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The Hopkins Touch

By Jim Cornfield

On the chilly December morning when she gingerly rang the doorbell of Will Hopkins' Manhattan studio, Gray Davis Boone was not a stranger to the publishing business. She was the founder and publisher of *Antique Monthly*, the venerable, newsprint-format bible of serious collectors. She had also married into the family whose name anoints the Boone newspaper chain throughout the South and Midwest. Boone had proverbial printer's ink on her hands, but her recent acquisition of glossy *Horizon* magazine had quickly changed everything for her. *Horizon* was not a roll-and-throw newspaper. It was a slick journal of culture and the arts, and despite lofty subject matter and a chic target demographic, it just lay there. *Horizon* needed a facelift, in fact a whole makeover.

This was in the late 1970s and then, as now, it was a given in the publishing business that one name, hands down, could offer the chance of salvation to a troubled magazine. It was Will Hopkins.

Enter the Wizard

Hopkins' design pedigree was forged principally at *Look* magazine, where he was senior art director from 1966 through 1971, during the era universally acknowledged as the Golden Age of the big picture magazines—*Look*, *Life* and *Collier's*.



WILL HOPKINS

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As founder of the Hopkins Group, now Hopkins-Baumann, which he partners with Mary K. Baumann, his wife of 22 years, he's among a rarefied group of independent graphic designers who still work almost exclusively on publications—books and magazines. The evolution of Hopkins' extraordinary effect on the whole field of graphic design is a saga of innovation, not just repair. But on the day Gray Boone sought his help, Hopkins' resumé was almost incidental. The buzz about him

was not. She needed someone to save the beleaguered re-launch of *Horizon*. "I was practically pleading for help," she remembers, "from this person I didn't even know, but everyone had recommended him as the wizard of the magazine world."

After an intense three days, under the pressure of an inflexible printing schedule, Hopkins accomplished what Boone still considers to be a miraculous redesign and the genesis of a new editorial direction for *Horizon* that would help keep it going for the next decade.

Hopkins' acute publication savvy has indeed made him the "wizard" for many consumer magazines yearning for metamorphosis: *Forbes*, *Sports Afield*, *Food & Wine*, *Mother Earth News*, *Architectural Digest*, *Geo*, *Money* and *World Tennis*. Invariably, his success with these projects flows directly from the mingling of his design instincts with a keen, lively intellect. Like his early mentor at *Look*, Allen Hurlburt, Will Hopkins is a blend of art director and editor in a single package.

Before television delivered the *coup de grâce* to the big graphic picture magazines (looking back, their circulations in that era seem colossal—7.5 million readers of *Look*, 6 million for *Life*), Allen Hurlburt had crafted a new paradigm for the quality consumer magazine. He was a little bit of a sorcerer himself, approaching every



Twen's originality and its powerful use of photographs made Hopkins' experience in Germany "an overwhelming visual experience." But it bore the liability that occasionally a story "might have been sacrificed for the sake of making it look good." Not so at *Look*, Hopkins recalls, where he finally came "face to face with responsible journalism." Hurlburt preached a simple maxim: "The art director is the first reader of a story and has to sort out how the story works for all the readers who will follow."

A Photographer's Art Director

Hopkins' eclectic model for producing a magazine story has translated into an epiphany moment for many talented photographers, from the *Look* era to the present. Magnum Photos shooter Paul Fusco, a 14-year *Look* staffer and one of photojournalism's most honored veterans, has fond memories of the Hopkins touch. "He gave you your voice," Fusco recalls of his early Hopkins projects. "Once you were assigned, he put his faith in you. The photographer always got the privilege of making the initial edit and Will had such an obvious zest for good photography. It was very rewarding."

Among the scores of great photo essays in the Fusco canon, two from his assignments for *Look* demonstrate the value of Hopkins' collaborative work style with photographers:

For the illustrations that accompany "George's Branch, KY," writer William Hedgpeith's rugged 1969 take on the rigors of modern life in hardscrabble Appalachia, Hopkins backs away from the



urge to bombard the reader with shots that illustrate every telling detail of life and work in a dirt-poor mining town. Instead, he respects Fusco's fascination with the landscape of the human face as the palette for telling this poignant story. The whole package, interweaving the photographer's select candid photos with his unposed, almost Goya-like portraits, is a precision *pas de deux* between photos and graphic design.

