

He definitely wasn't one of the Mad Men, not least because he "was better looking than Don Draper", but, as an originator of "the big idea", Lois sparked a creative and artistic revolution in the 1960s. Now, he says, the industry in its current state "sucks"

MR GEORGE LOIS ESQ

By Lindsay Stein



George Lois doesn't pull any punches when describing the state of adland today. "Advertising is a lost art. Look at it. It's all terrible. The work sucks. The industry sucks," he rails, arguing that the industry is completely devoid of talent.

The creative icon, who turns 88 this month, was one of the original Mad Men who helped revolutionise the American advertising and graphic design industries by making creativity its beating heart. Now, he believes it's time for another shake-up.

"It's simple – the future of advertising won't happen until somebody starts a new creative revolution. What the world is waiting for is what I did when I was a young guy. I started the advertising creative revolution and changed advertising immediately," he says. "You only need one group of people with real talent to start the creative revolution again."

Big mouth strikes again
Lois began his advertising career in the late 1950s after he returned from the Korean War. Initially he worked at the TV station CBS, before moving to ad agency DDB, and then setting up his own agency Papert Koenig Lois in 1960, which became the first ad shop to go public. He has founded several agencies since, including Lois Holland Callaway, Lois/USA and Lois TransMedia.

Big mouth strikes again

Some describe Lois as a real-life Don Draper, the protagonist in the TV show *Mad Men*, although he dislikes comparisons. Lois argues that the show was not an accurate portrayal of his world – he says, unlike Draper, he is not a womaniser and adds that he and his peers worked hard and were talented.

As he once wrote: "The more I think about *Mad Men*, the more I take the show as a personal insult. So, fuck you, *Mad Men* – you phoney, 'Grey Flannel Suit', male-chauvinist, no-talent, WASP, white-shirted, racist, anti-semitic, Republican SOB! Besides, when I was in my 30s, I was better-looking than Don Draper."

Lois has never been afraid to speak his mind – once threatening to jump out of a window when a client rejected his ad campaign. The client changed his mind rapidly.

His candour is a quality he has had since childhood. Born in New York City to Greek immigrant parents, Lois was drafted into the US army in 1951. During a roll call, he couldn't help but hit back at a major, who had aimed a derogatory term at him, telling him to "Go fuck yourself!". That retort earned Lois 14 weeks' worth of punishment before he was shipped off to Korea.

"At every opportunity, I have attempted to speak truth to power... by creating graphic imagery and organising battles against ethnic, religious and racial injustice, always standing against a conservative, indoctrinated, and racist society, and playing a conscious role... as a cultural provocateur," Lois wrote in his 2012 book *Damn Good Advice*.

This mindset proved the spark for Lois' creative firepower, which led him to develop some of the most memorable ads and designs of all time.

The "big idea"
Lois was an originator of "the big idea" concept, which has shaped adland ever since. "The big idea is the name of the game. You don't just create advertising. It has to be about the big idea," he says.

Indeed, Lois' famous work for MTV in 1982 came from one of his legendary "big ideas". The television music channel was failing and in desperate need of a pick-me-up. By somehow managing to convince rock star Mick Jagger to do his bit for zero pay, Lois brought MTV back into the game with the "I want my MTV" campaign.

Another of his big ideas – and the piece of work of which he says he's most proud – is the billboard that made fashion designer Tommy Hilfiger famous.

When Hilfiger launched his clothing brand in the US, he was completely unknown, but his period of anonymity was shortlived, thanks to Lois.

Hilfiger originally wanted a typical fashion ad – young models showing off his clothes. Lois wasn't having that. Instead, the zealous art director made Hilfiger go far outside his comfort zone by creating a billboard that compared him to famed fashion designers, including Ralph Lauren, Calvin Klein and Perry Ellis. The billboard, which stood in New York's Times Square, bearing letters 10-feet high, piqued interest among consumers.

"THE IMAGE OF MUHAMMAD ALI TO DRAMATISE THE BOXER'S PERSECUTION FOR HIS PERSONAL BELIEFS, IS THE GREATEST MAGAZINE COVER EVER CREATED. IT'S NOT JUST A GREAT IDEA, BUT VISUALLY ELEGANT, ECONOMICAL, PERFECT"
KURT ANDERSEN

Following that ad, Lois launched successive executions, one of which boldly declared: "First there was Geoffrey Beene, Bill Blass and Stanley Blacker... Then Calvin Klein, Perry Ellis and Ralph Lauren..."

