

High Standards of Design

PETER MITHAM investigates the Look of Books competition, an important forerunner to the Alcuin awards.

WHAT CONSTITUTES good design, and how should it be acknowledged?

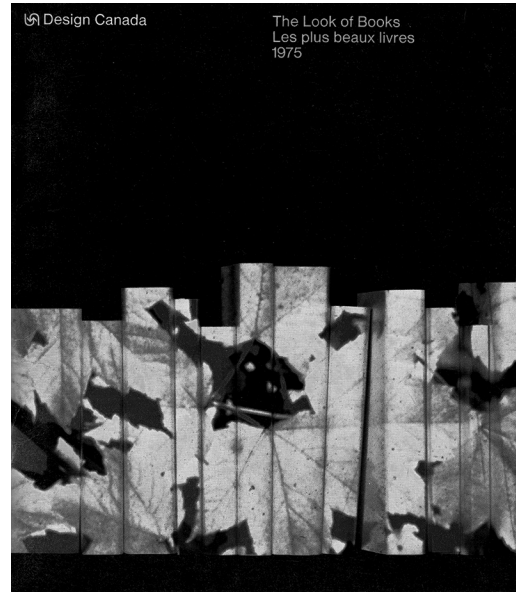
Many feel the ideal, particularly with books, is that design should support rather than distract from the text. It should be unobtrusive and therefore invisible. The effects of good design aren't hard to see, but it's even easier to take good designs for granted because they become part of the way we see the world.

The graphic artist Seth argues this point in identifying a few of the defining characteristics of the dominant aesthetic in Canada that both appealed to him and informed his design sense.

"There is the idea of landscape, there is some image that connects us to government, or heraldic symbols of Britain or France, or something that has some feeling of officialdom to it," he said, speaking to the Alcuin Society in September 2014. "And three, they're humble. . . . It's a style that I've come to call Canadian National. It's based on Art Deco but it's distinctly Canadian in that it is almost always about landscape rather than about skyscrapers." (See "Inspiration from the *Peanuts* Gallery," *Amphora*, no. 168 [Fall 2014]: 12–16, and Seth's essay "Creating a Personal Vernacular Canadian Design Style," *Devil's Artisan*, no. 69 [Fall/Winter 2011]).

Raised in the shadow of the 1960s, with cultural hand-me-downs from a sister and brother whose childhoods played out in the post-war era Seth idolizes, I grew up no stranger to the orderliness of post-war design. There were designs I liked, and others I didn't. I may not have been able to explain just then the source of the appeal, but the designs I gravitated towards fed into my memories, both the good and the bad.

A MODERN HYMNAL, A CANUCK READER
Seldom do we get a chance to see what others thought of the things that fascinated us as kids and informed our sensibilities. What we took for granted, or at least accepted as part of the



The Look of Books catalogue (1975).

world in which we grew up, wasn't something we would ever call high design. And yet it was produced by accomplished professionals, even artists. (Type designer Rod McDonald reveals his hand in the Tea-Bisk logo elsewhere in this issue, while the Resdan anti-dandruff shampoo was the work of Ian Tyson, better known for the classic song "Four Strong Winds.") And the work was subject to the judgment not only of consumers, but also of other professionals.

This is part of what makes leafing through the catalogues of the Look of Books design competition, which ran from 1970 to 1977, so fascinating. Among the titles that stand out for me is the *Hymnal*, which I associate with the sleek interior of the church I attended shortly after its publication. The church was modern; the book's cover design was consistent with the building's interior, and its red matched the cassocks of the servers. The content was unapologetically modern: 1960s camp songs ("He's Got the Whole World

1 Take my life and let it be
con - se - cra - ted, Lord, to thee;
take my ino - ments and my days,
let them flow in cease - less praise.

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| <p>2 Take my hands, and let them move at the impulse of thy love; take my feet, and let them be swift and purposeful for thee.</p> <p>3 Take my lips and let them be filled with messages from thee; take my intellect, and use every power as thou shalt choose.</p> | <p>4 Take my will, and make it thine; it shall be no longer mine; take my heart, it is thine own; it shall be thy royal throne.</p> <p>5 Take my love: my Lord, I pour at thy feet its treasure store; take myself, and I will be ever, only, all for thee.</p> |
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Frances Ridley Havergal 1836-1879

Unison
1 Lord of all good, our gifts we bring to thee,
use them thy ho - ly pur - pose to ful - fil;
to - kens of love and pled - ges they shall be
that our whole life is of - fered to thy will.

