Communication Arts

Land of Discovery
Visual Communication Design
in Portugal

Robert L. Peters, FGDC

Peters shares his observations on visual
communication design in Portugal in
this 10-page feature. He has previously
contributed CA features on design in
Russia, Japan, Brazil, China, Cuba,
Australia, and New Zealand as well as
congress reports from Portugal, Uruguay,
Australia, Korea, and Denmark.

VISUAL COMMUNICATION DESIGN IN
PORTUGAL
Land of Discovery

by Robert L. Peters, FGDC

My first visit to Portugal was in the sweltering heat of late July 1995, as an attendee of the world's 16th biennial graphic design congress Icograda '95 Portugal in Lisbon—then on to the northern city of Porto as a delegate to the XVI Icograda General Assembly [*Communication Arts* Design Annual 36, Nov. 1995]. While congress attendees came from 38 different countries, I remember being struck by how few Portuguese designers participated, and more broadly, by how underdeveloped Portuguese graphic design seemed to be.

My second visit to Portugal was in May 2009, as a speaker at OFFF 2009 Oeiras (International Festival For The Post-Digital Creation Culture), a sell-out event attended by over 3,500 design and new-media enthusiasts, most of whom were Portuguese. In marked contrast to my earlier experience, this time around I was greatly impressed by both the tangible energy I felt and by the quality of visual culture I encountered in and around Lisbon and Porto. This article attempts to examine contemporary Portuguese design (and what lies behind it) and to showcase some of the excellent work emanating from this "Land of Discovery."

People by the sea

Situated in the extreme Southwestern corner of Europe, Portugal is Europe's third smallest country. At 92,090 km² (35,645 sq. mi.) in size, Portugal, including the Autonomous Regions of the Azores and Madeira (archipelagoes situated in the mid-Atlantic), is slightly smaller than the U.S. state of Indiana. The country's long shoreline, with many harbors and rivers flowing westward to the ocean, gave birth naturally to generations of the world's most adventurous seamen and explorers, predestining what would become a great seafaring empire.

Historically, Portugal has benefited significantly from its on-the-edge-of-the-continent position and excellent geo-strategic location (between Europe, Africa and the Americas); and the Portuguese became true pioneers in cultural globalization

"The Church says that the earth is flat, but I know that it is round, for I have seen the shadow on the moon, and I have more faith in a shadow than in the Church."

—Fernão de Magalhães (Magellan), Portuguese Explorer (1480–1521)

This page: **Flag of Portugal**. The five blue shields comprising the cross in the center represent the five Moor kings defeated by the first King of Portugal, D. Afonso Henriques. The dots inside each blue shield represent the five wounds of Christ when crucified. Counting the dots (and doubling those 5 in the center) there are 30 dots that represent the number of coins Judas received for having betrayed Christ. The seven castles in the shield's outer ring represent the number of fortified cities Henriques conquered from the Moors; the golden globe represents the world discovered by the Portuguese navigators in the 15th and 16th centuries; the green field is meant to symbolize hope in the future, and the red field represents the blood of Portugal's heroes.

Right: **Stamps** featuring Portuguese comic strip heroes. Jorge Silva, art director; Eduardo Teixeira Coelho/Stuart de Carvalhais/Nuno Saraiva, illustrators; silva!, design firm; CTT Correios, client.

Week 46 (editorial illustration). Hilary Fitzgibbons, art director; Cristiana Couceiro, illustrator; New York magazine, client.

The New Freedom Fighters (editorial illustration). Claire Dawson/Fidel Pena, art directors; Claire Dawson, designer; Bryan McBurney, photographer; Cristiana Couceiro, illustrator; Underline Studio, design firm; U of T Magazine, client.

Vai com Deus (Go with God) typographic installation for a gallery. Liza Ramalho/Artur Rebelo, art directors/designers; Fernando Guerra, photographer; R2, design firm; Ermida Nossa Sehhora da Conceição, Belém, client.

and cross-pollination (they were the first Europeans to reach Japan in 1543, introduced tea to the British court in 1662 and brought the ukulele to Hawaii). Today, the Portuguese find themselves at the crossroads between tradition and modernity, and remain highly receptive to new ideas and influences from abroad.

By population, Portugal's 10.7 million residents rank it eleventh in Europe—though it's estimated that an additional four and a half million Portuguese live abroad. The people of Portugal enjoy a warm climate, a relatively high standard of living (with a GDP per capita of approximately $23,000 USD; about two thirds of the EU average, half that of the USA) and a relaxed way of life influenced by the sea, the good weather and the taste of good food. They are socially conservative (over 90 percent identify as Roman Catholic), communicative, eclectic, uniquely multicultural, highly adaptable and welcoming—Portuguese refer to themselves as a land of *brandos costumes* [gentle ways]—with a respect and tolerance for different peoples, cultures and habits that accrues directly from their history as far-flung sailors and worldly-wise explorers.

