

When Canadian designers recall identity icons of the past, Americans, like Saul Bass and Paul Rand, are often top of mind. However, there are many pioneering designers here at home who laid the foundation for modern practices. It's time to start celebrating them

# CANADIAN ICONS

BY ERROL SALDANHA | As the design scene tends to showcase the latest and greatest, we often forget our own “veteran” designers, who blazed the way for today’s generation. By raising standards and enlarging their role to become strategic partners with clients, with deep understandings of their businesses, designers of years gone by laid the groundwork for modern practices. Some were even practising brand design long before the term came into play in the 1980s. Their early works helped distinguish some of today’s most recognizable Canadian establishments. The fact that so many of their marks are still in use today proves that the basic principles of a strong identity have not really changed.

As branding in Canada evolves, it is important to recognize those who contributed to this specialized field, enabling designers to make a living from brand development today. Whether working for Canada’s first design firms, advertising agencies, typesetting/print shops, in-house or as freelancers, there were a select few designers who dared to focus on the highly specialized identity work of the 1960s and ’70s.

It was these designers who first suggested that “a brand is more than a logo”—a phrase so often used today. By persuading executives to let them go beyond the design of a trademark to develop a broader identity program, they helped define a broader client-designer relationship for all of us.

*From Art to Design:* Today, art and design are often seen as opposites, but there was once no clear delineation between the two. Design was viewed as an artistic embellishment by most clients and early designers had to fight not only to justify their designs and fees but their very existence.

By the early ’60s, design was evolving and increasingly being recognized as a strategic business tool. Corporate identity and brand packaging exemplified functional design—where instant identification was of primary importance. The systems approach to visual identity was fermenting and the practice of establishing set standards would later become the basis for modern branding programs.

Designers of the time laboured on extensive manuals that specified every application detail. This new approach to design was accentuated by European-trained designers immigrating to Canada. Ironically, prior to this period, Canadian designers were forced to find work abroad, in America and Europe, since commercial design work in Canada was sparse.

It was an exciting time, as what was once called “commercial art” changed from a traditional illustrative style to a more iconic approach. The establishment of consistent graphic, typographic and colour standards became key to building comprehensive visual identity programs. Designers began working increasingly in a consulting capacity—with less focus

on traditional “graphic art” assembly.

Awareness of corporate identity was heightened through a number of well-published, highly visible international programs. Canadian clients became more conscious of how they were perceived by their publics and commissioned the best designers to strategically create and manage their visual identities. The idea of a professional design practice that concentrated solely on identity and image management was born.

Designers of this era refer to it as the glory days—for both design firms and their clients. Canadian corporations flourished and their chief executives held blank canvasses in need of marking. Business leaders began to view an identity as a leadership device, a corporate flag of sorts—it was common for the president of a large corporation to personally approve the logo. Today, a thick layer of insulation (known as the marketing department) lies between the CEO and the brand designer.

*Marking the Past:* Though not very well documented, the emerging branding field in Canada can be traced back to the year 1960, when Clair Stewart (now 97 years old) founded one of Canada’s first “graphic design firms,” Stewart & Morrison. Prior to this event, corporate identity and brand packaging were handled by the “art departments” of large commercial printing companies, like Rolph-Clark-Stone. In fact, design was often thrown in for free as part of the production fee. As a result, the value of design and the role of the designer in building an organization’s image went unrecognized.

Designers such as Stuart Ash and Don Watt would later form their own design consultancies, focusing not just on esthetically pleasing designs, but the design strategy to support them. They, too, would elevate the designer’s role from that of an assembly artist, who executed the ideas of others, to a strategic creative partner—welcome in Canadian boardrooms.

And there were many other pioneers: Ernst Baren-scher, Robert Burns, Heather Cooper, Carl Dair, Jim Donoahue, Allan Fleming, Manfred Gotthans, Fritz Gottschalk, Rolf Harder, Hans Kleeffed, Burton Kramer, Ernst Roch and Chris Yaneff are just some of the designers who helped develop Canada’s most prominent identity programs.

