

## d = f (a-s)

Wim Crowwel, a timeless 20th Century Designer



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[ GEERT SETOLA ]

Design is the product of function and aesthetics-minus-subjectivity. This formula could be used to represent Crowwelian design, the visual manifestation of a life-long pursuit of objective, functional communication, with inadvertent but pleasing interference from subjective aesthetics. A retrospective exhibition, *Wim Crowwel, a Graphic Odyssey*, presented Crowwel's work and viewpoint in 2011, first at the London Design Museum and then at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam.

Crowwel was born in Groningen in 1928, an extraordinary year for architecture and design. It was a year of eager innovation, in which hope and ideology seemed to rise from one and the same source. In 1928, Milanese architect Gio Ponti founded the design and architecture magazine *Domus*, which is still considered to be an authority even today. Later editors include Alessandro Mendini, the chief architect of the Groningen Museum. In La Sarraz, Switzerland, Le Corbusier founded and directed the first International Congress for Modern Architecture. At the Bauhaus, Hannes Meyer took over from Walter Gropius, changing course towards urbanism with a more socialist slant. The German type designer Jan Tschichold, who called himself Iwan for a time as a mark of his admiration for Russian constructivism, published his essay *Die neue Typographie*, in which he distanced himself from classical humanist book design. Later, however, he came to reject this view and instead promoted neo-classical design. Geometrically designed typefaces were enjoying a boom. Paul Renner, an advocate of the German Bauhaus, designed Futura, his bestselling constructivist typeface. The London sculptor and designer Eric Gill created the equally well-known humanist sans-serif typeface Gill Sans, which owes much to Johnston, the London Underground typeface designed by Edward Johnston.

And in that same year of 1928, Wim Crowwel was born. *Datum est omen?* One thing is certain: Crowwel imbibed this largely modernist idiom from an early age.

### To the letter

The artist Job Hansen lived next door to Crowwel's grandparents, in Grachtstraat in Groningen. Hansen helped the young Crowwel to develop an artistic eye, and he started to create his own paintings. "The man was a great influence on me,"



Crouwel later said. As a boy, Crouwel was also very interested in architecture and fashion, and designed clothes for his mother. From the age of nineteen to twenty-one, he studied art at the Minerva Academy in Groningen. This course, however, was firmly lodged in the Arts and Crafts tradition and Crouwel soon moved on to study typography in Amsterdam, at the college that would later become the Rietveld Academie.

Crouwel had found a sample of *Cassandre Bifur* at the library, a typeface designed by the famous French poster designer A.M. Cassandre which, he says, “made a great impression on me”. The geometric, almost architectural construction of the letters was a revelation for him. Architecture would continue to inspire Crouwel for the rest of his life, including and especially in his two-dimensional work. In Amsterdam he became an assistant to the renowned poster designer Dick Elffers and in 1953–54 he worked at the Enderberg exhibition company, where he learned to design exhibitions and became acquainted with two Swiss designers, Karl Gerstner and Gerard Ifert.

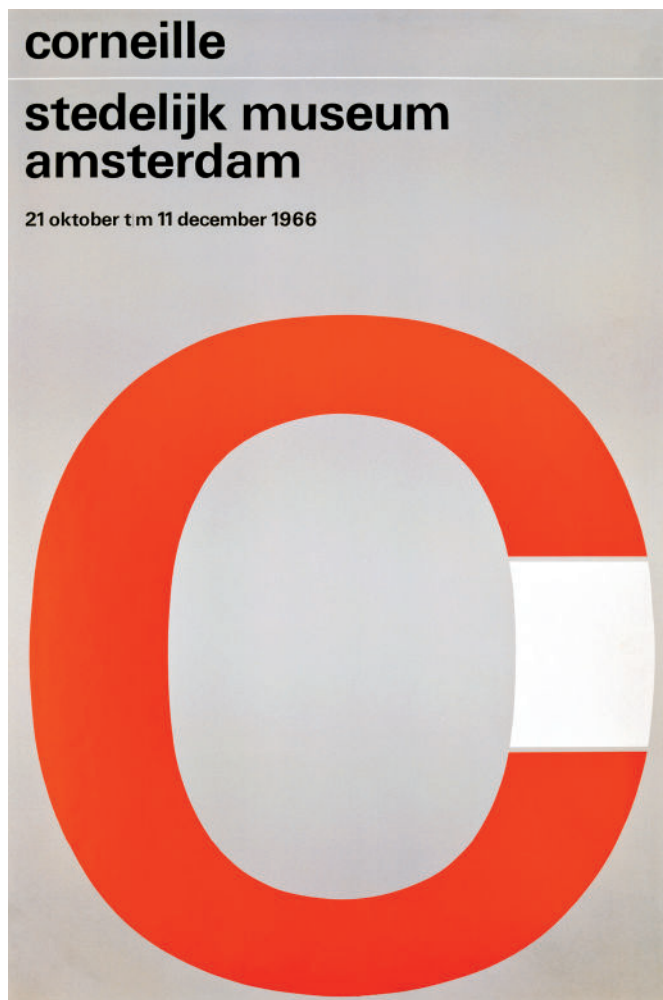
“I think 3D is wonderful,” said Crouwel, as is amply demonstrated by his career, with examples such as his contribution to the Dutch pavilion at the 1970 World Fair in Osaka and his many museum exhibitions.

