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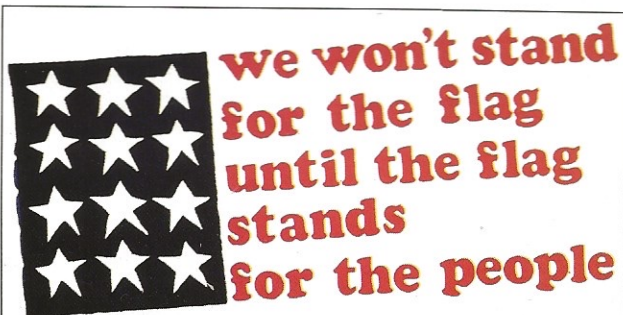


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A Passionate Response

By Carol Stevens

The Graphic Workshop is renowned for its endangered species posters, a series shaped not only by the goal of protecting wildlife, but also by the contributing artists' drive for personal expression.



"It was just a total protest. It was day and night printing, printing, printing. The energy was astounding. But it was really exciting because we were able to do something with our art and express our political opinions in the most amazing way."

The speaker might be talking about Paris in 1968, or Warsaw in 1980, or almost anywhere in Central Europe in the fall of 1989. But the accent is American and the voice is Felice Regan's recalling the birth of The Graphic Workshop, a loosely organized collective of artists that is today based in Somerville, Massachusetts, and is known for the joyously colorful spectacle of its endangered species posters, for its quality silkscreening, and for its unswerving and highly principled commitment to green causes.

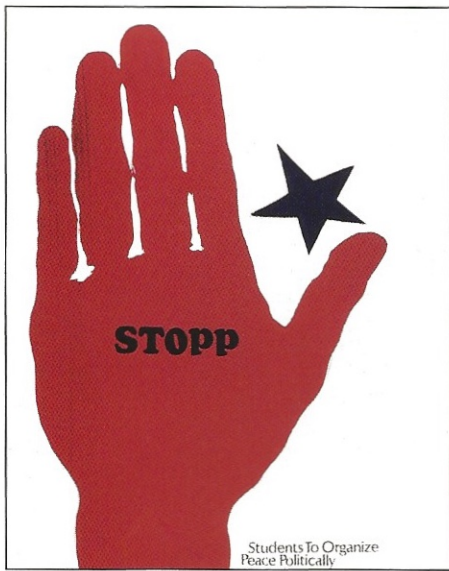
"We were seniors at Massachusetts College of Art," she relates; "there were student strikes about the Vietnam War, and on May 4, 1970, there were the Kent State killings. I was working on a project when my friend Chris called up and said, 'Stop everything and get over here. We're closing the school.' And we did; we closed the school and we started the Workshop!" Even now, over 20 years later, Regan's excitement and surprise evoke the intensity of those early days.

The Workshop's first home was the corner of a classroom with some rudimentary silkscreening facilities at "Mass. Art." The "we" Regan speaks of was a nucleus of painting and graphic design majors—including Regan's roommate, Chris Mesarch—and a teacher of painting who had joined the faculty three years earlier, Rob Moore. Moore, who provided the group—as he still does—with artistic supervision and moral support, refers to the fledgling Workshop as a "visual propaganda unit," but accurate though it may be, that designation somehow fails to capture the passionate response of the participants to the events of the early '70s.

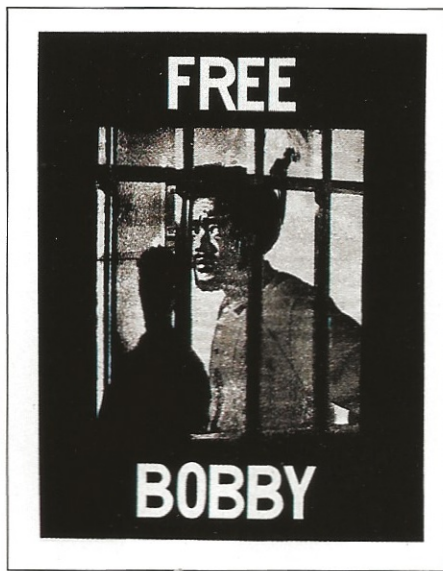
"I loved silkscreen printing. It was a perfect way to get information to the public. Not just 'off-the-pigs' things. U. Mass. had a tremendous outreach program for the community. We did posters in Spanish explaining the war to people; we announced a symposium at M.I.T.; we did war-protest armbands for Harvard; we got involved in the Black Power movement; we did a poster called 'Free Bobby' [Seale]; we did one called 'Two Dead in Mississippi.' Anybody who came to visit we'd train to print. And some people would rack. We were enlisting all our friends, volunteers, students from other schools. Limited budget but great imagination. Great spirit." Regan's description of this period, delivered in rapid-fire, not-always-complete sentences studded with superlatives seems to call forth the frenzied activities themselves.

When the school formally closed, Moore, who says he often acted as a "kind of gofer" bringing coffee and doughnuts in the morning to students who had been printing around the clock, provided the group with space in his loft in a turn-of-the-century building on High Street in downtown Boston. With graduation (in an informal ceremony) and the move off-campus, the Workshop developed a more objective perspective. "As a grass-roots organization, we had to find a role for ourselves," Moore remembers. "And we felt we could continue to do interesting graphics."

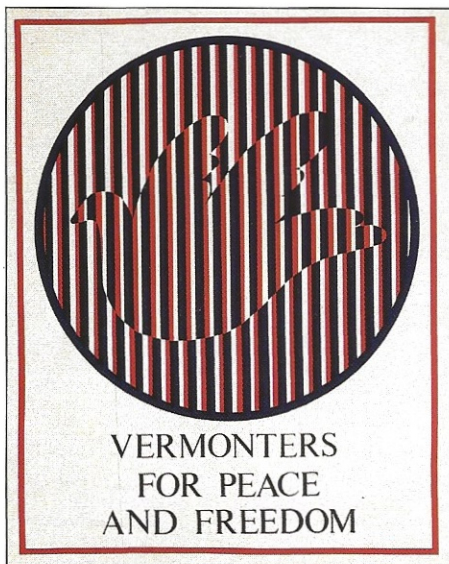
The determination to run the Workshop as a business forced a decision to take on some commercial jobs. Though the group's commitment to producing public information posters and strike posters remained firm, \$65 commissions for 500 posters from organizations like Vermonters for Peace and Freedom would barely cover the cost of materials. The mix of work was eclectic. One of the most welcome clients was the M.I.T. Dramashop, then under the direction of Joseph Everingham. The pay was modest, but the artists were given complete artistic freedom. No one ever questioned their choices.



