



# The Black Experience in Graphic Design

*Five talented black designers candidly discuss the frustrations and opportunities in a field where “flesh-colored” means pink.*

**by Dorothy Jackson**

The graphics industry is constantly seeking fresh talent. Where does the black designer fit into this search? In a field where talent is the prime prerequisite, are black designers' abilities being sought and developed?

The fact is, of course, that there are still just a relatively few black designers in the field. Perhaps this is due to poor quality of training, lack of perseverance (some just give up), discrimination, frustration, or lack of opportunity. The black designers whose opinions are presented here feel it is a combination of these factors, and more.

Yet the very existence of even these few designers would indicate that it is possible for young black people to receive adequate training in the design profession, even though the subsequent route to satisfactory employment may be

circuitous, frustrating and sometimes stifling to a budding creative talent. Bill Howell, for example, remembers that he had to secure his first job via the intervention of the NAACP. William Wacasey, faced some time ago with segregation in southern schools, studied art and advertising by means of correspondence courses; after graduating from high school, he went on to art school in Chicago and Detroit. Dorothy Hayes says, “I do not think that I have ever experienced so much discouragement and suppression of black artists in art instructors treat the black student as though he were some out-and-out freak and a tremendous threat to the instructor, when all the student is trying to do is develop talent.”

However talented he may be, the job-seeking black designer still runs into such embarrassing, if not humiliating, situations as being asked to do “brain-picking” homework, or, as Wacasey recalls, arriving to keep an appointment with an art direction and “having the receptionist hand me a package because she thought I was a delivery boy.”

To counter the effect of such situations, Alex Walker (one of the few black studio owner-operators in New York) ruefully advises the design school hopeful who is about to “offer him or herself to the graphic arts would do so with the eyes wide open, plenty of Excedrin and a degree in another field — just in case.” Many black graphic arts students do, in fact, minor in education while getting their BA, and after long, fruitless periods of seeking design work that suits them, eventually give up and go into teaching.

But this is by no means always the case. Bill Howell is among those who persisted in the field, with no intention of giving up. His first job when he got out of art school required him to do the usual apprentice work — mechanicals and flapping and labeling finished art — a job which gave him useful experi-

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ence in the basics of advertising design. Also, in delivering jobs to clients, he was afforded valuable exposure to the field.

Two years elapsed before Alex Walker found his first design job, after attending Pratt Institute at night. To fill the void, he became a freelance silkscreen film cutter. When that elusive first job did come, it was with a studio.

The gap between the black designer's first job and his first creative position is considerable. Dorothy Hayes relates that "I was employed by a well-known broadcasting company and led to believe that I would hold a design position, yet I was never allowed to do anything but non-creative work. I was frankly told that my employment was simply a form of tokenism."

Tokenism is still the order of the day in the graphic arts industry (having replaced a routine refusal or a smiling "I'll call you"). However, there are signs that conditions are changing: advertising agencies in particular show a greater willingness to open up their bullpens to more black designers.

There are certainly many more black art directors in agencies now than there were five or ten years ago. Then, there were so few that their numbers were statistically insignificant. Today, black designers constitute perhaps 1% or 2% of the total — not exactly an overwhelming percentage. In an advertising agency employing approximately 40 art directors, one can expect that about one to three will be black. However, in an agency employing 200-300 art directors, you will usually find the same one to three who are black. Also, the salary of the black art director is far less (\$2000 to \$5000 less) than that of a white art director at the same level.



**Top: Symbol for Island Record Co.  
Designed by Alex Walker;  
Bottom: Symbol sketch for Product  
Engineering magazine (unused)**

Furthermore, as Bill Howell points out, "The majority of black people who work as designers at advertising agencies never get to see the white clients. A black art director friend of mine had been working on a particular account for some time, but the client didn't know he was black because all transactions had been conducted by telephone. When he appeared in person one day to revise a mechanical, the representatives of the company were genuinely shocked."

With his sights set on accumulating enough experience to ready himself for the hoped-for art director's job, the black designer often sidetracks into freelance work; a few black designers in New York have sidetracked prematurely, opening up their own design studios. This was the case with William Wacasey, who worked his way through the usual channels of lettering and display man for retail outlets and packaging/product designer for an industrial design firm before opening Wacasey Associates — New York's first black-owned design studio — only to discover initially that "because I was black I tended to get the smaller jobs or those with practically no budget."

Alex Walker opened his own design studio last year, after leaving a position with a studio which he had helped for 13 years. This long stay with one firm is not unusual; when a black designer gets a job in the design field, he tends to keep it, knowing there is not an over-abundance of positions available to him. Looking back on his own experience, Walker states, "Unusually long periods of employment at one job tend to hamper one's creative process. Most white designers who eventually become award-winning art directors or make lots of money spent short periods of time in various studios and agencies. With each move, their knowledge, contacts, and usually their income increased. This is one modus operandi that has left the black designer in the dust." One reason black designers don't move around more is that they lack the all-important