Despite the general public’s “brand recognition” of these identities, not all of the individuals who designed them have received the same recognition. The majority of young designers would give you a blank stare if you dropped such names. However, ask any young architect who 78-year-old Frank Gehry is and you will get a more enlightened response. For some reason, architects become renown as they age, while communication designers are often forgotten. Yet their works and contributions to our field should not be ignored.

A good example of “Canadian designer obscurity” would be another 78 year old—designer Hans Kleeffed. If you don’t know the name, you should. During his lengthy tenure at Stewart & Morrison, Hans crafted some of Canada’s most recognizable symbols—some of which still adorn airplanes and bank towers today. The existing brandmarks for Air Canada, Bank of Montreal and Toronto Dominion Bank (although slightly modified) were hand rendered by Hans back in the ’60s. But unlike Paul Rand and his famous trademark designs (such as IBM), Hans is not known by a lot of today’s design community.

No disrespect to America’s greats, but Canadians must celebrate our own design pioneers. Not only did they change our brand landscape, they contributed to Canada’s cultural heritage and helped to make branding a business for all of us.

Following are a few of our design icons. 📌  
—Errol Saldanha is a branding practitioner and founder of the Communication Designers of Toronto association ([www.communicationdesigners.org](http://www.communicationdesigners.org)).

## DON WATT

Before branding there was Don Watt, a man who defies classification. Born in Regina, he graduated from the Ontario College of Art in industrial design in 1957. He then worked as an illustrator, an animator and an agency creative director before founding Watt + Associates, in 1966, and turning his predilection for 3-D design into package work.

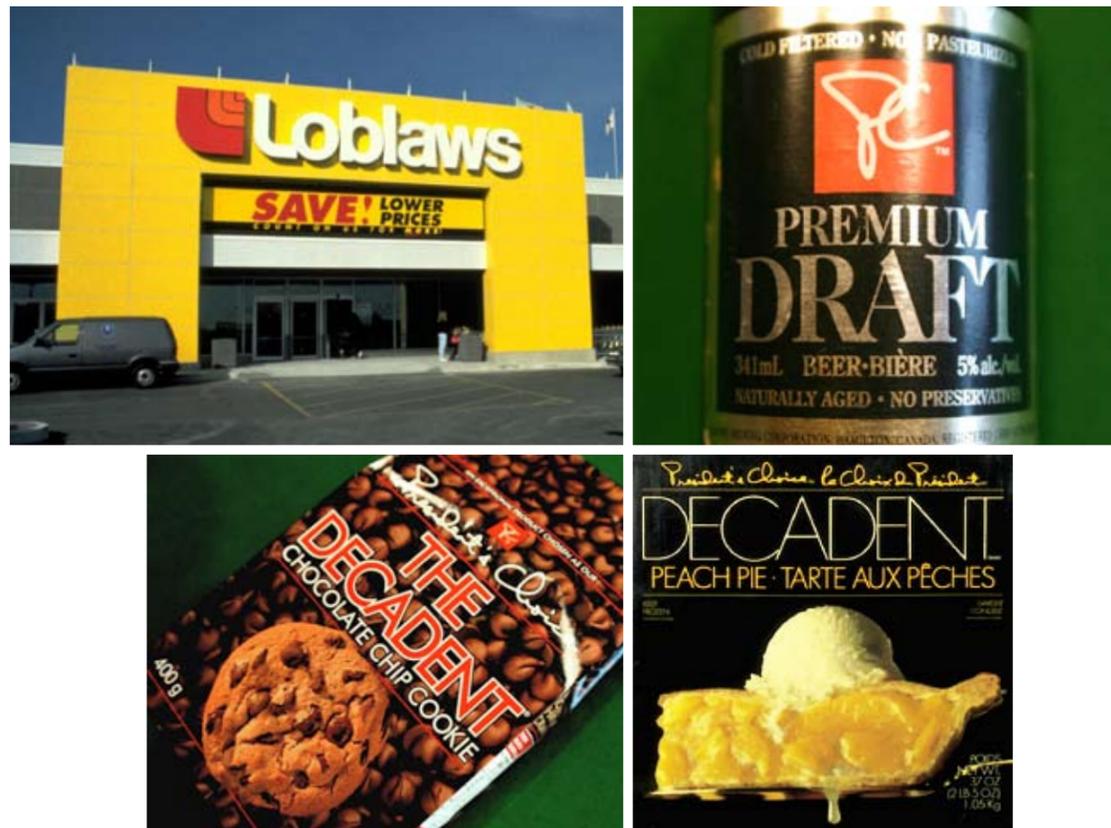
But rather than just design packages, he started designing whole brands. Watt's successful work revamping the packaging for Nestlé's Nescafé instant coffee had him travelling to Europe on behalf of Nestlé to work on its brands in various markets. There he discovered what "stood out on the shelves." "Back then, people didn't regard retail packages as being important," Watt recalls. "They regarded the commercial as everything. But the television wasn't playing when you went in the stores. So what I wanted was to bring the emotion that you

