

ROCKPORT



**THE MAKING OF THIRTY
EXTRAORDINARY GRAPHIC DESIGNERS**

WRITTEN AND DESIGNED BY
STEFAN G. BUCHER



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Bored with sitting in hospital basements drawing body parts, Margo Chase turned to graphic design. Dripping blood all over Francis Ford Coppola's posters and transforming Cher into a tarot goddess, she single-handedly invented high-fashion Goth design.

MARGO CHASE

Many designers come from backgrounds that make a career in the arts seem almost inevitable. Margo Chase is one of them: her late biological mother drew, painted, and made furniture; her stepmother plays bass viol with the Santa Barbara Symphony and studied calligraphy. Her grandfather was a photographer, and both aunts were painters. Even her father, an aerospace engineer by trade, is an accomplished jazz guitarist. Surrounded by so many artistic influences, Margo started drawing at an early age. "I got into trouble in elementary school for doodling and drawing horses all over my school papers. Most of my horses had heads that were too small and butts that were too big, but I kept drawing them anyway."

Surprisingly, nobody in Chase's family considered visual arts a viable career. So when it came time to pick a major in college, she enrolled in the biology department of Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo in hopes of later moving on to the School of Veterinary Medicine at UC Davis. "I loved studying biology. I was learning how living things worked. It was visually exciting to study all the life forms in comparative anatomy and learn about plants in plant taxonomy. I loved the classes where we looked at things under the microscope. I even loved dissection. I think my interest in organic form in graphic design carries over from my years studying biology."

SEEDS OF CHANGE *It was an act of cold, hard calculation that eventually brought Chase into contact with graphic design: "Grades are extremely important for getting into medical school so I spent a good deal of time trying to figure out how to get my liberal arts credits without damaging my GPA. Drawing and painting classes were easy A's. I had already taken a few when I signed up for an illustration class that I thought would just be more figure drawing. It turned out to be a third-year class in the recently formed graphic design department."*



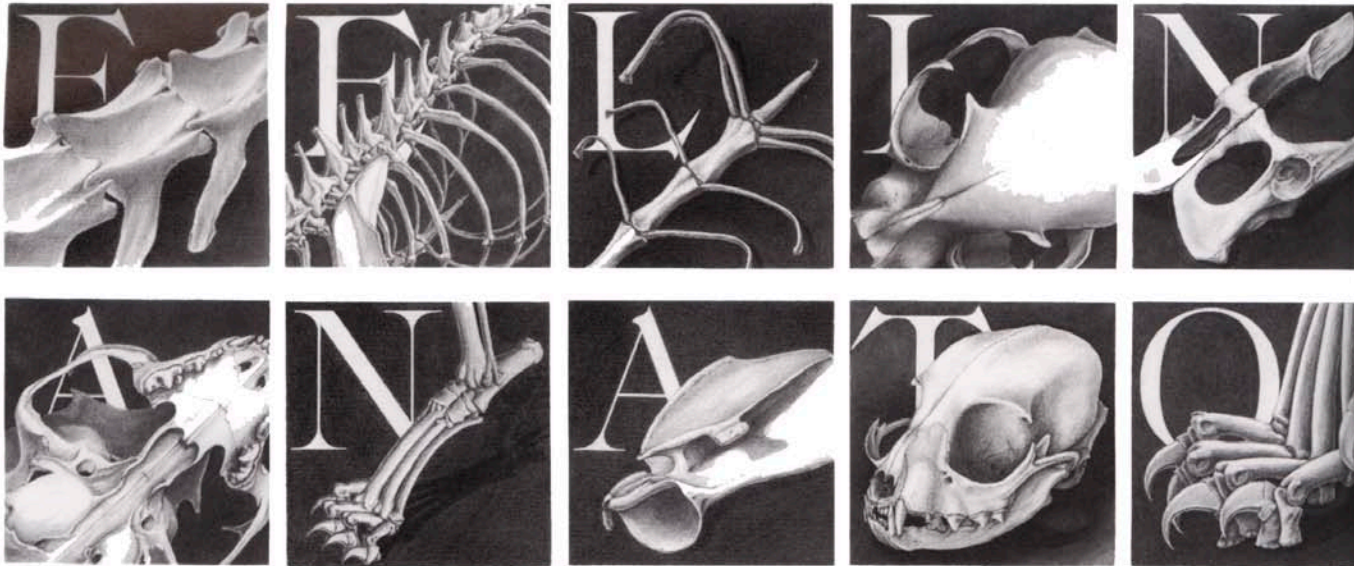
1978



1992



NOW



Human Foot, illustration This scratchboard illustration was a graduate project and one of the pieces Margo had in her portfolio when first trying to break into the graphic design field.



