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Curating an Imaginary Exhibition:

The Evolution of Album Covers (Artwork)

Music is one of life's greatest pleasures, with 'Roughly 7.11 billion people' (HeadphonesAddict, 2023) listening daily. According to the book 'The Evolution and Equilibrium of Copyright in the Digital Age' around 100,000 albums are released each year, and with this comes the visual element of the artwork on the cover (Frankel & Gervais, 2014). 'As explained by Oxford Learner's Dictionaries, curation means to select, organize, and look after the objects or works of art in a museum or art gallery.' (*Curate2 verb - definition, pictures, pronunciation and usage notes: Oxford Advanced American Dictionary at Oxfordlearnersdictionaries.com* 2023). Through the curation of my exhibition, my aim is to explore the evolution of album covers, starting when the first album cover was made, until the present day. My exhibition will include 5 images of album covers, all 20 (or so) years apart. These will be projected on each wall. At each location of each album cover will be a record player, with headphones, playing each of the songs. This will allow the audience to interact with the exhibition and see how music has also evolved through time too.

For the location of my exhibition, I have decided to use the Elysium Gallery on High Street in Swansea. The Elysium Gallery is a huge open space, allowing anyone to host exhibitions, one-off events, photoshoots etc. and has a track spotlighting system. As well as this, it has a projector and 32 meters of 2.40-meter-high white wall space, allowing opportunities for projections to be shown, or pictures to be hung up and displayed. This is a very useful factor to me as I plan to project each image onto the wall. The map below shows a plan of how my exhibition will be set out.

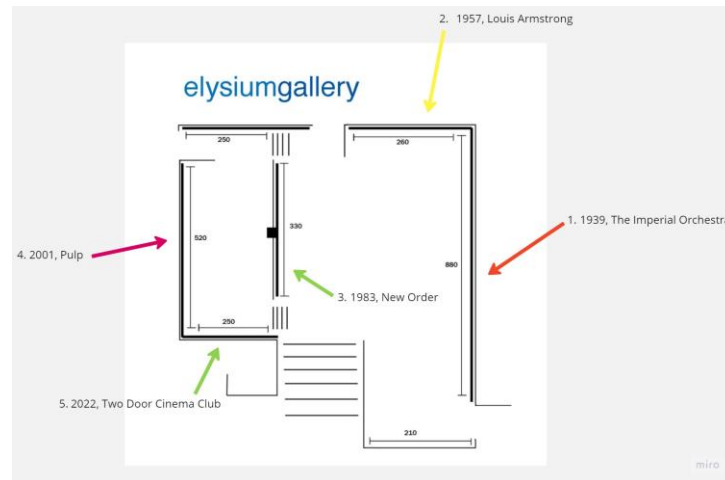


Fig. 1: Floor Plan

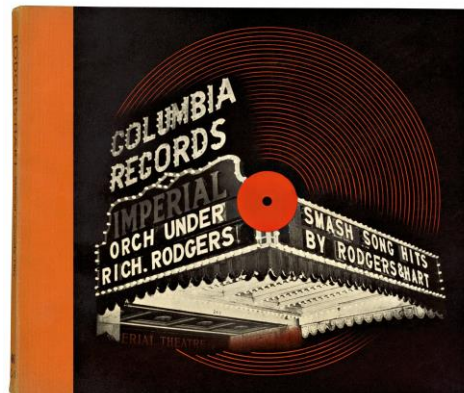


Fig. 2: *Smash Song Hits by Rodgers and Hart* by Richard Rodgers and the Imperial Orchestra, 1939

Over the years, artwork on album covers has changed significantly. The first ever album cover to be designed and illustrated was by American Graphic Designer, Alex Steinweiss. The industry had hardly any graphic tradition at the time, until 1939, when Steinweiss illustrated the cover for the late Richard Rodgers and the Imperial Orchestra, when he was working for Columbia Records. He then went on to invent the first ever paperboard 33 1/3 LP container in 1953, which became the standard music packaging for over 30 years. 'Original record album art did not exist before Steinweiss stumbled into the field.' (Ediriwira, *Alex Steinweiss: The story of the world's first record sleeve artist* 2014) according to The Vinyl Factory. The industry had hardly any graphic tradition at the time, however once Steinweiss was hired, musicians

noticed a huge soar in sales, which 'began the tradition of decorated album covers that we know today.'

(*Album covers* 2020).

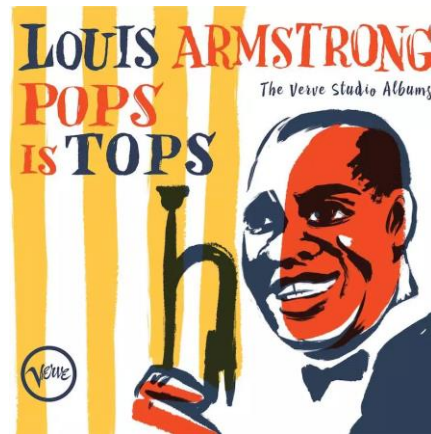


Fig. 3: *Louis Armstrong, Pops is Tops; The Verse Studio Albums, 1957*

The 1950's saw a vast improvement in terms of design. As seen in the 1957 Louis Armstrong album 'Pops is Tops; The verse Studio Albums', designers took a more illustrated / hand drawn design approach. The 50's was 'a period of perkiness' (Clark, *Design through the decades: The 1950's - creative agency Brisbane: Hello Creative Agency* 2020) which included no warnings on cigarette packets, and the birth of Helvetica, a sans serif typeface. However, Armstrong's album consisted of a serif typeface, making this different from the then trending typeface. Despite this, a lot of design pieces during this period followed the same illustrated / hand drawn look as this. The 1950's was also when designers Saul Bass and Milton Glaser became very well known, which also had an impact on the trending design styles of that time.