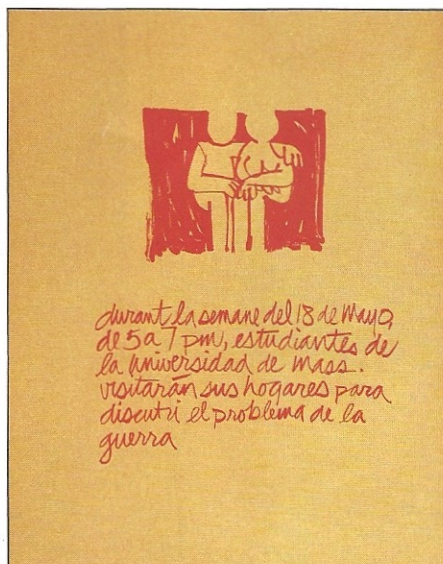
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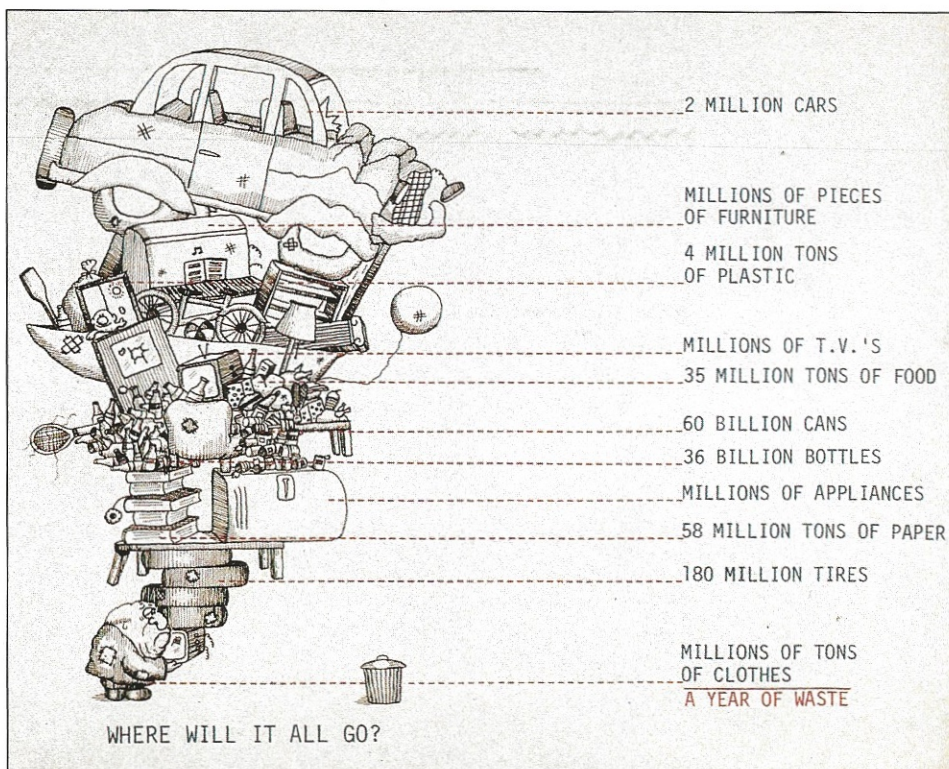
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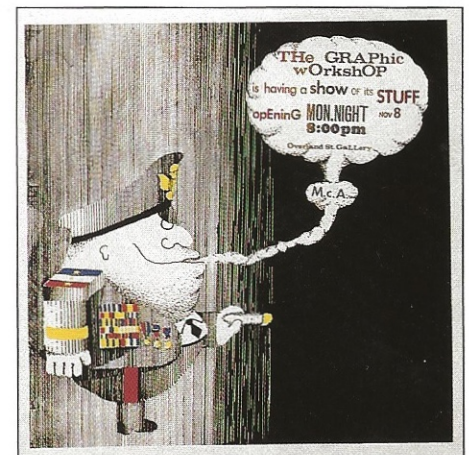


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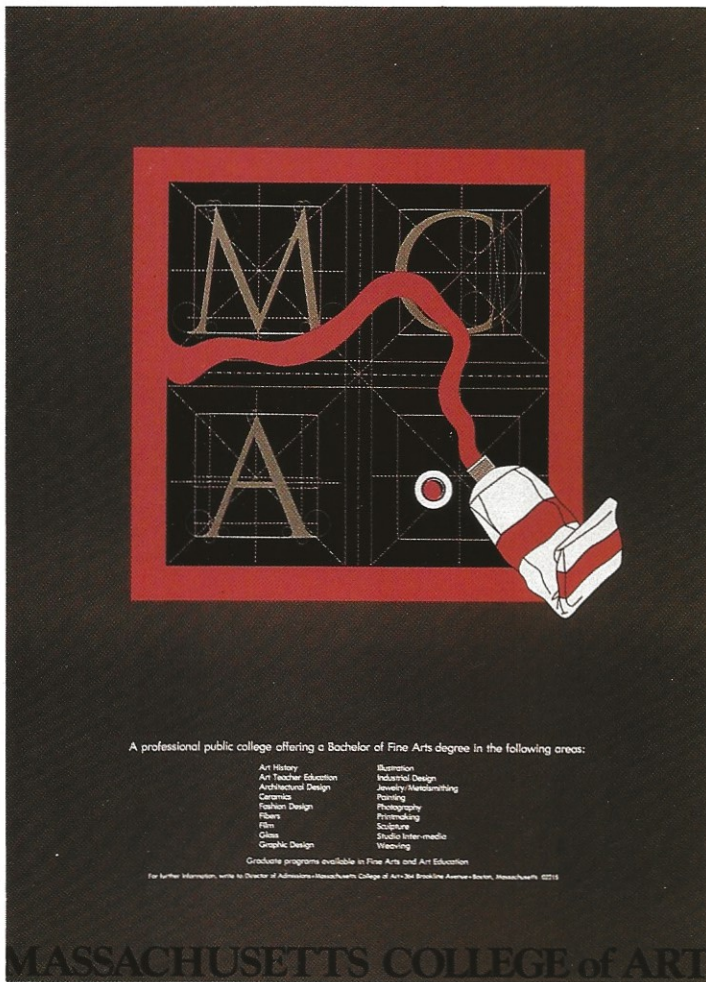


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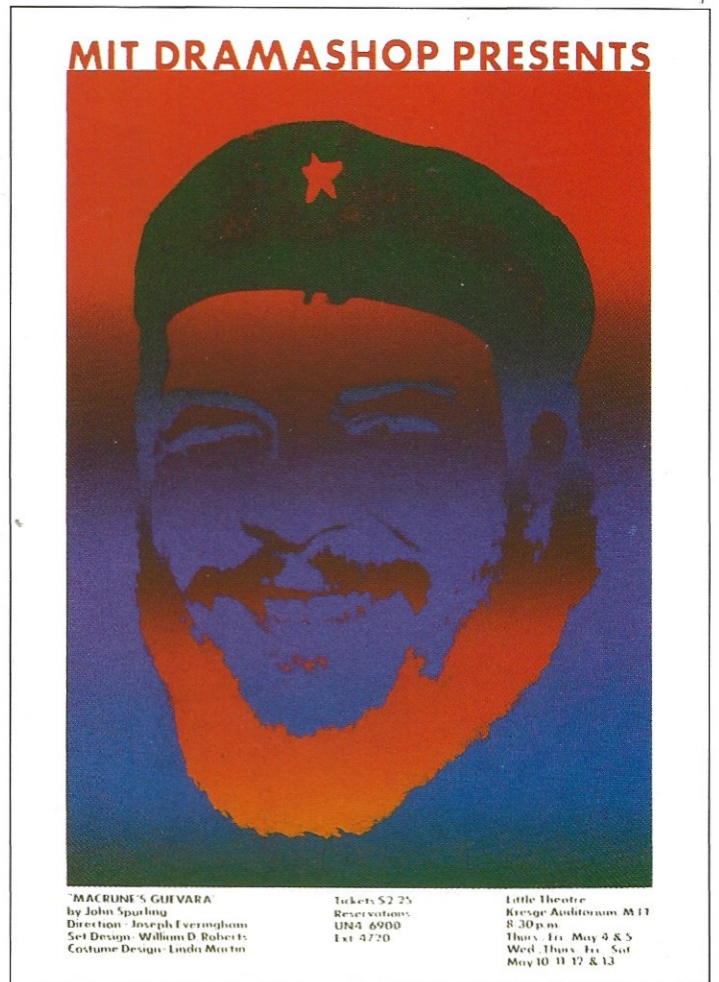
1. The more-or-less current cast of characters at The Graphic Workshop pose informally in their Farnsworth Street studio: (front row, left to right) Felice Regan with Puggy, Agusta Agustsson with her son, Paul, Judith Ziegler; (back row, left to right) Lisa Houck, Leo Byrnes (recently deceased), Judy Kensley McKie, Rob Moore.
2. Strike poster, 1970. Artists: Laurel Barney, Felice Regan.
3. Poster for Students to Organize Peace Politically, 1970. Artists: David Majeau, Felice Regan.
4. "Free Bobby (Seale)" poster, 1970. Artist: James DiSilvestro.
5. Poster for Vermonters for Peace and Freedom, 1970. Artist: Deborah Jones.
6. Poster publicizing an outreach program through which students volunteered to meet with members of Boston's Spanish-speaking community to discuss the Vietnam War, 1970. Artist: Laurel Barney.
7. Poster for the Somerville Recycling Group, 1972. Artist: David Sipress.
8. Poster publicizing exhibit of Graphic Workshop posters at the Overland Street Gallery, Massachusetts College of Art, 1973. Artist: David Sipress.