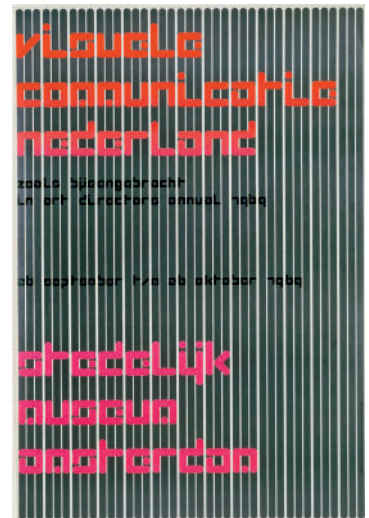
However, it was typefaces that captured Crouwel’s attention and would not let him go, serving as a constant source of inspiration and playing a dominant role in his work. Crouwel researched the use of fonts, finding beauty in their functionality. He may not yet have come across the phrase “Form follows function,” coined by American architect Louis Sullivan, the mentor of Frank Lloyd Wright, but it soon became clear that functionality would be Crouwel’s rational, investigative and systematic standpoint.

In the 1950s, Crouwel became familiar with the work of the Bauhaus and the Swiss Style. Back in the 1930s, Bauhaus designer Max Bill had introduced an asymmetric layout, for which he designed a grid based on geometric proportions and the use of his favourite sans-serif typeface, *Akzidenz Grotesk*. Although, at that time, there was generally a formal distinction between art and applied arts, the work of artists such as Hans Albers, Paul Klee and Wassily Kandinsky was already characterized by an aesthetic style that had an almost utilitarian structure.

The Swiss Style – young, new, fresh – was a graphic design methodology that had been able to take root in Switzerland before WWII, sheltered as it was by its political neutrality. Expanding on the work of the Bauhaus, a relaxed and sober kind of graphic design developed in Zurich and Basel. Typical characteristics of the layout were the use of sans-serifs, asymmetric typography, a grid system, real-time photography and photomontage. Armin Hoffmann and Joseph Müller-Brockmann were the teachers who, both as designers and theorists, underpinned this concept and gave the Swiss Style a name that would resound all over the world: the International Typographic Style.

In 1957, Wim Crowel met Joseph Müller-Brockmann. In that pre-computer era, lead typefaces were a serious and costly investment. As a result, most printers were able to offer only a limited selection, usually consisting of classic typefaces such as Garamond and Bodoni. The purchase of an early sans-serif typeface was a matter for lengthy consideration. The features of new, sans-serif typefaces were very critically scrutinized by designers and praised or reviled. In principle, Müller-Brockmann would employ only one typeface: Akzidenz





Grotesk, released in 1896. Wim Crouwel, however, has always been less rigid. Like many of his contemporaries, he also appreciates other typefaces, such as Futura, Gill Sans, Univers, and the more machine-like Helvetica, internationally regarded as an icon of the Swiss School. Wim Crouwel, seen by many as the ultimate modernist in Dutch graphic design, has gone so far as to express his aversion to what he calls the “petty individualism” of the early-twentieth-century modernists. Wim Crouwel likes Akzidenz Grotesk primarily because of the hand-designed typeface’s touching imperfections. Is this an inconsistency in his functionalist approach? No. His fellow type designer Chris Brand once neatly explained such a paradox with reference to his own practice: “The deficiency of the hand is the charm of the drawn letter.” Wim Crouwel has expressed his own view as follows: “We need the machine since we have no time,” but “the machine cannot replace the precision of the human eye and human feeling.”