- 2 We give our mind to understand thy ways, hands, eyes and voice to serve thy great design; heart with the flame of thine own love ablaze, till for thy glory all our powers combine.
- 3 Father, whose bounty all creation shows, Christ, by whose willing sacrifice we live, Spirit, from whom all life in fullness flows, to thee with grateful hearts ourselves we give.

Albert Frederick Bayly 1901-

Hymnal (1971).

in His Hands”) sat side by side with traditional hymns and contemporary lyrics squarely aimed at modern worshippers (“God of concrete, God of steel, / God of piston, and of wheel!”).

Published in 1971, the book was even a product of the era’s ecumenical *zeitgeist*, a collaboration—not without controversy—between the Anglican and United churches.

But while clerics and congregations grumbled over how much ground to cede or share in the hymn selections, the judges of the Look of Books competition for 1972 praised a design that materialized on paper specially designed for the purposes.

“The omission of folios is an aid to the user of this book for it avoids confusion with the number of the hymn and should be seen as an act of careful intent,” the commentary reads. “The typography is delightful.”

The previous year, the school reader *Driftwood and Dandelions* was recognized for the excellence of its design. It was part of a series Nelson Canada produced that was filled with the kind of content you would expect a Canadian kid to be reading, the result, observes educator Satu Repo, “of a very self-conscious attempt to create *Canadian* textbooks.” Design elements were also important; Repo describes how one section, “Fog,” begins with a couple of nature poems against a backdrop of watercolours. The section’s closing story features coloured linocuts.

“The whole section reminds me somewhat of one of those moody NFB documentaries which became fashionable in the sixties, when the medium had suddenly become the whole message,” she writes. I have favourable memories of the book (and others in the series), and the fact that I was exposed to it at all must have

been due to some special recognition by my Grade 3 teacher (who anticipated that I would be a writer). A note in my report card that year happily observes: "Peter is now reading a Grade 4 level reader." Any appeal or impact of the design on the young mind would manifest later.

SEEKING FUNDING

But what was the Look of Books, exactly, and what was the impetus for creating the competition?

Canada was brimming with confidence in 1970, having adopted its own flag in 1965 and celebrated its centennial two years later. Montreal, fresh off the success of Expo 67, won its bid to host the 1976 Olympic Games in May 1970. Graphic design and book publishing were also filled with energy, overturning an aesthetic mandated by bureaucrats at the Ministry of Enforced Drabness (if Seth is to be believed).

"In the period before the 1960s there was a time when, if I may quote Sam Smart, Canadian books at international design competitions were surpassed in dullness only by the books from the Soviet Union," Laurie Lewis, who along with Allan Fleming designed the aforementioned *Hymnal* and occasionally sat on the Look of Books organizing committee, told me. She suspects Fleming, with his interest in classic book design, was instrumental in having the Book Promotion and Editorial Club, an industry organization based in Toronto (subsequently the Book Publishers' Professional Association), establish a competition recognizing excellence in book design in Canada.

In the introduction to the 1975 catalogue the organizers wrote, "The Club had felt strongly that the encouragement of high standards of design and production of books was an important aspect of its purpose of fostering the professional attitudes, awareness, and involvement of its members, and decided that a carefully organized book design competition would be an effective source of such encouragement."

The initial competition took place in 1970.

"The terms of the competition were established, publishers were invited to submit work and an international jury was struck," Lewis recalls. "Four major international designers arrived in Toronto, stayed at the Park Plaza,

and were properly fêted. They looked at the entries from Canadian publishers, made their selections, had a good party, and went home. The winners of the competition were undoubtedly given some kind of certificate or medal."