Look's January 13, 1970 forecast for the new decade that lay ahead included a prescient, early warning that our planet's natural resources were borderline endangered. Rather than go after gloomy shots of industrial waste and smog-choked cityscapes, Fusco chose to illustrate this idea with positive, uplifting images of the things we must protect—two children reveling in natural

surroundings, romping over shore-side rocks and through backlit meadows. In his design treatment, Hopkins paced the series like an impressionistic movie montage, alternating close-ups of the kids with wide shots of their pristine environment. He savors the memory of this issue as a "tremendous editorial and graphic experience." A couple of editors, along with Hopkins, Fusco and writer John Poppy left the office and set up shop with a slide projector in a midtown hotel room. There they crafted one of *Look's* most impressive achievements—"The 70s Issue"—a supremely well-orchestrated tribute to hope, for the planet and for the human race.

Among the photographer connections Hopkins had cultivated during his two

years at *Twen*, controversial young Will McBride was practically unpublished in the U.S., until Hopkins appropriated his unique essay, "Siddhartha," for use in *Look*. This photographic retelling of the popular Hermann Hesse novel had run 16 pages in its original *Twen* debut. Its relevance to *Look's* readership centered around the growing number of young Americans who, at the time, were turning to Hesse's books and to eastern religions and culture for spiritual guidance. Hopkins approached the project as a storyteller, using the pictures in narrative order, with variations in cropping and image size to impel Hesse's tale forward. As readers page through this piece, the visual effect suggests the alternating dynamics of a soft, primitive drumbeat.

Another *Twen* compatriot was the brilliant color stylist, Pete Turner, who shot

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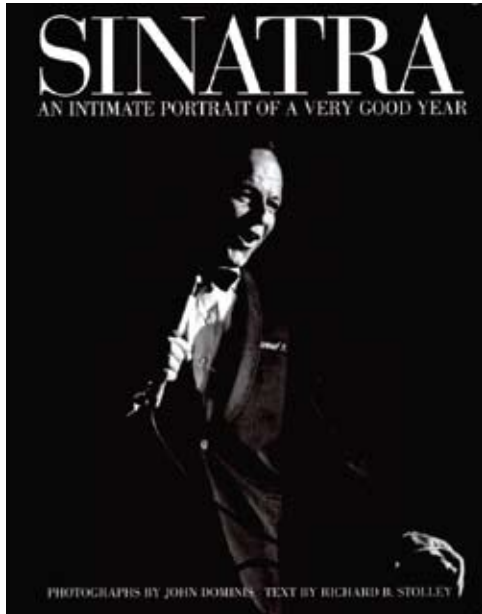
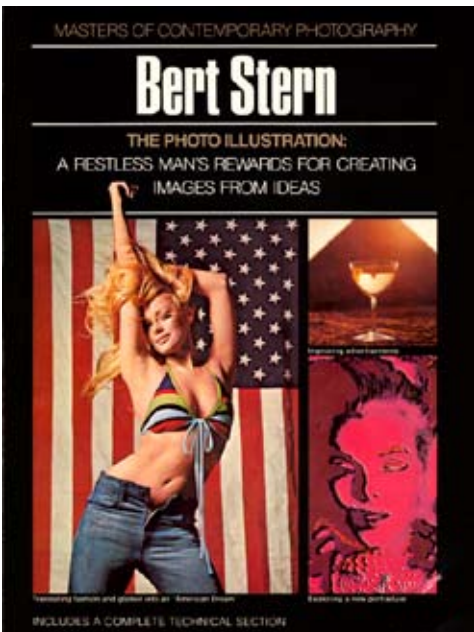