could get on television right into the store, by putting it on the package."

Watt was able to put this learning into practice when he made an unsolicited approach to the owner of Loblaws in 1973, and received what could only be called a sweeping mandate. Not only did Watt begin his revolutionary practice of putting fresh food images on packages, he redesigned the interiors and exteriors of stores, recommended ad agencies, worked to help develop in-house brands, created in-store signage, introduced TV screens in stores, so that president Dave Nichol could talk directly to customers, and did much more than can be listed here, helping to turn the company's fortunes around.

Asked how he could secure such a wide-ranging role for himself, Watt responds: "All disciplines tend to create silos for themselves. People say I am a package designer, a promotional designer, a graphic designer, and so on. I always told myself that I don't have those barriers in my head. Why should I let anyone put them there? I learned very early that if I talked about design for design's sake, nobody would listen. But they would listen if you could show how design affected the profitability or performance of a product or service."

After selling the Watt Group in 1999 to Envoy Communications, he founded DW+Partners, in 2003, as a consultancy specializing in retail branding and design. With his new business growing, Watt is still faced with the old problem of describing to people what he does: "If someone asks, I say that I am a problem solver. I don't care what the problem is—I'll tackle anything that affects the consumer and the consumer's perception of the business."



In his groundbreaking work for Loblaws, Don Watt went far beyond the traditional role of a designer, developing in-store food brands to compete with the national brands, designing stores, taking care of in-store communications, recommending ad agencies and doing much more.

## BURTON KRAMER

Burton Kramer is no stranger to controversy. Born in New York, Kramer moved to Toronto in the 1960s after learning all he could about Swiss design, living in Zurich. After working for Paul Arthur+Associates, on high-profile accounts such as Expo 67 in Montreal, he launched his own firm in 1967, which would become Kramer Design Associates. When he created the logo for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation in 1975, it unleashed a storm of controversy that was compared to the furor when Canada adopted its new national flag.

But the design held up and proved very flexible (his intent), working well in different colours, sizes, in 3-D, animation and so on. Today Kramer is only angered by how the network has "messed" with his original design. "You can only say something hackneyed like, 'Forgive them, they know not what they do,'" he says. "The funny thing is, you can buy a lot of CBC nostalgia online now. So there are

lots of people walking around with my original design on T-shirts and so on, indicating they like it better than what they've got now."

Over the years, Kramer created identities, signage, publications and much more for high-profile clients, including North American Life, Onex Packaging, Teknion, the Royal Ontario Museum and Via Rail. In many cases, he managed to extend the range of the designer's role to different facets of the job. He points, for example, to his work for the Ontario Educational Communications Authority (public broadcaster TVOntario), which included logos, teachers' guides, posters, information sheets, stationery, signage, vehicle graphics and more.

Still, he is in no rush to adopt the new term of "branding." "I thought branding was what they did to inmates of concentration camps and cattle," Kramer says. "It's a word that implies power over. We've branded you. It's hard to believe that designers came up with that. It smells like an advertising agency."

