

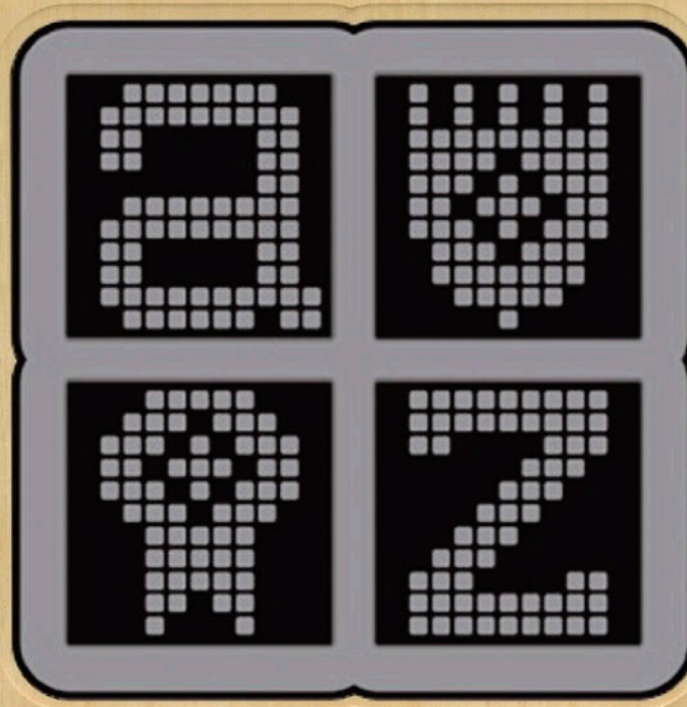
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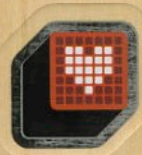
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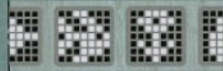


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catharine fishel



bill gardner

∴ Constellations for the Brain

Michael Doret,
Michael Doret Graphic Design

Michael Doret has long been respected and admired for his ability to combine design and illustration in identity designs that harken from the past, yet feel completely contemporary. His clients have included such admirable names as Time magazine, the NBA, the Graphic Artists Guild, Taschen Publishing, and Disney Imaginering. In this article, Doret shares how inspirations from the past inform his work today.

What I like to do with my work is create what I call “constellations” of letters **AND** **IMAGES** ∴

Your identity and logo design work is so distinctive. Where does your inspiration come from?

∴ How I approach my work has a lot to do with my growing up in the 1950s in Brooklyn, near Coney Island. I was not really aware of how this environment had influenced me until a few years ago when I came across an old photo my dad had taken of my brother and me in front of the Tilt-A-Whirl in Coney Island. Looking at that photo, I realized that it contained many of the visual cues and elements that would later become very important in my work: bright colors, emblematic shapes, and wonderful, shaded, outlined, and dimensional letterforms.

So I had this epiphany: This was where and when my visual aesthetics were shaped! I remembered that I had been fascinated with lettered and hand-painted signs—from the enameled sides of Good Humor trucks, which roamed my Brooklyn neighborhood in summertime, to the huge billboards in Times Square I'd see when I visited my dad at work.

Nobody ever said my work was subtle—and now I understand why: Who I am and what I do was inspired and influenced by what we would now call the “Pop Culture” that surrounded me as I was growing up.

Much of your work is also very complex. How does the human brain process and recall a complex design like one of your crest logos?

∴ I think one tends to see and remember patterns in images. What I like to do with my work is create what I call “constellations” of letters and images that somehow are tied together by the use of pattern, repetition, form, and color, and a very basic geometry. Any really good art should do that.

I think the origins of contemporary logos go back to ancient symbols, like the cross and the star, the circle and the triangle—geometric symbols that were imbued with magical properties by their creators. Think of medieval heraldry and of ancient vestments: We may not be conscious of it, but these forms are at the root of what we now call logos and corporate identity. These icons, shapes, and symbols are an important part of our past. Who knows whether or not our responsiveness to them might even go all the way back to the genetic level?



1: Cliff's Amusement Park logo, 2: Disney's River Country Water Park logo, 3: New York Knicks logo

Take a look at a couple of what I consider to be classic midcentury logos: the Sunoco Oil diamond, the Chevrolet chevron, or the Pennsylvania Railroad keystone. Why do we remember them so clearly, what makes these identities endure, and why have they become such beloved icons of our culture?

So you feel that the basic shape of a crest is part of the key to the enduring popularity of these designs?

▣ There is balance and symmetry to these shapes. They are forms that for some reason appeal to us on a very basic level. A psychologist might better be able to tell us why these shapes have been so appealing over time. To me it's the inherent geometry that I find so attractive.

When I was growing up, I knew I would become either an artist or an astronomer, and I now realize there's a direct connection between the two. There is a grand geometry to the stars and the heavens; there's a great pattern that ties all things together. Perhaps my love for astronomy helps me see the patterns in all things—and informs my design work.