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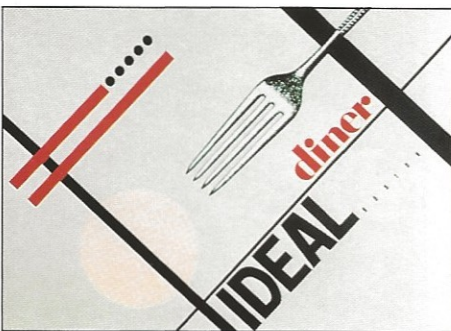


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9. Poster for Massachusetts College of Art, 1980. Artist: Rob Moore.
 10. Poster for M.I.T. Dramashop production of *Macrune's Guevara*, 1972. Artist: Rob Moore.
 11. Poster for the Ideal Diner, 1986. Artist: Tom Kuchenski.
 12. Poster for the M.I.T. Dramashop production of *The Madwoman of Chaillot*, 1982. Artist: Agusta Agustsson.
 13. Poster for the M.I.T. Dramashop production of *Playboy of the Western World*, 1972. Artist: Chris Mesarch.

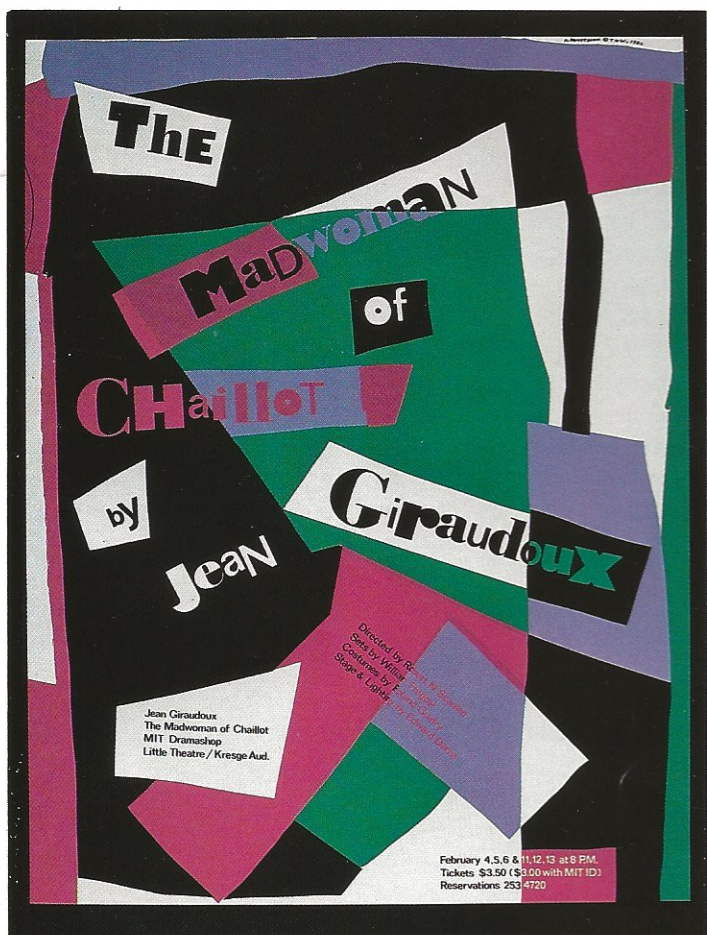


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This system was not without danger, however. Regan recalls that her first design for *The Indian Wants the Bronx* featured an American Sioux. Luckily, before going on press, she happened to show it to the director, who explained that the Indian was supposed to be South Asian. They also did multiple-image display posters of Marlene Dietrich for a shoe company, a sunflower poster for Boston's Horticultural Hall, and some low-budget environmentally conscious work: posters for the Somerville Recycling Group and the Association for Bicycle Commuting, and a Save-the-Earth poster for the first Earth Day celebration in 1971. Fortunately, they were able to support some of their close-to-the-bone projects with two atypically well-paid commissions—a series of environmental posters for then governor Francis Sargent, at \$1000 for five designs, and a limited-edition Christmas gift poster of the Tall Ships for special clients of Northeast Petroleum, which had decided that the standard bottle of holiday booze was losing its appeal. “We charged mega-money,” Regan recalls with a gleeful note in her voice. “Of course, it *was* a petroleum company, but we’re not that environmentally conscious—yet.”

There were other assignments that Regan refers to as “our weirdo commercial jobs”—for example, a series of Plexiglas signs for the Fletcher School of Law and Diplomacy, and 500 red vinyl binders with “Hot Pants” silkscreened on them in yellow epoxy ink for a clothing manufacturer. “We did specialty printing on odd materials,” says Regan. “We did banners, we did big pieces of wood. Sometimes we made really good money.”

Mostly they didn’t, however. In spite of the occasionally lucrative job, the Workshop always seemed to be scrambling to make ends

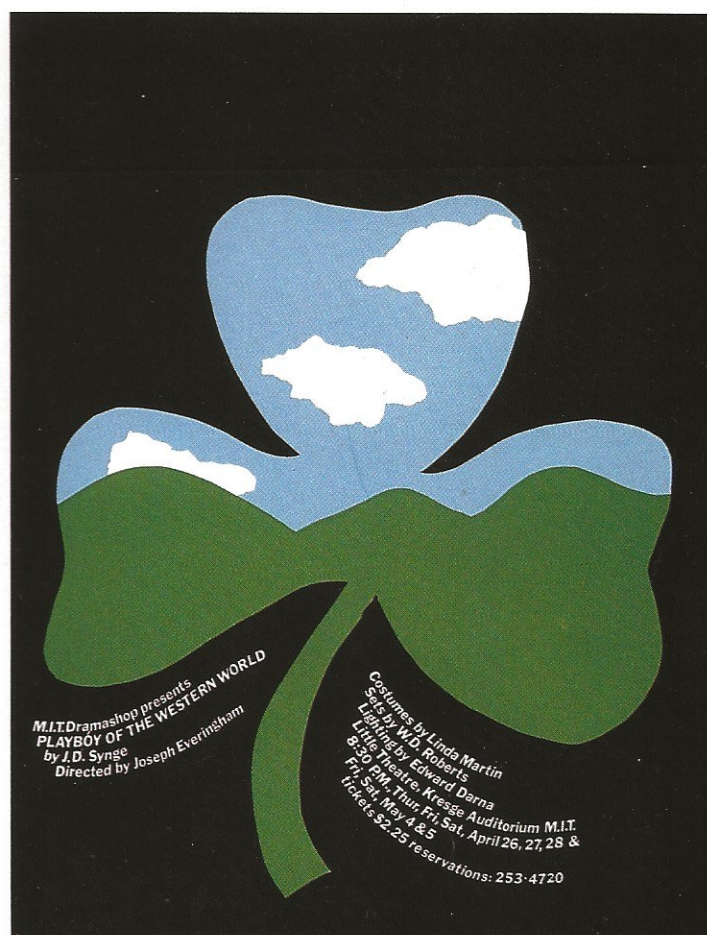


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meet. They often had to depend on scrounged materials such as the backs of thousands of copies of a 1930s vacuum cleaner ad printed on 25"-by-30" sheets and donated by John Donnelley, a billboard display company. Moore, of course, continued to teach, and Regan sometimes worked as a waitress. Fortunately, however, they had no trouble recruiting enthusiastic, if unskilled, labor. "Friends came by and we'd train them overnight to print," recalls Regan. "And Rob sent students from his class at Mass. Art. They were apprentices. They'd help us print and we'd allow them to do their own work." Eventually, this practice became part of the Mass. Art curriculum: Art students were allowed credit for a semester as independent study students in The Graphic Workshop. When the group needed to raise money for supplies or to pay the rent, they'd throw a party where they'd give silkscreen demonstrations and sell their artwork. The refreshments were apt to be vanilla milkshakes from a nearby McDonald's, laced with cognac.