Today, more than 75 years old, Kramer is retired from the design business and devotes himself to his abstract painting. Burton Kramer Associates is run by his son Jeremy, who, Kramer feels, has benefited from the work of client education done by design pioneers like himself. "It's a different world for Jeremy. He's not saying to people, 'You need signage,' and they ask, 'What's signage?'" he explains. "They're coming to him for the work. I always said when I started in Toronto that it would take a couple of generations before there was the kind of informed client that you needed. That's happened now."



Clockwise from top left: Bronze corporate logo sculpture (9 x 4.5 meters) created for North American Life Assurance (1988). Logo sign sculpture designed for Onex Packaging (1980). The much-discussed Canadian Broadcasting Corporation logo (1974). Part of the Amblin Mining (gold) corporate identity (1992).

## JIM DONOAHUE

Designer Jim Donoahue probably deserves the title of Dr. Logo. He began his career in Toronto in the early 1960s. He was creative director of renowned type house Cooper & Beatty, spent time at the MacLaren ad agency, joined as a partner in hot design studio Burns, Cooper, Donoahue & Fleming and then struck out on his own in 1978.

Many of his early logos and symbols have been seen across the country, including the Canada wordmark (something he threw in for free while doing a Canadian tourism poster at MacLaren), TSN, Global Television, Investors Group and Marathon Realty.

Recalling the early days of design, Donoahue says he was frustrated by the many Canadian companies that wouldn't look to home for design work. "A lot of serious money went from the Canada to the U.S. to buy logos," he says. "A guy like Saul Bass could get a half-million dollars for a logo. I went down

and spent time with Bass in Los Angeles and considered working with him, but decided not to move there because of my kids. It might have been a better career move if I did."

Even so, Canadian designers began to command more respect and heftier fees with their work in the '70s and '80s ("you could get \$50,000 to \$100,000 for a really big logo design"), often expanding their roles with clients. Donoahue recalls, for example, doing a logo design for Marathon Real Estate about 25 years ago that grew into a hefty graphic standards manual dictating how the logo should be used.

Though still active today in his Toronto studio, Donoahue isn't about to embrace the term "branding." "It's so gimmicky, I really hate it," he declares. "I think it's just the modern way of saying you do corporate design. I once did a job for a restaurant being opened by the owner of the Windsor Arms in Toronto. The name for the Italian restaurant came to me one night and I called the owner and said, 'Let's call it Noodles. Everyone understands noodles.' Then I did the logo, menus, advertising—everything. Was that branding? I don't know, maybe the word gets you more money."

"I am still designing. I just don't want to quit. I can't imagine not doing this," adds Donoahue. "But I am amazed that with architects you can be 70 years old and seen as at your peak. Whereas with graphic designers, at 70, you're seen as over the hill. You really have to be 25 and perceived as red hot."



Clockwise from top: Logos created for the Primrose Restaurant at the Rimrock Resort Hotel in Banff (1993), the Global Television Network (1973), The Sports Network (1984), musician and songwriter Mort Ross (1975), the Canada wordmark (originally designed for the Canadian Government Office of Tourism in 1965) and the Kyo Japanese restaurant in Montreal (1991).

## STUART ASH

Stuart Ash managed to build one of the most successful design firms in Canada, Gottschalk+Ash, by adopting a resolutely international outlook. After graduating from the Ontario College of Art, in 1963, he worked at the Cooper & Beatty typesetting firm in Toronto. There, under the direction of Anthony Mann, he created Canada's Centennial symbol, used nationwide to celebrate the country's 100th anniversary, in 1967. Cooper & Beatty developed the symbol in conjunction with the Ottawa office of Paul Arthur+Associates, where a young Swiss designer named Fritz Gottschalk worked.

In 1966, Ash and Gottschalk opened their own firm in Montreal. "When we started, design was considered commercial art, especially in Toronto," Ash recalls. "I don't think we could have started our business there. But with Expo 67, Montreal was put on the world stage, featuring its international architecture

and design. I think that the Expo really established design in Canada."