The first four competitions were financed by the club, supplemented by participation fees. The funds supported the competition as well as an exhibition of the winners and a bilingual exhibition catalogue. In 1972 and 1973, the Canadian Book Publishers' Council generously funded a cash award of \$250 for the designer of the competition's best book. The publishers' council also advocated for stable funding for the competition. Since 1972 was International Book Year, it asked the national committee responsible for events to consider funding the competition in order to help it command submissions, gather a broad spectrum of judges, and ensure that competition winners were exhibited across Canada and even internationally.

"The Committee turned down the application, feeling that the competition as it stood was not sufficiently broadly based and was run in too amateur a fashion," the organizers wrote. Nevertheless, \$5,000 was given for a committee to draft plans for a competition that might be eligible for federal funding. "By July [1973] a detailed brief with an outline of the purpose, procedures, structure, and budget for a Canadian book design competition was ready for presentation to the Department of Industry, Trade and Commerce and the National Design Council." The result was a formal application in November 1973 that garnered federal funding of \$50,000 a year for three years, in each of 1974, 1975 and 1976. While it doesn't sound like much today, it translates into nearly \$645,000 in today's dollars, an average of \$215,000 per year.

The generous funding was possible because books were, Lewis says, a paper product and offshoot of the forest industry. Good design was realized on good materials, as illustrated in the first catalogue issued following the award of government funding. Printed on paper from Abitibi Provincial Ltd., the cover stock was Twincoat Cover C2S 10pt and the text was printed on Georgian Offset Smooth 200M. The cover was black, with a tawny band



*Judge Walter Jungkind at the
Look of Books competition.*

of book-shaped blocks featuring a pattern of maple leaves wrapping around. It possessed a contemporary elegance without being overstated.

"Its job was to promote Canadian books, and it did so very well," Lewis says of the competition, while the organizers themselves felt that book design in Canada was finally finding its legs in the world.

"This has resulted in an increase in public awareness of what constitutes a well designed and well produced book and a demonstration to other countries that there is a sophisticated and strong book industry in Canada."

A CULTURAL PRECEDENT

However, when the government funding commitment expired, industry support was difficult to harness. On the one hand, suppliers required that books in the competition use materials from Canada.

"Since government support was provided in order to stimulate Canadian industry, the Canadian material clause was logical and necessary, particularly in light of the very troubled times that the Canadian fine paper industry is experiencing now," the organizers wrote in the 1977 catalogue.

Yet other funding sources, especially from the publishing industry itself, were tough to secure, precipitating the competition's demise. While many were keen to provide in-kind support, cold, hard cash was not forthcoming. Rather like Kenneth Rexroth's rant against "cheap sons of bitches" who loved poetry but wouldn't buy it, the Look of Books organizers ran into an industry that wanted the exposure and benefits a competition offered without giving the support it needed.

The reason lay in a kind of self-interest, which actual practice quickly betrayed.

"Many [publishing houses] feel that the show has not related directly to everyday commercial publishing, but has rather been concerned with big budget productions," the catalogue editors wrote, noting that two "spotlight awards" for educational and trade titles were created as a result. "The response to these was less than enthusiastic," it observed. "The number of entries was not encouraging."

The circumstances spelled the end of the competition.