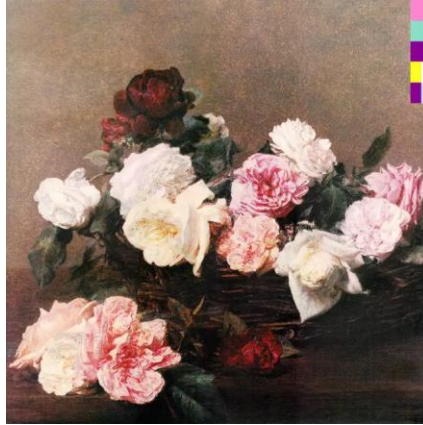


Fig. 4: *New Order, Power, Corruption and Lies*, 1983

Manchester based band New Order had famous designer Peter Saville design their 1983 album cover. 'Saville had gone for a Futurist look for the Manchester band's debut album *Movement*, but for the follow-up, he wanted to combine the classical beauty of the music with the up to the date technology used to create it.' (O'Gorman, *The best album covers of the 1980s* 2022). Saville decided to take the 1980 Henri Fantin-Latour 'A Basket of Roses' painting, and created a colour wheel, which was based off every tone within the artwork. The difference in design from this album compared to the previous two is very different, this having a more modern look, whilst the others have a more illustrated / hand drawn look. However, the design for this album is different to a lot of other 80's album artworks, as others contain bright, vibrant colours which would make a statement. In this time bands would experiment with their album artworks as it was 'a way to visually represent their music.' (*Why did 80s rock bands have awesome album covers* 2022).

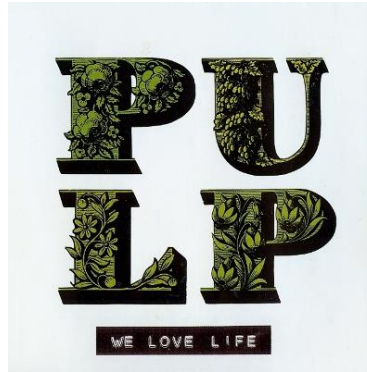


Fig. 5: *Pulp, We Love Life, 2001*

2001 saw the release of the Pulp 'We love life' album. The design style had completely evolved from the 80's and had taken a typography-based approach. Like New Order's 1983 album, Peter Saville was also the designer behind the 2001 Pulp album. Saville took two very different typographic approaches to this album, these being 'intricate floral letters cut by hand into wood, and plastic label tape stamped by a machine.' (Coles, *Pulp – we love life album art* 2013). 'The large letters come from at least two designs (the 'P's are from different alphabets) in a decorative wood type series by the Louis John Pouchée foundry who was active in the early 1800s.' (Coles, *Pulp – we love life album art* 2013). According to Fonts in Use, 'Pouchée's letters were first shown in the Journal of Historical Society' (Coles, *Pulp – we love life album art* 2013) .

Typography is still used on many album artworks to this present day, with Helvetica still being the most used typeface, along with Arial. However, people have questioned whether the typeface on an album cover influence expectations and perception of music. As stated by Syneonline, 'After people actually heard the music, the typeface also had affected how people perceived the sounds they heard.' (Juhnke, *Can album cover fonts change how you hear the music?* 2020). Although the lettering on the album appears green, this is only featured on the UK album covers, any album sold outside of the UK has autumnal coloured lettering (orange / brown).



Fig. 6: *Two Door Cinema Club, Keep on Smiling, 2022*

Musical Artist Alan Fears was hired by Two Door Cinema Club to design their latest release, *Keep on Smiling*. Fears is known for his 80's inspired designs and has demonstrated this very well on this album. 'As well as the 80's theme, Fears also incorporates pop culture references', according to the website Decorative Collective (*The art of the album: Two door cinema club 2022*). With the design of this album going back to the styles from the 80's this shows that designers have gone back to the illustrated, painted, modernist look, which is full of vibrant colours, and not an inch of typography in sight. 'The purpose of an album is to capture the identity of the music within' (PARMA Recordings, *The musician's canvas: The importance of album art in the modern day 2022*) which is exactly what this album does. The artwork matches perfectly with the vibe the music on the album has, which again is very similar to how music was back in the 1980's. As the artwork is the first part we typically experience before listening to the music, it is important that what the listener see's is visually engaging, as first impressions mean everything when in such a highly competitive market such as this one.

By choosing to focus on music and the evolution of album artwork for my exhibition, it allows my audience to see how design plays a vital role in music, as well as how it shapes the listeners listening experience. The artwork of an album cover sets the tone before the music has even been played, so it is

highly important to communicate across the correct message, set the correct tone, and be part of the listener's musical adventure. By having record players playing songs from each of the different albums I have selected, it provides an interactive experience, and demonstrates how far we have musically, as well as from a design perspective. In my opinion, I think my exhibition has demonstrated and communicated my idea well, and this would really appeal to aspiring musicians or aspiring designers (for example). Not only does it provide design inspiration, but it also provides you with the history of design, informing you on significant steps within the design industry, for example, the importance of typography and how popular it was back in the early 2000's.

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