



Star Grid Poster

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The following article focuses on the origin, development and repercussion of a limited edition series of posters created by designer Mark Brooks for a visual identity project commissioned by a Barcelona-based retail-clothing company, Santamonica. It features a series of black and white designs which recreate through a singular and laborious modular pattern photographic portraits of real and fictional people.

Mark Brooks / portrait / halftone pattern / poster / corporate identity

This article focuses on the origin, development and impact of a limited edition of posters designed by Mark Brooks as part of a visual identity project for a retail-clothing company based in Barcelona. It is comprised by a series of images in black and white, based upon the simplification of photographic portraits of well-known people, real or fictional, that were reproduced using a unique, labour-intensive halftone pattern, which was hand-made through the repetition of a star-shaped module.¹

About the author

Mark Brooks is a graphic designer and art director born in Barcelona, that works both in his home city and in New York. Born to a Spanish mother and an American father, he acknowledges the influence of both European and North American cultures.

He is an alert designer who pays meticulous attention to detail in his work. His projects go from maximum simplicity and synthesis of shapes² -geometric or not- to the virtuoso approach that is typical of the artisan master bent on gaining complete command over the aesthetic possibilities of the elements that they work with.

A brand's visual identity

With this project, initiated in 2009, Mark Brooks admittedly got one of the most difficult commis-

sions of his career. He had to develop the visual identity and brand image³ for a new clothing company that would be opening its own stores in Barcelona, as well as selling through their online store. The main difficulty was to begin a project for which no brief had been given. "Freedom was complete", acknowledges Brooks, and "that is way more difficult than starting off from a much more defined commission"⁴. The client had trusted him and his work completely, giving him the green light to establish both the values of the brand and the aesthetics related to the visual communication of the business. As we will see, this fostered the development of a highly personal work, completely related to his outlook of the world, reflecting his origins, his cultural interests, even his social concerns.

During the first phase, the new brand name had to be established. Extensive lists were drawn up with denomination proposals for a business that aimed at reflecting its geographical origin, since both design and production would take place in Barcelona – as much as its cosmopolitan spirit. Finally, the chosen name was SantaMonica⁵, which on the one hand referred to the final stretch of "Les Rambles"⁶, the emblematic promenade of Barcelona linking Catalunya Square, in the city centre, with the sea; on the other hand, it pointed at a coastal city of Los Angeles County. A few months before starting this project, Brooks had travelled to Santa Monica, coming back with fond memories of his visit. The sea, its light, the sun, the good climate... it all reminded him of Barcelona. The particular ring to its name had seduced him too, which makes us conclude that beyond the logical conceptual justification of the chosen name, with its sought-after geographical ambiguity, there was a clear aesthetic motivation⁷ behind it, and why not, a sensorial one.

On the other hand, the origin of the symbol of the brand is also very closely linked to the city of Barcelona. This relationship is hardly noticeable by the viewer, however, it is still of interest. In this case, Brooks focused his attention on an element that has become a popular icon of the city. It is the tiles⁸ that we find in the central neighbourhood of Eixample. Amazed by the geometric simplicity of this architecture modular element covering the sidewalks of the city, he decided to experiment with its geometry. It consists in five circles strategically placed so they may remind us of a flower. In a work of maximum synthesis, he made the most of the structure and the empty spaces left by the tangent lines of four of the circles, to obtain a new and singular shape that we could define as a four-point star.

Brooks aimed at transmitting the brand values through a visual system that could be applied to a variety of media: posters, t-shirts, bags... He realised that an effective way to transmit such values was through

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The pattern was called Star Grid, in English.

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In several occasions he has admitted his admiration for Mies van der Rohe's dictum less is more.

03

The project comprised work from naming, designing the identity signs, the diverse graphic applications of the brand, to art direction and web site and collection catalogue design.

04

Personal interview carried out by Nacho Clemente with Mark Brooks in Barcelona on October 16th, 2013.

05

The brand's name would be written with the two words together, a trend that we are familiar with now after the popularisation of web site addresses, where spaces between words disappear.

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They are known as *Les Rambles de Santa Mònica*.

07

Mark Brooks is a devotee of music and poetry.

