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DESIGN FROM THE INSIDE OUT

BY NANCY BERNARD

A LOT OF AWARD-WINNING FIRMS GET ATTENTION BY BREAKING RULES AND CHALLENGING CONVENTIONS. A LOT OF THEM WORK IN MAJOR, TREND-SETTING MARKETS OR SPECIALIZE IN LUXURY AND ART-RELATED CLIENTS. OTHER FIRMS WORK IN "SECONDARY" MARKETS WHERE THE CLIENTS TEND TO BE CONSERVATIVE, UNSEXY COMPANIES. THESE DESIGNERS DON'T GET THE SAME KIND OF ATTENTION AND ADULATION— BUT THEY MAY DESERVE MORE.

Rigsby Hull is in the latter category. Based in Houston, the firm doesn't have easy access to the big, sexy clients. They work with oil companies, construction engineers, insurance companies, healthcare institutions, financial firms—and do such consistently sensitive, appropriate and gorgeous work that they've managed to attract plenty of more-glamorous clients along the way. The work doesn't challenge convention or jump up and down screaming Look At Me. It's just really good, time after time. And a large part of this is due to superb typography.

In this column, we look at two pieces from Rigsby Hull. One is understated, almost to the extreme. The other is bold and muscular. Both serve the client and the content very well by establishing a distinct voice. Together, they show the firm's typographic range. And not incidentally, both were winners in the recent STEP Design 100 competition.

ANTIQUE RUGS & OIL RIGS

"Eight Rugs, Eight Stories" is a catalog for Carol Piper, a retailer of rare rugs (and a client every other firm in Houston probably lusts after). The catalog's concept is based on a piece of Azerbaijani lore, which holds that "every rug is a sentient being ... each grows more complex and beautiful with age, becoming gradually but eternally marked by its human caretakers." That leads to pairing rugs with stories—excerpts from classic literature. And yes, there is an excerpt from *Scheherazade, One Thousand Nights And a Night*, paired with an Anatolian rug.

From that beginning, you might expect storybook typography—Old Style fonts at a largish size, with illustrated initial caps, in centered settings with wide margins, and maybe decorative little colophons here and there. But that would compete with the rugs. Instead, Rigsby Hull uses Helvetica light heads and body copy, with tiny labels in Garamond italic for a bit of variety, in a flush-left, flush-right setting.

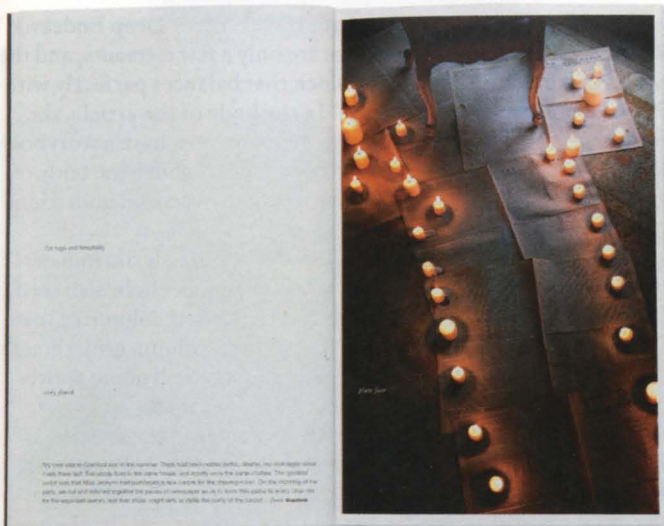
The cover typography establishes a quiet, contemplative mood. The type is gray, placed very low and set in lowercase. It's also tac-

tile, because it's deeply debossed into the thick, soft cover stock. This minimal approach is a bit of a surprise in a piece about antique luxury goods. Then again, the concept is, as the subhead indicates, "a literary sampler."

Think about that for a moment. There are lots of other options for a piece about rugs. You could do a travelogue, bringing the reader to where the rugs are made. You could simply showcase the rugs (a lot of us would do that—let the goods speak for themselves). You could do a piece on the cultures behind the rugs, or the craft of rug making ... but all of those would be about the rugs.

This concept is about the buyer. First, it tells the buyer that he or she is a sophisticated person who enjoys fine literature, as well as fine goods—a deep, even spiritual person who is less interested in ostentatious display than in culture. Second, it is about the relationships between the carpets and their "human caretakers," which brings the customer into a long-ago romance. The subtlety of the typography supports that tone.