▣ One design that covers both initials and crests is my logo for the Graphic Artists Guild. It embodies many of the things I've spoken about. It harkens back to ancient pictograms with its star shape, which has long been considered magical, and as in most classic monograms, all of the letters are intertwined. I chose this form so that the letters *G*, *A*, *G* would not appear sequentially as a word. All these elements are enclosed and tied together within a ring of text. The design has many disparate elements, but because of the math and geometry underlying the design, it ends up completely in balance.

This logo is a good example of pushing things to the limit. I do like to push things, but one has to

be aware that there is a point beyond which a design becomes illegible or awkward. You have to be able to sense how far to push. You have to understand what the inherent possibilities of the letterforms in the design are, and you can't force letters into a design that won't accommodate them. If the guild's name had had different initials, such as *GDG*, this logo would have taken a very different form.

They are forms that for some reason appeal to us on a VERY BASIC LEVEL. ▣

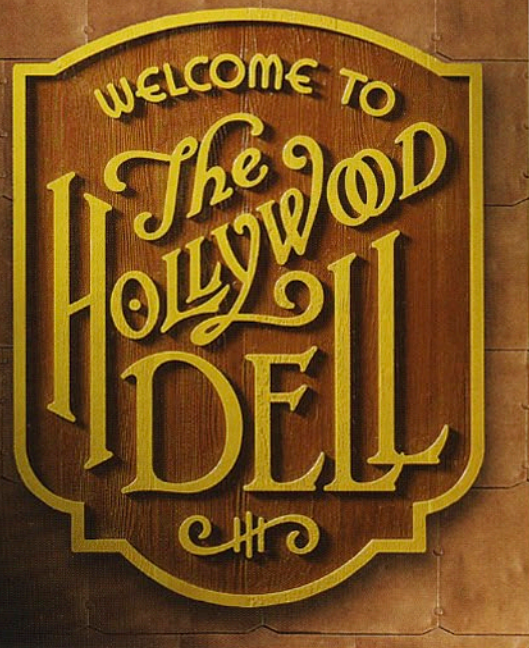
By using such familiar shapes, does the designer risk creating something unintriguing to the eye?

▣ I believe successful design has to do with the departures and liberties you take. One thing I like to do is to look at a lot of old graphics, done by people who did not have formal design training. They made mistakes, but many were charming and interesting mistakes. Many of them did not know the rules, so they did not know they were breaking them. So there are times when I deliberately try to do it wrong—to learn from others' mistakes, and repeat them!

Sometimes in balancing all this geometry and symmetry, you have to throw a monkey wrench into the works and break some rules in order to keep things lively.



4: Graphic Artists Guild logo, 5: Event Media logo, 6: Chic-A-Boom logo



What are some examples of crests that you admire?

■ I always go back to the older stuff like those I mentioned earlier. There are many, many others including the Heinz logo, arching inside a pickle inside a keystone, or the Texaco logo within a star, or MGM with its lion surrounded by a crest made of unspooled, looping film. The Shell Gas logo is a shell, but it is also a crest. Over the years many of these have been updated, but they have all kept their essence. Think of the American Automobile Association “AAA” mark—three As in an oval—you can’t get more simple or memorable than that. Old car badges and logos have also been very influential to me. Ford, Buick, Chevrolet, and Oldsmobile—they are all so beautiful. I could go on and on.

What in your opinion causes a crest design to not work properly?

■ There can be a lot of elements to coordinate in these designs. One of the most important

elements is color. Some designers don’t understand how to use color, or at least don’t use it in a way that I can relate to. Another problem can be too much information. When in doubt one should always err on the side of simplicity—eliminating elements that aren’t 100 percent necessary for successful communication.

Another contributing problem is imitating without understanding—or blind imitation. There have been those who have chosen to ape the look of what I do. The problem with this is that instead of looking at my work, they should be looking at what *inspired* me. My work pays homage to certain historical precedents—but with a spin. Any designer interested in a specific sort of design should look to the original source of inspiration, not to any of their contemporaries.

I also advise young designers to forget about asking what program I work in. It’s not important. A computer program can help with the process, but it is not an end in itself. Be aware of the history of design. You don’t need to be able to cite dates or names, but if you are aware of historical trends, and study the work you love, you will be better equipped to pursue your goals. When you are overly concerned with the computer and what it can do, you will end up with something that is clean and slick, but that has no content and no soul. What makes any design successful is the *thinking* behind it, not how slickly it’s done.

Does creating logos ever become any easier for you?

■ Before computers, I did very detailed pencil drawings to map out every angle. Everything was very carefully planned, elements aligned very carefully. I used drafting instruments as an architect would. A lot of that drudgery was eliminated when I started working on a Mac in



7: The Hollywood Dell signage, 8: Tribeca Film Festival logo, 9: Local Flavors logo

1995. The mathematics was inherent in the applications and made the drawing part a lot easier. But as I just said, it didn’t eliminate the thinking part.

Coming up with good ideas is just as hard as it ever was. When I get a good idea, I can implement it faster and easier than before, but giving birth to good ideas is always a difficult process that never seems to get any easier. Seeing a successful design materialize before your eyes—and knowing it’s your own creation—now that’s a thrill that never gets old.