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Melanie McNaughton

Martha Stewart, as every American knows, is a living brand . . . a force of nature, the most influential person alive in terms of giving shape to our living spaces.  
- Kevin Kelly

Martha Stewart is a witch . . . . Nobody could do that much decoupage without calling on the powers of darkness.  
- “Wrecked,” Buffy the Vampire Slayer

A living brand or a force of darkness, Martha Stewart is an indomitable figure in 20th-century domestic life and her place in North American domestic history is tied to the success of Martha Stewart Living, the flagship publication of the Martha Stewart Living Omnimedia (MSLO) empire. The success of Living is tied to its graphic design. Living typographically enacts the values it argues for by fusing traditional elements with modern edges to present a vision of homemaking that is soft and appealing yet also a statement of skilled precision and quality. Tacking between broad, more theoretical analysis and close textual analysis of specific MSLO texts, this project thus collectively ties theory on design to particular practices of design.

Typeface: The Currency of Surface

I begin this investigation with the smallest, most ubiquitous element of typography: typeface. Just as the very language we use to communicate shapes others’ responses to and interpretation of these ideas, the typeface used to communicate content likewise shape others’ response to and interpretation of said content. Having a unique typeface sets an organization apart from its peers. Martha Stewart Living’s fonts are an especially strong illustration of this. In late 2000, Living began the long, careful process of renovating its typography. Typeface ranked high on the list. Changing the typeface was a very specific move designed to create an identity for Living that would remain singular and matchless.

Developing a proprietary typeface that cannot be copied also speaks to the organization’s argument for painstaking and careful artistic execution. The projects that Stewart and her team advocate within the pages of Living are ones that cannot be easily reproduced. Living celebrates the handmade, the exceptional, the singular. Likewise with its type.

Hoefler & Frere-Jones designed two fonts for Living; a text (called a front-of-book) font which operates as the “workhorse” of the magazine, and a display (feature well) font to catch the eye of the reader. The well font designed by Hoefler & Frere-Jones is named Surveyor, and is a light serif font (Figure 1). Suggested by its name, Surveyor is “inspired by old, hand-drawn maps.” Hoefler notes that one of the design goals of this font was to make a “typeface that felt very handmade, to evoke the craft philosophy of the magazine.” Today, engraved letters still very much connote formality, careful elegance and tradition. The front-of-book font designed by Hoefler & Frere-Jones is named Archer, and is a slab serif font (Figure 2). The slab serifs drive out with more forceful, geometric lines, a counterposition to the more rounded finials. Hence Living’s slab serif font marries modern aesthetic boldness and elegant tradition, echoing the move made by the magazine’s content.

Structure and Flow: The Shape of Eye-Catching Transparency

Moving from typeface to how typeface is arranged on a page, a document’s visual structure plays an important role in engaging the reader as well as communicating the purpose, tone, and persona of the content. This role holds a peculiar function: it must be both eye-catching and transparent. Typography with anything to say therefore aspires to a kind of “statuesque transparency.” The statuesque transparency of typography takes its shape from two sets of interrelated features, which I am calling first principles of graphic design and the use of space. To understand the rhetorical function of these typographic elements, I explore first principles of graphic design by closely analyzing the front cover of Living’s January 2008 cover.
First principles

Turning to the typography of Living, I want to focus on three central functions: inviting the reader into the text, revealing tenor and meaning of the text, and making the content of the text stick. In no place is the visual structure of magazines more important than the cover, since that is the first point of contact with the reader.

There are two primary ways in which Living invites readers into the cover: the use of color and the cover image itself (Figure 3). Living's cover first grabs readers' attention by the bright, cheery yellow in which the title is rendered. This color is pulled directly from the cover image, which contains a number of yellow elements: (from top to bottom) Stewart's yellow sweater, a toaster and a Kitchen-Aid mixer, a striped kitchen towel, the keyboard tray for the kitchen computer/TV, a stoneware mixing bowl, a stick of butter placed near the mixing bowl and two stools arranged near the island.