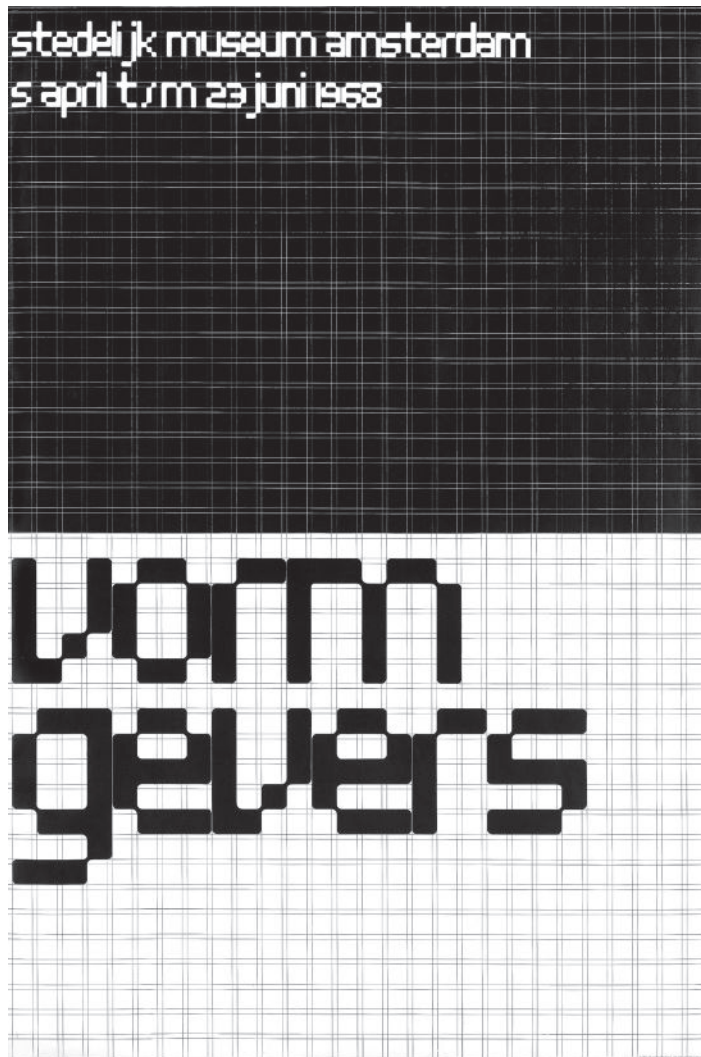
Crouwel’s work was strongly influenced by the International Style, but what he introduced to the Netherlands was still a very distinctive, structural graphic design based on typographical and spatial invention: rational, systematic, minimalist at times, and yet, perhaps inevitably, poetic.

“I am a functionalist troubled by aesthetics,” Wim Crouwel said in an interview with design critic Max Bruinsma. At the same time, he spoke out against “individual subjectivity” in the design process.

## Letters on posters

In 1955, when he started out as an independent designer, Wim Crouwel met Edy de Wilde, the director of the Van Abbe Museum in Eindhoven. De Wilde became his first major client and the one he would work for longest. The flood of posters and catalogue covers designed by Crouwel focused primarily on the museum rather than the work of the artists. The museum was viewed as the “creator” of the artist. This was a new and sensational concept. At first, Crouwel employed occasional images of the artists’ work, but before long his posters





At a later stage, Crouwel began to use images on his posters after all, but in a rather disengaged way. This approach caught on and is still typical of the work of many Dutch designers even today: the functional separation of image and typography. The image – whether a photograph or some other element – forms a foundation, with a top layer of typography. This makes it seem as though two designers have been involved in every design: one for the typography and the other for the pictorial component, with the typographical concept as the starting point. This practice differs fundamentally from graphic design in other European countries, such as France, England or Poland, where designers are more likely to start out from a “general idea” or, in other words, a form of “thinking in words and images”, where the design begins with an integrated form and the result is an amalgam of image, text and meaning.



## Changes of scale

In 1963, the Total Design studio was founded by Wim Crowel, industrial designer Friso Kramer, graphic designer and architect Benno Wissing, and the brothers Paul and Dick Schwartz, who were responsible for the organization and financing. This was the first large design studio in the Netherlands to develop a multidisciplinary, full-service practice, based on the model of British studios such as the Design Research Unit (DRU), F.H.K. Henrion and Fletcher/Forbes/Gill (later Pentagram). The motivation behind the company's creation was that prestigious Dutch design commissions were all too often being awarded to foreign studios. The direct trigger was when F.H.K. Henrion swiped the contract to create branding for KLM. Henrion explained this success by saying that "Institutions like to talk to institutions", which served as an eye-opener for Total Design.