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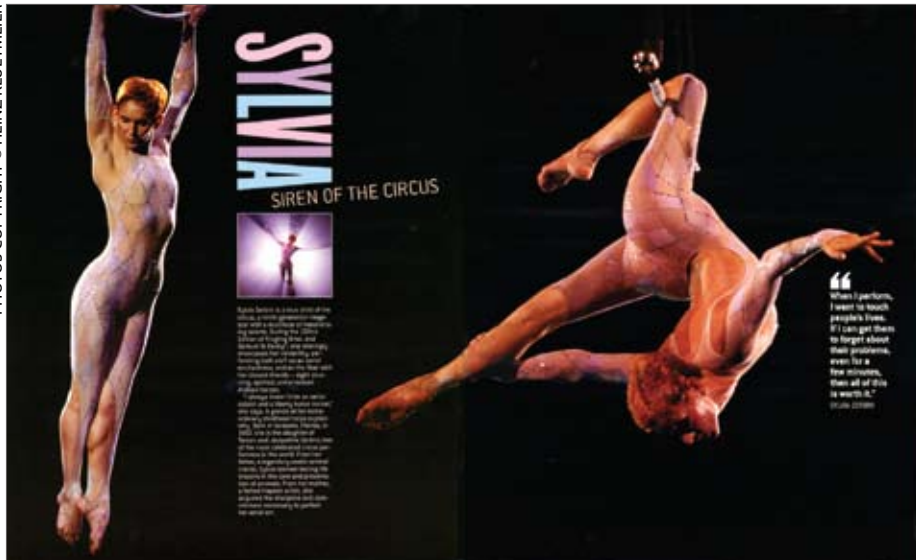
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the cover and a powerful, evocative essay, "Black Beauty" for *Look's* groundbreaking January 7, 1969 issue, themed "The Blacks and the Whites." The subject had special meaning for Hopkins, who had grim memories from growing up in "a little segregated Mississippi Delta town."

He remembers convincing the editors to change *Look's* traditional fashion story into "an ode to black beauty," which Turner photographed in his signature graphic style. Probably no shooter has ever manipulated silhouettes and color saturation as audaciously as Pete Turner. The result of the "Black Beauty" collaboration is a series of three stunning, textural close-ups, featured explosively large on the magazine's oversized pages, each accented by smaller,



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square-finished detail shots on the opposite side of the spread.

Life Beyond Look

As the samples arrayed on these pages demonstrate, Will Hopkins' unique design skills have been in demand long since the demise of *Look*, and well into the era of new, alternative media, where magazine publishing still persists as a viable industry. The firm of Hopkins-Baumann remains in perpetual motion, (ensconced in the spectacular renovation of a vintage industrial building in downtown Minneapolis) designing and redesigning magazines of every stripe: the sleek Brazilian fashion book *Claudia* (Hopkins-Baumann's redesign increased circulation by 300,000 readers); lifestyle magazines, *American Health* and *Mother Earth News*; specialty publica-

tions for American Express, Canon (the Explorers of Light series), Ringling Bros, Barnum and Bailey Circus; the always dazzling *American Photographer*; a lively educational magazine, *Kids Discover*, now in its 15th year, and the 75th anniversary edition of *Reader's Digest*, still reigning as the world's largest circulation monthly.

There are books as well in the Hopkins oeuvre, impressive one-shots, some of a genre Hopkins likes to call "photo archeology," featuring the work of dedicated editorial shooters—John Dominis, Howell Conant and others—who spent years documenting subjects like Frank Sinatra, Grace Kelly, Martin Luther King. Hopkins is consistently amazed at the level of intimacy these picture biographies create between photographer and subject. He recalls traveling out to Block Island to work with Conant on the

Grace Kelly book: "Howell was in his eighties, and still so in love with the woman, he could barely talk about her."

Recently, Hopkins-Baumann's book publishing forays have begun to explore the lure and mystery of deep space, an outgrowth of their work on *Kids Discover* (see this month's "Light Reading," p. 78). And practically every serious photographer has some familiarity with one of Hopkins' personal crown jewels: the Masters of Contemporary Photography series. Nowhere is this designer's passion for the power of the photograph more evident than in this innovative collection, which probes the techniques and personalities of star-quality commercial shooters—Bert Stern, Paul Fusco, Annie Leibovitz, Mark Kaufman, John Zimmerman, Art Kane, Mary Ellen Mark and more.

Bob Ciano, former art director of *Life*, *Esquire* and *Travel & Leisure*, once expressed his admiration for Hopkins' facility at "stripping away the decorative aspects of design. He's pared it down," says Ciano, "to the essence of communicating information." Which explains, rather neatly, Will Hopkins' love for solving design problems with photographs rather than illustrations or elaborate design tricks. "I always liked one of (photojournalist) David Douglas Duncan's lines: 'I'm not an artist. I'm a practitioner.' I think that might also describe me," he says.



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