

# **DAMN GOOD ADVICE FROM GEORGE LOIS**

A NO-HOLDS-BARRED, IN-YOUR-FACE TALK GIVEN BY THE ACCLAIMED  
CULTURAL PROVOCATEUR AT THE ADC 93RD ANNUAL AWARDS + FESTIVAL  
OF ART + CRAFT IN ADVERTISING AND DESIGN  
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## **Is what we do Art?**

Any attempt to understand the Art of Advertising as a serious expression of a man's creative originality is usually overwhelmed by controversy over morality and ethics. We tend to equate Art with Virtue and Commerce with Sin. According to some critics who try to understand its massive impact on modern living, advertising is a 20th and 21st century love-potion: it arouses wants beyond means, it invites extreme consumption, it conjures a material paradise as life's goal.

## **It is not easy to explain the complexity of the ethos that inspires my life of creating ideas for selling.**

Since I was a youngster in public school, I lived to draw, design, rearrange things. I knew I was going to be an artist. What kind, I didn't know. But I was going to be an *artist*. When I went to a specialized high school (The High School of Music & Art) I could draw better, design better, sculpt better, paint better, do better in history of art courses, than anyone in school.

## **But my special fascination was with that art that was expected to persuade, to sell.**

Like no other art I was studying, it required a cause and effect connection, or it simply couldn't work.

In high school, I worshipped the paintings of Stuart Davis, with his floating words jammed between objects and images, but the spontaneity of a Cassandre poster seemed even more thrilling by the merging of words and images into a wholly new language. There were more hints of this new way of communicating in the work of Paul Rand who struck out boldly during the 40's by visualizing copy in an individualistic manner. At age 16, I started to get more of a kick out of listening to Cassandre and Rand talk to me, than Picasso or Léger or Matisse or Stuart Davis. I was hooked.

From the role of a lowly layout man, sitting in his room with his thumb up his ass waiting for a piece of copy from a writer and/or account man, the art director in our digital media age must now be a conceptual, Big Idea thinker. I hope I played my part in that legendary transformation, not only with my work, but in 1960, founding the power prototype ad agency that, for the first time, announced an art director on its masthead, a new force in the creation of their product!

**The art director of today must be a communicator, not simply someone who accepts copy and rearranges elements in a layout or design.**

Written by a copywriter or himself, or in unison, a Big Idea campaign can only be expressed in words that absolutely bristle with visual possibilities, leading to words and visual imagery working in perfect synergy, because the verbal and visual elements of modern communication are as indivisible as words and music in song. Talking to people on a page or TV spot or on the internet has nothing to do with art, other than using art. It has nothing to do with literature other than using today's language. Art and words are merely tools for communicating.

**But all the tools in the world are meaningless without an essential idea.**

(An artist, or advertising person, or doctor, or lawyer, or electrician, or Twitterer, without an idea, is unarmed.) When that original idea springs out of a communicators head and intuitions, the mystical and artful blending (or even juxtaposition) of concept, image, words and art can lead to magic, where one and one can indeed be three.

I had a lot of breaks in my life (including being raised in a hard-working Greek family and marrying the right woman – over 63 years ago) but three people recognized my talent and led me to what I continue to do to this day: My public school art teacher (Mrs. Engle), my design teacher at Pratt (Herschel Levit), and my first boss (Reba Sochis). After working for Reba Sochis and then, returning from fighting in a bad war in Korea, and then a dream job at Bill Golden's atelier at CBS Television, I plunged into the mediocrity of the commercial world and got myself a reputation as the enfant terrible of the advertising world.

I'm sure I deserved it, and I'm just as sure that without fighting for my work every second of my life, my work would be just as dull and uninspired as most of the so-called communications in the world (the bland leading the bland).

**To produce work I could be proud of, I've had to shove, push, cajole, persuade, wheedle, exaggerate, manipulate, flatter, be obnoxious, occasionally lie, and always sell.**

And with all those lucky breaks of mother and father and teachers and wife and sons and first jobs, I believe a man still decides his own fate, that he ordains what kind of family life he has and what kind of work he wants to produce. He can, and must decide that no client can make him run a bad ad! A client can kill and kill and kill what you think is right for him (the Abominable No-man), but he can't make you run bad work. Your choice is to fight back with an even better creative idea (or find better clients).

**The ethos of my life has been to believe that creativity can solve almost any problem – the Big Idea, the defeat of habit by originality, overcomes everything!**

Big Ideas can change world culture. Our mission is not to sedate, but to awaken, to disturb, to communicate, to command, to instigate, and even to provoke. The Big Idea in advertising sears the virtue of a product into a viewers brain and heart, resulting in a sales explosion. I know that in the act of creativity, being careful guarantees sameness and mediocrity, which means your work will be invisible.

**You can be Cautious or you can be Creative (but there's no such thing as a Cautious Creative).**

Better to be reckless than careful.

Better to be bold than safe.

Better to have your work seen and remembered, or you've struck out. There is no middle ground.

But understand, a talented but meek creative personality who allows Big Ideas to be trampled upon, can never join the pantheon of the greats, because timidity and fear of the fray leads to mediocrity.

**The more innovative your idea, the more courageous you must be to sell it.**

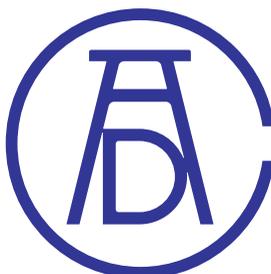
A work of art derives its identity from its visibility and from the response it evokes in others. I spend my spare moments drinking in that art created by generations of artists who have been the antennae of human sensibility. Artists who understood that art of the past but who broke violently with it according to the needs of their time. I see my role as precisely that of an artist.