Total Design grew into a company that worked for industry, the government, the cultural sector, trade and commerce. It meant a completely new approach to design in the Netherlands. The notion of corporate identity emerged, followed by a plethora of logos – a marketing concept. This was not, however, the full-service practice of what at the time was perceived as the typical American advertising agency, answering the client's question of "What time is it?" with "What time do you want it to be?"

Total Design was multidisciplinary, shaping visual information and rigorously checking quality at all the required stages and across a range of media: documentation, concept, design, photography, production. It was Wim Crowel who established and maintained the aesthetic standard, and who was behind many of Total Design's numerous successes. He was omnipresent. Strict. Principled. But still he encouraged his colleagues' own ideas and respected other opinions. Clarity was always of prime importance, both visually and socially, according to the Dutch tradition of consensus. Crowel has always been a critical observer, but also a diplomat. As the British newspaper *The Guardian* said, "His revered body of work, which spans 60 years, has a deep humanity and an artistic quirkiness that combines precision with emotion."

Headed by Wim Crowel for over twenty years, Total Design had a great deal of highly unpleasant criticism heaped upon it in the late 1960s and '70s. Those were the years of the Vietnam War and anti-Americanism, of the generation of '68, in short, of social activism. The idiom of Wim Crowel, based on modernism, was dismissed as the work of "crowel and his cronies". That's right, "crowel": the fashion at the time was for small or lowercase letters. Even worse, Crowel was labelled a "grid freak" by his more progressive colleagues and a "pattern freak" by students. His work was denounced as "colouring inside the lines". Conservative elements among the cultural classes described his work as exhibiting "perpetual baldness", and his 1977 number stamps as "hazy". Author Renate Rubinstein called the telephone directory that Crowel designed with Jolijn van de Wouw, which featured no uppercase letters, the ultimate example of "the New Ugliness". Crowel and co were accused of taking a one-size-fits-all approach to Dutch design and making the entire country "total designed".



In 1987, *Vrij Nederland* journalist Rudie Kagie reassessed the development of Total Design: "When it was founded in 1963, Total Design was innovative. It soon became 'timeless' and in 1986, following the departure of Wim Crowwel, the last of the founding members, it became dated."

Designer Karel Martens says that, "It was actually quite difficult to avoid Wim Crowwel's work. In the 1960s the Netherlands was inundated with posters, catalogues and stamps designed by him, even the telephone book."

Be that as it may, Crowwel, as a designer, thinker, and finally as a director of Total Design, has had a huge, structural influence on the way visual information is presented in printed matter in the Netherlands. Crowwel's younger colleague, type designer Anthon Beeke, who at first, when observing from a distance, had called the "dictatorship" of Total Design "criminal" and was subsequently invited by Crowwel to come and tackle it from the inside, later said, "When I was working there, I suddenly saw what a blessing that studio was for Dutch industry and business, as Total Design threw a marvellous blanket over the communication process in the Netherlands, where very many things were indeed going wrong. And I have to say, because of the way TD dealt with companies that had a lot of printing work, it always turned out well."

## The value(s) of design

"Ethics is the aesthetics of the future." This was wishful thinking on the part of Vladimir Ilyich Ulyanov, alias Lenin, the son of a Russian aristocrat. In the Dutch design scene in the 1970s, there was growing discussion about the socio-cultural implications of the profession. Famous graphic designers such as Jan van Toorn, Gert Dumbar and Anthon Beeke turned against Wim Crowwel's uncompromising standpoint that it was possible to practice the profession of designer objectively and without reference to personal values.

The dispute culminated in 1972 in a public debate between Crowwel and Van Toorn at Museum Fodor in Amsterdam, about the (im)possibility of objective design. As a socially oriented thinker who employed design to communicate a vision, to comment on society, to stir political awareness, Jan van Toorn perceived design as visual journalism that both liberates and enriches the recipient, with strong images that can be "read" and which are an indicator of the age. Aesthetics are an incidental extra. Jan van Toorn declared, "Forms that are based solely on aesthetics are forgotten in fifteen seconds, as the next pretty picture comes by." There was no winner in this fierce but friendly discussion. Both men were gentlemen. Wim Crowwel expressed his amusement in a later interview: "There were heated debates at the time, but I knew how to handle criticism and I was sure of myself."