Tommy Hilfiger rapidly became a household name around the world.

Jason Peterson, a former Havas chief creative officer, who launched creative agency The Times earlier this year, says of the campaign: "Tommy Hilfiger was nothing, but Lois said: 'We're not going in the middle. We are going to the top.' The audacity of that is amazing. We always say we want something that's worthy of being viral and, to me, that's what he did."

Peterson, who refers to Lois as one of his advertising idols, says that brands and agencies are not as brave as they used to be when it comes to outside-the-box thinking. "Agencies now will do whatever the clients want to do and soft-peddle," he adds. "That's the problem with the industry. That's why creativity is lost today in our business. We need to add true value to the client."

"I don't collaborate with clients"
Agencies are constantly trying to figure out the best ways to work with competitors, vendors and, most importantly, their clients. But Lois doesn't believe in collaboration. He believes in pushing the client. "I don't collaborate with clients," he says. "I force them to do great work, literally. I don't think we push brands enough. I push them by making something so sensational, so memorable, their business triples."

"I don't collaborate with clients"

While Lois may sound arrogant, he has the evidence to back up his statements. In 1982, he told *USA Today*, which had just launched and was struggling to attract advertisers, that its own ads were bad. "You're doing pussy advertising now," he told Al Neuharth, former chairman of *USA Today* parent Gannett. "You ought to be doing triumphant fucking advertising."

Not only did Lois convince *USA Today* to run a boundary-breaking ad, but he also managed to get the publication to drop its then agency, Y&R, in favour of hiring him.

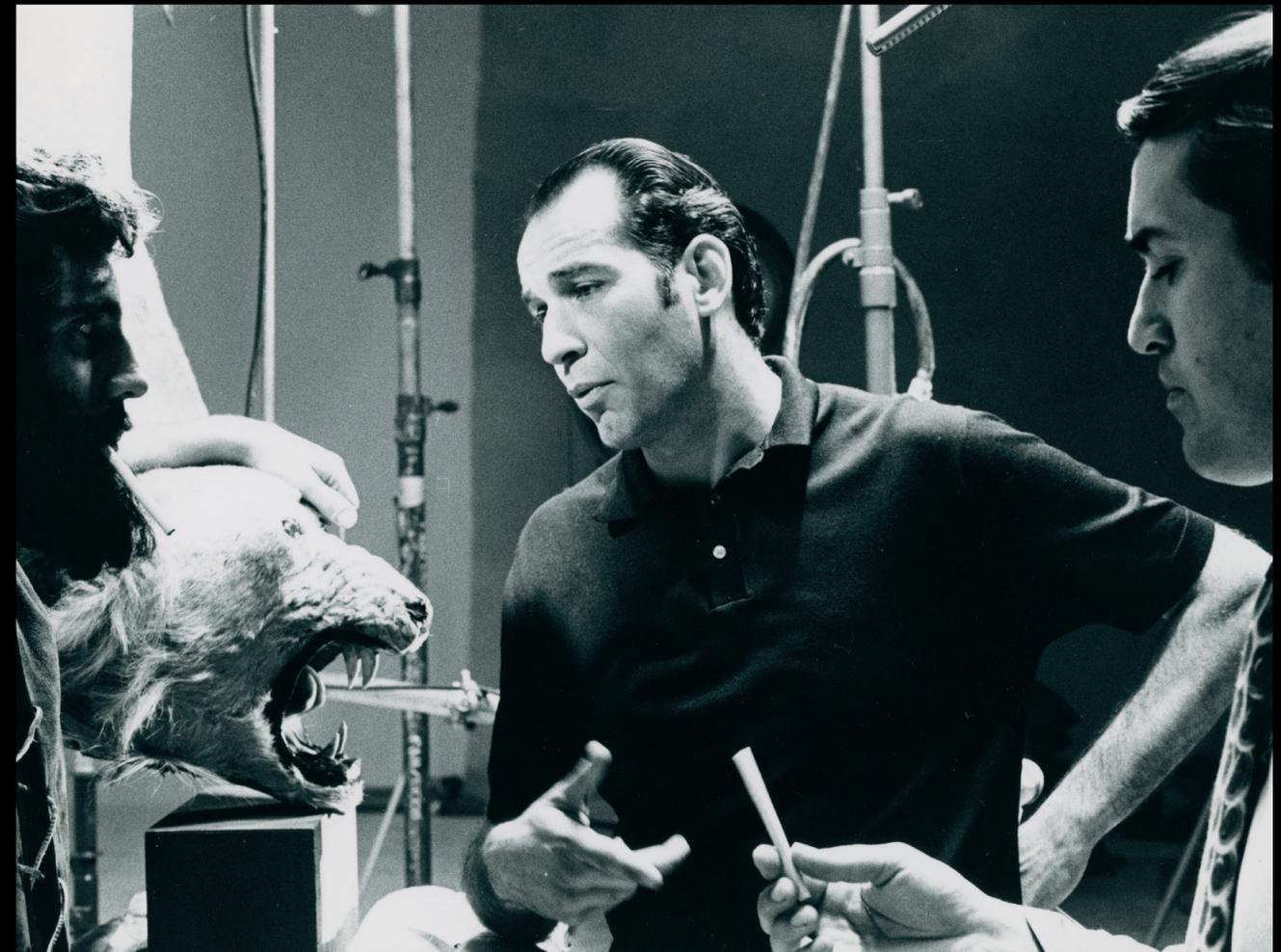
Lois' ad, which featured a hybrid fish-chicken creature, stated: "A lot of media people are saying *USA Today* is neither fish nor fowl. They're right! To our readers, we're a newspaper – bold, exciting, colorful and unique. To our advertisers, we're a news magazine – bold, exciting, colorful and unique. The truth is, we don't care much what you call us. Just as long as you call us."

