



Montreal agency Paprika is a singular design force across print, digital and environmental channels, propelled by lot of strategy—and a little bit of magic

By Wendy Helfenbaum



↑
Detail of Paprika's poster
for the Integrated Health
and Social Services
University Network for
West-Central Montreal
(see p. 38).



the foot of Mont-Royal on Montreal's uber-chic Laurier Avenue, 10 designers juggle up to 60 projects at a time inside the understated offices of Paprika, a graphic design and strategic marketing firm. Burnished wood walls hung with dozens of sparkling awards hint at the great success this boutique agency has achieved since launching in 1991. Helmed by president Joanne Lefebvre and her husband, creative director Louis Gagnon, Paprika specializes in corporate identity programs, branding, annual reports, brochures, catalogues, posters, packaging, environmental design, signage and websites. Their recipe for maintaining an impressive list of long-term clients in retail, hospitality, the arts, fashion and home furnishings? Smart, sophisticated design with a dash of flair.



"FROM THE BEGINNING, WE DEVELOPED A PLAN based on our strengths and on what we liked doing," says Lefebvre, who studied modern dance before shifting her focus to marketing and management at the Université du Québec à Montréal (UQAM). Gagnon holds a degree in design from Université de Laval.

Paprika does not do any business development, other than entering competitions in Canada, the US and Europe. Design-minded clients find them via word-of-mouth, and some have been with the agency for at least 10 years.

While quietly collecting accolades—nearly 800 awards worldwide, including AIGA, *Applied Arts*, Art Directors Club and Type Directors Club of New York, *Communication Arts*, Grafika, Graphex, *Graphis* and HOW International, among others—Paprika continues to strengthen its portfolio of daring, groundbreaking work.

Style and substance

"Our designs are very strategic but also well thought out," explains Lefebvre. "We're known to be very aesthetic in terms of our typography and the materials we use, but we've also demonstrated we can take on very complex mandates that involve more creative thinking."

Paprika's work process varies by project, but the goal is always to exceed expectations, says Gagnon.

"We listen and take notes, but we also want to surprise clients and go beyond what they think they need," he explains. "Doing a beautiful project isn't enough; it has to be effective and unique to boost the client's reputation and drive results."

Beyond print

Over the years, certain clients have proved pivotal in Paprika's growth. The agency's 20-year association with luxury furniture brand Maison Corbeil led to designing, most recently, innovative commercial space. Maison Corbeil's concept store, MUST Société, which opened in 2016, houses other high-end merchants including a bakery, florist and electronics outlet.

"We visited the empty space with the client and developed the vision from there," says Gagnon. "We brought it to life choosing materials and colours, and applied the brand identity everywhere in the space."

Paprika's branding campaign and space design snagged them a Grand Prix at both Grafika and Les Prix du Design earlier this year.

"We worked on the experience of the brand; everything represented the persona of the customer we wanted to attract to the space," adds Lefebvre. Celebrity chefs and florists offer workshops, and Gagnon still participates in selecting product lines to sell alongside Maison Corbeil's team of buyers.



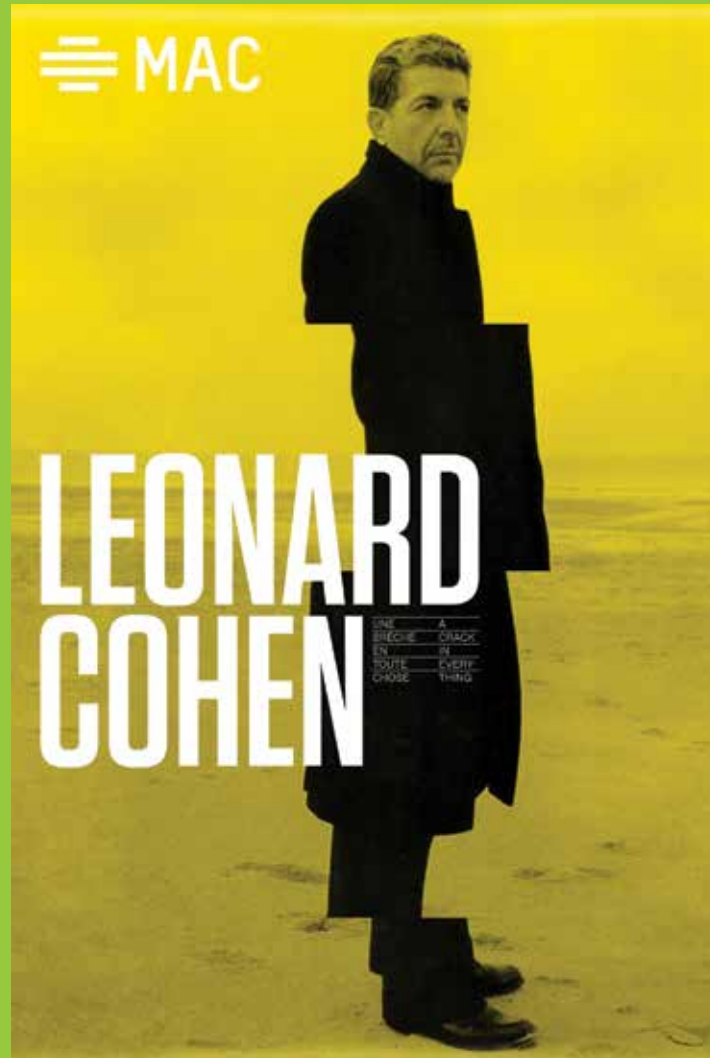
"We listen and take notes, but we also want to surprise clients and go beyond what they think they need. Doing a beautiful project isn't enough; it has to be effective and unique to boost the client's reputation and drive results."

