

FALL IN LOVE WITH A MASTER

In the beginning months of 2001 I was banging my head against a wall trying to come up with a suitable direction for our site redesign. I had tried everything I could think of and had actually designed one version almost to completion. But each comp I designed failed under the weight of its own ambition. I felt pressure to design a site that would blow people away and erase any memory they might have of our original site design.

My thought was to design something bold and cutting-edge, so I studied the work of my peers: designers who I thought were doing new and exciting work. Still nothing was working. The designs I turned out really fell flat, and every night I went home empty and depressed.

Finally, one night at home, my wife Christina was sharing with me some of the highlights of a poetry conference she'd just attended. It was called the Dodge Festival, and it's sort of like Woodstock for poets - minus the brown acid. Of the many readers and lecturers she heard, C. K. Williams really made an impression on her, as he would soon make on me as well.

A member of the audience asked the poet what he does when he's creatively blocked, when he can't start the next poem. Williams responded without hesitation: / fall in love with a master. Instead of immersing himself in the work of his peers, he explained, he looks further back, to those who perfected their craft long ago, to those who originally inspired him to write poetry when he was a young man. Listening to Christina tell this story, I knew I'd found my answer. While much of the work I was looking at was impressive, none of it was speaking to me at the very core. So the next morning, I hit the book collection in my office and zeroed in on the design legends: Saul Bass, Paul Rand, Tibor Kalman, Ikko Tanaka, Paula Scher, and Pablo Ferro, to name a few. Then I came across one of my all-time favorites: Josef Mueller-Brockmann.

The Swiss designer, who established himself during the '50s and '60s, used complex grid structures for his beautiful, often minimalistic posters. I've always been drawn to the stability and consistency in Moller-Brockmann's work and how every color, line, and font seems to be the product of careful consideration. So after flipping through the book (Josef Miller-Brockmann Designer.- Pioneer of Swiss Graphic Design, Lars Mueller Publishers), I knew I'd found my model.

I wanted my site to exhibit the same thoughtful functionality, thus buttressing my longstanding belief in always finding the simplest solutions to design challenges and to use that simplicity to allow subtle, often deep beauty to come forth. So we designed, with help from our friend, the designer Ben Wuersching, a grid system upon which to lay out and design our site.

God is in the details - Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

This quote, from one of the 20th century's most important architects, became our war cry during the redesign process. As we worked, we started to believe with evergrowing conviction in the power of details. We began with the idea that to your naked eye, a pixel difference from page to page may be invisible, but to your subconscious, it wouldn't. You would be slightly aware of the imbalance, and it would register within you and cause some discomfort. From there, we didn't let any detail slide. We demanded of ourselves as fine-tuned a site as we could create - from pixel to pixel, byte to byte, and page to page. And though no single page of the site will ever "blow you away," the system of the site, where elements appear in the same places from page to page, where navigation is consistent and immediate, and where information is presented clearly, started to shine with a sublime beauty to us.