Portuguese live relatively efficiently, with good resource stewardship (Portugal's per capita energy use is half that of the Netherlands, and one third that of the USA). Twenty percent of its energy now comes from renewable resources. Wind farms dot the countryside, the world's largest solar farm opened in Alentejo in 2008 (providing energy to power 30,000 homes), and the world's first "wave farm" is now harnessing the ocean's power just north of Porto.

Terra de beleza

Portugal is a land of striking contrasts and astonishing beauty. While rural areas and small towns still seem rooted in past centuries (replete with old-fashioned charm), larger urban areas and the country's internationally famous resort playgrounds exude modernity and sophistication. Portuguese people (as a whole) and its designers (in particular) navigate these seeming contradictions with finesse and engagingly laid-back ease. Seen through outsider's eyes, I'd suggest that the disarmingly picturesque richness and idiosyncrasies of this remarkable land can't help but contribute in significant ways to the aesthetic sense and visual acuity of Portugal's creative practitioners.

Bounded by its sparkling coastline, Portugal's north (just beneath Spanish Galicia) is a land of lush river valleys, jagged granite peaks and virgin forests. Home to the Vinho Verde and the ancient terraced vineyards of the Rio Douro, its urban gateway is the striking city of Porto, home to the eponymous Port wines, gracefully blending medieval attractions with modern additions.

Central Portugal offers rolling vistas replete with picture-perfect whitewashed villages, olive groves and Cork Oak tree-covered hillsides scattered with prehistoric remains and medieval castles. Aesthetically eclectic, the region's chief urban center is Coimbra, "Portugal's Cambridge" boasting the country's oldest university (founded in the thirteenth century).

Built on the broad estuary of the Tagus river and a central hub since Neolithic times, the city of Lisbon spreads erratically across a switchback of steep hills. Above the city, the medieval Moorish castle above the Alfama district looks down across an amazing network of whitewashed cobbled streets, grand Neoclassical boulevards, squares lined with Art Nouveau shops and cafés, a fortified Romanesque cathedral and over to the fantasy Manueline architecture of waterfront Belém. As Portugal's capital and its largest city (Greater Lisbon population: 3.34 million), Lisbon enjoys its favorable position as the center of the country's wealth and corporate influence.

To the south of the Tagus river, stretching eastward from the windswept Atlantic beaches to the Spanish border, lies Alentejo, a sparsely populated agricultural region of undulating plains known as the country's bread basket. Vast swaths of Cork Oak plantations (the world's premier source for wine corks) and olive groves are interspersed with hillside fortresses, megalithic sites (dating from 3000 BC), medieval villages and picturesque cities steeped in history.

The Algarve, Portugal's southern coast so well-known to people-watching sun-seekers, is marked by breathtaking views of end-of-the-world cliffs, scalloped bays of glistening sand, trendy beach resorts, windswept woodlands and picturesque cobblestoned towns.

An early and embattled history

Recorded Portuguese history is one of ongoing occupation and strife: Phoenicians invaded around 900 BC, followed by Mycenaean Greeks, Tunisian Carthaginians, Romans, East Germanic Vandals, Iranic Alans, Suebi from the Rhine district and then Visigoths—who established and maintained a spurious unity until the Moorish advance in the eighth century.

The occupancy by these Muslim invaders from North Africa over a period of nearly 500 years brought an undeniably civilizing influence to Portugal: freedom of worship was allowed (e.g., for Jews and Christians), Roman irrigation techniques were perfected, prosperous local craft industries were developed (spurring urbanization), and the concept of crop rotation was introduced, as were the cultivation of cotton, rice, oranges and lemons. Muslim culture, scholarship and trading acumen led the world at the time, lending Portugal a rich legacy that it would benefit from for centuries to come.

The *reconquista*, an extended war by Christendom to take back the Iberian Peninsula from the Muslims ended by the mid-12th century during which time feudal power struggles between Portuguese and Galician nobles resulted in the for-

mation of the Kingdom of Galicia (1071) and the subsequent evolution of the Kingdom of Portugal (in 1139) under Afonso Henriques. Portugal's independence was subsequently proclaimed by the Pope, and modern-day borders with Spain were finally defined in the Treaty of Alcañices in 1297.