The campaign went on to win a clutch of awards and transformed the perception of *USA Today*. Peterson admires the fact that Lois has always had a voice and stands up for what he believes. His "forceful perspective and confidence" allowed him to stand out, he adds.

"If you look at the work he's done, he has a different level of thinking based on honesty and transparency and saying what's on everybody's mind but nobody says it – and he says it in a bold way," Peterson says.

He argues that Lois' artistic prowess had a creative point of view that resonated with people and tapped into culture. "That's the piece that's been lost in advertising," he adds.

Peterson picks out Lois' American Airlines campaign from 1955 as an example of his "honest, »

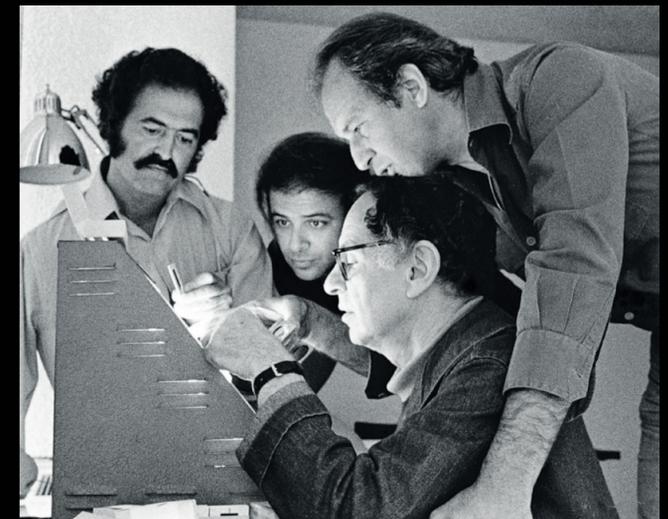