Riding this wave, G+A quickly established itself as a major player in corporate design, embracing research and marketing data, and becoming strategic partners with clients, undertaking multifaceted projects that went far beyond pretty graphics. A major part of the firm's sophisticated approach was to be aware of what was going on elsewhere in the world. "Every year we invited an international designer to work for a short period in our office, so we would get exposure to international design," says Ash. "We also associated ourselves with the best design schools in both Europe and America. As a result, the firm has attracted a number of likeminded, talented designers over the years."

Ash attributes the agency's ability to do an amazingly broad range of work—from complete brand identity programs to wayfinding systems to advertising strategies—to the insistence on working with the right people in a company. "We were always looking for the opportunity to do visionary design. And it is the people at the top who have the position and vision," he says.

Today, Gottschalk+Ash International has offices in Toronto, Calgary and Zurich (run by Gottschalk) and is under the banner of Don Watt's DW+Partners, affiliated with St. Joseph Communications. Ash indicates he is giving more and more responsibility for the day-to-day running of the business to managing director Justin Young and design director Udo Schliemann. But he's not willing to retire just yet: "I try to look at everything that goes out our doors. I still love the chase, the strategizing, the creative results."



Clockwise from top left: Toronto PATH signage and wayfinding system (1988). Part of an identity created for the Royal Bank (1972). Logo created for SkyDome with merchandising appeal in mind. Branding work for the Ontario Lottery and Gaming Corporation (1982–2006). Canadian Centennial symbol created by Stuart Ash while at Cooper & Beatty (1967).

**CHRIS YANEFF**

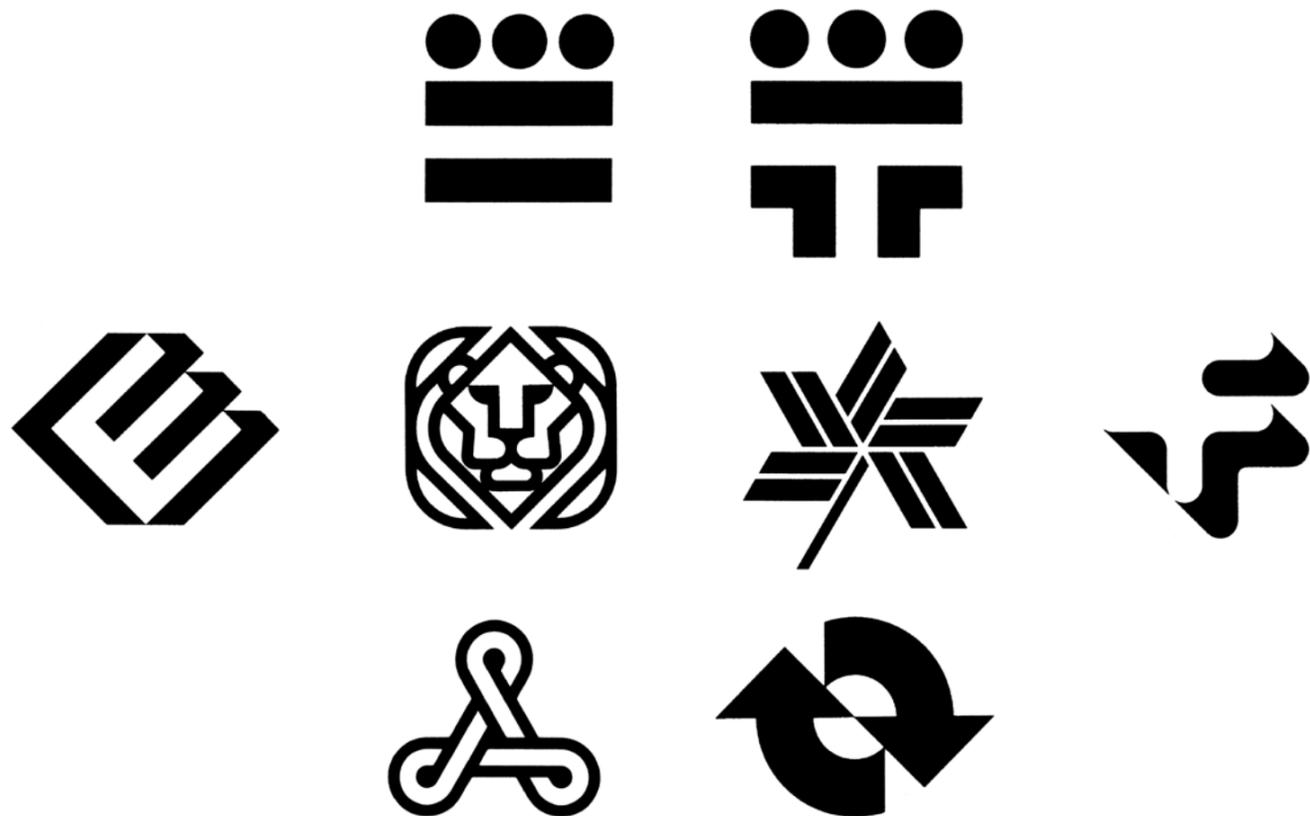
Chris Yaneff, who passed away in 2004, was a unique personality in the annals of Canadian design. He'd tell students that they would have to learn to wear suits and become business partners with their clients. He advertised his services through the national press and on radio. And he developed a flexible business with partner Fred Gotthans that seemed to be equally adept at creating corporate identities, package designs, company names and advertising.

