Flat Out Rebellion: The Rule-Breaking Career of Designer-Illustrator Seymour Chwast

Danielle Ridolfi
Washington University in St. Louis

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FLAT OUT REBELLION

THE RULE-BREAKING CAREER OF DESIGNER-ILLUSTRATOR SEYMOUR CHWAST

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Flat Out Rebellion / An Exhibition

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An Exhibition / December 3, 2022–February 12, 2023

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Washington University in St. Louis

Curated by Danielle Ridolfi
Illustration and Visual Culture MFA Candidate

Far Left
Arno & the Mini Machine
Seven Stories Press, 2019

Front Cover
She Sells Sea Shells: World Class Tongue Twisters
Applesauce Press, 2008

Children's Book

Arno & the Mini Machine
Seven Stories Press, 2019

She Sells Sea Shells: World Class Tongue Twisters
Applesauce Press, 2008
During the late 40s and 50s, American illustration was dominated by the simulated small town charm of Norman Rockwell, and the slick but false assurances of the Westport School, an illustration style built for an affluent post-war America. The Westport illustrators produced fiction illustrations and advertisements for magazines like *Ladies’ Home Journal* and *The Saturday Evening Post*. The approach was stylish but often anodyne. According to Chwast, the careful construction and rendering of a Westport picture belied artificial narratives. “They were the enemy,” Chwast said of the Westport illustrators and art directors. “They represented an America that never really existed.”

Chwast co-founded a rival tradition at Push Pin Studios with Milton Glaser and others. Through his work Chwast wove acts of creative rebellion into every aspect of his career. He rejected tradition in both subject matter, favoring provocative political topics, and in form, embracing a flat, graphic style well-suited to clever concepts and counter narratives. From politically charged anti-war posters to unconventional picture books, Chwast and his Push Pin colleagues reinvigorated visual culture by pushing against prevailing norms, using a friendly, approachable aesthetic to signal that all were welcome in their creative rebellion.

Graphic designer and illustrator Seymour Chwast evades crisp categorization. His trailblazing, seventy-year professional career began at midcentury, during a time of drastic formal and cultural change in the graphic arts.
Westport illustrators sought to create symbols of hope, comfort, and plenty in their idealized depictions of suburban families frolicking on vacation, women dutifully tending to children, and young couples relishing in romance. Norman Rockwell, an artist sui generis during the Westport years, most famously illustrated covers for *The Saturday Evening Post* depicting nostalgic scenes of small town America. His detailed renderings created the illusion of reality, but his use of carefully staged models and props lent a cinematic veneer. In 1960, Rockwell acknowledged, “the view of life I paint excludes the sordid and ugly. I paint life as I would like it to be.” However, his later shift to issues of civil rights suggest editorial constraints, more than personal values, were the source of his idyllic America.

Westport contemporary Coby Whitmore also illustrated covers, advertisements, and fiction for *The Saturday Evening Post* and several other mass appeal magazines including *Good Housekeeping* and *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Much of his work showcases happy American families enjoying blissful normalcy in domestic spaces as well as romantic “boy meets girl” themes typical of the Westport school. Like his mainstream contemporaries, Whitmore adorned his scenes with the accoutrements of suburbia, including elegant clothing and modern appliances—a carefully crafted set for post-war narratives.
The narrow view of America that Westport highlighted, mostly white, middle class, and Protestant, did not sit well with Chwast and his Push Pin colleagues who believed the field of illustration was in dire need of a shake up. Push Pin Studios delivered that disturbance, swapping anesthetizing idealization for provocative themes and experimental forms in their monthly periodical, the Push Pin Graphic, where they used publishing as protest.

With Chwast at the helm as designer and art director of the Push Pin Graphic, the publication quickly became known for stylistic experiments and clever writing that set the studio apart from the prosaic fiction of contemporary mainstream periodicals. Early issues heavily favored printmaking techniques that produced bold, graphic results. Later, Chwast turned to his quirky drawing style featuring bright, flat color and delicate outlines. While Chwast continued to embrace stylistic experimentation, this cartooning-inspired aesthetic became a signature style for his later commercial work.

Push Pin Studios tackled topics like war, sex, relationships, and families with an exuberant irreverence that would have ruffled the feathers of any Westport art director. Vehemently opposed to sentimental and idealized tropes, Chwast relished in illuminating the complex dialectics of American life. In issue 64 on motherhood, Chwast’s colorful cover illustration depicting a simultaneously angelic and beastly mother foreshadows the issue’s iconoclastic meditation on parental archetypes.