The fourteenth century (Portugal's first as a sovereign nation) saw a blossoming of agricultural reform, forest-planting and the establishment of staple exports such as grain, olive oil, wine, salt fish and dried fruit; though on the dark side, the period was also marked by years of war with Castile (modern-day Spain), a battle for control of the western Iberian Peninsula that would reappear some 200 years later.

The age of exploration
Beginning in the early fifteenth century, Portuguese explorers, leveraging breakthrough developments in mathematics, cartography and naval technology (such as the mariner's astrolabe for celestial navigation, along with the caravel and carrack, the fastest, most agile and powerful seagoing vessels of the time) and backed by the visionary Henry the Navigator (himself motivated to find sea routes to the lucrative Asian spice trade) began exploring the west coast of Africa and the unknown Atlantic Ocean off Europe's coast. The uninhabited islands of Madeira (off the African coast) were discovered in 1419 and rapidly settled. Diogo Silves discovered the Azores archipelago in 1427, and within two decades Portuguese ships had bypassed the Sahara along the western coast of Africa (formerly thought impossible).

By 1471 Portuguese explorers had reached the Southern Hemisphere, and in 1488 Bartolomeu Dias rounded the Cape of Good Hope, setting the stage for Vasco da Gama's ensuing maiden voyage to India in 1498. This landmark achievement was followed in quick succession by the "discovery" of Brazil in 1500 (eight years after Cristovão Colombo had "discovered" America using the Portuguese-designed carrack *Santa Maria* and the caravels *Niña* and *Pinta*). Further advances along the East-African coast and a series of successive victories at sea soon led to a Portuguese trade hegemony in the Indian Ocean, setting the stage for exploratory conquests along the coasts and islands of East Asia (Malaysia, Indonesia, Macau) and the establishment of Portuguese outpost forts, trading posts and spice factories.

Boca (Mouth) theater poster. Liza Ramalho/Artur Rebelo, art directors/designers; Marco Maurício, photographer; R2, design firm; Teatro Bruto, client.

Paralleling the Renaissance elsewhere in Europe, Portugal's Age of Discovery established history's first global empire (finally ending with the handover of Macau to China in 1999), creating a lucrative commercial network, accelerating the country's influence to the status of a world maritime power, and making Lisbon the wealthiest city in Europe.

Decline, devastation and dictatorship
Portugal's imperial momentum and opulence was short-lived, however. Following a succession crisis in 1580, neighboring rival Spain occupied Portugal for a 60-year period, essentially dragging the country into conflicts with England, France and the Dutch Republic, which in turn resulted in the loss of former colonies. Portugal lost more of its wealth and status due to the massive destruction of Lisbon by a devastating 1755 earthquake, followed by French occupation during the Napoleonic Wars, and a further weakening of the country through the subsequent loss of its wealthiest colony, Brazil, in 1822.

A period of civil strife and political mayhem ensued, ending in the abolition of the monarchy in 1910 and the formation of a republic. Economically disastrous involvement in World War l (on the side of the Allies) followed by crippling postwar recession led to a military coup in 1926, ushering in the repressive military dictatorship of António de Oliveira Salazar, who would then "rule" Portugal until his death in 1970.

Massive discontent with the authoritarian *Estado Novo* (New State) of Salazar's regime, along with lingering, ruinous wars in Portugal's African colonies finally led to the remarkably peaceful *Revolução dos Cravos* (Carnation Revolution) of 25 April 1974, setting in motion the subsequent granting of independence to the colonies Portuguese Guinea (now Guinea-Bissau), Cape Verde, Mozambique, Angola and São Tomé and Príncipe, as well as a Portuguese withdrawal from East Timor.

The end of six decades of repression had at long last ushered in modernity and democracy for Portugal—bringing with it belated and rapidly flourishing cultural, scientific, industrial and economic growth. Portugal joined the European Economic Union in 1986, and was one of the first-wave EU countries to adopt the Euro in 1999. The country's economy today is

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diversified and increasingly service-based; major trading partners are fellow members of the EU and the United States.

Português: a language of its own

You cannot contemplate Portuguese culture without considering the origin and influences of its unique language—derived from the Latin spoken some 2,000 years ago by the Romanized peoples of the Iberian Peninsula, and evolved, as it did in situ, with later influences by Germanic and then Moorish invaders—the latter left modern Portuguese with about 900 words of Arabic origin, especially relating to food, agriculture and crafts.

Referred to by linguists as "suave" and "the sweet language," phonologies of contemporary Portuguese language have more in common with French and Catalan than with the Spanish spoken by its Iberian neighbors. Thanks to 500 years of colonial and commercial empire-building in Africa, Asia and the Americas, Portuguese remains the fifth most spoken language in the world today (more than 210 million).