This battle of opinions helped to plough and reseed the Dutch design landscape, partly because the new generation of art and design students, in the slipstream of democratization, made their voices heard. In the majority of art academies, programmes were subject to vigorous discussion, which in some cases resulted in coups, with changes of management and teaching staff. The word "beautiful" was declared taboo within the institutions and replaced by "good" and "conceptually sound".

As lecturers too, both Jan van Toorn and Wim Crouwel also contributed to the endless debate about the profession, at home and abroad. Crouwel started teaching in the 1950s, at the Royal Academy of Art and Design in Den Bosch and at the Institute of Applied Art in Amsterdam. From 1965 to 1985, he was attached to the Industrial Design department at Delft University of Technology, first as a member of staff, later as a lecturer, professor and dean. From 1987 to 1993, he was the chair of Art and Cultural Sciences at the Erasmus University in Rotterdam.

As well as the argument about ethics and aesthetics, another debate – about the equalization of “high” and “low” art – was expanded to take in autonomous art and design. Crouwel’s position was clear. He did not accept the merging of art and design. In his own words: “I myself cannot stop believing that graphic design is first and foremost a means to inform. That, for me, is the basic rule. Creating complexity and curiosity and raising questions belong to a different domain. In my opinion, the most important issue is always the question of why it is that we do what we do. Is it always about our responsibility towards society?” And: “This very socially aware attitude among designers is most probably a question of time and circumstances. Let the Dutch hammer away all they like, but it’s essentially part of a trend.”

dagelijks geopend  
van 10-17 uur  
zondag  
van 13-17 uur  
dinsdag- en  
donderdagavond  
van 20-22 uur

stedelijk  
van abmuseum  
eindhoven

**vijftig jaar  
oostenrijkse  
kunst**

22 december '56  
tot 27 januari '57

The poster features a large, stylized graphic element consisting of a blue outline of a square with rounded corners and a white outline of a square with rounded corners, both with thick, rounded ends. The blue shape is positioned above and to the left of the white shape, creating a sense of depth and contrast.

## Hope - and modernism after all

Following all that criticism, it seemed for a while that the “Crouwel era” was drawing to an end. Modernism gave way to postmodernism and its cheerfully referential approach. The image copulated enthusiastically with the letter, and the imagination reigned supreme. The “complexity” referred to by Crouwel is now abundantly evident in the visual culture of the internet.

In 1985, Wim Crouwel became the director of the Boijmans Van Beuningen Museum in Rotterdam and remained in that position until 1993. He did not wish to combine his role as director with the role of designer, but instead brought in the young British studio 8vo (Octavo) for the graphic design, whose studio members Hamish Muir and Simon Johnston were trained by the Swiss typographer Wolfgang Weingart. The studio developed its own visual language based on the Swiss Style. It became a very special collaboration and the museum created exhibitions featuring harmonious displays and graphic design.

The British design scene rediscovered Wim Crouwel’s modernism via an unexpected route. I have already mentioned the band Joy Division, and designers Peter Saville and Brett Wickens’s use of Crouwel’s New Alphabet for their album cover, and the hip music magazines that subsequently embraced this functional style. These hand-drawn, imaginative, constructed typefaces intrigued young designers in particular. This revival – coming after postmodernism – in the form of a futurist-inspired modernism was undoubtedly connected to a need for order and structure in the midst of overwhelming and inescapable visual overload.

This new way of looking at Crouwel’s work shows just how remarkable his influence has been on the Dutch design scene, and how much he has since influenced a younger generation worldwide. That said, Crouwel himself wonders if this interest involves nothing more than citing a particular style.

The past hundred years of Dutch Design, one of the country’s most important export products, is made up of contributions from a very large number of individual designers and studios and has also paid the bills for many critics. For six decades of that century Crouwel has been an important and influential designer. It was not for nothing that his work achieved cult status, and he is often referred to as one of the founders of Dutch Design. His own reaction is brief and Crouwelian: “The label of Dutch Design is a slogan that is a product of our modern-day one-liner culture. It has become a concept in the trade and represents a fruitless attempt to extend the brief upsurge of design in the Netherlands.”

Wim Crouwel has always aimed to be “timeless”. Has he succeeded? In an interview he says, “I no longer believe in timelessness. My work from the 1950s is different from what I did in the ‘60s, ‘70s, ‘80s and ‘90s. But at the same time I hope that it is still recognizable.” ■

*Translated by Laura Watkinson*

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