Lois directs Japanese baseball player Masaichi Kaneda

Lois and Don King



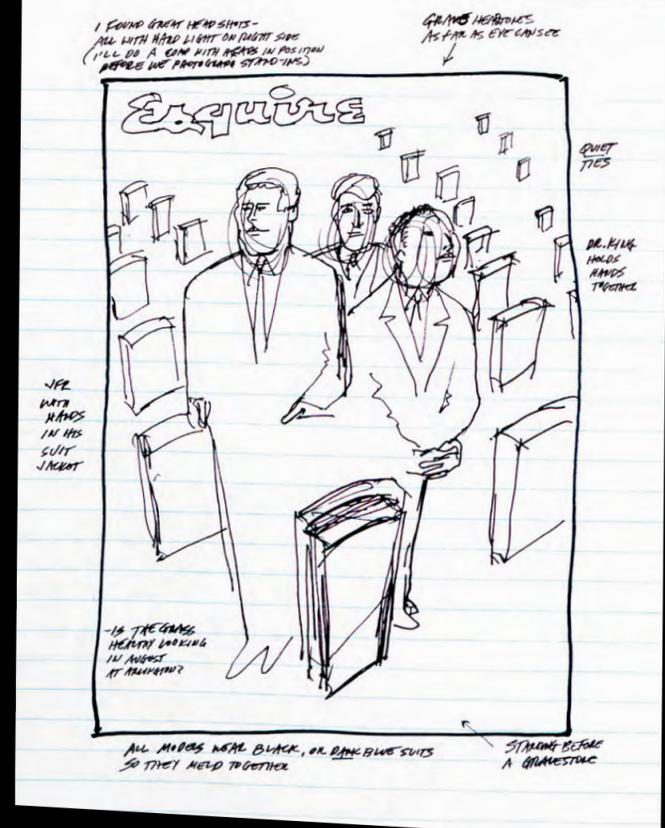
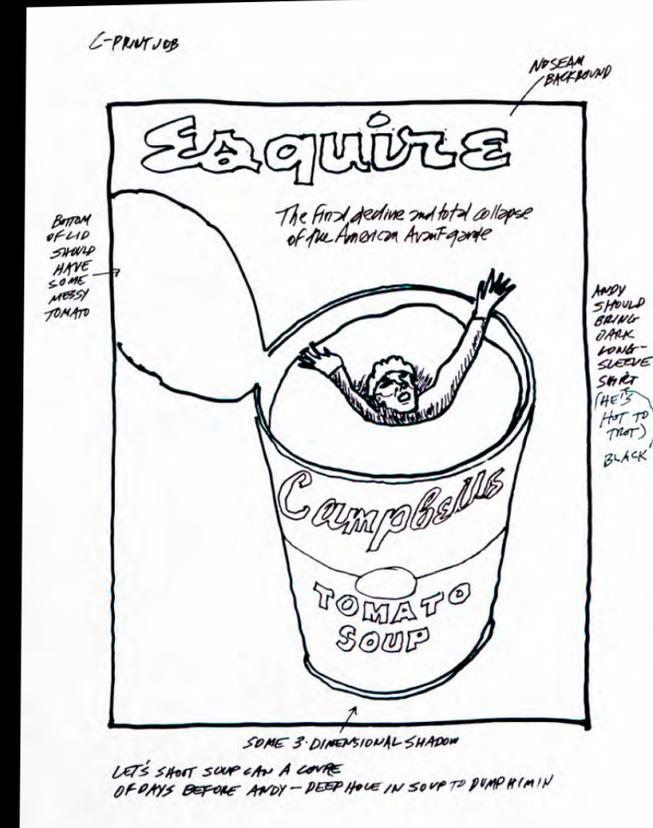
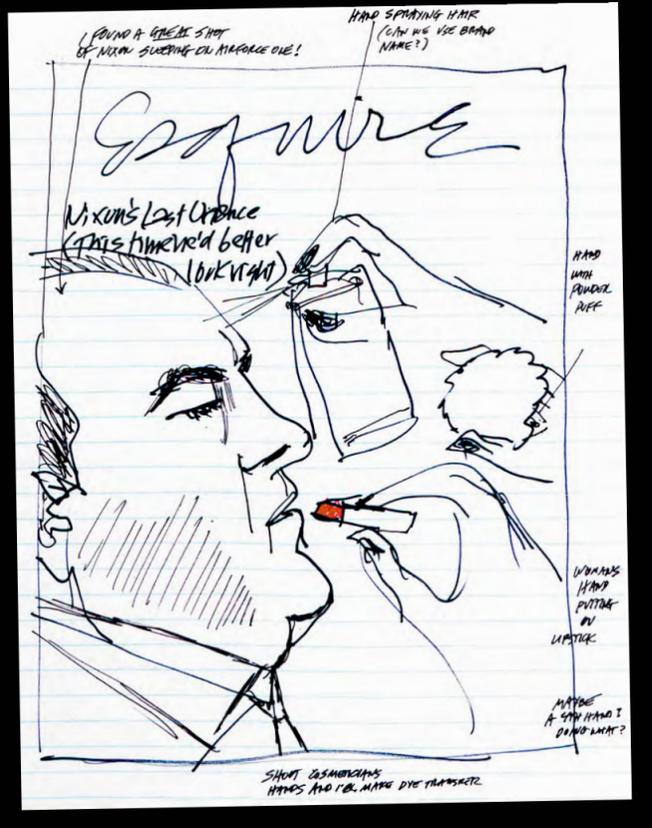
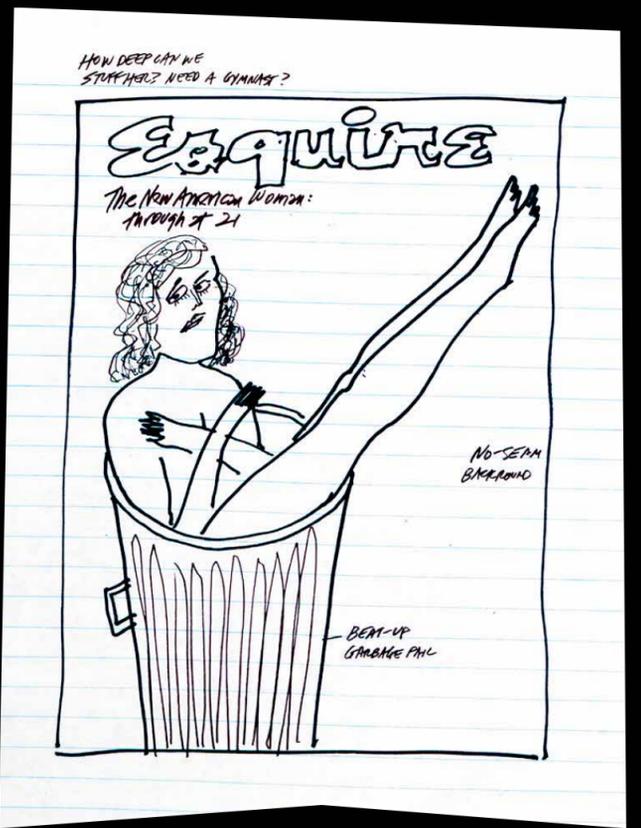
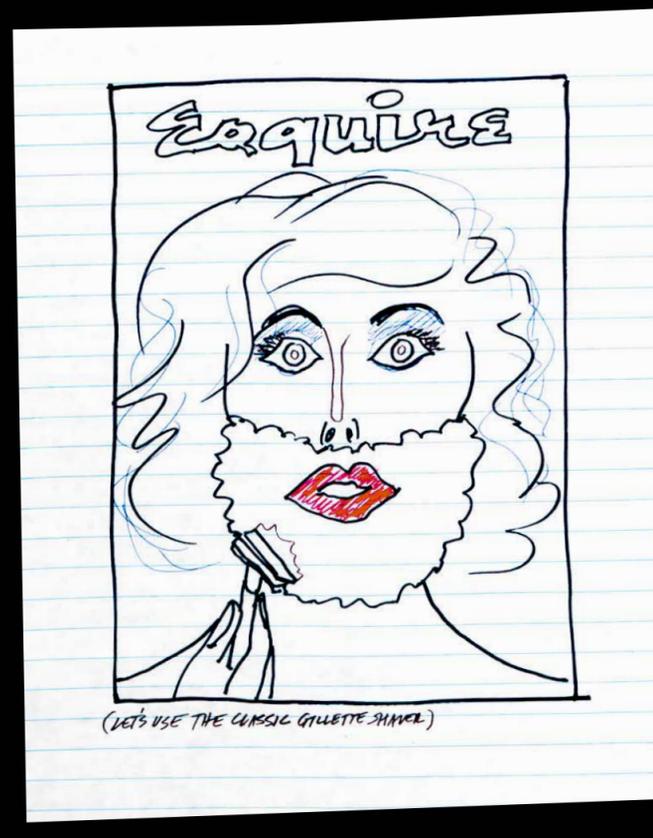
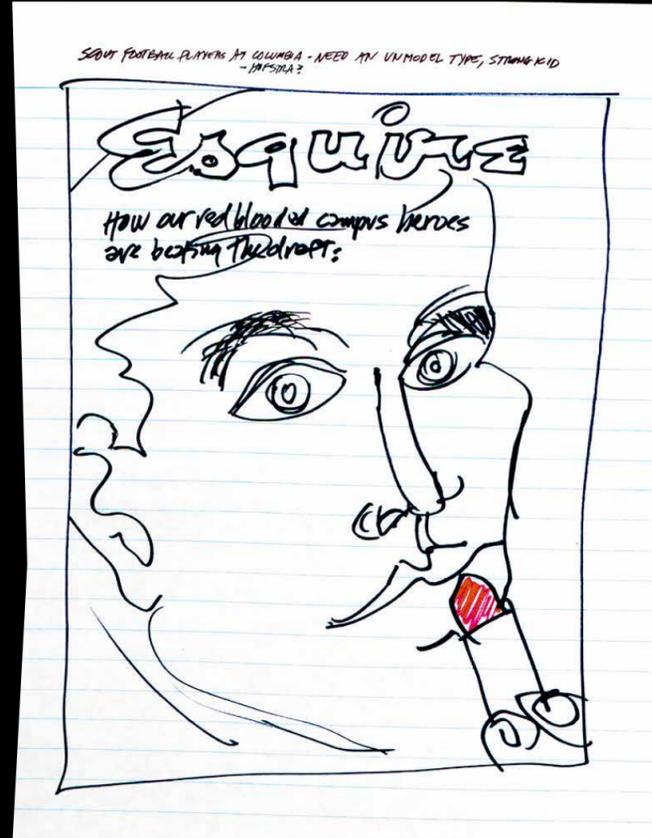
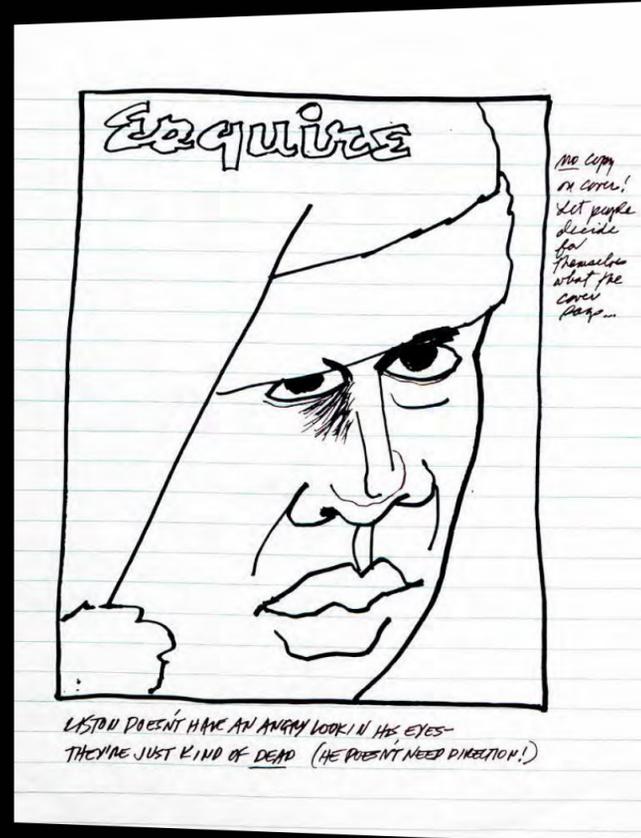
Lois with baseball legend Yogi Berra