One of the first illustration projects was to pick a word and letters that expressed the word, and then illustrate it. She chose "Feline Anatomy" and rented a cat skeleton from the biology lab. "I had no idea what a typeface was. I'd copied the letters out of a book." Chase soon added a minor degree in graphic design to her biology curriculum. "The most exciting part was discovering that one might actually make a living doing something visually creative. Design was a revelation!"

Following the advice of one of her instructors, Chase signed up for the graduate program in medical illustration at UC San Francisco. "My parents were enthusiastic about the medical illustration idea. They were still sure I'd starve to death doing graphic design." But despite honing her technical skills, Chase was not thrilled by the idea of spending the better part of her life in hospital basements making drawings for medical textbooks. "I realized I hated it. I missed the creativity and openness of the graphics classes. I quit graduate school in 1981."



1979

21



1981

23



1984

26

MACANALLY
Frank Chase

1987



PRINCE
and the New Power Generation

1988



MADONNA

1989





"MY PARENTS WERE ENTHUSIASTIC ABOUT THE MEDICAL ILLUSTRATION IDEA. THEY WERE STILL SURE I'D STARVE TO DEATH DOING GRAPHIC DESIGN."



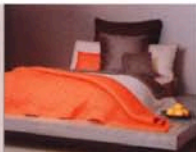
Feline Anatomy, illustration "We were asked to choose a word and letters that expressed the word, and then illustrate it. I rented the cat skeleton from the biology lab. I brought the final drawings into class and one of the first questions was "What typeface is that?" Since I'd missed the first two years of Graphic Design, I had no idea what a typeface was. I said I'd copied the letters out of a book, which was true, but not the right answer. The instructor was extremely forgiving. By the end of the class I had figured out the typeface thing (it was Tiffany), and I did get an A."

GETTING A FOOT IN THE DOOR Times turned tough trying to scare up design work with a portfolio of anatomical field renderings and a drawing of a human foot. Eventually, she was hired to do production work for a small advertising agency in Long Beach, California. Any thoughts of a glamorous life in design were kept in check by having to do paste-up on plain wrap packaging for Ralph's grocery stores, the agency's biggest client.

Three months later, salvation came in the form of a small publishing company, Rosebud Books, where Chase had interviewed months before. Editor Rick Frey, acting on a hunch, asked her to design a series of tourist guidebooks. "I have no idea why he thought I could design books. I had nothing in my portfolio that suggested I could. He asked if I knew how to spec type. I lied. Then I went to the library and checked out everything they had on type and book design. Things didn't go badly and I loved the work." Rick Frey is now an executive at the WB television network and remains a Chase client to this day. "He gave me my first big break."



Olympic Arts Festival, catalog This catalog, one of Chase's earliest forays into graphic design, already shows her natural understanding of negative space and a lingering fascination with skeletal bones.



1991

1992

1997

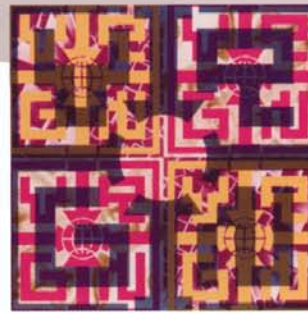
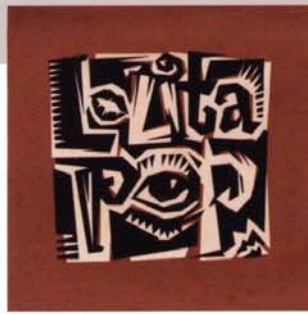
2000

NOW

Lolita Pop, record sleeve (near left) For better or worse, the fate of album cover and logo designs are inextricably linked to the music they encase. *Lolita Pop* did not prove an enduring vehicle for Chase's artwork.

Virgin Records, record sleeve (middle left) Record companies ship advance copies of most records in generic sleeves. Chase created this design using overprinting for Virgin.

I, Napoleon, record sleeve (far left) Chase designed the logotype for this LP cover and then personally carved it from the living rock.



MAKING THE DIVA LIST Her work with Rosebud soon led to other opportunities: "My second big break was when Laura LiPuma, one of the staff designers at the publishing company, left and got a job as an art director at Warner Bros. Records. She hired me freelance to design logos for endless never-to-be-heard-from-again bands. She liked the work, so she recommended me to art directors at other labels like Virgin and Sony. When Laura was given all of Prince's releases to design, she asked me to design logos for *LoveSexy* and Prince's Paisley Park production company. "Once you design a logo for a successful artist, more work follows. I was hired by Laura's boss, Jeri Heiden, to design the logo for Madonna's *Like a Prayer*. Eventually I was able to talk my way into designing the full packaging, not just the logos."

