

Seventy years after publication, the infographics at the heart of Herbert Bayer's *World Geo-Graphic Atlas* are still front and center—now as part of a new exhibition in Aspen.

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HOW CAN INFORMATION TELL A STORY ABOUT THE WORLD AROUND US—AND OURSELVES?

That's the question at the center of the Aspen Institute's upcoming *Concept of a Visualist: Herbert Bayer's World Geo-Graphic Atlas* exhibition, opening June 20, 2023, at the renowned Aspen Meadows Campus Resnick Center for Herbert Bayer Studies.

Running through April 2024, the installation centers on the groundbreaking 368-page reference guide Bayer produced in 1953 for Walter Paepcke to celebrate the Container Corporation of America (CCA)'s 25th anniversary.

"How do you make an exhibition about a book?" asks Benjamin Benus, Ph.D., and associate professor of art history at Loyola University of New Orleans, explaining the challenge he was up against as co-curator of the show's enlarged page selections, photographic documentation, preliminary sketches, and never-before-seen paintings from the mid-century visionary.

From visually engaging statistics to countable pictograms, Bayer's work plays an important role in the popularity of data visualization techniques employed today. Though not the first use of infographics, Bayer's work is credited by Benus for its effectiveness in influencing generations of designers. He notes its "less is more" incorporation of dynamic page

WORDS: Cory Phare

design, full-spread layouts, deliberately off-center graphic orientations, and use of negative space as an active element.

"Figuring out when to use pictorial graphics to augment the limitations of what text can accomplish is crucial," he says of Bayer's infographic expertise. "It's an almost cinematic experience as the viewer scans the page."

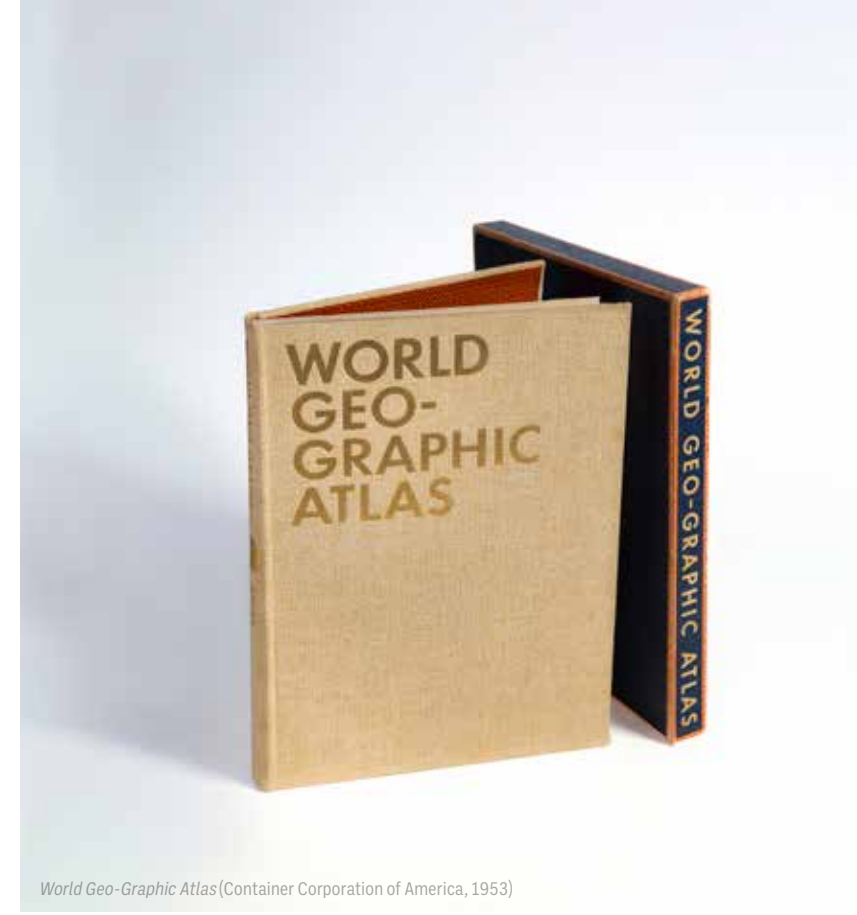
The exhibition, co-curated with Bayer expert Bernard Jazzar, is multimodal and interdisciplinary, a fitting approach to represent a creator who worked across media. Be it sculpture, graphic design, photography, or architecture, Bayer fully embodied the Bauhaus ethos of dismantling previously siloed hierarchies and empowering design-driven accessibility.

"He really saw all forms of visual communication as a potential for creative expression," Benus says. "Within Bauhaus, the arts could and should be integrated into everyday life, eliminating the imposed barriers that kept them separate. The atlas is a perfect example of this."