THE ESQUIRE COVERS

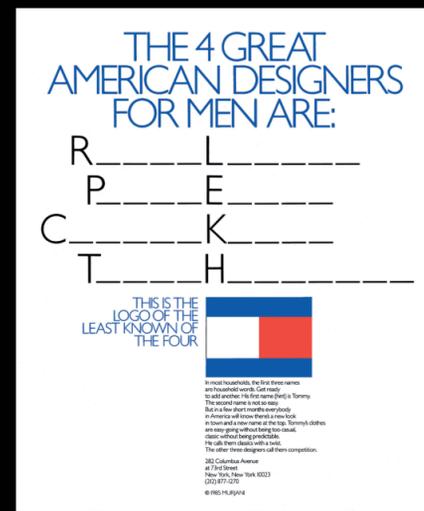
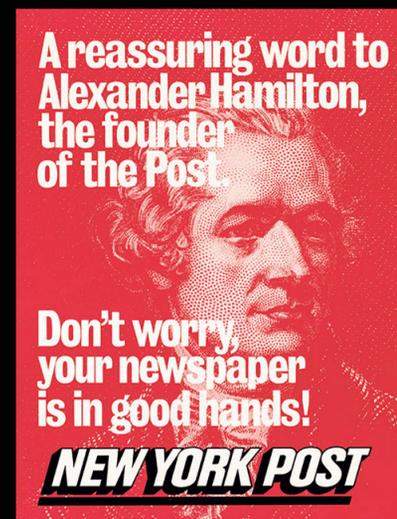
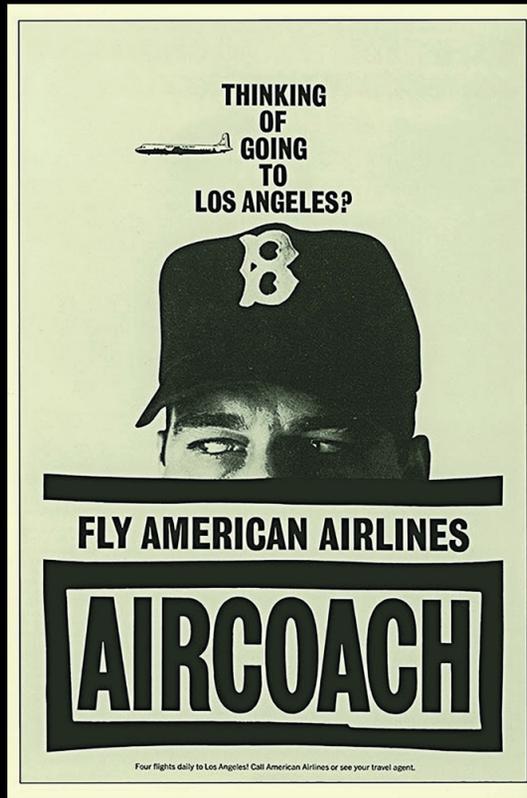
George Lois produced a series of lauded covers for Esquire. Pictured below are some of the sketches that Lois sent to the photographers in preparation for setting up the cover

