

About Face



Jack Weiss is principal of **Jack Weiss Associates**, an Evanston, Illinois based planning and design firm. Since forming JWA in 1977, he has directed over four hundred major projects ranging from corporate identity and communications to marketing and sales, educational materials, and signage, primarily for clients in the Midwest. He is a Fellow of The Society of Typographic Arts, past president, and sole recipient of its William Goldsmith Humanitarian Award. He is a member of the Society for Environmental Graphic Design and co-founder and vice president of Design Evanston, an organization dedicated to raising the level of design awareness in the community. He is past chairman of the City of Evanston Sign Review and Appeals Board and former chairman and member of the 27 Chicago Designers.

Currently a member of the design faculty at Columbia College Chicago, Jack also served on the faculty of the Institute of Design/IIT. A visiting lecturer at the Institute of Design, Art Institute of Chicago, and Northern Illinois University, he was also a founder and publisher of *The Design Index* and a contributing writer to *ECO*, a nationally distributed newsletter on design and environmental issues.

Honored as a Life Master by IIT in 1992, Jack studied at the Corcoran School of Art, Institute of Design/IIT and the School of Art & Architecture at Yale University, studying with, (among others), Paul Rand, Bradbury Thompson, Norman Ives, and Walker Evans. Jack's design work can be viewed in the collections of the Columbia College Book & Paper Arts, University of Illinois at Chicago Special Collections, and the Newberry Library, Chicago.

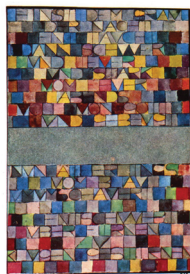


Top and above: Columbia College Beginning Typography student work.

[Tell us more about your time as a cartographer.](#)
[How did this influence your work?](#)

My Air Force job description was Illustrator Technician. In wartime I would have done cartography but, thankfully, it was peacetime in the late 50s. I got it by passing a test while in basic training for what you would call today, design proficiency. I've always loved maps, though, and continue to this day. So I spent four years on active duty at Air Force Headquarters in Washington DC. I did commercial art: posters, brochures, and lots of presentation charts, all involving lettering and illustration. At one point I had a side job in the BX printing signs from metal type on a small letterpress. It was a typical 9-5 job, so I soon discovered opportunities to go to night school in town. I took drawing classes at the Department of Agriculture, then commercial art classes at the Corcoran School of Art. When I wasn't going to night school I started painting, using the office as my studio. I actually exhibited (and sold) some of my drawings and paintings at an art fair on the Ellipse near the White House. It was simply being in DC that influenced my work. Besides a couple of jazz clubs, the Corcoran Gallery and Phillips Collection became my favorite hangouts. Then I heard about the Institute of Design in Chicago. My instructor at the Corcoran said he thought I should apply there.

[Who would you say had an early influence on your work, and who continues to inspire you?](#)



I discovered Jackson Pollack at the Corcoran Gallery and fell in love with Paul Klee's work at the Phillips Collection in DC. Both continue to inspire me to this day with their unique (and very different) approaches to visual material. More recently, I discovered Klee's use of letterforms in his work and show it to my students in the introduction to my *Beginning Type* class at Columbia College. Norman Ives, a little-known artist/designer, who taught in the graphic design program at Yale, continues to inspire me. Norman was Joseph Albers' screenprinter. But, in his own work, he explored the abstract qualities of letterforms through collage, screenprint, and assemblage – of actual metal or wood type. Paul Rand, of course, continues to inspire me in my "modernist" approach to design. Simplicity, elegance, and playfulness permeate much of my work. But there's also a sense of order and structure – call it architectural, if you will – that's reflected in my work too. I'd like to attribute that to the Bauhaus and ID, but I'm not sure how to make the connection. Maybe it's the

[Tell us more about your teaching experiences at Columbia College.](#) [What do you think of the trends in type design?](#)

Trends first: I'm pleased that order seems to be returning to the use of type in communications. I think that the radical reaction to Swiss order and structure has finally faded and clarity has returned.

Teaching: I taught at the Institute of Design for a while when I was working with Hayward Blake at Blake & Weiss. He gave me the time to accept Jay Doblin's invitation. I taught visual fundamentals and, later, the graduate program for art educators. When I started my own design firm in 1977, I gave up teaching to focus entirely on my practice. I decided to teach again in 2004 when my schedule permitted the time. I've focused on Beginning Typography as my area of interest. I made a presentation at the 2007 STA *Aha!* conference in which I enthused that my students had bought into my love of letterforms and typography. My class is largely about the visual qualities of letters. I begin with my reflections on Norman Ives' work with abstract letterforms and the "architecture" of letters. We progress through basic applications of letterspacing and leading, pattern and contrast, expressive words, and end with a semester-long project that documents the alphabet and numbers in a collage of 36 found letter/numbers. While I don't entirely like the textbook for the course, I add additional material, largely from Ellen Lupton's *Thinking With Type* as handouts.