A string of high-profile projects came Chase's way in 1991 and 1992: Madonna and Cher albums, divider pages for the first edition of *Alternative Pick*, and the poster campaign for the movie *Dracula*. "The music business was a fantastic place to work in the '80s and early '90s. I've been extremely lucky to get projects that were visible. They've propelled my career. I still hear 'Oh my God, you design for Madonna!' Her name is more impressive than the work, to most people."

Mac McAnally, *Finish Lines*, logo (above, left) The logo for the 1987 release *Finish Lines* by Nashville singer/songwriter Mac McAnally shows just how far Chase had advanced her letter-form design in the eight years since her first attempt—*Feline Anatomy*.

Prince, *LoveSexy*, logo *LoveSexy* (above, middle) marked the aesthetic zenith of Prince's album artwork, fully expressing the Paisley Park aesthetic while retaining a clean, modern feel. It doesn't get better than this. And (graphically) it didn't.

Madonna, *Like a Prayer*, logo (above, right) "I've been extremely lucky to get projects that were visible." Madonna's *Like a Prayer* logo was one of the jobs that resulted in a string of high-profile work that came her way in the early '90s.

								
1979	1981	1984	1987 29		1988 30		1989 31	



Cher, Love Hurts, CD packaging
 (above and right) The special package for Cher's *Love Hurts* CD was the first project Chase tackled in Photoshop, a remarkable feat considering that the layers option was still several versions away from being introduced into the software.



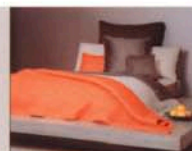
Many of these projects gave Chase a chance to wrestle with infant versions of Adobe Illustrator and Photoshop. "I think the single thing that really created a breakthrough for me creatively was the computer. I was doing really complex, layered work using unusual methods and it took awhile for me to feel like the computer would actually help me do what I wanted and not force me to change the style of work I was doing to conform to the limitations of the technology.

"USING A MOUSE FELT LIKE DRAWING WITH A BAR OF SOAP. BUT THE RESULTS WERE AMAZING."

"Before the computer, I drew every logo by hand, then revised it, redrew it, and finally inked it on Duralene. Every change or correction was agony. Adobe Illustrator was freedom! I remember, however, being extremely frustrated trying to learn to make smooth curves with those Bezier handles. Using a mouse felt like drawing with a bar of soap, but the results were amazing. I could duplicate shapes, flip things, rotate them, make changes, and print another, all without resorting to a stat machine. Incredible. I had always been interested in symmetry. The computer made it easy. My Lucigraph moved to storage and never came back."

The first job Chase ever tackled in Photoshop was a CD box set featuring a set of Cher tarot cards. This turned into a trial by fire. Creating a series of densely layered collages would be considered complex even on today's equipment. Add to that countless change requests from Cher in a time before layers became part of the software and you're looking at a truly Sisyphian task. Still, the effort paid off: The package was a hit and garnered Chase a Grammy nomination. "Prince, Madonna, Cher, Bonnie Raitt, Jody Watley, and others followed. Somehow I was on the diva list."

THE QUEEN OF GOTH The success of having a very identifiable aesthetic so widely exposed carries with it the need for change. "I got to be known for the style of work I was doing then, the Gothic thing. Even at the time, I knew that the sensation of walking into a record store and seeing several of my designs prominently displayed was an experience that wouldn't be repeated indefinitely. Fads change fast, but it was a lot of fun being 'it' in that world for a little while."



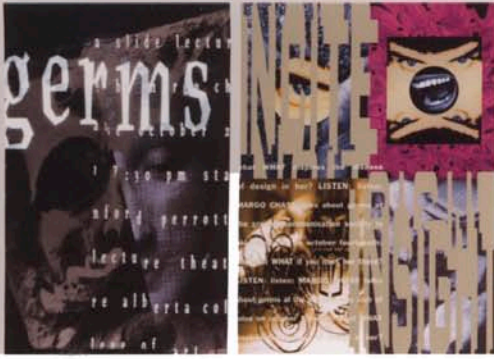
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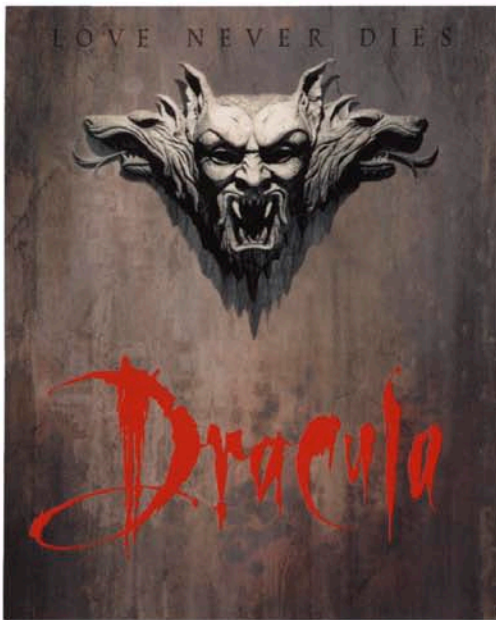
2000

NOW



Germs, poster (above, left) **Incite Insight, poster** (above, right) Chase's posters advertising her lectures gave her a chance to explore dense layering effects that were necessarily missing from her logo work.