shoots. The respective covers in their final form, which featured well-known faces such as disgraced US president Richard Nixon and pop artist Andy Warhol, are pictured on the far right.



THE WORK

Below: MTV ads (1982), which featured stars such as David Bowie, revived the ailing music channel. Right: Lois' first ad for an ad agency was for American Airlines (1955). Far right: a bus-shelter poster for the *New York Post* (1988). Centre far right: early ad for fashion designer Tommy Hilfiger (1985).



Left: work for Aviiion Data General (1982) played on the computer company's pizza-box-like logo. Above: in 1962 *New York New York* was suggested by Lois as the title for a proposed *New York Herald Tribune* Sunday supplement, with the title eventually truncated to *New York* before launch. Below: Lois' stated aim for oil-change brand Jiffy Lube was to make it "the McDonald's of the 80s".



human, almost trolling-like theme". The work was Lois' first for an ad agency – and it made quite a splash. At the time, New Yorkers were upset about rumours that the city's Brooklyn Dodgers baseball team was moving to Los Angeles, so Lois decided he could tie that into the American Airlines ad by using one of the Dodgers squad. The idea was to have the player looking towards the West, with the line: "Thinking of going to Los Angeles? Fly American Airlines." The problem was that none of the Dodgers players would do it. But that didn't stop Lois. He simply posed for the ad himself, with only his eyes showing and the rest of his face covered by an American Airlines logo.

Following the ad's launch, bookings on American Airlines' flights to Los Angeles spiked. Critics might say that Lois' bold approach worked only because it was a different time. Agencies today have less power, now that client budgets are shrinking and margins are narrowing. But Lois argues this is just an excuse. "You don't have to have a big budget at all. A big idea doesn't need a big budget. I did famous campaigns with no budgets at all," Lois says. He adds that the internet – and technology in general – has "destroyed advertising". "It's a great tool, but it has caused complete digital dumbness. People don't know what they're doing," Lois says. "I hope WPP, Omnicom, Publicis, Interpublic and Dentsu all go out of business," he adds. He argues that these big groups have had a detrimental effect on the industry, because the consolidation of smaller boutique agencies, combined with the rise of data and focus groups, has hastened the death of creative advertising.

Cover versions
Lois has also been much celebrated for creating a series of powerful *Esquire* magazine covers between 1962 and 1972, some of which are currently housed in New York's Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection.

In April of 1968, Lois put boxer Muhammad Ali on the cover of *Esquire*, posing as the Christian martyr Saint Sebastian. A year earlier, Ali had refused to join the army on the grounds of his Muslim faith. This led many to call him a traitor and he ended up facing jail time for draft evasion. The powerful image of Ali on the cover became a non-violent protest symbol.

The US radio show host and writer Kurt Andersen once said of it: "[Lois'] April 1968 image of Muhammad Ali, to dramatise the boxer's persecution for his personal beliefs, is the greatest magazine cover ever created, making a political statement without being grim or stupid or predictable. It's not just a great idea, but visually elegant, economical, perfect."

Another of Lois' *Esquire* covers, produced in 1968 for the magazine's 35th anniversary issue, depicted three of the US's most loved – and mourned – leaders, all of whom had been assassinated: John F Kennedy, Robert Kennedy and Martin Luther King. The trio is shown watching over the Arlington National Cemetery, where the two Kennedy brothers are buried.

