

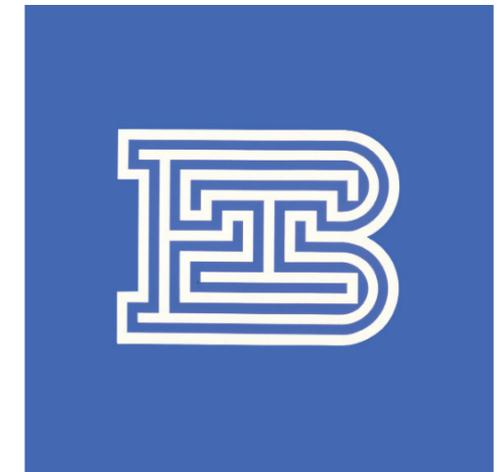
NORMAN IVES

[1923–1978]

Fine artist, graphic designer, teacher and publisher

A new book sheds light on the remarkable contribution of this largely unsung American artist

Words Catherine Coyle



Few young adults have a plan mapped out when the time comes to pick a career. Even if they do know what they want to do for a living, the chances of them remaining in the same field for the whole of their working life are slim. Gone are the days where you'd serve your time at one company, picking up a carriage clock and a hefty pension on your way out.

Norman Ives, unusually, had four careers. But, instead of changing paths at different points over the years, his four jobs ran concurrently. Was he a workaholic? Probably. Did he feel a sense of vocational responsibility? Almost certainly. But what is most striking about the life and times of Norman Ives is that in spite of his culturally significant and prolific output within the world of art and design, he flew largely under the radar.

John T. Hill was Ives' student at Yale University's School of Art in the 1950s, where the latter had been enlisted by Josef Albers, one of the founding fathers of modern art education, to help overhaul the curriculum there following his graduation. Hill's new book, *Norman Ives: Constructions & Reconstructions*, is the first comprehensive monograph of Ives' oeuvre, his many

roles and his contribution to mid-century modernism.

Ives was born in Panama – his father was an officer in the US Navy and the family moved around a lot during his early life. He proved to be a gifted artist from a young age, and after graduating from Wesleyan University, he enrolled at Yale's first graphic design class, where his tutelage by Albers, Alvin Lustig and Alvin Eisenman began. "As a student of Josef Albers, Norman Ives was exposed to his mentor's great respect for type-forms as an art," says Hill.

"During Albers' teaching at the Bauhaus, he would often ask students to examine letterforms of various designs as objects and forms worthy of being made part of their visual studies. In some of these exercises the letterforms were cut and reconfigured. Albers brought many of these exercises to Yale. This was likely the source of Ives' use of letterform fragments throughout his collage, painting and bas-relief."

Graphic design offered Ives the chance to combine his love of form with his desire to create a dialogue with his work. A consummate artist, he was able to reduce elements of his graphic design down to their constituent parts while still getting his message across. This was true, too, in his personal fine art work, recalls Hill: "His work was characterised by a sophistication and

mastery of form which used a minimal number of components to create visual impact. Letterforms and simple typography often became the dynamic images that activated the page."

While teaching full time, Ives was working in the background on his personal art, creating new works as well as accepting commissions for graphic design and murals for public spaces. His life at Yale traces the arc set by Albers and Lustig, which reflects much of the Bauhaus teaching. "With this way of thinking, an artist could produce any number of objects satisfying their artistic gifts," asserts Hill. "Type design, furniture design, weaving and various other media were equally respected."

In 1967, a convergence of Ives' talents occurred; the Whitney Museum of American Art accepted his Number 3-L painting

[Top left] This untitled collage from 1959 is an example of how Norman Ives used typography in his artworks. [Top right] Ives (far right) and his former classmate Sewell Sillman (second left) set up a publishing house, producing prints and portfolios for other artists. Here they are in their studio with Eugenia Fayen and their mentor Josef Albers (photograph by John T. Hill). [Above] A graphic design commission for BT bank ([any more info for this - date, maybe?](#))



[Right] Norman Ives (left) casts his eye over the work of three of his students – from left to right, Christopher Pullman, Arthur Congdon and Dick Ritter (photograph by Esther Pullman). [Below] Ives is invited to produce work for an art-house cinema. He made two pieces: a 9ft-long bas-relief, and this piece, a 30-inch square mirrored box that is set into the wall adjacent to the ticket booth. This enigmatic box, with its reflections and converging geometrics, deconstructs and reconfigures the space within. [Middle] 10ft tall and 70ft long, this mural from 1971 is in Southwest High School, Baltimore, Maryland. [Right] XXX painting, Bow Tie, XXX [info to come](#)

“His rare skill as a teacher let him pass on to multiple generations of students his thinking on graphic design”

as part of its annual exhibition of American painters, and the Museum of Modern Art featured him in its show, *Three Graphic Designers*, alongside Massimo Vignelli and Almir Mavignier. But, just as these acknowledgements cemented Ives’ multi-disciplinary prowess, it also goes some way to explaining why he was not better known during his lifetime. Working simultaneously across two distinct fields – fine and applied art – possibly stopped him being seen as a master of either. There was also the explosion of the Pop Art movement at that time; Ives decided against moving to New York where the scene was at its most fervent, favouring his family life and his university job. Celebrity, it seems, was not a priority.

Instead, he much preferred his role as loved and lauded educator and, subsequently, a publisher; he set up a boutique publishing venture with his former classmate Sewell Sillman, producing portfolios and editioned prints for many of the leading artists of the time, including

Robert Indiana and Roy Lichtenstein. “Ives’ rare skill as a teacher gave him an opportunity to pass on to multiple generations of students his thinking on graphic design as a profession that was more demanding than anything in the current field of graphic design or advertising art,” says Hill.

“His students took their experience with him and made it a part of their own design process. Many of these students became teachers who practised this same simple, direct style of inspiring their own students. Among today’s best graphic designers, Michael Bierut [of Pentagram, the world’s largest independent design consultancy] has paid tribute to Ives’ influence.”

Ives died of lung cancer in 1978 at the age of just 55. Although he carried through the principles of graphic design valued by Albers, Lustig and Eisenman in his own work, his legacy runs beyond what he learned from these past masters, to a true love for letterform – indeed for art – and his passion for teaching has enshrined his own design tenets for generations to come through the students he taught and the body of work, so beautifully compiled in this new monograph, that he has left behind. r

Norman Ives: *Constructions & Reconstructions* by John T. Hill (Powerhouse Books, £55) is published on 29 October

Pls note: Bierut is right spelling

