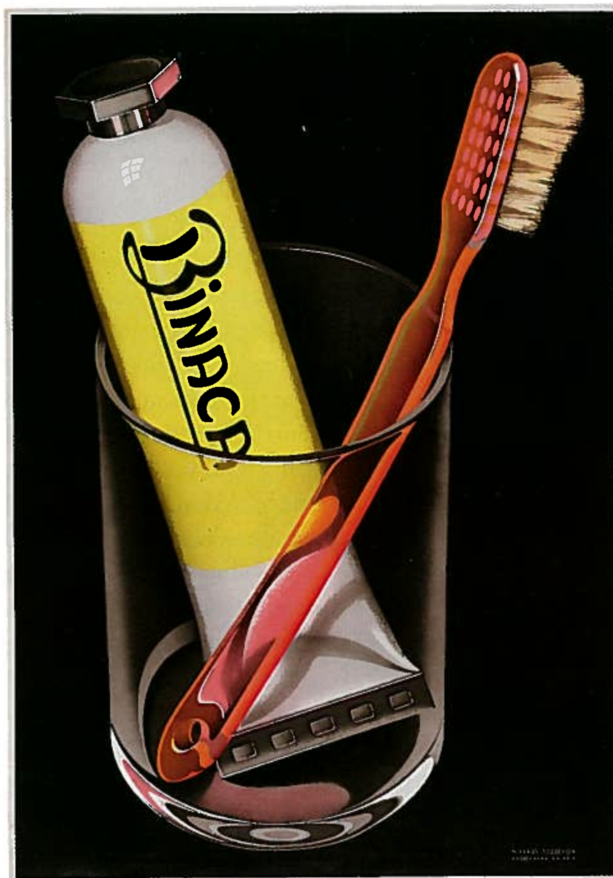
standing still

IF THE PUBLIC IS AS VISUALLY LITERATE AS WE THINK, IT MUST HAVE AN ABILITY TO READ—*REALLY READ*—VISUAL IMAGES.

By Rick Poynor

Our speaker's subject was convergence. In the future, the young designer informed us, music and image-making would no longer be separate creative activities. Produced on a common platform, the endlessly adaptable computer, they would fuse into a single, dynamic new medium. If Titian were alive today, the speaker continued, he would be Steven Spielberg. This was such a misguided notion that a colleague sitting in front of me turned around and shot me a look that could only be interpreted as "Huh?!"

My sentiments exactly. There had to be a better comparison than that between one of history's greatest painters of mythological and religious scenes, and the stylistically gifted but artistically shallow box-office hit maker. Still, the speaker's meaning was clear. Titian crafted antiquated, immobile images using quaintly outdated equipment, while Spielberg draws on all the wonders of digital technology to deliver a flowing stream of hallucinogenically intense *motion pictures*. Given the choice, who wouldn't want to make and, for that matter, look at movies?



Binaca, by Niklaus Stoecklin, 1941.

Graphic designers have suffered from moving-image envy for decades. Once in awhile someone succeeds in making both static and animated forms of communication, usually by designing film titles (Saul Bass, Robert Brownjohn), and a particularly intrepid ship-jumper will occasionally manage to direct an entire feature film (Kyle Cooper, Mike Mills). Of course, it's different now because the availability of low-cost digital tools means that almost anyone can become a temporarily famous supplier of YouTube clips. Meanwhile, digital video has made professional filmmaking much cheaper and more flexible, and even a certified celluloid-loving auteur of David Lynch's stature is happy to give it a try. Today, the easy availability of the means only serves to underline the primacy of the moving image.

Even so, it's wrong to assume that moving images are inherently superior to the still image, and it's tempting to say that anyone who thinks so probably doesn't know how to look at pictures. One of the great untested claims of our time is that people are far more visually literate than they were in the past. This is an assumption based on the proliferation of visual images in advertising, design, media, and computer games, the ever-increasing sophistication of these images at a technological level, and the apparent ability of audiences to decipher, assimilate, and enjoy these products. But is it really the case?

When you spend time in art galleries, it's striking to see how few people pause to look—really look—at the paintings they pass. Even the greatest masterpieces are dispatched within seconds. Viewers take in the image as a whole, as a kind of mental snapshot, but the only way to appreciate and understand a painting of any complexity is to give it time, allow your eyes to wander over its entire surface, and permit it to act on you. Paint is a medium of expression and

a carrier of meaning, and these meanings are available only to viewers prepared to make a modest effort to scrutinize color, the stylistic effects of brushwork, and the use of light. The composition may be crucial to what the painter is trying to say about the subject matter, and it needs to be studied carefully, as well as savored as a source of aesthetic pleasure. Questions will probably arise about the painter's relation to the subject and about the painting's relation to other artworks. It isn't excessive to spend 10 minutes, or considerably longer, looking at a good picture, but it's unusual to see a viewer devote this much attention to a single image—though everyone sits happily in a movie theater for two hours staring at a screen. It's also revealing to observe what happens when galleries show films: The viewing rooms fill up with spectators.