The collective framework offered emotional as well as financial support. After a serious fire in the High Street building in 1974 forced them to evacuate, they gave a fund-raising and clean-up party at Mass. Art. "Billions of people came," says Regan with her customary hyperbole. "The teachers donated their artwork for an auction; all our friends helped us move; they washed down everything—the racks had all burned; we had to take the press completely apart. Oh my God, what a mess!" Regan proudly displays a relic of this event—a melted telephone that might be mistaken for a museum piece by Claes Oldenburg.

Looking back on this period, both Moore and Regan marvel at



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their naiveté. They kept the lacquer-thinner used for cleaning screens in open buckets, oblivious of its toxicity. Before someone told them about protective face masks, they'd get "sick-high" from printing with epoxy inks and would have to leave the studio to recover. They sent a shipment of posters on consignment to a gallery in Washington, DC, whereupon the owner skipped town owing them \$2500. And their attempts to market themselves were so labor-intensive that even if they'd brought in jobs—which they usually didn't—the ledger balance would still have been on the minus side.

One such attempt was a self-promotional poster/mailed headlined "Package Deal" and designed as a communal effort. "We used kraft paper and just kept adding colors until there were about sixteen," recalls Regan, "and someone stuck a cup of coffee on it and we liked the way the ring looked, so we printed coffee stains, and we matched the color of masking tape so perfectly, it looked as if you could peel it off the poster. We printed and mailed about 500 of them and we got not one job!"

The Workshop was not entirely without practical direction, however. In the winter of 1973, Kevin McCollough and David Fox, then in their first year at Harvard Business School, read an article about the Workshop in the Boston Phoenix and decided to offer the group some free business advice. Regan remembers McCollough saying over the phone, "We've read that you're artists and that you're in business. No offense, but most artists don't know anything about business. May we come over and talk to you?" When she quotes his proposal, Regan pulls her chin into her neck as if it were constricted by an imaginary tie and starched collar, lowers her already husky



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voice half an octave, and tries to sound like a banker. Recalls McCollough, who today is president of a group of meat-packing companies and still takes an interest in Workshop projects, "Business school was kind of boring; we were just looking for something we could do."

McCollough and Fox introduced Regan to a number of concepts she had previously ignored, such as overhead, cost estimate, salary, and bank loan. Although the group was reluctant to burden their shoestring operation with debt, the loan enabled them to buy a press, which, in turn, permitted them to produce both their bread-and-butter jobs and their personal work more efficiently. Regan's father co-signed the loan, a kindness that speaks for both his generosity and Regan's diplomatic skills. He was a retired lieutenant-colonel in the Marine Corps whose view of his daughter's activist involvement in the antiwar movement was decidedly negative. "It was an amazing difference of opinion," says Regan, who had lived on military bases from the time she was born until she went to high school. "My father and I simply didn't talk about the war. We wanted to remain friends."

Gradually, McCollough, who was impressed by the group's political ideology, talent, and commitment to producing fine-art original prints at affordable prices, helped the Workshop incorporate and shape their venture into a business. Harvard, however, might have found some of his procedures unorthodox. Too unfamiliar with silkscreening to advise Regan about estimating, he sent her off with one of the group's posters to a commercial silkscreener to find out what they would charge for a similar job. And when it came to appointing officers, he resorted to the *I Ching*. "Everybody cast coins," he remembers, "and we didn't really argue because the hexagrams read out so clearly. Felice's was so strong, she just had to be president."

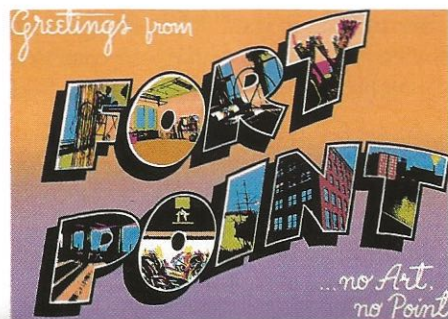
A couple of years after McCollough and Fox began giving the Workshop free business advice, the group got a commission that not only helped define their focus, but also brought them to the attention of the Boston design community. John Walsh of the World Society for the Protection of Animals was trying to interest Boston's public television channel, WGBH, in a series of programs on endangered species, and in 1975, he asked the Workshop to create posters that he could give to his backers as premiums. Unfortunately, Walsh's project fell through, but not before Jack Weiner had designed the San Francisco garter snake poster as the first premium, Chris Mesarch had produced the South American anteater, and Paul Campbell, the whooping crane.

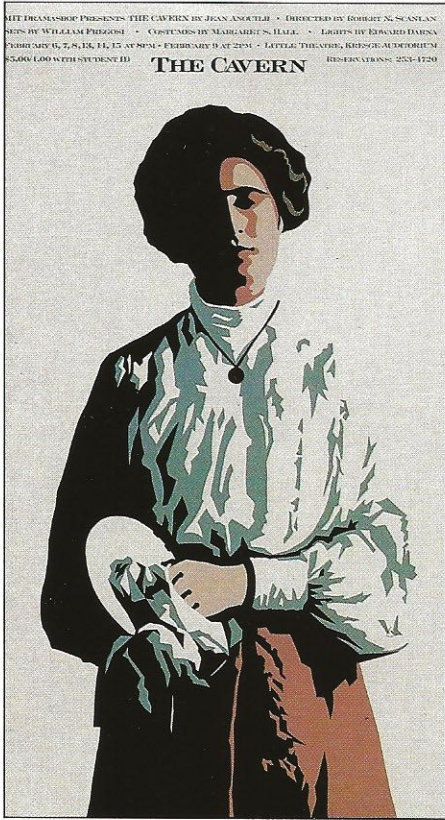
Saddened by the collapse of a project that had held so much promise, Regan decided, nevertheless, to get some mileage out of the posters that had been produced by entering them into local design competitions. Quite unexpectedly, the "Package Deal" poster won a Hatch award ("For collateral," explains Regan. "We didn't even know what that meant."). She also entered it and the San Francisco garter snake poster into the Boston Art Directors Club show, where they were awarded, respectively, a gold medal and best-of-show. Regan likes to finish off this success story by recalling that it was almost impossible to scrape together the \$20-a-plate ticket price that would allow her and Jack Weiner to attend the Art Directors Club awards dinner. "Why are these events so expensive?" Weiner is reported to have asked one of the club members. "To keep the riffraff out," he replied. "So we made riffraff buttons," Regan says, "and wore them to the awards ceremony because *we* were the riffraff!"

The garter snake poster was subsequently culled, along with several other Workshop posters, for a comprehensive Smithsonian-sponsored exhibition at the Corcoran Gallery in Washington, DC,