**My kind of art has nothing to do with putting images on canvas. My concern is with creating images that catch people's eyes, penetrate their minds, warm their hearts, and cause them to act.**

But is it possible that cause and effect conceptual thinking can truly be regarded as Art? Can what we do be regarded as art?! You're damned right it can be art. Spend your life rejecting Con – and you can create...Icon! If you don't believe that what we do can be Icon rather than Con, you'll never understand the potential of great creativity.

In 2008, my argument was validated when the Museum of Modern Art installed 32 of my *Esquire* covers of the 1960s into their permanent Art, validating the possibility that the best of the work we do, can be called...works of Art.

**Creativity in branding and graphic design, as I practice it, is art. If you are talented and passionate enough, you too... can create art.**



## Spend your life rejecting Con....



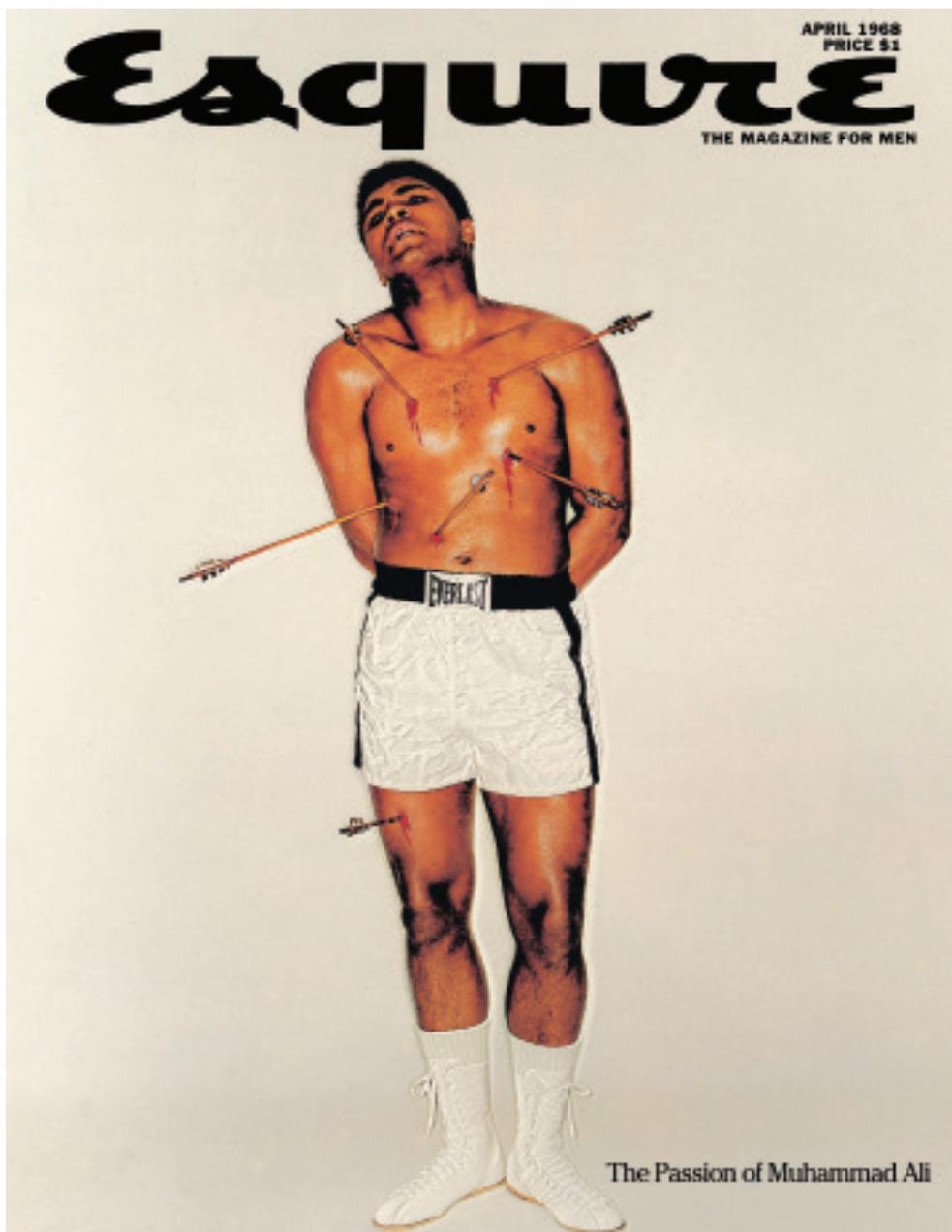
Richard Nixon, campaigning for the presidency in 1968.

Nixon conned America when he proclaimed that he would end the war, but instead he escalated America's involvement in Vietnam.

President Nixon was obsessed with stifling antiwar dissent, and "Cassius Clay" was his nemesis.

According to the White House chief of staff, Nixon called Ali "that draft-dodger asshole."

**And you can create...Icon!**



The Associated Press wrote that showing Muhammad Ali as a martyr for refusing to fight in a bad war was “the most iconic image of the '60s, tying together the incendiary issues of the Vietnam War, race, and religion. The image is so powerful that some people remember where they were when they saw it for the first time.”

**If you do it right, it, and you,  
will live forever!**

GEORGE LOIS

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