LONDON CALLING: THE LONDON ISSUE

GIACOMETTI AT THE TATE:
After 50 years, the prodigal son returns

GOING UNDERGROUND:
Beck and the iconic Tube map

KEEP IT SIMPLE AND CARRY ON:
5 British masters of minimalism

Peter Saville
Abram Games
Olly Moss

Reader’s poll:
The 5 best album covers ever!

   Designer: Peter Blake
   Total reader votes: 1,202
   The cover was originally going to show the Beatles playing in a park. That slowly evolved into the final concept, where they stand amidst cardboard cutouts of their heroes. The band originally planned on including Leo Gorcey, Gandhi, Jesus Christ and Adolf Hitler. Common sense kicked Hitler off the cover, the still-lingering bitterness of John Lennon’s “bigger than Jesus” comment kicked Jesus off the cover and Gandhi got the boot over concerns that India wouldn’t print the album. Actor Gorcey requested $400 for his likeness, a decision he probably lived to regret.

2. Pink Floyd - Dark Side Of The Moon (1973, Harvest records)
   Designer: Hipgnosis
   Total reader votes: 933
   Hipgnosis had designed several of Pink Floyd’s previous albums, with controversial results: the band’s record company had reacted with confusion when faced with the collective’s non-traditional designs that omitted words.

   Designer: Robert Fisher
   Total reader votes: 755
   Spencer Elden, the naked baby on the cover, said he feels weird about his bizarre role in history. “It’s kind of creepy that many people have seen me naked,” he said. But what does this cover mean? “Kurt was intellectual and deep-thinking about his work,” says Fisher.

   Designer: John Kosh
   Total reader votes: 729
   Beatles nuts who believed that Paul McCartney died around 1967 and was replaced by a dopplegänger found a lot to examine on this cover. They saw the picture as a funeral procession.

5. The Clash, ‘London Calling’ (1979, CBS Records)
   Designer: Ray Lowry
   Total reader votes: 695
   Pennie Smith was snapping photos of the Clash at New York’s Palladium when she captured one of the most iconic images in rock history. Paul Simonon was annoyed by the relatively quiet audience, so he began smashing his bass guitar against the floor.

The album cover dates from 1939, when Columbia Records art director Alex Steinweiss decided his label’s offerings might find a wider audience with some added visual appeal. Since the very first Steinweiss design, an album of showtunes by Rogers and Hart, album covers have represented the apotheosis and nadir of graphic design, and have touched all points in between. In the age of the digital download, the album cover is sadly a lost art – which probably explains why 90 percent of the albums that readers selected come from the 1960s and the 1970s. Here are the Top 5:
In 1957, the writer Jean Genet described the studio of his friend Alberto Giacometti. It was “a milky swamp, a seething dump, a genuine ditch”. There was plaster all over the floor and all over the face, hair and clothes of the sculptor; there were scraps of paper and lumps of paint on every available surface. And yet, “lo and behold the prodigious, magical powers of fermentation” – as if by magic, art grew from the rubbish; the plaster on the floor leapt up and took on permanence as a standing figure.
He worked away at it with his knife, often subjecting it to so much pressure that it finally crumbled away, forming the rubbed observation by Genet. When he was happy with it, he painted it. The original Women of Venice exhibited at the Venice Biennale in 1956 were plaster figures with black and brown lines etched on to their faces and bodies, making them resemble the women in his paintings.

Now the Giacometti Foundation in Paris has found new methods of restoring his plaster sculptures, many of which were damaged by being broken apart and covered in orange shellac to be cast in bronze. The Woman of Venice, whose painted surfaces have been revealed, can once again be exhibited as they were at the Biennale, rather than as bronzes. And they will make their first appearance at a major retrospective opening at Tate Modern in London next month.

This will be Giacometti's first Tate show since a retrospective in 1965, when the sculptor worked away in a basement, perfecting the works that he was never quite prepared to declare finished. It will be his first major exhibition in London for a decade.

Giacometti was born in a remote Swiss valley in 1901, the son of a successful, conventionally realistic Swiss painter. His first sculpture of his brother Diego at the age of 13, and swiftly dedicated himself to art. In 1922 he moved to Paris, where he discovered surrealism, becoming a friend of André Breton. He stopped modelling from life and devoted himself to dreamlike visions, claiming in 1933 that for some years he had “only realized sculptures, objects, and a process of continually reworking the subjects’ expressions, in the sculptures, and particularly in the paintings, creates the effect of a moment that is also timeless. This is something Giacometti had sought to capture since that vision outside the cinema after the war. And in his final busts of Annette, there is a resilience that the sculptor appears to forge with gratitude. He was trying “to succeed, just for once, in making a head like the head I see.” He failed, of course, but these are failures that stand as cautions to those who seek to do more than strive.

During the second world war, Giacometti returned to Switzerland. There he met Annette Arm, the ingenuous and adoring girl who seems to have decided almost immediately that she would share his life, and waited patiently for him to agree. Living in a hotel with her in Geneva, he sculpted smaller and smaller figures, claiming that they shrank against his will. Many were only the size of a finger.

After he returned to Paris in 1945, he had a vision that enabled him to break away from the miniature. Coming out of a cinema on to the Boulevard Montparnasse one day, he experienced a “complete transformation of reality” and understood that, until that moment, his vision of the world had been photographic, though in fact “reality was poles apart from the supposed objectivity of a film”. Feeling as though he was entering the world for the first time, he trembled in terror as he surveyed the heads around him, which appeared isolated from space. When he entered a familiar cafe, the Brasserie Lipp, he found that the head of a waiter as a sculptural presence as he leaned towards him, “his eyes fixed in an absolute immobility.”

Now he was able to enlarge his figures, but he found that as they became taller they lost heft, becoming inevitably more slender. It was thanks to these elongated, pointy figures with heavy feet that he swiftly rose to fame. He had some money now, though he insisted on living in his studio, refusing to indulge Annette in her desire for an ordinary home. He became acquainted with many of Paris’s most exciting writers and artists. He drank in cafes with Jean-Paul Sartre and Simone de Beauvoir, went for late night, largely silent walks with Samuel Beckett, and became a regular – though often rather critical – visitor at Picasso’s studio. Even at his most successful, this was not so much an artistic career as it was an endless, inevitably failed attempt to capture life that hovered on the verge of obsessive madness. “Ever tried. Ever failed. No matter. Try again. Fail again. Fail better,” wrote Beckett, perhaps he saw the head I see”. He failed, of course, but these are failures that stand as cautions to those who seek to do more than strive.

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