Born in Toronto in 1928, Yaneff became art director at the *Financial Post* in 1949 and then founded Chris Yaneff Limited in 1956, quite happily mixing annual reports with creating TV spots and newspaper ads. But he became best known for his corporate identities, creating logos for companies and organizations such as Crown Life Insurance, Conklin Shows and Square One Shopping Centre.

With lots of work coming in, Yaneff and Gotthans believed in giving clients what they needed, as opposed to what they wanted, if the two differed. In the summer 1986 issue of *Applied Arts*, a feature reported that Yaneff was trying to sell the CEO of Crown Life on a new logo design, which clearly didn't impress the exec. Yaneff told the CEO in front of the board of directors: "Quite frankly, if you want this firm to move into the 20th century, and you have the guts to do it, this is your logo." The logo was quickly accepted.

In the area of packaging, Yaneff created the famous box design for Windsor Salt, which became a staple in Canadian kitchens for 40 years. It was redesigned last year—a move mourned in the Canadian design community. And when it came to names, Yaneff was no slouch, either. For example, he was responsible for renaming the Brewer's Retail, in Ontario, the Beer Store. He simply asked people on the street what they called the retail beer operation and, voila! The Beer Store was born.

The key to Yaneff's success "was that he was able to deal with presidents of companies," says his son Greg Yaneff, who worked with his father and now runs a successful online vintage poster business spun out of his father's Yorkville art gallery and personal poster collection ([www.yaneff.com](http://www.yaneff.com)). "He felt that whether he created a corporate identity or a name for a company, it was far too important a matter to be handled by assistants." Greg adds: "Nowadays it's difficult for designers to work this way, because there are other people in a company allocated to deal with them. That's why we see so much poor design out there."



Logos create for (top, from left) Crown Life Insurance Company, Crowtex (middle) Economical Mutual Insurance, Monarch Industries, Canadian National Exhibition (CNE), Financial Trust, (bottom) Certified General Accountants Association and New Brunswick Hydro.

**HEATHER COOPER**

Heather Cooper and Robert Burns ran the "it" firm of the 1970s, doing groundbreaking work for clients such as Union Carbide, Alcan, Abitibi-Price, Kimberly-Price and many others. Burns & Cooper in Toronto achieved particular fame for its all-encompassing design program for Roots. The studio also served as a "design school" for prominent talent, adding associate names to the firm as it went along (at one time it was the mouthful Burns, Cooper, Donoahue, Fleming & Hynes).