Because the title of the magazine draws from colors in the image, the color works to harmoniously bring readers into the whole of the image, especially with respect to the way the yellow elements are centered on the page, drawing the eye down the cover in a smooth line. Starting with the title text, the yellow elements form an inverted triangle on the page, a shape known for its dynamic nature. The yellow elements bid viewers' eyes to travel from the inverted base (top of the page) to the apex of the triangle (bottom of the page).

The yellow title text is narrowly bordered in white, which both brings a crisp cleanness to the text and brightens the yellow by contrast. The white border also creates a clean boundary between the title and the image on which it is superimposed. Like the yellow elements, the white provides a smooth visual flow of color that draws the reader's eye across and into the image.

Readers are also invited in by the appealing image on the cover, which features a medium-length shot of a beautifully appointed kitchen. The photographic distance is important here. In a medium-length shot, the viewer is positioned at close social distance, as an inhabitant, literally invited in by offering the sightline one would have if perched on a stool just on the other side of the kitchen island.

Once invited into the text, the typography of Living's cover reveals the tenor (elegant quality) and meaning (the act of living) of the content of the magazine through three aspects: the primacy of the title text, the careful craftsmanship of the typography and the aesthetics of the cover. As shelter magazines, Living and its peers uniformly emphasize quality of life. Among the rhetorical choices made on the Living cover, the title text may be the most important. The most prominent element on the cover is the word “Living” and takes up one fifth of the height of the page. Beyond catching the reader's attention and communicating the tenor and meaning of the content,
the typography of Living’s cover also emphasizes important content items. To start, the image on the cover is accentuated by the absence of text (unlike Living’s competitors), with only a few lines of text. What stands out is the image of gracious living adorning the cover.

The use of color is another key way to make particular content items stick in the mind of the reader. Over and above rendering the title important and eye-catching, the yellow items on the cover, the items emphasized through use of color, are tools for quality living, including Stewart herself. This is precisely the message Living is hoping to communicate and make stick in the minds of readers. The few textual elements on the page work to make each of the visual components of the cover more memorable.

Use of space

Moving from first principles to the use of space, the literal structure of a page is an important feature of compelling typography. Simplicity is important to good graphic design. According to Alex White, author of The Elements of Graphic Design, like good writing, good graphic design “eliminates unnecessary elements and structures those that remain in a logical, consistent system.” By doing so, good graphic design makes information more comprehensible by rendering information more compelling and absorbable.

The simplicity of Living’s cover has been a hallmark of its production from the very first test issue issued in December 1990 (Figure 4). Comparing Living’s December 1990 and Living’s January 2008 covers, the 1990 cover might seem busier and more disjointed than its present-day counterpart. However, when compared to the competitor magazines of the day, Living’s cover clearly outperforms. Living’s December 1990 cover has one minimal image (Stewart seated on an outdoor bench) and a limited amount of text in a single font rendered in a color pulled from Stewart’s plaid flannel blouse. Living’s simplicity, what Alex White describes as its ability to “[d]istill the essential from the mass of confusing muchness,” is what made it stand out on newsstand and grocery store magazine displays in 1990 and what makes it compelling to consumers today.

Like simplicity, white space is a critical component in structuring content so that it is both compelling and absorbable. Living’s use of white space may be the characteristic that gives the magazine its design unity, aside from its imagery. The magazine’s deliberate and dramatic use of white space renders content scannable because with fewer elements on the page competing for space, it is not only easier to discern the important information but also to read since there are fewer elements demanding a reader’s attention.

Unlike simplicity, white space carries strong cultural connotations separate from its utility in organizing information. Alex White feels that white space “is considered extravagant, exclusive, classy. It symbolizes wealth and luxury.” One popular analogy used to explain this rhetorical quality is likening white space on a page to deliberately empty space in a store, for example the difference between shopping a couture store
and a bargain chain. Prada stores, for example, have very little merchandise on display and great expanses of polished expensive flooring, whereas TJ Maxx is so filled with merchandise one can hardly see the floor. Living’s 2002 redesign worked to maximize the amount of white space, including cutting 10% of the content text. The sense of quality and anticipation offered by the use of white space is tangibly affirmed by the weight of the page. Living’s pages are of a higher and thicker quality of paper than those of its competitors and have a beautiful glossy sheen to them. The high quality of the paper is what also makes it technically feasible for Living to use so much white space. In competitor magazines with thinner, cheaper pages, content on other side bleeds through the white space, making it muddy and unclear instead of open and dramatic.