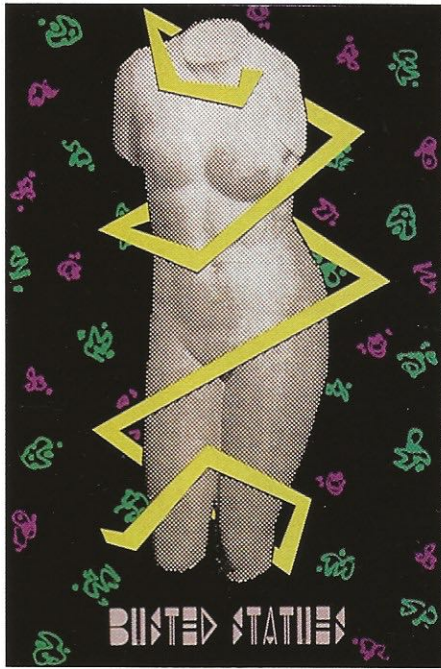


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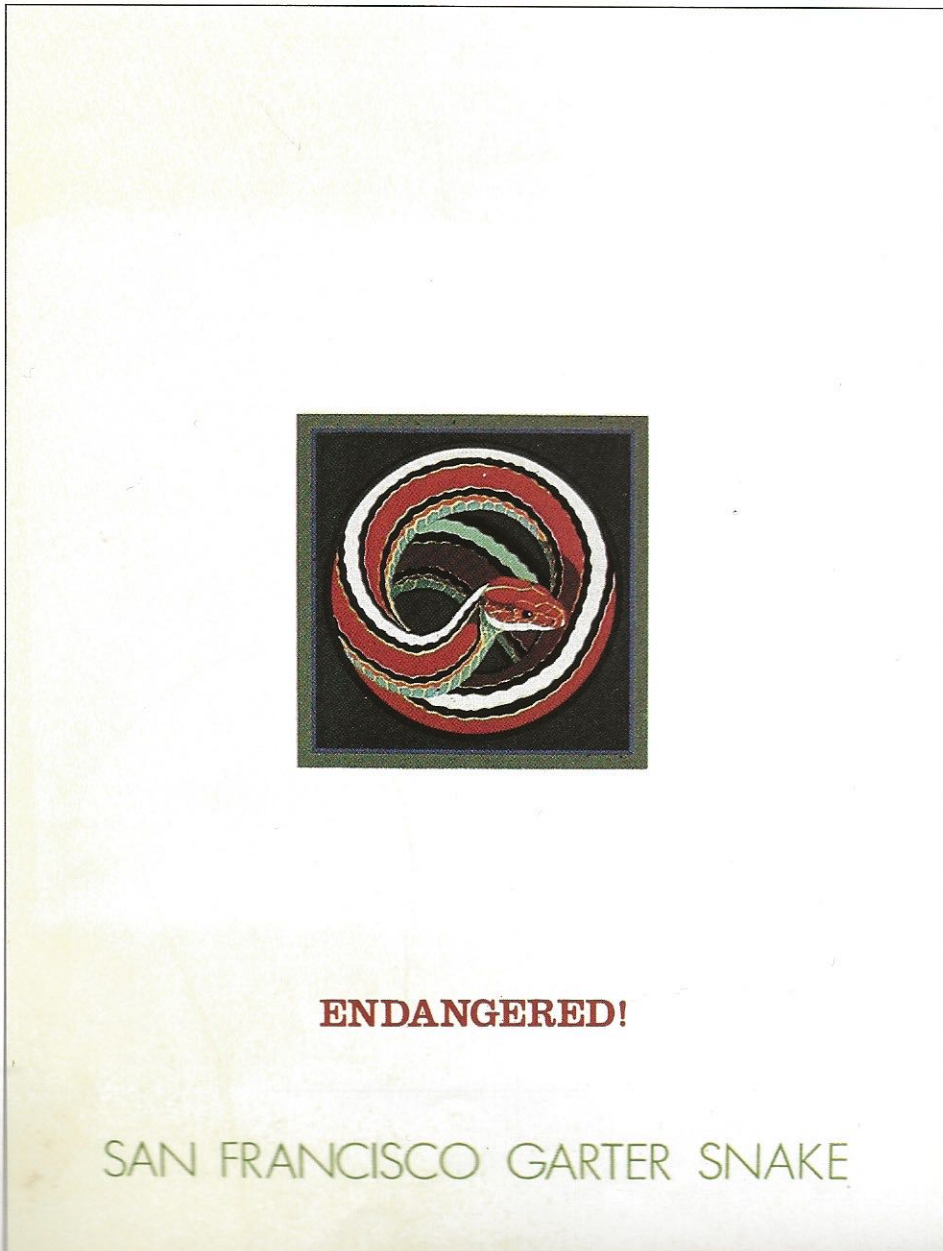


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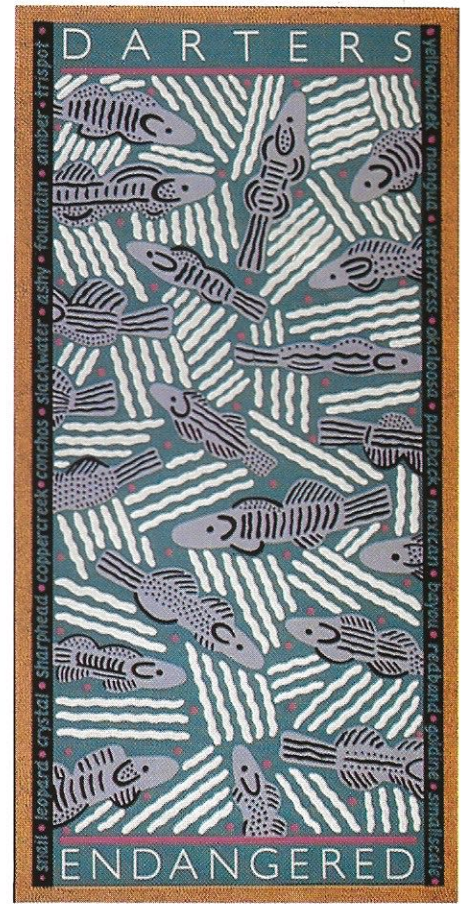


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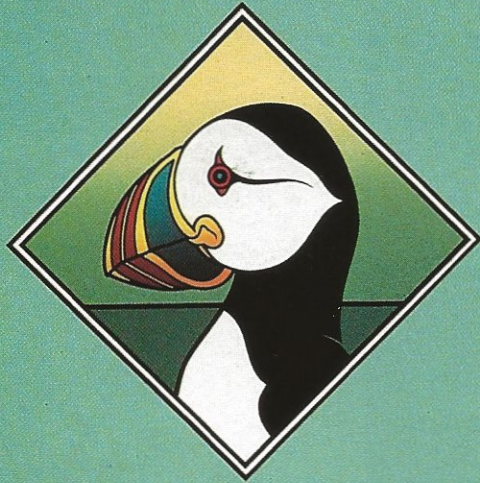
- 14. Self-promotional poster titled "A Package Deal," 1975. Artist: Rob Moore.
- 15. Poster/invitation for holiday party and sale at The Graphic Workshop, 1981. Artist: Agusta Agustsson.
- 16. Poster for the Fort Point artists' community, 1985. Artist: Felice Regan; sponsor: WBZ-TV, Boston.
- 17. Poster for M.I.T. Dramashop production of *The Cavern*, 1987. Artist: Tom Kuchenski.
- 18. Poster for a rock 'n' roll group called Busted Statues, 1986. Artist: Tom Kuchenski.
- 19. San Francisco garter snake, the first of the endangered species series, 1975. Artist: Jack Weiner.
- 20. Endangered darters, 1988. Artist: Lisa Houck.



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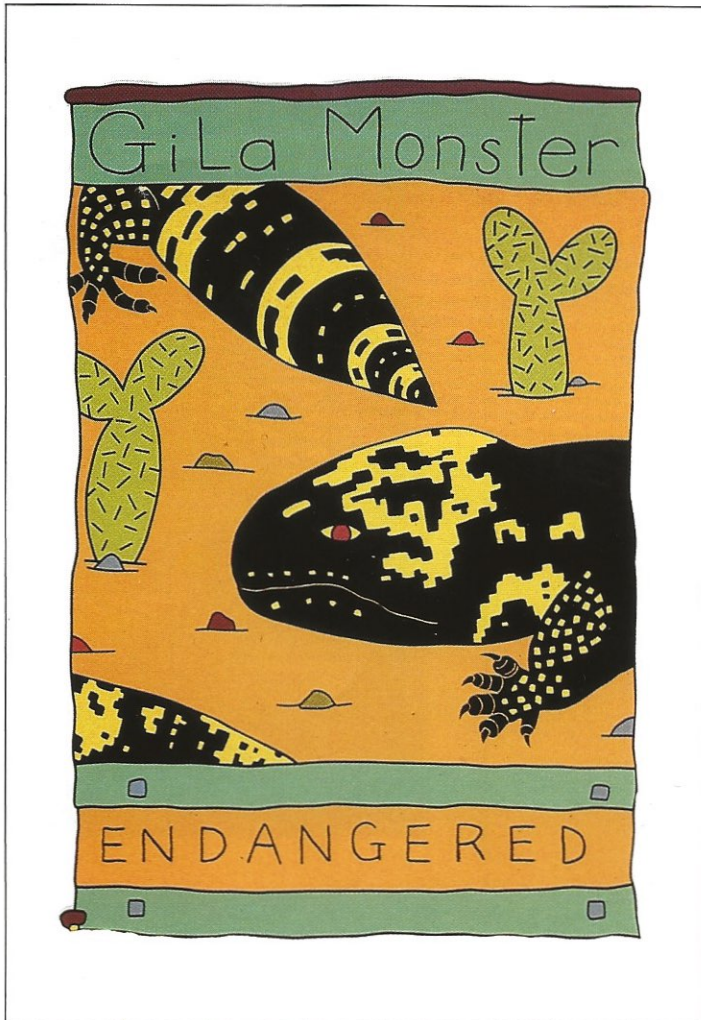
THE COMMON PUFFIN

The National Audubon Society has undertaken a project to restore the breeding range of the common puffin in the United States.