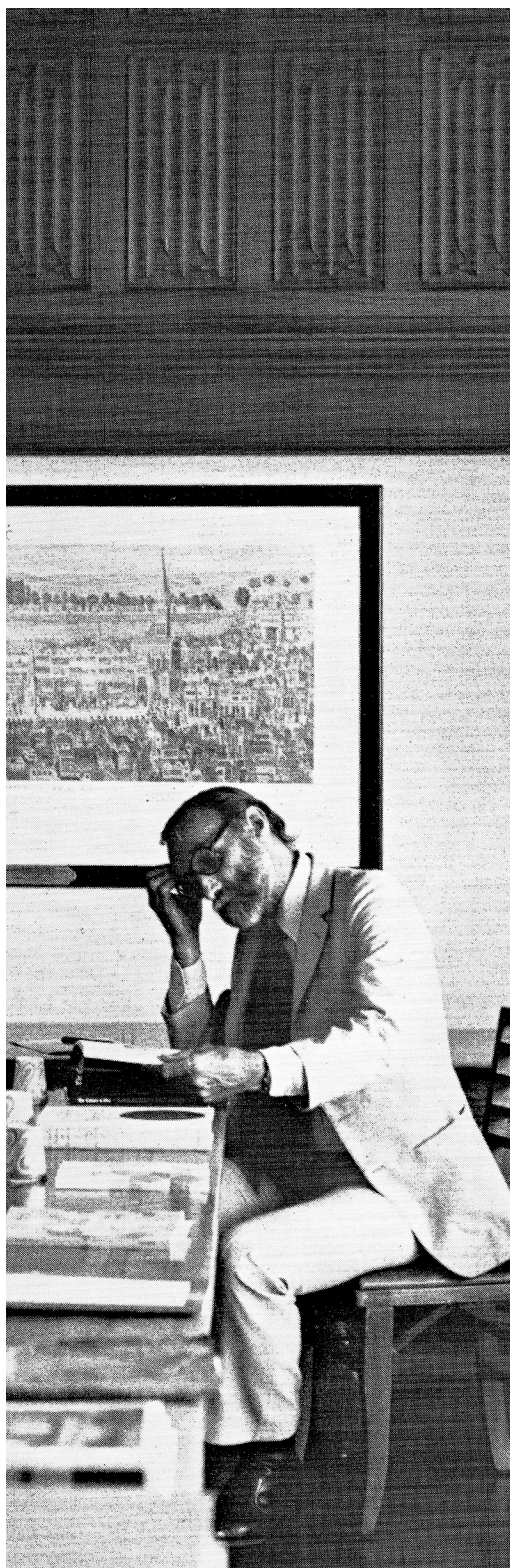
“Without enthusiastic publisher participation and industry compromise on the question of material usage, no unified support for the competition is possible. Without the latter, funding will be very difficult,” the organizers said, pledging themselves to investigating the opportunities but making no promises regarding a show in 1978—a show that never took place.

However, the competition had set a precedent.

When the Alcuin Society began exploring additional activities for itself in 1981, after government funding was rejected because membership wasn’t increasing fast enough, chair Peter Quartermain suggested a competition along the lines of the now-defunct Look of Books. The official records of the Society don’t mention the Look of Books, and Quartermain himself doesn’t recall drawing inspiration from the competition, but the Alcuin Society had found its niche.

The new competition would recognize “the best designed trade book published in Canada.” Books published in 1980 were solicited from publishers, and of the modicum received, three received citations from the Society. The history and evolution of the event known today as the Alcuin Awards for Excellence in Book Design in Canada is discussed elsewhere (see Leah Gordon and Jim Rainer, “By Chance, By Design: A Brief History of the Alcuin Society Book Design Competition,” *Amphora*, no. 139/140 [Sept.–Dec. 2005]: 15–23, and Peter Mitham, “Designs on Excellence,” *Amphora*, no. 170 [Summer 2015]: 8–11). The competition, now approaching its 35th year, continually adapts to the changing environment of publishing in Canada and today attracts more than 200 submissions annually from across the country. The winners are displayed at 22 venues nationally and internationally, including Leipzig. Since 2006, winners of the Alcuin awards have been shown as the “best designed books of the year” from Canada and have been Canada’s official submissions in the Leipzig competition.

“By chance, by design,” then, as Leah Gordon and Jim Rainer put it in 2005, the Alcuin competition has ultimately fulfilled the original vision the Look of Books organizers had for a competition



Judge Pierre Garneau, as he appeared in the 1975 Look of Books catalogue.



Judges (left to right) Muriel Cooper, Carl Brett and William Rueter at the Look of Books competition.

celebrating excellence in book design in Canada and boosting its international stature. It has done so without government funding, and independent of the publishing industry whose support was rallied for Look of Books. It can claim an independence the previous competition lacked, but a commitment to national interests and culture in common with its predecessor.

Will the books that receive Alcuin awards have the same impact on young minds as those the Look of Books recognized had on mine? One

can hope; and in fact, it seems certain. While school readers seldom appear among the entries, plenty of other titles from children's books to cookbooks have been honoured; so have monographs and small-press titles of inspiring beauty. The ways we use books may have changed over the past five decades, but the ability of books as physical objects to inform and inspire remains.

~ Peter Mitham is editor of *Amphora*.