State of design

Portugal currently has an estimated 12,000 designers registered with professional organizations: the Associação Portuguesa de Designers formed in 1976 (apdesigners.org.pt), Associação Nacional de Designers formed in 2005 (and.org.pt) and Centro Português de Design (cpd.pt), and is served by a good number of design blogs (worth visiting are ressabiator.wordpress.com and experimentadesign.pt).

The first design courses in Portugal only began in 1969, predating the simultaneous introduction of design in Portuguese universities in Lisbon and Porto in 1975—the first master's degrees in design appeared just a decade ago. Today, Ph.D. programs in design are growing in popularity, and numerous universities and public institutions across Portugal offer graphic design in their syllabus.

Delayed for half a century by the authoritarian and isolationist Salazar dictatorship, it's fair to say that the profession of graphic design is a full generation younger than elsewhere in Europe, and

Left: **Compact Discothèque** (self-promotional flyer for a monthly dance event in Oporto). Nuno Coelho, designer.

Club invitation for **Lisbon Fashion Week**. MusaWorkLab, design firm; ModaLisboa, client.

Depressa, Devagar (Fast, Slow) children's book. Bernardo Carvalho, illustrator; Planeta Tangerina, design firm/publisher.

Exhibition stand for **Serralves Art Museum**. MusaWorkLab, design firm; Dreamgate/Fundação de Serralves, client.

This page: **ColorADD**® Color Identifying System for Colorblind People, is an innovative visual code system with a wide range of applications (www.color add.net). Miguel Neiva, designer; Miguel Neiva Atelier Design, design firm.

Guimarães Jazz 2009, poster. Alejandra Jaña/Oscar Maia/João Martino/Joana Silva, art directors/designers; Claudia Santos, illustrator; Atelier Martino&Jaña, design firm; Centro Cultural Vila Flor, client.

today suffers somewhat from what one could call an inferiority complex. Designers expressed frustration to me about the lack of a mature design culture, a lack of discourse regarding design and its role, the absence of a national design legacy (Russian, Dutch and Swiss style were noted with envy) and a lack of respect and recognition—both for the design profession and for the contribution designers make (to be fair, this is a familiar chorus I've heard from designers almost everywhere in the world).

"During the decades of dictatorship we learned to be shy, scared, and afraid of outside opinion," explains Ana Farinha. "I guess Portuguese design reflects how we deal with our nationality in general—we don't show off very often." Little or no published history exists about Portuguese graphic design, and design publications dedicated to communication design appear to be nonexistent (no doubt one of the reasons that design-focused blogs are proliferating to fill this gap, using the Internet to help overcome the disadvantage of "being at Europe's tail end," as Carla Carrão has put it).

"Before the 1970s, design was practiced by architects, photographers, filmmakers and ad men," explains educator and design critic Mário Moura. Names of influential individuals in the design arena who pre-dated the cultural sea-change triggered by the Carnation Revolution include the illustrator/cartoonist Rafael Bordalo Pinheiro (1846–1905), painter/poet Almada Negreiros (1893–1970), Swiss-trained poster artist Fred Kradolfer (1903–1968), architect/photographer Victor Palla (1922–2006), architect/cartoonist João Abel Manta (1888–1982), architect Daciano da Costa (1930–2005) and, of course, Sebastião Rodrigues (1929–1997), universally considered the father of Portuguese graphic design.

Left: **Theater posters**. Jorge Silva, art director; silva!, design firm; egeac/São Luiz Municipal Theatre, client.

Self-promotion **poster**. António Silveira Gomes, art director/typographer; barbara says..., design firm.

Environmental graphics for **Lisbon Book Fair**. António Silveira Gomes, art director/typographer; barbara says..., design firm; Lisbon Town Hall/marcosandmarjan Architecture, clients.

This page: **Gluttony**, editorial illustration. Mário Belém, illustrator; thestudio, design firm; Jornal i, client.

Próximo Futuro/Next Future, magazine cover. Valdemar Lamego/Ricardo Matos/Diogo Potes, designers; ALVA, design firm; Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, client.

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Saudade and *Desenrascar*

It has been said that the Portuguese are possessed by a deeply-felt, vaguely nostalgic (at times even fatalist) longing for something or someone dear that has gone missing, has been lost forever or simply cannot exist. Nothing conveys *saudade*, as this phenomena is named, more distinctively than melancholic *fado* (literally 'fate'), the bluesy, bittersweet Moorish-infused music unique to Portugal and born of homesick sailors. Arguably, it is a trait that today imbues itself in the Portuguese psyche by means of heightened visual sensitivity, an ongoing recollective search or quest, and a predilection towards the contemplative and romantically reflective.