The origin of the *World Geo-Graphic Atlas* stretches back to industrialist Paepcke's immigrant father, who, as the owner of Chicago Mill and Lumber, created personally inscribed copies of Rand McNally reference books for shareholders and customers as holiday gifts.

As the junior Paepcke took the helm and launched CCA as a successful corporate packaging-provider in 1926, he understood the importance of establishing a visual brand identity in order to grow customer affinity. Continuing his father's tradition, Paepcke had an in-house world atlas designed to celebrate the organization's 10-year anniversary—serving as progenitor to Bayer's later work.

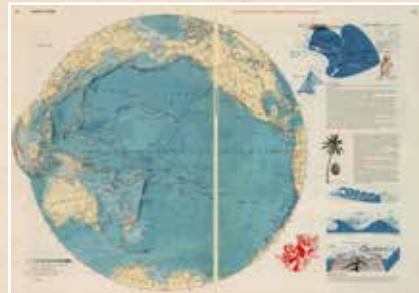
First presented at the Aspen Institute's 1953 International Design Conference, Herbert Bayer's *World Geo-Graphic Atlas* [ABOVE] was a watershed for data visualization, reference books, and environmental sustainability. The upcoming exhibition opening June 2023 at the Resnick Center for Herbert Bayer Studies [RIGHT] commemorates the 70th anniversary of its publication. The exhibition showcases never-before-seen artifacts and provides new insights into Bayer's larger body of artwork, highlighting the atlas's continued relevance for audiences today.



World Geo-Graphic Atlas (Container Corporation of America, 1953)

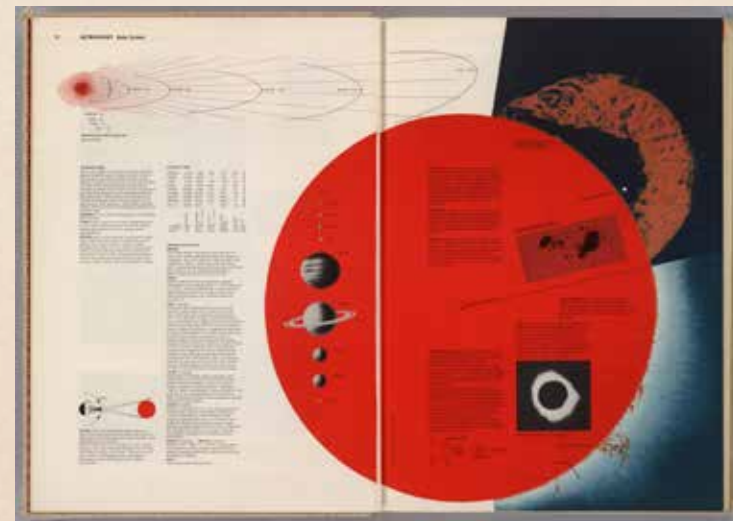


Photo: Bernard Jazzar



Not a scientist himself, Bayer consulted with subject-matter experts to understand the interdisciplinary and overlapping fields found in his atlas, drawing on his varied interests in geology, astronomy, sociology, natural history, and economics. Benus notes that Bayer was also inspired by other contemporary design innovations—like Buckminster Fuller’s Dymaxion map projections—as a way to present thought-provoking information.

“FIGURING OUT WHEN TO USE PICTORIAL GRAPHICS TO AUGMENT THE LIMITATIONS OF WHAT TEXT CAN ACCOMPLISH IS CRUCIAL. IT’S AN ALMOST CINEMATIC EXPERIENCE AS THE VIEWER SCANS THE PAGE.” – Benjamin Benus