Even when the Push Pin Graphic did not address explicitly political issues, the studio still found creative ways to push boundaries with content, capitalizing on Chwast’s dark humor and wit to poke fun at consumer culture and popular trends. Chwast crafted piquant criticisms of American society through narrative illustrations that foreshadowed his future children’s books. In issue 73, Chwast offered a subtle but scathing criticism of American consumerism and conformity in a comic called Bobo’s Smile. Bobo dutifully follows the prescribed path to the American dream, accumulating money and material goods along the way, but finds himself nevertheless dissatisfied and disillusioned.
While the Push Pin Graphic became an outlet for pushing the social envelope, its primary purpose was to drum up freelance business for the studio, particularly in the early years when Chwast and his colleagues had day jobs elsewhere. As a result of sending the Push Pin Graphic to friends, colleagues, and art directors, steady freelance work indeed came, including magazine covers, book jackets, and advertising work. Given Chwast’s penchant for broaching controversial topics with warm wit and humor, clients looking to soften their image sought Chwast out. Never shying away from challenging subject matter, Chwast’s commercial projects broach topics including cancer prevention, mental health, business, and early digital technology.

Chwast completed many commercial projects for The Ink Tank, an animation studio in New York City founded in 1978 by R.O. Blechman. Using his signature abbreviated style, he drew and painted on acetate to create animation cels ready for the production team for animated commercials and several “Mobile Showcase” television programs.

Consistent with his interest in social advocacy, one client Chwast worked for under the art direction of The Ink Tank was the National Institutes of Mental Health. In a reference to the nursery rhyme The Little Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe, one such advertisement promoted a free parenting survival kit offered through social services departments. The scene depicts a frazzled mother struggling to contain her exuberant children. As with much of his work, Chwast used comic relief and friendly color to inject levity into a topic prone to stigma.
Chwast also completed animation work for a Hewlett-Packard advertisement under the art direction of The Ink Tank. The narrative depicts a frazzled businessman as a headless chicken fleeing his demanding employees at a company aptly named “V. Hektic”. He recovers only when the HP truck delivers his personal computer. In the 1980s, many computer companies and business magazines employed Chwast’s friendly drawing style and inviting wit to make new digital technology and financial enterprises feel less intimidating and threatening. This trend led to a number of commercial projects for Chwast including Hewlett-Packard, Forbes and various computer and technology conferences.
Chwast’s rebellion found another form in his many posters. Inspired by his coming of age during World War II, Chwast was a passionate pacifist and used posters as an opportunity to make more overt political statements about the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War and other armed conflicts. The poster has roots in protest movements and Chwast sought to extend that popular tradition through formal and conceptual means. His graphic style allowed him to communicate outspoken ideologies with single images.

In arguably his most famous poster, *End Bad Breath*, a visual protest to the United States’ involvement in the Vietnam War, Chwast used woodblock printing, a medium that lends itself to flat, graphic outcomes, to subvert a traditional symbol of American patriotism. Inside Uncle Sam’s open mouth he inserted a flurry of American aircraft bombing Vietnamese houses. During the 1960s, companies commissioned Chwast and other liked-minded designers to create anti-war posters like this one to sell.
Chwast also designed and illustrated countless rally and event posters for socially-informed and environmental causes. In *March for Peace and justice*, a rally poster promoting a march in New York City calling for nuclear disarmament, Chwast used his signature abbreviated style to depict an image of a dove, the universal symbol for peace. The dove marches forward thanks to its many legs, representing various races, occupations, and walks of life unified by a common goal.

In many of his posters, Chwast wielded a combination of humor, friendliness, and gravity to pique viewers’ interest and make various causes and events more welcoming and accessible. In his *Earth Day New York City 1991* poster, perhaps in homage to his own history of using design and publishing as acts of rebellion, Chwast adroitly positions creative pursuits like writing as important acts of advocacy and protest.
Chwast embraced a flat drawing style that resembled cartooning. While he has used diverse media throughout his career, he remained partial to drawing, particularly the combination of flat color and outline he refined in the *Push Pin Graphic*. Chwast borrowed from childhood heroes, including Lee Falk and Walt Disney, whose 1937 film *Snow White* first inspired him to pursue art. Chwast probed his imagination for visual content and abbreviated images in order to strip complex topics down to their core narratives.

To achieve the flat, even color he preferred, Chwast prepared his work for reproduction by either using opaque paint or, in later years, composing carefully cut pieces of translucent colored plastic as such products became commercially available. In his mechanical drawings prepared in this fashion, the under drawing is often visible through the flat transparent shapes revealing Chwast’s intention to add details with subsequent layers. He added this definition and detail with a key outline drawing in black ink composed as a separate layer from the color layer to aid in the reproduction process. While printing methods varied throughout Chwast’s career, color separations were common.

