



Design History 101

The Lost Story of Soviet Germany's Most Famous Graphic Designer

Wittkugel's designs were far more playful than you might guess for Stalinist East Germany

By Liz Stinson
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It was 1951 and Klaus Wittkugel had just designed a poster that was going to get him into trouble. As head designer for the German Democratic Republic's Office of Information, the graphic designer was tasked with creating a poster for an exhibition about the Five Year Plan, which highlighted the GDR's Soviet-style economic goals. Wittkugel's poster had an army green background with sans serif numbers "1951-1955" that appeared to be advancing like soldiers. It was simple: clean lines and heavy type. The poster was, by most objective standards, totally benign.

After the exhibition ended—and it was considered a wild success—the

local newspaper of record ran a piece condemning Wittkugel's work, writing: "An abstract, intellectual play with numbers and format takes precedence over depictions of people and clear symbols... This ever-dominant formalist approach to visual communication continues to find its expression in other experiments that show a hatred of mankind."

A hatred for mankind. Despite his loyalty to the German Democratic Republic, Wittkugel was censured because of the design. "He was basically considered a bad Socialist," says Prem Krishnamurthy, founder of [Project Projects](#) and P!. "He had to go to reform classes, read his Marx and Lenin. My suspicion is in that moment something started to change in his work as well."

Krishnamurthy co-curated ***Ost Und ~~oder~~ West [East and West]***, a two-part exhibition that looks at the work of Wittkugel and his contemporary Anton Stankowski (through February 21, 2016). The two exhibitions run in tandem; Wittkugel's work at P! and Stankowski's at Osmos Address, both in New York City. Viewed side by side, they highlight how two graphic designers—both of whom originate not just from the same country, but the same school and teacher—developed their craft as a result of the environments in which they ultimately existed.

Unlike Stankowski's corporate work for Deutsche Bank, Wittkugel's legacy has faded over time. "This history has never been told," Krishnamurthy says. Both Wittkugel and Stankowski studied under the same teacher in Essen Germany, but after graduating their paths diverged. Wittkugel got a job working in Berlin, while Stankowski moved to Zurich and later to Stuttgart where he became one of Germany's most well-known designers of corporate logos.

Wittkugel eventually became the head of the GDR's graphic design program, a position Krishnamurthy says was arguably more valued at the time. "In the East, a graphic designer was the highest form of artist," Krishnamurthy says. Unlike painters and sculptors, graphic designers worked for the people, at least in theory. Their work communicated a message (propaganda or otherwise). Quite simply, it served a purpose.

Over the years, Wittkugel designed some of the most recognizable identity work from the Soviet era. But after his censure, Krishnamurthy notes that Wittkugel's work began to embrace the human form over his more typical Modernist use of typography. One famous poster shows a young coal miner emerging from the darkness, his face covered in soot, the words "Ich bin Bergmann! Wer ist mehr? (Translation: "I am a miner! Who is better?") written below him as a call to action. "It was like the 'We Want You, Uncle Sam poster,'" he says.

Still, Krishnamurthy describes Wittkugel as an aesthetic chameleon who made elegant transitions from style to style. Krishnamurthy

explains Wittkugel was self-reflexive in his work, often cleverly nodding to the process through which it was made. In one example, a poster for an election depicts a man hanging a poster. Another features a magnifying glass being held to a logo that reads “Qualität” (“Quality”), essentially inviting viewers to judge his work.

On the whole, Wittkugel’s designs were far more playful than you might guess for someone who worked for Stalinist East Germany.

Ultimately, the story of German graphic design—all graphic design, really—is left to what we choose to remember. Krishnamurthy says much of the history of design that was ultimately written about Wittkugel’s time focuses on designers working with corporate partners—the Eames and IBM, Stankowski and Deutsche Bank. “I think we tend to take that as a neutral condition,” he says. Holding up a piece of Socialist propaganda as an example of canonical design is, understandably, a less comfortable position, and as a result Wittkugel’s work has disappeared along with the dissolution of the GDR.

“On the other hand,” says Krishnamurthy, “if we have a designer who works for a Socialist government or a designer who works for the Communist party, we ask these deep questions of them.” Questions like, why did you work for that client? Is it ethical? Does that impact the value of a piece of graphic design? To that, says Krishnamurthy, there might be a simpler explanation yet. “The actual answer,” he says, “might just be that the East German government was a really good client, and they paid on time.” ●