**Imagery: The Heroic Overlooked**

Living’s imagery is an exceptionally important element of its typography, which is noted by magazine personnel and industry reviewers alike. Living’s photography is easily characterized as still life. Still lifes are typified by their subject matter, the material of daily living. This subject matter is hardly unique nor exclusive to Martha Stewart Living. What is unique to Living as a shelter magazine is how they photographically treat this subject matter. Living’s magazine covers are typified by an absence of text. More than its peers, Living’s content pages rely on what I am calling artistic photography (imagery offered for its own merits, without accompanying text). For instance, in the January 2008 issue, Living had 68 content pages dominated by text and 33 pages dominated by images. Of these 33 pages, 22 were full-page images unaccompanied by text.

Moreover, though other magazines focus on similar content, the style of imagery in Living is more cohesively characterized as still life. Mariët Westermann, an art historian specializing in 17th-century Dutch painting, stating that both “beguile” viewers with images “of elegant dining.” There are some interesting corollaries between Living, Dutch still lifes, and the social contexts of both. To start, Stewart’s elevation and celebration of the elements of daily life, exhibited in MSLO’s mission statement, shares much in common with the artistic project of still lifes:

Our community of how-to experts is committed to teaching, innovating, designing, and inspiring with ideas and products that make every day more meaningful, more functional, and more beautiful. We elevate the familiar elements of daily life, infusing them with the pleasure and confidence that come from the growing sense of mastery and discovery we foster in our customers and ourselves. Our
product and our style are distinctive, with a consistently high level of quality. Though our content is timeless, we deliver it in the most current ways: wherever, whenever, and however our customers need and want it.

As both the foundational and flagship publication of MSLO, Living is the medium through which MSLO’s values are most ardently realized.

Beyond subject matter and their celebration of domestic space and pursuits, golden age art and Living’s imagery share the affirmation of Herculean hand labor and testify to the rhetorical power of rational order and control. For example, if we compare Living’s June 2006 cover to Willem Van Leen’s 1821 painting “Still Life with Roses, Iris, a Bird and a Dragonfly” (Figure 5), we can see a striking similarity in artistic vision, composition and focus. The art historian Norman Bryson asserts that Dutch flower paintings “are non-pastoral and even anti-pastoral in that the flowers chosen for depiction are those which require for their existence a high level of horticultural sophistication.” The flowers depicted in these paintings are varieties that require intensive caretaking and meticulous cultivation, as are the flowers in Living’s June 2006 cover.

The arrangement of these flowers is a similarly technical skill: these are not loosely gathered wild flowers, but carefully selected blooms arrayed in an artful composition. Be it golden age art or Living’s photography, the artistic eye needed to compose the floral arrangement and the technical skill needed to complete it are abilities that take time and care to develop—labor valorized in these images.

Robert Bringhurst, an influential authority on typography, argues that typography “is to literature as magical performance is to composition: an essential act of interpretation, full of endless opportunities for insight or obtuseness.” Living’s typeface is a tangible affirmation and an enactment of its self-defined identity as a “unique and pioneering influence both as a business and as a voice inspiring people to live creatively, beautifully, and well.” Further, by connecting with the visual tradition of Dutch still lifes, Living renders its content timeless at the same time as it celebrates the ability of the human hand to pleasingly order the world around it. What distinguishes Living from its peers is its visual emphasis on hand-crafted projects, a focus central to the ways that Living refigures still life imagery to elevate the human subject and to reclaim the home as a space of hand production. Living’s typographic interpretation of its content is an essential component of its success.

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Figure 5.