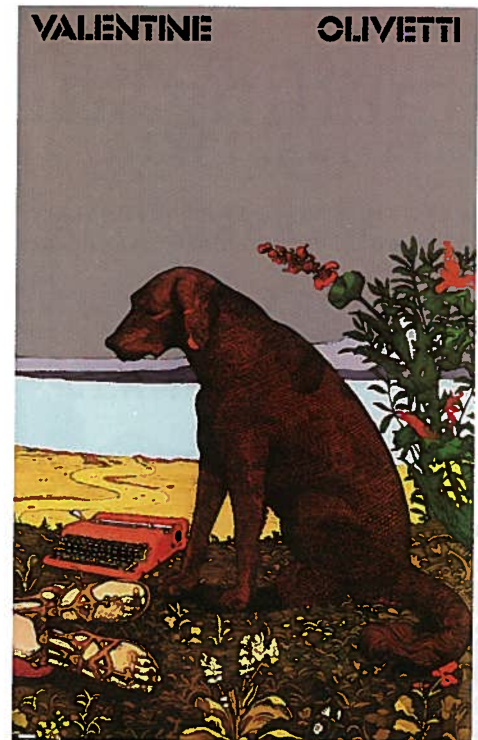
The critical element when looking at a complex static image is time. The image might not move, but the viewer's relation to the image is far from static. Still images withhold what comes before and after, freezing a single defining moment for contemplation, and this challenges the viewer to engage imaginatively with the image and interpret it: Why show this scene in this way? A still image of an occurrence or event will always be more iconic than a filmed version of the same episode.

Moving images, by contrast, oblige the viewer to move and react at the speed of projection. Momentum exerts its own irresistible seduction, regardless of what is shown. Watching a film, we can be absorbed by narrative and performance without paying conscious attention to the construction of the images as imagery. Using a DVD player, it's always possible to "stop time," allowing us to study a frame at leisure, but this is an artificial extension of our ability to reflect on what would otherwise be transient, a violation of the essential nature of the motion picture as a viewing experience, where one image follows another and the editing and flow within a sequence of images becomes a source of meaning.

Some might argue that the depth and complexity of painting is irrelevant in a media environment where speed of communication is vital. But the study of art from all epochs provides the best possible form of visual education, a grounding that underpins every kind of applied art. If gallery-goers are unable to appreciate fully the works of art they nevertheless feel compelled to file past as tourists in major museums, then it's hard to see how the same viewers could have developed the skills of visual interpretation needed to engage critically with advertising and design. For the highly developed visual literacy the public is said to possess to mean anything at all, it must entail an ability to read visual images—to apprehend their full range of meanings and understand how they contrive to influence the viewer. Merely being familiar with the conventions of image-making doesn't in itself constitute genuine visual literacy.

The remarkable thing, looking back now, is how narrow the gap between fine art and commercial art used to be. Old advertising images frequently match the paintings of their period for visual quality, transcending their commercial origins. If I owned a copy of Niklaus Stoecklin's 1941 poster for Binaca toothpaste, I would happily hang it on my wall, because I doubt I would ever tire of looking at that heroic, oversized tube and toothbrush rendered with hyperreal, lithographic precision. While the image anticipates Pop Art's compellingly ordinary iconography of the everyday by a good 20 years, it also conveys a profound sense of mystery produced by placing the tube, brush, and glass against a background as black and ineffable as the voids of deep space. These ordinary objects seem to be about much more than mere dental hygiene.

A similar depth of sentiment and realization can be found in Milton Glaser's *Typewriter with Dog* poster from 1968, an advertisement for Olivetti's classic Valentine. Glaser based his drawing on a section of a picture by Piero di Cosimo (circa 1495) of a satyr mourning over a nymph. All that can



Typewriter with Dog, by Milton Glaser, 1968.

be seen of the nymph in Glaser's tribute is her sandaled feet next to the little red typewriter. A melancholy brown hound, modeled with tender, immensely assured, crisscrossing strokes of the pen, stands watch over the fallen girl.

Neither of these posters can be accused of failing to deliver the client's message, though Glaser's is an audaciously understated piece of product placement by any standards. His image subordinates the then-fashionable Italian typewriter to more mortal concerns and elevates it to become a symbol of rumination, a writing device for musing on some of life's most pressing and personal questions, a presence as natural as water and plants. Both Stoecklin and Glaser take it for granted that their picture is to be looked at, and as with any work of art, the more time and effort you put in, the more you will get back. A culture of making and viewing that routinely turns first to the moving image, forgetting the contemplative value of stillness in pictures suffused with the passage of time, is choosing, in a real sense, not to see. ⓟ

Rick Poynor's latest book is Designing Pornotopia: Travels in Visual Culture *(Princeton Architectural Press).*