THE SMILEY

SELECTED BY ART CHANTRY | # THE HAPPY FACE | DESIGNER UNKNOWN

In graphic design circles, there is an ongoing and vociferous debate about the authorship of the happy face (a.k.a. "Mr. Smiley"). This image has been around so long and has been through so many permutations and redefinitions, that it has become one of the most basic and essential images in the dictionary of graphic design. It's possibly the most ubiquitous (and therefore most prominent) bit of graphic design of the last century.

The earliest current documentation of the happy face origins is its use as an advertising icon (not quite a logo) for the New York radio station WCMA (the "good guys") in 1964. There is even a photograph of a young John Lennon wearing one of the radio station's promo T-shirts featuring a happy face. Soon thereafter, a Mr. Harvey Ball penned the classic (East Coast) version of the happy face for a novelty company. It then exploded into the mid '60s Pop Art market and was picked up by every company selling Pop trash (greeting cards, buttons, clothing—basically all that graphic design stuff we try to ignore). It seemed to be the happy-go-lucky, kid-next-door version of the slightly frightening peace symbol; a sort of industrial psychedelia marketed to American teenagers by corporate America. We always have to cash in on what the kids are up to. It's what made America great.

There were regional variations as well. On the West Coast, in about 1967, Seattle marketing guru David Stern executed an ad campaign for University Savings and Loan using the happy face, most notably as a little button that became hugely popular. The actual design (slightly different from the East Coast version) of the happy face in that campaign was executed by George Tanagi, a venerated longtime Seattle graphic design grand master. To this day, most West Coast academics credit George Tanagi and David Stern for the creation of the happy face. Stern even ran for the mayorship of Seattle largely on the basis of his having created the happy face (no joke). Thank heaven he lost.

Turn the happy face upside down and make it green and he became Mr. Yuk, saving America's children from the evils of household poisons. Sneak him

on tablets of the drug "xstacy" and the happy face became the underground logo for that notorious feel-good drug culture. Slap him into a megastore ad campaign for Walmart, and he became the virtual logo for that huge corporation. I imagine they even tried to file an exclusive copyright on its use. Pop a bullet hole in its forehead and you've got the dark ironic brand of the Watchmen. Bring on the Internet, and we have millions of happy face emoticons peppering the ether. The happy face is as available as belly buttons—I mean, everybody has one! My mom collects them and has hundreds of mugs, stuffed toys, dolls, place mats, and crap.

So who actually did the first one? Some high school cheerleader? The Dadaists? The Roman Empire? The earliest advertising use of the happy face that I've found is the logo for a small (but popular) store in Beulah, Michigan (cherry capital of the world), called The Cherry Hut. Founded in 1922, it uses not the classic yellow Mr. Smiley of 1960. However, I doubt the happy face was invented by The Cherry Hut.

Tibor Kalman's famous argument was that most important graphic design language grew from the vernacular. I always had a problem with that idea, not because I disagreed with it, but because it somehow felt like slumming, like anything deemed common or vulgar or authorless was to be dumped into the landfill of the vernacular to be exploited freely as source material for postmodernist genius. I think a definition of vernacular may have been helpful. If you loosely define the word as "of the people," then I would agree wholeheartedly with Tibor. In fact, I think of graphic design as *the* language of the people. We all understand what the happy face means. It doesn't even require a common spoken or written language to understand it.

I think that graphic design itself is a language—a language everybody speaks fluently but doesn't know they speak it at all. We all know what red means, what a circle means, what a ratty line or a smooth curve means, and we know what a happy face means. Through all of its scattered lives and constant "rebranding," its basic underlying meaning remains intact. So, who was the author? We'll never know, like we'll never really know who did the Coke bottle or the Oreo cookie. It's lost to a time when we didn't value authorship in graphic design; indeed, did not value graphic design.

Every little girl named Debbie who dotted her *i* with a smiley face is the author. Every person who slaps a smiley emoticon onto their comment on a blog or email is the author. Every ad agency hack who thinks they invented the concept of a smiling little face is the author. We are all the author. The happy face basically grew on a tree. Maybe a cherry tree.

Arthur S. W. Chantry II (born April 9, 1954, in Seattle) is a graphic designer known for expanding on the bristling low-tech aesthetic of punk music, in posters and album covers for bands like Nirvana, Hole, and the Sonics, as well as lesser-known groups like the Cramps, the Lord High Fixers, Mono Men, and Bert. His work has been exhibited at the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame, the Museum of Modern Art, Seattle Art Museum, the Smithsonian, and the Louvre.

WORK TO BE DONE

1/ According to the author, how was the happy face invented?
2/ How is the happy face understood by the people of the world?
3/ What is the relationship between the happy face and the tree?
4/ Try to find the corresponding meanings to the following words in both English & Arabic: vociferous/ permutation/ ubiquitous/ promo/ Pop Art/ slightly/ frightening/ guru/ venerated/ mayorship/ heaven/ notorious/ forehead/ vernacular/ common/ fluently/ authorship.