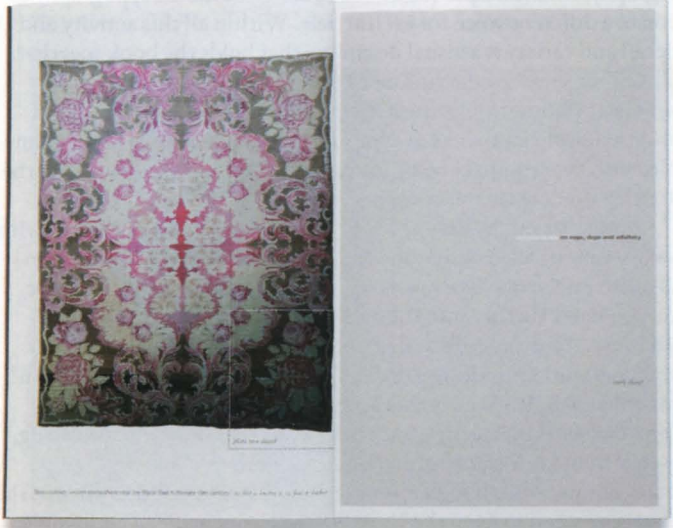
Inside, the stories are presented in a repeating format. Gray title pages with white borders introduce the themes of the stories—"E.M. Forster on rugs and true love," for instance. The titles are set flush right to point the way to the next page. Then there's a spread with an evocatively staged photo on the right, again with the white border. The text is on the left, set flush left at the extreme bottom of the page, with the title above on the same baseline as the type on the title page. The broad white expanse between the title and the photo sets up the only visual tension in this understated setting.

[illegible][illegible][illegible]

When the King had finished all his work, and was dressing of his arms, he did not know, which of his sons should inherit the kingdom after him. So he said to his wife, "The fairest and the wisest to become the most beautiful queen I shall be King after my death." And so say the fair queen when again he said, "which should be the wisest in my estate," I should like to have the wisest and fairest queen to be my wife. The fair queen used the needle. One of the young lords sought to love, and the fair lady loved him, and gave the fair queen a needle made of gold, and set the gold on the needle, and would have their names put in. Thus the King and Queen

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The third page of each story shows an entire rug, with a little boxed label—e.g., “plate one detail”—that outlines the part of the rug that’s shown in the staged photo. As the stories progress, the rectangular boxes turn into funky, curvy outlines. That label is the only element that changes shape and position: It’s the only active detail. Even when doing a quiet, sedate setting, Rigsby Hull understands the need for some tension and variety.

The cycle starts again opposite the display photo of the carpet, with another gray title page. This gentle rhythm sets up a linear narrative, again supporting the literary concept.

Rigamarole is as different from “Eight Rugs” as you can get without smashing conventions or otherwise drawing attention to yourself. It’s a muscular, bold and anything-but-minimalist corporate magazine for Diamond Offshore, the third-largest offshore oil drilling company in the world. They’re in a gritty, hazardous, highly technological industry that is pushing harder and harder to find and extract dead dinosaurs from ever less-accessible reserves. And the magazine’s dense, bold, precise typography expresses this very well.

Rigamarole has a beefy, slab-serifed banner (which makes the somewhat-silly name more purposeful), saturated colors and photography, with multiple variations in the grid and the typography to create a different voice for each article. Within all this activity and detail and variety is a visual discipline that holds the book together.

On the cover of the summer 2005 issue, the type frames the dramatic photo simply: flush left with just one indent, two fonts and two compact blocks of type. The contents page is equally simple, with two compact columns of type anchoring the page. It’s the articles that create the energy.

A story titled “Scaling the Peaks” starts to break up the grid with an asymmetrical headline and single, wide text column, maintaining the copy in one block, low on the page, flush left, ragged right. As you move further into the article, each page does something different. There’s a full-spread photo with a flush-right caption showing workers pulling a drill bit. A spread on “The Asian Boom” introduces multiple elements and a complex, carefully managed informational hierarchy—it’s a design for skimming and browsing, rather than for linear reading. Boldface in the sidebar highlights main points. And though it is now back to a two-column format, the text is justified to keep the complicated layout as clean as possible.

The opening spread of the next article, “Ultra-Deep Endeavor,” is completely different. Now there are only a few elements, and the type is centered in a single neat block that balances perfectly with the focal point of the illustration. In the body of the article, the typography continues to be centered, but we now have a storybook device: a big, red initial cap. A pull quote floats above the body of the article, set in the bold, slabbed font with oversized quotation marks, another new device.

“Emblems of Performance,” the following article, introduces yet another visual language. The headline font is a light slab serif, flush right, and set corner-to-corner with the first column of text. The column widths are now based on a three-column grid, though they’re still at the bottom of the page. And the pull quote above the body text is set asymmetrically in a lighter font.

The visual language, and thus the character of the articles, is driven by both the content and the mix of data types it presents (text, image, chart and so on). Each story is delightful in its own way. An executive interview uses big, bold spaces and shapes; an employee profile looks more like a news magazine, with three columns and lots of insets; a spread about Confidence, a deep-sea rig, scatters smaller photos in a dense pattern across the pages; a spread listing all of the company’s rigs is presented as a chart.

What holds the magazine together is the consistency within the variations. It uses just the two typefaces. The underlying grid combines two-column and three-column layouts; when a wider column is needed, it’s two-thirds wide; when a narrow column is needed, it’s one third. Most of the pages have borders, and when a photo is printed full bleed, the border shows up as a white ruled box. But the most important unifying factor is the hardworking personality—and that is established as much by the typography as by the gritty imagery.

As I said, these two designs are as different as they can be. You might not think the same firm did both. But the same typographic and visual intelligence is behind them. These two examples are articulate exponents of the power of plain old Good Typography to express character and support content clearly, appropriately and gorgeously. And both show why this small firm in a secondary market manages to get national attention—and hold on to it year after year. **S**