08

Similar models of square tiles have been used in Barcelona for years, but they have never enjoyed comparable popularity.

the image of several well-known people of universal influence. People relevant for their thoughts, their values, their personal achievements, or their professional merit, which made them icons. He decided to reproduce just their faces, probably because, as Román Gubern pointed out, “the human face is the most intimate, yet most exterior place in a person, the one that translates more directly and in a more complex way their psychological interior”⁹, and it also is “our main sign of identity, and a true organic palimpsest, since its mobility makes it appropriate to talk about facial phrases, not just facial expressions¹⁰”, it is “our largest emotional and character display¹¹”.

Initially, the possibility of using photographic images was considered, however, such idea was quickly dismissed, since getting their copyrights was beyond the reach of a startup. Then, he started considering graphic alternatives to represent those characters. We suppose that in Brooks’ mind different graphic references would pop up, like Bob Dylan’s well-known profile, by Milton Glaser, or the work of artists Andy Warhol¹² and Roy Lichtenstein¹³, or the work of urban artist and designer Shepard Fairey¹⁴.

A unique halftone pattern

Some time ago, in 2007, during a trip to London, Brooks had seen in the subway a poster made up of small images, forming up a photographic mosaic, and he regarded such technique, based upon repetition and the double image as suggestive. Now that he was ready to generate new images, based upon photographs that he did not own, he thought that way to reinvent an image could be a very adequate formula. Who does not know the infinite versions of Mona Lisa or Che Guevara? What if the very symbol of the brand could become the element configuring those images?

In the earliest stage of experimentation, he started repeating at random, time and again, the four-point stars, the brand’s symbol, but the results were completely unsatisfactory. He found that using the very symbol of the brand as the element articulating the image, in this case that of activist Malcom X, was very evocative, but the image was not defined enough to identify the portrait clearly. It was too subtle, it lacked nuance while it was not forceful enough. Then he decided to approach the use of half-tone, in which dots of different sizes translate as a larger or smaller density of ink. He decided to keep the stars, but his objective was to obtain the maximum result with the smallest number of graphic elements, so he only used two sizes. The bigger stars would invade all the surface, thus creating an inalterable grid. Both the spaces between their vertices and the blanks between the stars were filled with the smaller stars, according to the intensity of ink needed. After me-

ticulous artisan work, placing each element without really knowing whether that would bring him anywhere, he decided to take a break. He was surprised to see that the further from the screen, the clearer the image became, as though it was some magic trick. He had found the solution at last.

The characters

Mark Brooks admits that the idea of using the image of well-known people to carry out a series of posters came in 2009, while he was reading the autobiography of activist Malcolm X¹⁵. Due to his own personal growth, and the evolution of his moral values and principles, this one deserved to be the first poster. Later he would show his admiration for Salvador Dalí. Although he makes it clear that this is not so much for his personality, but for the genius that he displayed through his work. On the other hand, he picked Sophia Loren, one of the first European actresses of world-wide fame, for her commitment with her roots and her humanistic values. Later on, in 2010 and 2011, he increased his collection of images. Of artist Pablo Picasso he would highlight his continuous learning through perseverance in work. He would also portray several musicians. Ray Charles, an icon of work, talent and honesty. Bob Marley, whose music sent messages of love and freedom to the entire planet. Genne Simmons, revolutionary singer and bassist of the band Kiss, who kept his identity a secret under the make-up. Also, Morrissey, front man of the English band The Smiths, of whom Brooks highlights his influence on the history of pop music, as well as his defense of animal rights. On the other hand, Samuel L. Jackson, Afro-American actor who used to stutter when young, finding the cure to his insecurities through acting. Actor Leonard Nimoy, who interpreted Spock in the cult science-fiction series Star Trek, and of whom Brooks highlights that he found spirituality as his path to personal growth. In another poster there was another fictional character, the stormtrooper, an absolute icon for cinema fans. There would be a tribute too to Max Headroom, played by actor Matt Frewer, the first cyberpunk character on television. Lastly, a monument of great symbolic value, the Statue of Liberty, that was curiously portrayed with a close-up of its face, as if it were just another person, perhaps revealing how familiar it is for Mark Brooks.