Heather Cooper, who still runs her own design studio, recalls that from the outset, in 1968, she and Burns targeted decision makers in companies and tried to get projects that went beyond the usual role of designers. "At that time, designers were considered layout artists, somebody who just did what the client wanted," she says. "We wanted to come up with ongoing, intelligent ideas that you could

initiate from a project and extrapolate to other things. It would become a bigger piece of communications that goes beyond the logo. This approach is much more fulfilling."

An important part of this process was to truly understand the business and strategic needs of the client. In an interview in the launch issue of *Applied Arts* (Spring 1986), Burns said, "We have to appreciate the nature of management in the client's organization. Mutual respect has to exist. Designers complain that managers don't understand the language of design, but how many designers attempt to understand the language of management? The most odious thing about designers—myself included—is a kind of moral superiority we profess."

In the case of Dominion Bridge, the steel company came to Burns & Cooper to produce a small brochure for customers, explaining that a worldwide shortage was keeping it from fulfilling orders. "We convinced them that they wouldn't get a lot of goodwill out of a stopgap measure like that," says Cooper, who is also an acclaimed illustrator. "That's how this series of posters was born. It gave the customers something truly special, of greater interest, positioning the company as forward looking, trying hard to live up to its commitments."

In recalling her partnership with Burns, she says it was a perfect combination of her creative talent with his penchant for ideas and inspired salesmanship. "Robert was a thinker. He loved the big idea," Cooper recalls. "Where he really excelled was to take something, digest it and come up with a different twist. And then he had this ability to sell the big idea. You might even say Robert was an idea looking for a client."



Posters created by Burns, Cooper, Donoahue & Fleming for Dominion Bridge in the mid-1970s. Concept: Robert Burns, design/illustration: Heather Cooper, design: Jim Donoahue and concept/writing: David Parry.

## HANS KLEEFELD

When Hans Kleefeld arrived in Canada from Germany in 1952, with only \$20 in his pocket and a duffle-bag of clothes, he had one thing that local designers didn't: a top-notch design education. He had apprenticed as a type compositor before being allowed into the Academy of Fine Arts in Berlin, where he studied for five years. "Having come from Europe with a different background and training, I found that what I could offer clients was highly appreciated right from the start," recalls the 78 year old.

Kleefeld started to work right away for TDF Artists in Toronto, where he did house ads, ads for General Motors and a wide range of promotional materials for the Hudson's Bay Company. "It was a good relationship—the client looked upon us as a partner, not a supplier," he says of Hudson's Bay. Next he joined Stewart & Morrison, where he found his stride, doing graphic identities for Air

Canada, Air Jamaica, Bank of Montreal, the TD Bank, Stratford, Inco and many others, as well as packaging for clients such as Canada Packers and Labatt's.

The wide range of work came through the connections of studio head Clair Stewart. "Clair was very well connected in social circles and business," says Kleefeld. "We got some wonderful clients, developing core graphics and even [identity application] manuals for different companies. But we weren't following through to become big-time partners with business. That sort of thing didn't happen until later."

Kleefeld also spent three decades as an instructor in typography, and graphic and package design at the Ontario College of Art. And today he is in his fourth year of teaching design courses at Oakville Ontario's Sheridan College. As a keen observer of the industry, he feels that the way "branding" is used today "muddies the water." A corporate identity should refer to what is done for a company as a whole, and its separate products and services are the brands.

Considering the lot of his students, Kleefeld feels that they are entering a more difficult world than he knew. With many more people in the business, design services now being offered by ad agencies and less access to top decision makers in corporations, it has become more of a challenge to succeed. "I think a young designer will find it much harder to get the kind of work I had," he says. "I was just in the right place at the right time. The '50s, '60s and '70s really were the glory days of corporate and visual identity."



Logos created in the 1960s and '70s for (top, from left) Toronto Dominion Bank, Bank of Montreal, (middle) Brewers Retail, Air Canada, Scarborough Town Centre, (bottom) Stratford Festival of Canada and International Nickel.