LOUIS GAGNON, CREATIVE DIRECTOR, PAPRIKA



Clockwise from top: Inside the MUST Société concept store for Maison Corbeil; MUST's bakery; Canada Post's stamp series celebrating Formula 1 Grand Prix racing in Canada; collateral for the National Film Board of Canada (NFB). Gagnon especially enjoyed working on the 2002 rebranding of the iconic NFB logo. "Georges Beaupré, who designed the original logo in 1969, was my university professor, so it was a real honour to redesign it," he recalls. "The idea was to render the logo to improve their brand identity, and the fact that it was bilingual made it very challenging."





↑ Clockwise from left: A poster-meets-road map for Montréal en Histoires; a poster for the Montreal Museum of Contemporary Art's new exhibition *Leonard Cohen: A Crack in Everything*; Paprika's guest art direction for *Wayward Arts* magazine involved designing 100 unique business cards; and two examples of work for Simplicim, a dental surgery clinic in Rosemere, Quebec. Over the past 10 years, Paprika

has designed promotional and packaging materials for Simplicim, including this one, designed as a "toolbox." It was sent to dentists to promote Dr. Mireille Faucher's services, and garnered two awards this year, from *Grafika* and *Applied Arts*. "Whether it's to develop a strong brand identity, launch a new professional service or announce a new partner, Paprika manages to guide us to business communications

projects that are not only clear and innovative, but also elicit emotions from our clients," says Nicolas Ahern, Simplicim's managing partner. "We've learned from Joanne and Louis that doing things differently helps us stand out from our competitors. Their daring, refined and strategic work truly captures our history and philosophy, and brings us great results."

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JOANNE LEFEBVRE, PRESIDENT, PAPRIKA

"The client knows we're working from very solid concepts, so we can adapt to new trends while staying timeless," notes Lefebvre. Paprika is currently developing MUST's second concept store in Quebec City, slated to open in December.

For arts' sake

Paprika's award-winning collaborations with the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts began with the 2011 art book by Quebec author Thierry-Maxime Lioriot. *The Fashion World of Jean-Paul Gaultier* featured more than 550 pages of the famed French couturier's work packaged in a sleek slipcase. In 2016, Lioriot approached the couple again to design a tome showcasing 25 years of German contemporary photographer Peter Lindbergh's images.

"Because this wasn't his first book, we had to find a way to make it stand out from what had already been done," says Gagnon. "Also, there was an enormous amount of material, much of which had to be re-digitized."

Paprika played with typography to create a cohesive rhythm throughout the book, and chose a format that allowed them to include very large photos. Transition pages continued the modern, uniform look. The museum has since tapped the agency for other catalogues, books and gallery design for exhibits including *Revolution*, which is part of the official programming for Montreal's 375th anniversary.

"Paprika is an extremely talented team, always ready to adapt to every project, from the most traditional to the most contemporary," says Francine Lavoie, head of publishing at the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts. "Their designs are as elegant as they are informative. The 2016 exhibit catalogue for Rodin was a very classic subject with hundreds of works. We wanted this book to have a very contemporary graphic look. The format, typography and dominant pink colour resulted in a modern yet classic treatment."