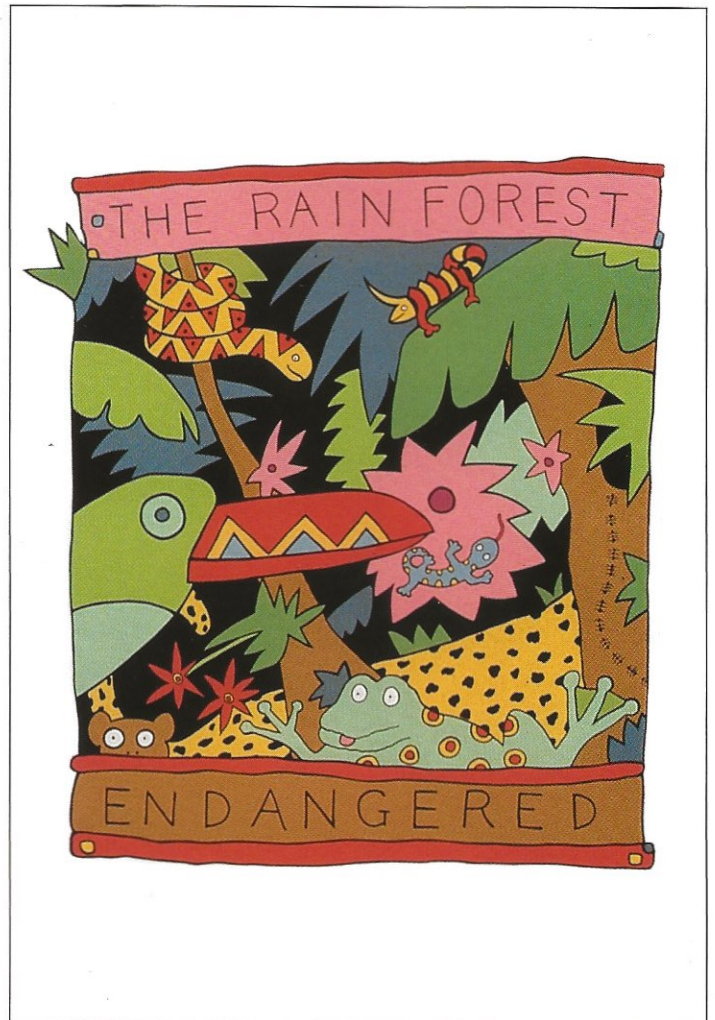
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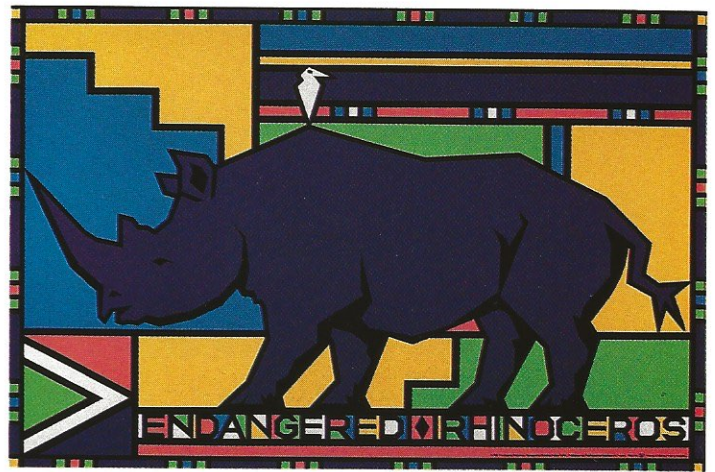
titled "Images of an Era: The American Poster 1945-1975." This exposure elicited inquiries from out-of-state galleries and produced a climate that encouraged the artists to focus on endangered species as a running theme. "I don't remember how it happened," Regan says; "we just started working on them." Moore recalls insisting that the Workshop maintain its activist involvement: "It seemed to me," he says, "that if we didn't maintain some sort of political position, the Workshop would lose its identity altogether." Publicizing the plight of endangered species seemed to answer not only this need but also the quest for subject matter that could be shaped by each artist's drive for personal expression.

The effort has remained labor-intensive. The artists choose the animals they prefer, usually from a list supplied by the World Wildlife Fund. Although they sometimes work from slides, the initial research can be time-consuming. They talk to the people at zoos who take care of the animals. Christine Kidder discussed her sea turtle poster with a diver at the Boston Aquarium. When Lisa Houck decided to work on a poster of a volcanic rabbit, the chief of endangered species at the local branch of the U.S. Wildlife and Fisheries service put her in touch with a rabbit expert. For her kangaroo poster, Regan delved into Aborigine art; and in the course of her research on the Panamanian golden frog, she was invited to dinner by a librarian she happened to consult who had lived in Panama for 12 years.

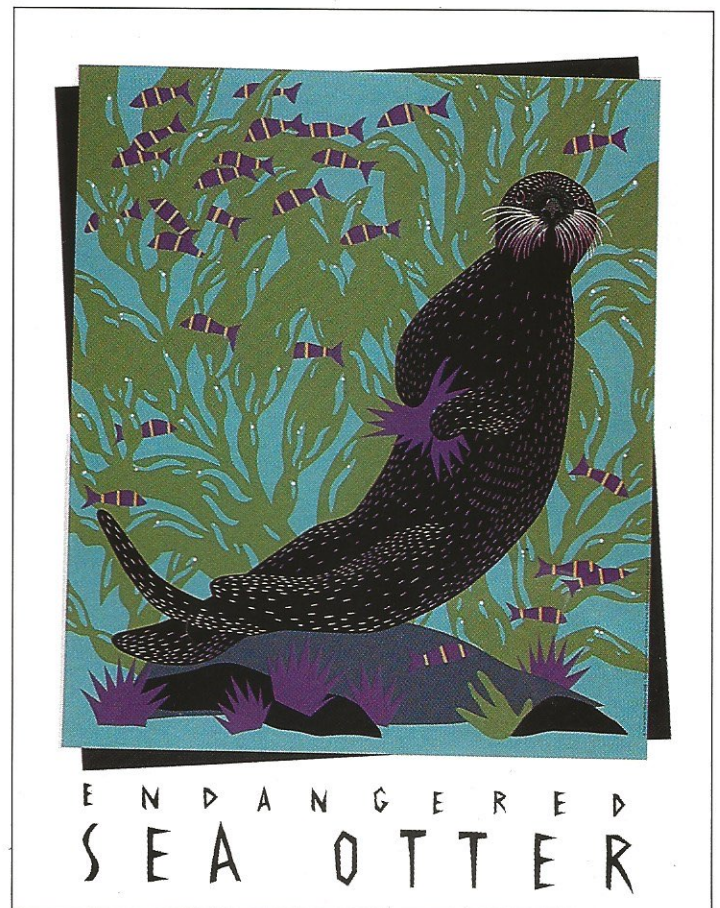
Each artist works out his or her ideas in sketches, which are then discussed in a series of group meetings—often as many as a dozen—with Moore and Regan functioning as art directors. Perhaps because Moore's special interest is in color theory, some of these discussions simply deal with the effectiveness of various color combinations. For her own posters, Regan does drawings in Magic Marker or gouache, cuts them out, and reassembles them against variously colored backgrounds. Until recently, each poster was hand-separated and proofed over and over until the colors satisfied everyone. "The pupfish has 24 colors, which I personally helped print twice because the artist wanted to change the green," says Regan.