Interestingly, Lois' swagger has also brought with it controversy. In 2009, the podcast *This American Life* interviewed some of Lois' former colleagues, who claimed he took credit for ad campaigns, ad

copy and *Esquire* covers that were either partially or wholly the work of others. The podcast episode, which was dated 19 June, was produced by Sarah Koenig, the daughter of Julian Koenig, with whom Lois had set up PKL and who featured on the show.

Whether there is any truth to the claims made or not, there is no denying the impact Lois has made on adland in general. "My first acquaintance with George Lois' work was seeing some of his iconic *Esquire* magazine covers. His ad campaigns have the same punchy graphic visual impact," Cindy Gallop, an ad agency veteran and founder of Make Love Not Porn, says.

Gallop cites one of her favourite Lois ads as the "Who just fit mainframe power in a pizza box?" piece for Data General's Aviiion system in 1982, in which he played off of the brand's pizza-shaped logo.

Gallop describes the ad as having "an entertaining resonance", with Apple having recently made its own circular pizza box, which was featured in one of its spots.

Lois says that Lee Clow, founder and chairman of TBWA\Media Arts Lab, who was behind the revolutionary "1984" commercial introducing Apple's Macintosh, is one of his advertising idols.

The feeling, it seems, is mutual. "George Lois has been my hero since 1968 when I discovered advertising," Clow says. "George represented all the things that inspired an entire generation of young creative 'mongrels' to believe, if they loved the 'art of advertising,' and were a little bit crazy, no matter where you came from, that you could make it in this 'ivy league', Madison Avenue world. Even if you weren't Protestant, white, male, or worked in New York."

He adds: "It says a lot about our industry that you can come from anywhere and with passion, desire, and a little bit of talent, have a life of work that is incredibly rewarding, in more ways than one."

It's true that Lois' view on the industry today is far from optimistic. But adland could probably benefit from his punchier approach to work and listening to some of his guidance.

On one of the last pages of *Damn Good Advice*, Lois wrote: "The courage to create only superb work, through thick and thin, and fight to protect it at all costs is not generated in the head... it comes from your very heart and soul."

There's the challenge for the industry, if it is willing to take it on.

"I HOPE WPP, OMNICOM, PUBLICIS, INTERPUBLIC AND DENTSU ALL GO OUT OF BUSINESS"
GEORGE LOIS

LOIS RESPONDS TO SOME OF THE CONTROVERSIES

Julian Koenig has made the scurrilous claim that I am arrogant.

Heavens to Betsy. I teach art directors to be arrogant. I tell them to never be cocky – but they must be cocksure. I teach them that when they work with a copywriter – they must, finally, be in charge, because the final ad must be brilliant in all aspects. The words and images in big idea advertising must work together in concert, to catch people's eyes, penetrate their minds, warm their hearts and cause them to act. Copywriters, even great copywriters, routinely write headlines that the talented art director can't conceptually create, a mnemonic visual that synergistically works with a proposed headline. Two of Koenig's best-known quotes that related to working with me were answering the question: "How do we work at Papert Koenig Lois?" He wrote: "A snarling copywriter is locked in a room with an egomaniacal art director and we don't let them out until they are purring." And, in answer to the question "How can you become a good copywriter?", he said: "Get yourself a great art director." (Both quotes are from Koenig's speech at The Advertising Writers Club, 9 November, 1961.)

I have been accused of taking credit for writing the slogan "I want my Mayo".

In 1967, Mayo was considered a baby cereal. I told my client we could increase their sales by adding pre-teenagers to the target audience. They had originally succeeded in 1956 with a well-known TV campaign of a childish cartoon-style Markey Mayo (drawn by John Hubley) crying "I want my Mayo" to his mom. So I enlisted six of the greatest superstars of professional sports to sell Mayo, all in one spot, weeping and moaning: "I want my Mayo." In those days American consumers understood that macho sports icons crying "I want my Mayo" was a delightful parody of the original Markey Mayo campaign. I have always claimed I've rebranded Mayo to make it more appealing to older kids, by adapting and transforming the perky, old slogan.

Carl Fischer, one of the six photographers I hired to shoot my [Esquire] covers, continues to imply that he actually conceived some of them.

I have in my possession my original tightly drawn comps I sent to each photographer, with instructions and helpful comments for each *Esquire* cover shoot, in preparation for when I directed in person, except for three (out of 90 shoots) when it was impossible to postpone critical ad agency TV shoots or client meetings.