Below the image of those portraits, the designer selected interesting quotes that allow us to get closer to the essence of each of the characters: *If you have no critics you’ll likely have no success* by Malcom X; *Have no fear of perfection. You’ll never reach it*, by Salvador Dalí; *I’m against all War*, by Sophia Loren; *Who are you to judge the life I live?*, by Bob Marley; *Give me a museum and I’ll fill it*, by Picasso; *I hear like you see*, by Ray Charles... After those quotes, a text with an obvious informative intention would expand

on some singular aspects of each of those people. For instance, the text set alongside Bob Marley’s image was the following one: Bob Marley was a prophet for many people. Born in Jamaica but always spiritually attached to Africa, Marley sang songs of freedom, respect and love. His music crossed the boundaries of racism and through him the world discovered the reggae music and the rastafarian beliefs.

To finish it off, at the bottom of the poster an evocative sentence, *Distance yourself from the stars and enjoy the view*, encouraged us to get away from the stars, from the poster, to best enjoy the view, meaning, to enjoy the forming of a new image.

The impact of the project

Mark Brooks published images of this work in the portfolio website Behance. Very soon it became obvious that this was a project with a particular empathy with the viewer. On the one hand, the necessary interaction with the image and its surprising perception effect, as well as the accurate selection of admired icons of popular culture of today, that in many cases seemed to suggest a very moving nostalgia, all contributed to it being displayed in many graphic design blogs. Among them, its publication in Iso50, a blog by the well-known US graphic designer Scott Hansen¹⁶.

The poster series was so successful that a few tried, with not so good results, to apply the technique of the Star Grid Posters. In the graphic design blog Ministry of Type¹⁷, its author -Aegir Hallmundur published an entry under the title *Star Patterns* during November 2009, in which he explained step by step how to generate images using that unique star, identity sign of the brand SantaMonica. Curiously enough, the entire process was perfectly explained, but it did not define one of the points that are more interesting and simultaneously more complicated of that system, which was precisely to be able to get the different shades of grey, the chiaroscuro effect, that gave more depth and volume to the images.

Later on, Mark Brooks would receive many licensing requests for the project, which was published in more than twenty books on graphic design, from countries as disparate as Spain, Germany, Great Britain, United States, Japan, Hong Kong, China, Malaysia or South Korea, which confirmed that his proposal was widely well received.

What is surprising is that a commission for a tiny local clothing company like SantaMonica would attract the attention of a clothing multinational like Nike.

The appeal of those optic effects, as much as the obvious proof that effective images could be generated with just one ink, brought on the beginning of a professional relationship between Mark Brooks and the sportswear giant, a relationship that still goes on today.

Have I seen this before?

After watching these posters, interacting with them and experiencing a certain surprise, it is quite normal to wonder whether we have ever had a similar perceptive experience. Thinking of curious visual games and perceptive effects, the names of universally known artists crop up, like Escher, with his double image drawings and his many other visual paradoxes, or Salvador Dalí, with some of his surrealist paintings¹⁸. On the other hand, systematic repetition of geometric motifs brings us to the work developed by Victor Vasarely and other Op Art artists. On the other hand, if we think of the manual reproduction of the halftone pattern that is typical of industrial printing systems, what comes to mind are pop artist Roy Lichtenstein’s paintings. When we pay attention to replacing the dots that compose the mentioned halftone pattern with other visual elements, then it is easy to think of the images developed with letters and numbers¹⁹, in the 1950s by the concrete poets, or years later, computer²⁰-generated portraits of famous people²¹, executed with ASCII code.

Within the recent history of graphic design we can find a few examples that may remind us, however remotely, of the technique used in Brooks’ posters. For instance, in 1971, the Japanese Shigeo Fukuda reproduced the image of Mona Lisa, just using concentric lines of variable weight, so her face would appear in an almost magical way when looked at from certain distance.

A spectacular example of the use of typography with a clear figurative intention can be found in a portrait of Pablo Picasso by Paul Siemsen, that appeared on the cover of the magazine Upper and lower case, in September 1979.