Occasionally, when even the closely monitored silkscreening process proves inadequate, posters are finished by hand. For the theater poster *Keep an Eye on Amelie* (the Workshop has continued to produce posters for the M.I.T. Dramashop along with its endangered species series), the group, in an all-nighter, added real blush and eye-shadow to the face and painted in the lips with Magic Marker. Tom Kuchenski, who came to the Workshop in 1977 from a job at the Wadsworth Atheneum in Hartford, Connecticut, and has been highly valued by many of the painters in the group for his knowledge of typography, is still impressed by the conscientiousness of the collective effort. Commenting on the length of gestation of many of the posters, he says, "There's never the kind of hustle you get with commercial clients. There's a certain looseness that allows for real creativity." And Regan adds, "The Workshop has no deadlines, and nothing is ever done strictly for the money."

This view of the poster as a creative adventure that belongs to the artist first and the client afterward suggests an affinity with the European poster experience that is unusual in the U.S. It has resulted in posters that are primarily fine art whatever secondary purpose they may serve. As McCollough observes, "Felice and the people around her have found needs to serve, but they haven't had to compromise their artistic integrity." What's more, the posters—though they reflect the individuality of a loosely organized collective of artists who started out as painters, or as graphic designers—have a kind of coherence. They are richly colored; they look and feel like one-of-a-



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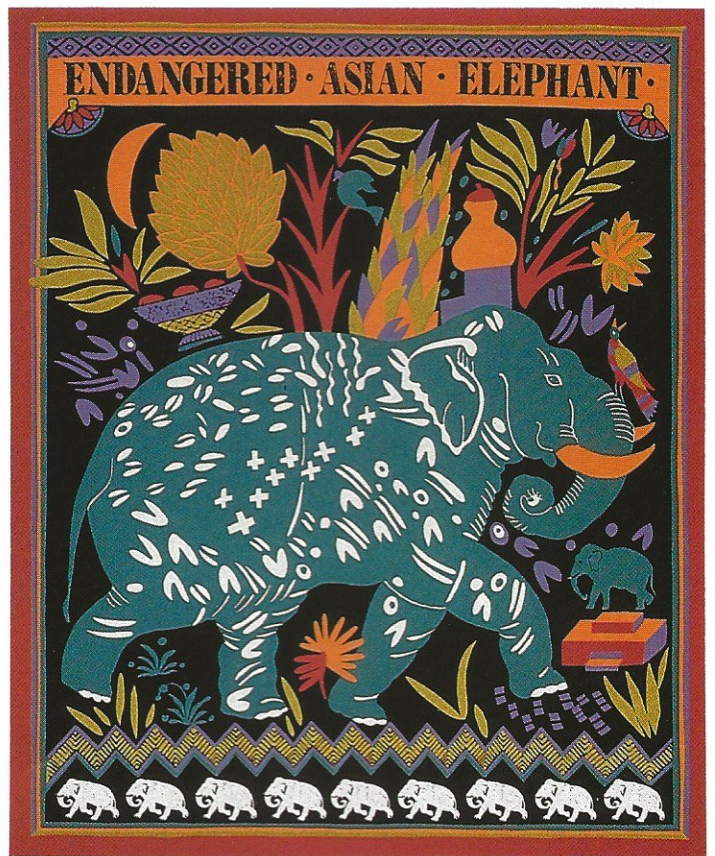


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- 21. Common puffin, 1980. Artist: Rob Moore.
- 22. Koala bear, 1989. Artist: Felice Regan.
- 23. Gila monster, 1989. Artist: Leo Byrnes.
- 24. Rain forest, 1988. Artist: Leo Byrnes.
- 25. Rhinoceros, 1991. Artist: Christine Kidder.
- 26. Sea otter, 1988. Artist: Mary Beath.



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- 27. Giant panda, 1983. Artist: Felice Regan.
- 28. Asian elephant, 1988. Artist: Judith Ziegler.
- 29. Rain forest frogs, 1992. Artist: Felice Regan.
- 30. Hawksbill turtle, 1990. Artist: Christine Kidder.
- 31. Polar bear, 1980. Artist: Agusta Agustsson.
- 32. Cuban crocodile, 1985. Artist: Judy Kensley McKie.
- 33. Grevy's zebra, 1982. Artist: Agusta Agustsson.

kind art; and although they offer personal and highly sophisticated interpretations of their subject matter, they appeal to the tastes of a broadly varied audience.

In spite of the growing popularity of the work, however, and the high visibility of the newest endangered species posters every year at awards time, the Workshop was still, at the end of the '70s, as Regan recalls, "in a real tough place." Sometimes they traded art for services—with their lawyer and with their accountant. Kuchenski did posters, placemats, and menus for the Ideal Diner, where he subsequently ate for years. At one point, they even traded a poster for a new hot water heater. Regan continued to need another source of income, but was able to give up waitressing for teaching. Moore, who became, in 1982, a professor at Mass. Art and was already a successful painter, sometimes provided cash to finance the overhead, but McCollough observes, "The Workshop was really subsidized with sweat, blood, friendship, and everybody living cheap."

Indisputably, it was also kept alive by Regan—by her energy, her commitment, and the sheer force of her personality. Over the years, through a constantly changing cast of characters (including not only Moore, Weiner, Mesarch, and Kuchenski, but also Agusta Agustsson, Paul Campbell, Laura Cardimos, David Sipress, Leo Byrnes, Jill Crossman, Lisa Houck, Christine Kidder, Judy Ziegler, Judy Kensley McKie, Mary Beath, and Karen Roehr) and residence in at least four different lofts, Regan has been a kind of Mother Superior providing technical know-how, artistic counseling, spiritual guidance, and a hands-on ability to get things done. "It's impossible to separate the Workshop from Felice," says the group's business manager, Rose Fiore. "She believed in it and kept it alive." And observes Moore, "It was Felice's steady commitment to the practical side of things that speaks to the success of the place today."

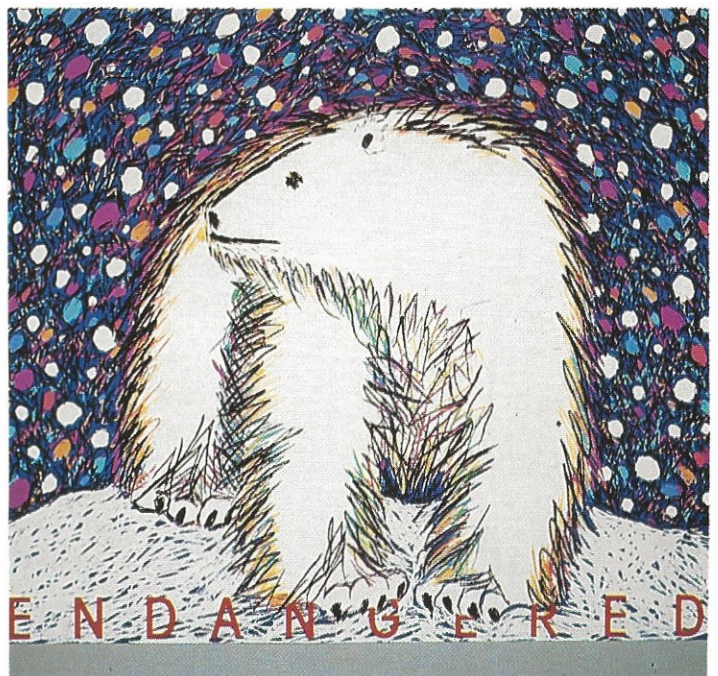
In the early '80s, Regan and her colleagues made a couple of deci-



