, Ansel was appointed co-art director alongside Brazilian designer Bea Feitler who had been working at *Harper's Bazaar* as well.

While at *Harper's Bazaar* Ansel collaborated with photographers like Richard Avedon, painters Andy Warhol, Roy Lichtenstein, and Robert Rauschenberg and young writers including Renata Adler and Bruce Jay Friedman. In 1965, Avedon guest edited *Harper's Bazaar's* April issue that was dedicated to the Sexual Revolution, youth culture-pop and Rock. "It flowed like a piece of music. It was to tell everything that was current and future in art, fashion, science, and music," Ansel said. (Siegler, 2005). The issue was at high interest after the cover featured British model Jean Shrimpton in a spacesuit, portraying her as the first female astronaut. "That was well before its time, nobody believed a woman would become an astronaut, and of course we know differently now," Ansel

said. (Siegler, 2005). This concept was one of the first of Ansel's many pieces that challenged the standards of magazine design, gender roles and society. "The issue scared a lot of people at the top at *Bazaar*," Ansel said. "They had started to become concerned with the economics of the market and turned their back on anything original or artistic. This signaled that the ship was beginning to sink." (Siegler, 2005).

Shifting environments from art and fashion to politics and hard news, Ansel became art director of *The New York Times Magazine* from 1974 to 1981, after *The New York Times* art director Lou Silverstein reached out to her. Ansel explained how the transition between environments was not too difficult as she was interested in learning about the corruption occurring in America and devoted to becoming more engaged with the city she was born and raised in. "Remember it was a devastating time. They were shooting down our heroes," Ansel said. "First President Kennedy was assassinated, then Martin Luther King, and finally Bobby Kennedy. They were

my heroes." (Siegler, 2005).

The hard news environment at *The New York Times Magazine* came with many stories and strict deadlines. Focusing primarily on the cover rather than the inside of the magazine gave Ansel a lot of creative freedom with poster images. "The type design in those issues suffered - I wasn't proud of that - and there were press problems," Ansel said. "Keep in mind that in the late '70s the only section in the newspaper that wasn't printed in black and white was the magazine." (Siegler, 2005).

In 1981, Ansel left the hard news environment at *The New York Times Magazine* and went back to creating artistic, elegant and modern designs as art director of Conde Nast's *House & Garden* and *Vanity Fair* magazines (Siegler, 2005). While her designs at these publications were memorable, her list of achievements surpasses her time working there. Ansel designed books including Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and Philip Jones Griffiths' *Dark Odyssey*.

(ADC, 2011). After the launch of her own studio in the early '90s, Ansel and her team designed advertising campaigns for fashion brands including Versace, Club Monaco and Karl Lagerfeld. ("Ruth Ansel: Biography", n.d.). "I was very proud of that (Club Monaco) campaign. It was the easiest design project I ever worked on and that also paid nicely," Ansel said. "Now I 'got' what those other advertising art directors were getting away with over the years and keeping quiet about." (Siegler, 2005).

Ansel has undoubtedly been awarded for her innovative and artistic designs. She has received countless awards for her work including the Gold Medal for Design in 1970, an award from The Art Directors Club, and a tribute from the Society of Publication Design Award for Continuing Excellence in Publication Design in 1994. Swedish studio Hjarta Smarta also designed a book dedicated to Ansel called *Hall of Femmes: Ruth Ansel*, which was

published in 2010. The book includes an exclusive interview, photos, and examples of her editorial and advertising designs. (ADC, 2011).

When asked by Siegler what makes good design work, Ansel expressed how she believes in simple design that takes a lot of work to achieve. "Trust your instincts, change the rules to suit yourself, embrace accidents, keep looking at everything, know your subject, appear fearless-even when you aren't and most importantly, work with an enlightened client or collaborator as often as you can," Ansel said. (Siegler, 2005).

From an innovative graphic designer who began her career with little to no experience, to an art director at several publications, Ansel can undoubtedly be deemed an icon in the world of graphic design. Ultimately, she paved the way for many young graphic designers looking to create original and artistic designs that have the power to start a conversation about world issues.



Figure 5. Ruth Ansel, photo by Scott Schuman, 2008. (Gaddy, 2016).

"Trust your instincts, change the rules to suit yourself, embrace accidents..."

- RUTH ANSEL



Figure 4. Versace's ad campaign designed by Ruth Ansel. (Mazzoni, 2015).

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