In Portugal it seems that necessity truly is the mother of invention. Forced to work with limited means and resources, it seems that Portuguese designers have become frugality experts by "doing a lot with a little," being exceptionally creative and "doing it all, on call." Arguably, being free of the burden of a definitive (and potentially restrictive) design history may actually help in this regard. *Desenrascar*, the well-known characteristic of adapting oneself to unusual and unexpected circumstances, was another leitmotif of my exchanges with Portuguese designers. As Miguel Ribeiro explains, "We tend to leave everything to the last minute— this provides additional improvisational capacity and truly gives meaning to *desenrascar*, doing it 'fast and fine.'"

Drawing on culture

Contemporary Portuguese design is largely "international" in style (eclectic), world class in caliber and sophisticated in its execution, regardless of medium—as such, it's notable for its plurality, malleability and openness to outside influences. "We have always been touched by others" rings in my ears, and there's clear evidence that Portuguese designers work very much in the spirit of global zeitgeist. Design instructor Luísa Ribas suggests that Portuguese design is particularly known for "articulating strong conceptual approaches with a sensibility to formal rigor, notable in the effective use of typography."

Is there anything that really sets this nation's visual communications apart though, in a distinctive way? Portuguese people love their terra deeply, and I believe this pride of place frequently spices the work with unique cultural (and cross-cultural) references. At the risk of painting with a big brush (yes, exceptions abound) and drawing heavily from the feedback of dozens of designers who provided me with valued opinions of their own, I would dare to characterize Portuguese graphic design as being imbued with a somewhat relaxed and charming Latin aesthetic (warm, often textured, sensitive to the quality of light, frequent use of organic forms, often humorous), and drawing from the rich visual vocabulary and broad palette of inspirational homegrown sources and subjects: think *fado*, *azulejos* (the ubiquitous ceramic tiles), Manueline architecture, ceramic roosters and *Zé Povinho* (the popular Portuguese everyman), to name a few.

Looking ahead...

Will the coming decade(s) provide Portuguese design with the legitimacy, recognition and increased visibility that so many of its practitioners yearn for? Can this generation of creatives help move Portugal from its current stance of "planted by the sea" to significantly put Portugal on the world (design) map, following in the wake of their dynamic seafaring ancestors? Will "design as a cultural agent" and as a contributor to citizenship and the quality of life meet with the same success that design for profit already has? Will the country's professional design associations and educational institutions succeed in broadening sought-after design theory dialogue, consolidating the infant field of design research, and furthering critical discourse regarding design and its role in society? We'll all just have to just wait and see… CA

Editor's note: Robert L. Peters expresses thanks to numerous Portuguese designers and design educators who enthusiastically contributed their insights, viewpoints and suggestions regarding works that appear in this article, in particular; Sarah Chaves Brasseur, Carla Carrão, Aurelindo Ceia, António (Tózé) Coelho, António Costa, Ana Farinha, João Cardoso Fernandes, Antero Ferreira, Afonso Figueiredo, Margarida Fonseca, Bruno Franco, António Silveira Gomes, Carla Ponte Júlio, Ana Lopes, Miguel Macedo, Mário Moura, Fernando Oliveira, João Maio Pinto, Rosa Quitério, Luísa Ribas, Catarina da Silva, Paulo Silva and Patrícia Sobral.

Right: **Eight** (identity for a business lounge bar). Rita Oliveira, designer; Shift Thinkers, design firm; Vernon SA, client.

Diverge (logo for product design firm). Gonçalo Cabral, designer; Diverge, client.

UNOKOSMO (identity for a natural therapy center). Codex, design firm; UNOKOSMO, client.

VIA Veículos de Intervenção Artística (Artistic Intervention Vehicles), identity for a cultural promotion association. Nuno Coelho, designer; VIA, client. Nuno Coelho, designer; VIA, client.

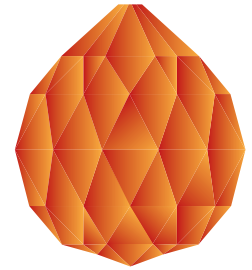**Lisboa ao Carmo** (identity for retailer). Diogo Potes, designer; ALVA, design firm; Lisboa ao Carmo, client.

TAP Portugal (identity application). Gonçalo Cabral, designer; Brandiacentral, design firm; TAP Portugal, client.

Egoista, magazine covers. Mário Assis Ferreira, director; Henrique Cayatte, art director; Filipa Gregório/Rodrigo Saias/Rita Salgueiro/Iara Zeferino, designers; Patrícia Reis, editor; Atelier 004, design firm; Estoril-Sol Group, client.

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