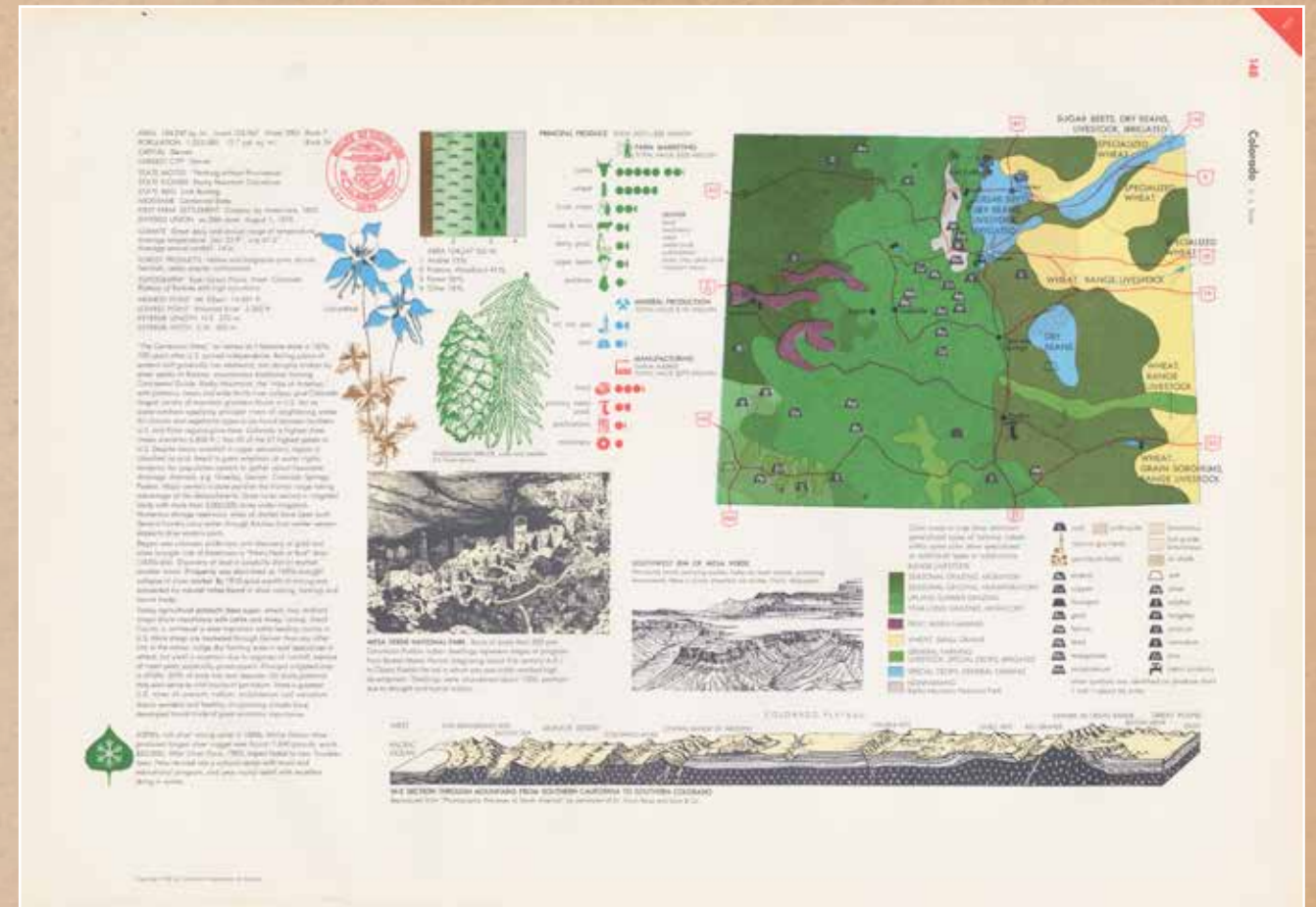


Images this page: Courtesy of David Rumsey Historical Map Collection

During the 1940s, CCA commissioned ads from several European modernists, including Bayer. An Austrian who’d fled the rise of fascism and its dictates of a constrained aesthetic, the designer was invited to Aspen by Paepcke in 1946. Falling in love with both the familiar alpine environment and the town’s creative ethos—later leading to his involvement in developing the Aspen Institute’s campus—Bayer

agreed to take on the project that’d become the *World Geo-Graphic Atlas*. Initially envisioned as a straightforward update of the 1936 version, it became clear that, following World War II, a different approach was necessary. “The world had changed so dramatically,” Benus says. “Bayer had ideas that this could be a new

kind of reference work altogether. Not only maps, but a way to teach people how to read information and think analytically about the data it contained.” The atlas provided Bayer a new kind of form to experiment with, incorporating his varied interests of natural history, geology, meteorology, demographics, and economics into educational



Colorado, *World Geo-Graphic Atlas* (Container Corporation of America, 1953), p. 148

graphics. He’d already proven himself as a visual changemaker across forms, and Paepcke essentially gave him carte blanche to literally reimagine a world of possibilities. When the final product was finished in 1953—two years later than planned due to production and budget overruns—the result was groundbreaking enough to attract interest from commercial publishers. This made CCA’s decision to decline the offers and stick to a limited run for supporters and research institutions all the more remarkable. One of the standout features of the *World Geo-Graphic Atlas*

is its awareness and social responsibility to sustainability. Emerging environmental consciousness existed at the time, but generally wasn’t at the forefront of many mid-century conversations—let alone found in a reference book. “Bayer put emphasis on this idea that human behavior was impacting the world around us, that natural resources were finite and that industrialization could have a potentially irreversible impact,” Benus says. Even more surprising: It has a narrative structure. Beginning with a universal scale, it zooms in on the planetary, then regional,

teasing out thematic social lenses along the way and culminating with a provocation for readers to wrestle with the information they just read. As Benus notes, it’s this foresight across generations that makes the questions as relevant today as they were 70 years ago. “We’re at a crossroads—what do we want the future to be?” Bayer reflected in the forward. That certainly wasn’t what you were expecting to read in a 1950s atlas.” **For more information visit: thebayercenter.org.**