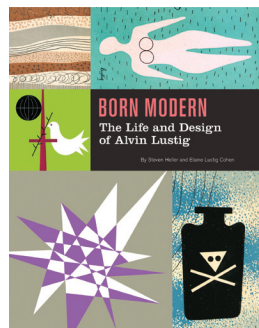


book reviews

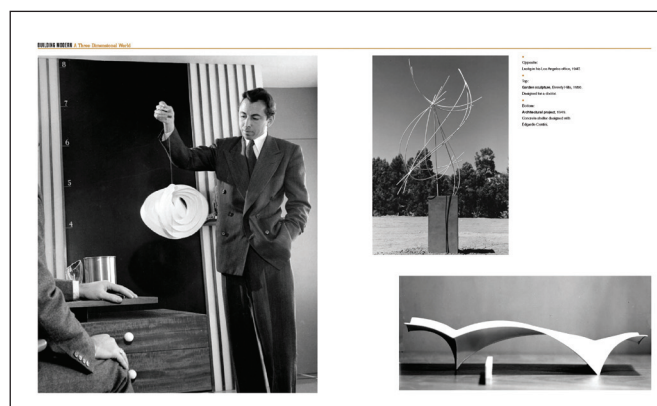


Born Modern The Life and Design of Alvin Lustig

By Steven Heller and Elaine Lustig Cohen
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The tragically-brief life of American designer Alvin Lustig (1915–1955) is brought into sharp focus in *Born Modern*. It celebrates his work, in all its forms, which until now has been overshadowed by the work of his peers Paul Rand, Saul Bass and Wil Burtin. Lustig loathed being pigeonholed as a graphic designer, because he saw the field as too specialized. In *Interiors* magazine in 1946, Lustig wrote, “The words graphic designer, architect or industrial designer stick in my throat giving me a sense of limitation, or specialization within the specialty or a relationship to society and form itself that is unsatisfactory and incomplete. This inadequate set of terms to describe an active life reveals only partially the still undefined nature of the designer.” That thinking sets the tone for *Born Modern*. Steven Heller and Elaine Lustig Cohen present not just a phenomenal amount of design, but the man behind it all.

While much of the book is dedicated to Lustig’s print work—book covers, editorial, advertising—it is just one part of his varied and prolific career. He had originally intended to be an architect, and his environmental work is well represented, with photographs of



interiors sure to delight any mid-century modern enthusiast.

Lustig’s book covers, especially for New Directions publishing, were groundbreaking. Type combined with geometric shapes or drawings created abstract graphics. His book jacket designs were not literally representative of the book’s text; they stood on their own. In 1947, Lustig wrote, “There was no need to ‘design down’ as there had been no ‘writing down’ in the books selected.” And his covers are a sight to behold, and what I consider to be the heart of *Born Modern*: side by side, at varying sizes, some spreads showing up to a dozen covers. Lustig’s use of color, form and type helped “make a mass audience aware of high-quality reading,” according to New Directions publisher James Laughlin, who went on to say, “Again and again, I find myself lining the books up just to gloat over them.”

In the book’s foreword, Elaine Lustig Cohen writes of her late husband’s love of form and items such as seashells and a boat propeller that were displayed in his office. She writes, “My memory is not of him as a graphic designer, but as an imaginative artist whose warmth and gentleness touched all who knew him.”

Lustig was ahead of his time, and the work within the pages of *Born Modern* is as fresh today as it was during his career. At the book’s close, we are left to wonder, along with Heller, what might have come next had Lustig lived beyond his fortieth year.

—Rebecca Bedrossian