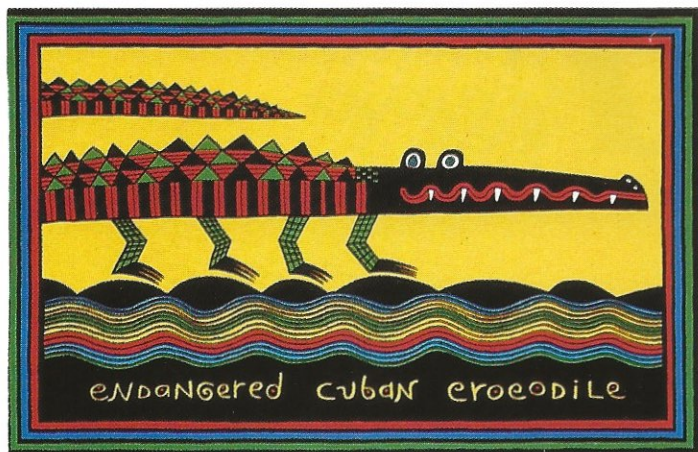
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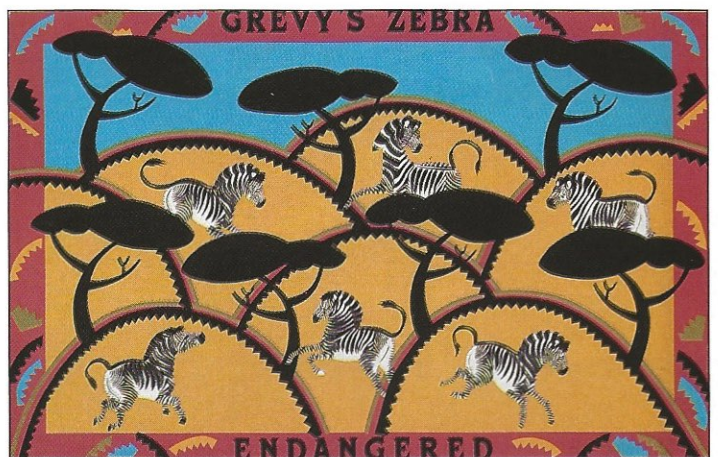
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sions that helped change the course of the Workshop's desultory relationship with profit. In 1981, as an experiment, 4000 copies each of the common puffin, the giant panda, and the *Othello* posters were printed commercially by offset and signed in the plate. The group also produced 500 of the Arctic polar bear and the zebra posters in silkscreen, though the usual silkscreen run was only 100. "We began to be a little successful," Regan recalls. "They started to sell." Then, in 1983, Regan decided to attend Art Expo in New York just to have a look around. "I found names of people to sell to," she says triumphantly. "Distributors *heard* of us." Among those who began to handle Workshop posters were Bruce McGaw Graphics, Museum Editions West, Graphique de France, Carol Robertson Fine Arts, and Greenpeace, which in 1982 contracted to use the images of the whale, the puffin, and the giant panda on T-shirts to be offered for sale in their catalog.

Indeed, it was the coming-of-age of the environmental movement, whose growth has paralleled the Workshop's, in tandem with Regan's tenacious belief in producing fine art at affordable prices, that has helped to turn the collective into a going concern. In the early '70s, when the Workshop was getting started, many of the organizations

devoted to preserving the environment were also newborn and struggling. It wasn't until at least 10 years later, however, that the environmental cause began to gather momentum and attract popular interest to the problems of deforestation, pollution, waste disposal, overpopulation, and endangered species. One important source of funds to support green activism were products with environmental themes that could be sold through catalogs. The Sierra Club also began to sell Workshop images on T-shirts; and when Carol Robertson went to Art Expo again in 1988, she sold five new posters for distribution through the Nature Company, Greenpeace retail stores, and the Wildlife Workshop store in Provincetown, Massachusetts. Says Regan, "They were land-office, phenomenal, beyond-our-wildest-expectations winners." Fiore remarks, "The world finally caught up with Felice."

Today, the Graphic Workshop posters—so far, there are a total of 24 in the series—are co-published by Graphique de France, which distributes them in the U.S., as well as in 36 countries throughout Europe and Asia. In addition, they publish the images in the form of a calendar and as postcards, notecards, and portfolios of 9"-by-12" mini-prints. Greenpeace, besides selling the posters through their

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retail stores, licenses a few of the images for use on articles such as tote bags, caps, and T-shirts. A company called Decipher has so far reproduced six of the images as puzzles, the underside of which features a map and information about the animal. Currently, there are 57 different applications of the images.

Regan and Moore have responded to these developments with a general repositioning. They hired Fiore, a freelance business consultant, to work out a system of royalties which are mandated by contract, so that each time an image is used, both the artist and the Workshop receive compensation. "What Felice has insisted on," says Fiore, "is that the Workshop retain control of the copyright on all the images so that whenever they're used, they're used only with her strict approval both as to format and quality of reproduction. Felice supervises the production of every single product, and it can be a very lengthy operation," she continues, lapsing into business school jargon, "because often there are certain economies that would preclude retaining the integrity of those images. But with her experience, her incredible empathy, and her ability to communicate, she manages to convince people that what's best for the artist is best for everyone."

In 1985, as the demand for the posters increased, the group started having the silkscreening done by commercial printers—first the Orange Line Press in Boston and Nick Farina in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, and currently, by Preston Graphics in Newton, New Hampshire. Although Moore regrets the loss of the "element of experimentation" that the artists could indulge in when they did their own printing, he and Regan find the new system much more efficient. "Some of the new artists, who lack the early Workshop training, can't do separations," Regan explains; and Moore adds, "The runs today are unlimited, and the printer keeps all the separations on hand so we can go back on press whenever we want to."

No longer needing the space for a large press, they gave up their studio on Farnsworth Street overlooking the ocean in Boston's Fort Point Channel district and moved to a smaller space in an artists' building (a former A&P warehouse) in Somerville. The artists now work in their own studios but still meet for group crits, the frequency and intensity of which

remain undiminished. Although Regan continues to produce her own posters, she has also become the Workshop's production manager and salesperson ("international adventuress," Kuchenski says), traveling to Paris to oversee press runs and to galleries from Maine to California to open up new channels of distribution.

From a marketing point of view, The Graphic Workshop's products have been successful. "To date we have co-published 14 of the posters and we sell an average of about 2000 a year for each title," says Nicholas Dubrule, editor of *Graphique de France*. "This is a very good record for silkscreen because they sell as relatively expensive posters. The more exposure the images receive, the more the market for them continues to grow." Lauren Preziosa, national merchandise manager of Greenpeace, calls the Workshop products "some of our best-selling items. I think people appreciate the color and the friendliness of the images," she comments.

It is harder to measure their effectiveness as instruments of persuasion, though there is no doubt about their ability to stir up controversy. On a caving expedition to Yreka, California, Regan happened to be at a barbecue one night, wearing her rainforest-endangered T-shirt. She was accosted by the brother of a logger whose job was in jeopardy as a result of efforts to restrict logging of the spotted owl's habitat. "I felt bad, because people do lose out," Regan says, "but at the same time so do the animals." Adds Preziosa, "We could take any issue Greenpeace works on, and there's always a flip side." McCollough calls these differences "the inevitable conflicts of a sophisticated, post-industrial economy," and goes on to point out that it is much too early to assess the long-term educational value of the posters. "As long as a poster is there in the public consciousness, how do you know how it will affect some five-year-old and whether or not he or she will grow up to be an attorney, or a corporate executive, or a political leader who's in a position to do something? Environmental awareness is an evolutionary process." There's no doubt that The Graphic Workshop has contributed to that evolving awareness and that with wider distribution of its imagery, it will be able to accomplish even more. For the time being, the only information approaching statistical evidence of its success is the news that while the San Francisco garter snake poster is extinct, the snake itself is thriving.