With the exception of some areas of pattern, Chwast leaves his shapes large open vessels for color with none of the cross-hatching some illustrators employ to create shading and depth. In true cartooning style, Chwast simplified his backgrounds to fields of opaque color and eliminated details like shadows and folds that he found unnecessary to the overall narrative.
TOP
mechanical color drawing
Mother Goose
1971

BOTTOM
mechanical key drawing
Mother Goose
1971

TOP
mechanical key drawing
Mother Goose
1971

BOTTOM
mechanical color drawing
Mother Goose
1971
Chwast found a freedom in children’s books that allowed him to play with form and narrative, including unconventional plot structures and book formats. Chwast used experimental forms, like fanciful folds and flaps, as a narrative tool while using his sense of humor to ground high concepts. In addition to pushing back against formal standards, He also created books about topics counter to the mainstream in children’s publishing, using his friendly drawing style to make somber subject matter more approachable for young readers.

*Tall City, Wide Country*, a charming book with an unconventional format, depicts the journey of two children traveling between the green, rural countryside and the bustling skyscraper-filled city. The book switches from horizontal to vertical format at the halfway point to capture the change in landscape and can be read forwards or backwards, defying typical narrative plot conventions and granting the child agency in their reading experience.
In an innovative example of how form can support content, *Traffic Jam*, a uniquely-formatted book about two cats who cause an enormous traffic jam, features a large fold-out page where the bulk of the plot takes place. Unfolding the flaps and examining the detailed pictures and dialogue inside significantly slows the pace of the narrative. This slowness mirrors the halting experience of an actual traffic jam and allows readers to feel immersed in the action, or lack thereof, in this innovative hybrid between picture book, map, and comic.
In *The Miracles of Passover*, an informational children’s book about the history behind the Passover tradition, Chwast pushes back against unspoken rules surrounding the depiction of serious topics in children’s literature. As opposed to glossing over potentially frightening issues of violence, illness, and death, Chwast approaches them head on using an engaging flap structure and his typical friendly comic-inspired drawing style to illustrate the plagues of Egypt in the story of Passover.

In *Arno and the Mini-Machine*, one of Chwast’s more recent works, a boy in a hyper-modern urban civilization, commits an act of rebellion by discovering and then befriending a yellow bird. Throughout the narrative, Chwast overtly expresses concerns about society’s loss of contact with nature in a technology-centered world, simultaneously offering an endearing story for children and a prescient critique of modern society for adult readers.
In *Mr. Merlin and the Turtle*, a magical wizard transforms his pet turtle, whom he has grown bored with, into a myriad of other animals who create countless problems and messes for the wizard and his wife. Chwast used complex flap structures that reveal each animal slowly, inviting creative guessing-games about the animals under the flaps. The double flaps also provide moments of humor when animals appear with mismatched limbs and tails, in a playful reference to an exquisite corpse.

Non-fiction tales can often feel dry, but *The Miracle of Hanukkah* surprises the reader with an experimental stepped-page flap format to depict the historical stories behind the Hanukkah celebration. The flaps, depicting the destruction of the Temple of Jerusalem, offer a fresh way to depict the passing of time in a single location and engage young readers in a tale that may otherwise feel remote. Growing up with few picture books about his Jewish faith undoubtedly motivated these books for Chwast.
This project was conducted as part of an Independent Study during the fall 2022 semester at the D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library at Washington University in St. Louis. We wish to extend a special thank you to Cassie Brand, Jessi Cerutti, D.B. Dowd, Skye Lacerte, and Ian Lanius for their support and invaluable contributions to this exhibition as well as to the many colleagues who assisted with the photography of the materials. Last but not least, we are deeply indebted to the donors who helped to establish the Seymour Chwast Collection, particularly the Walter and Karla Goldschmidt Foundation, who by doing so provided the opportunity for important archival research.

All of the artifacts in this exhibition are housed in the D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library at Washington University in St. Louis. The Seymour Chwast Collection contains over 150 posters spanning the length of Chwast’s career, as well as original process work and newly acquired children's books. The Ink Tank Collection houses animation cels from Chwast and his contemporaries. For more information about these collections, please contact Skye Lacerte, Curator of the D.B. Dowd Modern Graphic History Library, at slacerte@wustl.edu.
“They were the enemy. They represented an America that never really existed.”

–Seymour Chwast on the Westport School

From interview with D.B. Dowd, 2016
Washington University in St. Louis