Welcome inn

Swank hotels have consistently sought out Paprika's style skills, contracting the agency to integrate brand identity into everything from bathrobe monograms to shampoo bottles to lobby signage.

"When we started working with Hotel Germain in the late 1990s, it was challenging to create an image for a boutique hotel, because it was a new concept in Canada," recalls Gagnon.

Soon after Hotel Germain opened, The Antonopoulos Group commissioned Lefebvre and Gagnon to design the corporate image for five of its hotels, including the William Gray in Old Montreal. The property consisted of a newly constructed glass tower sitting atop two 18th-century heritage buildings. Paprika got involved as plans were drawn, elaborating upon the client's specific vision to blend the historic space with contemporary luxury.

"The graphic language stems from pictograms. We brought in a progressive, adaptable program with elements that change annually, such as accent colours that enable us to create accessories—bags, T-shirts," explains Lefebvre. Adding the trendy coffee shop Cafe Olimpico and modern retailer Off the Hook on the lobby level appealed to a younger clientele.



↑ Paprika's numerous art exhibition publications and catalogues for the Montreal Museum of Fine Arts focus on large imagery to properly showcase the work. From top: a spread from *The Fashion World of Jean-Paul Gaultier*; the cover of *Peter Lindbergh: A Different Vision on Fashion Photography*; and a spread from *Metamorphoses: In Rodin's Studio*.

Putting their own stamp on it

To mark the 50th anniversary of Formula 1 Grand Prix racing in Canada, Canada Post commissioned a series of stamps. Launched in June, the project honours five driving champions.

“This was an incredible project, and what you can’t see from looking at the final product is that it represents two years of work,” says Lefebvre. “F1 and each driver’s family had approval over all the design elements. There was an enormous amount of technical consideration—we had to re-create the silhouettes of the cars, the symbols on the drivers’ helmets, sponsors that had to be on there or be removed. It was much more complicated than the other stamp projects we’ve done for Canada Post.”

Included in the series is a folder, an envelope and a poster, with the whole package designed to appeal not only to stamp collectors, but to F1 racing fans. That meant every emblem, logo and car had to be authentic and instantly recognizable to discerning eyes.

“We had to work with existing materials—the images were all shot by different photographers, and we had to find ones that related to each other in order to create this series,” explains Gagnon. “Canada Post had to track down and negotiate the rights with each photographer. We then developed a concept for each seal, which was an exact replica of the tire upon which the drivers raced.”

Masters of illusion

Currently running at the McCord Museum, the *ILLUSIONS: The Art of Magic* exhibit highlights vintage posters and promotional items from the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Paprika did the exhibit branding, including a black-and-white invitation packaged in a sliding envelope that is itself an optical illusion. The team also designed the show’s book, launched last May. Clad in black linen, the volume celebrates magic’s golden age.

“The content of the exhibit is very rich, but rooted in the past; we needed to find a graphic image from the material to create a strong personality and identity for the show,” explains Gagnon. “The easiest thing to do would’ve been to choose one of the existing posters and use that as our visual. But our idea was to create a devil’s silhouette. When you look at the posters, this was an icon often featured in classic magic posters.”

Paprika repeated the optical illusion motif for the flyleaf, so the eye thinks the page is vibrating. Because the exhibit—comprised of 600 posters and more than 1,000 documents and rare books—was a new acquisition for the museum, the content had never been seen before.

“The challenge was to put these magnificent posters in context,” says Gagnon. “We wanted a modern flair inspired by the vintage poster art. The black cover and use of black throughout creates a big impact. Inside, we played with typography, using lots of vertical elements for the page numbers and table of contents.”

An eye to the future

Gagnon began teaching design fundamentals at UQAM 12 years ago, and says mentoring tomorrow’s design superstars is a great way to stay connected to fresh ideas.

“I learn a great deal from my students—they have access to tools I haven’t discovered yet—and I really enjoy seeing them develop,” he says. “Being able to challenge them and teach them how it works in the real world is very important. I often tell them, when you’re first starting out, you dread client feedback—yet often, their comments force us to go elsewhere and branch out. The bar is so high today, and the goal is for the industry to constantly grow and improve.”

With an elevated approach to design and a willingness to give back, Paprika is helping the industry do just that. ■

Wendy Helfenbaum is a Montreal writer and TV producer (taketwoproductions.ca).



↑ From top: Brand identity for Établi, a furniture store; graphic posters for the Integrated Health and Social Services University Network; “Memory Gaps,” an installation in Montreal’s SDC du village that invited passersby to walk through other people’s memories.