In the 1980s, precisely in 1984, Fukuda represented Mona Lisa again, but this time, based upon a repetition of flags. On his part, the influential US designer of Japanese origin, John Maeda, an expert in the application of new technologies, produced in 1996 an image of that portrait based upon small black and white geometric elements, within a series of posters for the Japanese font publisher Morisawa. Two years later, in 1998, the film The Truman Show was released, and its poster²² showed the actor Jim Carrey in a photomosaic image, which helped it spread. Also, in 2002, Rob Silvers created specific software to produce those photomosaics, which would make the task much easier. This possibility of automation would be applied by other artists, like photographer Joan Fontcuberta, author of the controversial series Googlegrams.

It must be acknowledged that, although this type of images are related to Mark Brooks’ work, they tend to be more complex and sometimes loaded with enigmatic meanings that may go unnoticed. Looking for

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GUBERN, R.: Patologías de la imagen, Barcelona, Anagrama, 2004, P. 96

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GUBERN, R.: Patologías de la imagen, Barcelona, Anagrama, 2004, P. 97

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GUBERN, R.: Patologías de la imagen, Barcelona, Anagrama, 2004, P. 101

12

Andy Warhol had represented Elvis Presley, Marilyn Monroe, Liz Taylor, James Dean, Robert Rauschenberg, Leo Castelli, Jacqueline Kennedy, Muhammad Ali, Jimmy Carter, George Washington, Lenin, Mao Tse-Tung or even Batman, Uncle Sam and the Statue of Liberty.

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Roy Lichtenstein portrayed George Washington and fictional characters such as Mickey Mouse or Donald Duck.

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Shepard Fairey made the image *Hope* used in the presidential elections campaign for Barack Obama, in 2008.

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The book’s title is *The Autobiography of Malcom X: As Told to Alex Haley*.

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The address is www.blog.iso50.com.

17

The address is www.ministryoftype.co.uk.

18

For instance, *Galatea de las esferas* (Galatea of the Spheres) (1952), *Retrato de mi hermano muerto* (Portrait of my dead brother) (1963) and also *Gala mirando al Mediterráneo* (Gala looking at the Mediterranean sea) (1976), in which at a certain distance Lincoln’s portrait can be perceived.

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The use of the typewriter to produce images is known as typewriter art.

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One of the first forerunners in the use of computers to generate figurative images with chiaroscuro effects through the use of typographic signs was the work by Leon Harmon and Ken C. Knowlton with *Studies in Perception* (1966)

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If we consider the optic effect of forming images comprised by tiny graphic elements, we shall not forget that pictorial style of the end of XIX Century, Punctillism.

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The poster presented in Spain did not use that technique.

a piece a bit closer formally, even if it is only through the use of logos and the black and white austerity, and due to the clarity of its message, we would think it is more correct to refer to a version of the well known image of Che Guevara²³ carried out in 2002 by graphic artist Patrick Thomas, based upon the addition of commercial brands, however, it did not have the same figurative nor advertising intention that the image object of this study actually displays.

As a conclusion

We are before a visual identity project that is outstanding in its conceptual strength and its formal originality. Its chosen media is the poster, even though the media itself has seen better times, as the container of messages that are eminently visual, and that distance themselves from traditional advertising²⁴. As we have seen, the main objective is communicating the brand's set of values, transmitted through the representation of great characters of our contemporary popular culture and that have become universal icons. We have to outline the high level of graphic experimentation in each poster, which, on top of carrying a subtle advertising (and cultural) message, becomes an object with a ludic function, with the apparition of a double image that opens up a dialogue with the viewer. Bruno Munari already referred to this kind of images in this book *Design as Art*, "these double images may be evident or hidden. An image can be constructed with the suggestion of another image, somehow indicating it, so it does not appear suddenly, but it plants a doubt in the mind of the other, the second image represented in an ambiguous way. In this case, the second image functions in the subconscious and it may have a more lasting effect, since the viewer has found it as their personal image within the first image, which is obvious to everybody²⁵." That initial ambiguity and the satisfaction it offers the viewer conquering a challenge, however simple it may be, contain certainly one of the keys of the success of this series of posters.

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The title of the image is American investments in Cuba (2002)

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This strategy may remind us of photographer's Oliviero Toscani's advertising campaigns for Benetton, in which the product was never showed.

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MUNARI, B., *El arte como oficio (Design as Art)*, Barcelona, Editorial Labor, 1968, P. 56-57