Bram Stoker's Dracula, poster (below) Chase made the typography for *Bram Stoker's Dracula* into an appropriately bloody affair, a device she would later revisit for the WB's show *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*.



One of the enduring hopes of designers everywhere is that recognition by your peers will make everything different. In 1993, Chase was featured in *Communication Arts Magazine*. "When it happened I was really excited. I thought it would change things, make getting work easier and maybe even make clients listen more to my opinions. It didn't. My strongest sensation after the article came out was one of anticlimax. I realized I hadn't planned what had happened, it had just happened, and I had no idea how to plan what to do next."

TEAMWORK Over the years, Chase has worked to expand her business. She took the big step of hiring her first assistant in 1985 and over the years, a number of designers have lent their talents to her quest. "I have a strong vision, so I have to be careful not to micromanage things. I look for people who have a strong vision that's different from mine. I think that helps to broaden the work and keep things from being stale and repetitious, not to mention keeping me inspired as well. I also look for designers who have strong hand skills and don't only think on the computer."

After learning how to lead creative enterprises came the need to face business realities. "I finally confronted the fact that I'm naturally terrible as a business person. I much prefer to be left alone with my creative team

"THINGS ARE STILL CHALLENGING AND DIFFICULT.

THE BIGGEST DIFFERENCE IS KNOWING THAT, NO MATTER HOW BAD THINGS GET, I PROBABLY WON'T STARVE TO DEATH. EVEN MY PARENTS ARE CONVINCED NOW."



1979



1981



1984



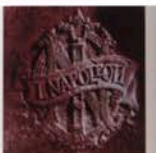
1987

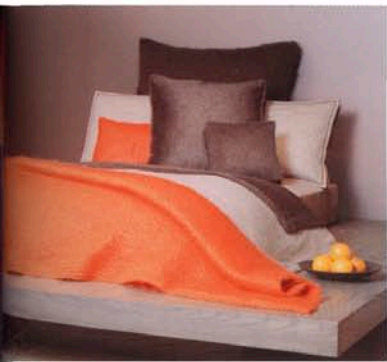


1988



1989





Matteo, product design (left) Expanding on her role as a graphic designer, Chase went beyond designing the identity and collateral for Matteo, a manufacturer of fine linens. She also tackled product and showroom design.

Perdu, banners and logo (right and below, right) When asked to design the stores for Lingerie Perdu, a retail store in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, Chase was forbidden by local custom to show female bodies or this company's product. For two duratrans posters, part of the store environment, she translated the sexual allure of the lingerie into sinewy typographic abstractions using a font with both Western and Arabic character sets that she had designed for the brand.



to get the work done, so in the past the planning and finances always got left to manage themselves, which does not work well. It's been tough to find good support for the business side, but I've got two really strong business people working with me now. I couldn't live without them."

B **BEYOND GRAPHIC DESIGN** By the mid-'90s Chase was getting bored working almost exclusively on music and entertainment assignments. She tried expanding into other areas, only to be faced once again with the drawbacks of a well-defined image: "Everyone thought I was the queen of Goth. They were afraid they would get something creepy if they hired me."

An opportunity presented itself in the form of Matteo, a manufacturer of bed linens. While she was initially hired only to design their logo and stationery, Chase's assignment soon grew to include packaging. "We were almost finished with that when their textile designer quit. The owner asked me if I'd like to take a stab at textile design." So Chase took a crash course in manufacturing: Matteo's owner sent her to visit the jacquard mills outside of Bergamo. "As usual I did as much reading and studying as I could to understand the process." Being thus prepared Chase ended up handling Matteo's product design for the next five years. In the end, she even took over the design of their trade show booths, display furniture, and Matteo's New York showroom.

Today, Margo Chase remains a powerful presence in the entertainment industry. While exploring ever further outside its borders, she continues to create products and environments that are seen the world over. When asked whether she feels she is successful now, she responds "I know that I'm successful, but it doesn't feel very different from when I wasn't. Things are still challenging and difficult in the same and different ways. I guess the biggest difference is knowing that, no matter how bad things get, I probably won't starve to death. Even my parents are convinced now. ☺"



Cher, Living Proof, tour book Returning once again to one of her most famous clients, Chase designed the logo and tour book for Cher's Living Proof Farewell Tour 2002.