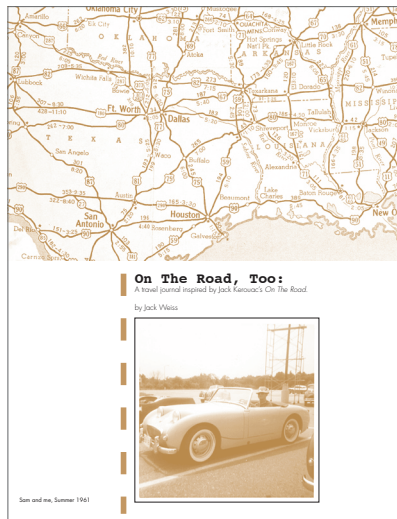
[What are your suggested essential fonts for the computer?](#)

My own "corporate" typefaces are Helvetica Black, a contemporary version of the 60s Swiss sans serif type, contrasted with Goudy Old Style Italic, the typeface designed by the STA's own Honorary Member. Other than those two, my "essential fonts" are few. Futura – for its pure geometric simplicity; Helvetica – for its functionality; Akzidenz Grotesque – because of Essex's typographic program for STA; and, most recently (forgive me because I tell my students not to use default typefaces), Times Roman. It's a truly a classic serif face. At the Illinois Holocaust Museum, working with Stanley Tigerman, Times was touted as the "dignified, sophisticated" typeface needed to communicate the Museum's message and to identify all of its donors – even though Bodoni is used as its "corporate" typeface. Neither is ADA-compliant for signage purposes. But as the official Museum typographer, I mandated the use of Times Roman Small Caps as the most legible typeface, but combined with the contrasting Futura Small Caps for ADA compliance – raised letters and Braille.

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You presented a wonderful book, a hand-made autobiography, “On The Road, Too,” at the STA 2008 winter conference. Of course, influenced by Jack Kerouac, it is a wonderful diary of your travels across the country during your early years. Can you tell us your thoughts in putting this together years later?

I was 21. During my time in the Air Force I became two people. An honor Airman...I carried the flag for the squadron in parades and I consistently won praise as having the neatest barracks room – I hung my artwork there. And a rebellious beatnik...I had a set of bongo drums, I hung out at DC jazz clubs, I made Pollack-like action paintings, I was reading Kerouac, I drove a Vespa all over...from the Maryland coast to the Blue Ridge Mountains. Then I bought a little sports car, an Austin-Healy Sprite. After four years of active duty, I was anxious to get out into the real world. I had been accepted at the Institute of Design and had a month between Air Force discharge and classes starting.



So I decided to make my own “On The Road” trip. There was very little planning other than the start and finish dates. I journaled the whole trip...in tiny, architectural-style, all cap lettering, noting daily experiences, mileage, expenses, etc. I took photographs and did drawings. My only targets were San Antonio, where I had done Air Force Basic Training, and my Aunt, a respected watercolorist, in Los Angeles. And I think I had about \$250 to start. (I phoned home in Salt Lake City when I ran out of money.) The journal sat in my file cabinet for nearly fifty years and the slides were still in a Carousel tray – although badly faded. It was the fiftieth anniversary celebration of Kerouac’s *On the Road* in 2008, and a renewed email acquaintance with a woman I had dated in 1960 DC that inspired me to open the file drawer to my past. It also occurred to me that my children might like to know something of their father as a young man. It took a long time to transcribe the journal into “Word,” and with each page, my memory was on fire! The graphic concept was easy: the book would run continuously, like a road, as an accordion fold. The journal would occupy a wide main column – in typewriter type (aka Kerouac) and the photos, mileage, and expense notations would run along a narrow left hand column. A vertical dashed line, a symbolic road marking, separated the two columns. In my first semester at IIT, a few weeks after returning from my “On The Road” trip, I wrote an essay about my journey. I had saved it as well, so it became an appendix to the book. I printed and bound about twelve copies. My daughters, two ex-wives, and 1960s DC friend were the first to receive my gift. My greatest disappointment was that the Center for Book and Paper Arts, to whom I had given a copy, didn’t include my book in its 2008 Kerouac exhibition.

The STA would like to thank Jack for generously taking the time to share some of his thoughts with us. If you have any questions you would like to share, or have suggestions for future “About Face” articles, please write to us at: aboutface@sta-chicago.org.

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Weiss, Chicago, 1962

Did Paul Rand influence your interest in typography?

No! Paul, who made some women in my class weep during one project critique, was not focused on typography as much as on the total success of the effort to communicate effectively. I’m not sure typography was a critical focus for him. As I reflect, Norman Ives, not even Bradbury Thompson, had a greater influence. Later, long after Yale, I realized that Walker Evans had a big influence on my awareness of typography. His “storefront” photographs kept creeping into my viewfinder.



Walker Evans, Roadside Stand, 1936

What books or websites do you recommend for inspiration?

Look at *Paul Rand: A Designer’s Art*, Yale University Press 1985, and *Paul Rand* Phaidon Press 1999, and tell me that you’re not inspired. Then there’s the website: <http://www.paul-rand.com/>

As one of the founders of The Chicago Design Archive, I’d have to say that one of my most important web references is: www.chicagodesignarchive.org

Websites with typographic themes:

Ellen Lupton: www.thinkingwithtype.com;
Norman Ives: www.francisfrost.com/ivesC4.html;
www.francisfrost.com/ives.html
Dennis Ichiyama:
www.cla.purdue.edu/ad/ad/area2/vcd2/vcd-fw-ichiyama2.html
Hamilton Wood Type Museum: www.woodtype.org



Jack Weiss

More of Jack’s work can be seen at jackweissassociates.com, in the *Chicago Design Archive* at www.chicagodesignarchive.org, and in the *STA Gallery* at www.sta-chicago.org.

For a look at a colorful biography of Jack, written by Illinois Institute of Art/Chicago student Lillian Davenport click on the pdf below:

Lillian D. pdf here