

by Karen Sorensen



### Clement Mok: A master of Macintosh design

A bustling madness descended on the designers as the deadline for Apple's 1987 annual report drew near. Clement Mok, Apple's young creative director, was making numerous last-minute adjustments at the photo session.

Finally, all of the elements of the photograph seemed to be in place: Apple computers, Apple printers, Apple disk drives, Apple everything. The colorful monitors glowed amid misty, gray surroundings. It was a beautiful, striking arrangement, and yet something was still missing.

An impish smile appeared on Mok's face as he related the story from his San Francisco design studio. "The photo was too cold; it felt like '1984' with all these monitors all over the place. The beautiful screens just weren't doing the trick." Mok sat up straight in his chair, his enthusiasm rising, as he flipped open the large, foldout photo in the annual report and points to his solution. There, a barely notice-able lizard crawled across the floor in front of a Macintosh SE.

"Everyone scrutinized this photo," he said, laughing. "It went before (Apple CEO) John Sculley and many other Apple executives for approval, but no one spotted what shouldn't have been there until after it was printed. People loved it. They loved the fact that we could do something like that within a corporation."

The story reveals Mok's obsession with the unusual - a characteristic friends say has greatly contributed to the graphic designer's phenomenal success.

"When Clement puts a lizard in a picture, he does it because he knows it will jog you," said Ellen Romano, a designer who worked with Mok at Apple. "He understands the impact it will have. When you see something

new and unexpected, you remember it."

At 30 years of age, the dark-haired, whimsical Mok is among the top designers in his field. His youthful appearance has led at least one friend to jokingly dub him "the most famous 12-year-old designer in America." Indeed, Mok has won more than 60 national and international graphic arts awards. Thousands of Mac users see a sample of his work every time they turn on their machine and the Picasso-like Mac logo flashes on the screen.

As a member of the original Macintosh graphics team, Mok helped create the well-known illustration that spread from the initial product packaging to the Mac computer interface to sweatshirts and beach towels. Using the Mac, he also condensed and redesigned the MacPaint user's manual, a simple, frequently copied booklet with a strong emphasis on graphics. More recently, he worked on the first HyperCard brochure, as well as Apple's first HyperCard-based annual report.

Today, after five years at Apple, Mok has taken his independence to its logical outcome and has established his own company, Clement Mok Designs, a communication design agency specializing in high-tech packaging and marketing materials. The hours are long and the pace is grueling, but after just seven months, "the volume is there," he said. His list of clients includes companies like Farallon Computing, Claris Corp., Connect Inc. and, not surprisingly, Apple.

Among graphic designers Mok is known as a high-tech wizard - the man who can bridge the left-brain to the right brain and the artist who understands the propeller heads. The reason: he not only creates graphic designs for computer products, he creates graphic designs with computer products.

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His small, brightly lit studio is filled with Macs and a group of young artists eager to use high-tech innovations. An average day might find them huddled around a Mac II, testing the sound and animation track for a computerized press kit or skill full maneuvering a mouse to create a new company image.

"In the design world there is a real phobia about technology," said David Meckel, vice president of the San Francisco chapter of the American Institute for Graphic Arts (AIGA), an organization Mok is active with. "The common perception is technology is for the pocket protector guys and computer nerds, not for artists. The interesting thing about Clement is he has a foot in both worlds."

Mok and his crew use a host of software, including drawing programs like Adobe Illustrator and Aldus Corp.'s FreeHand, and Apple's HyperCard. Clement Mok Designs was the creator of a HyperCard-based press kit distributed by Apple at the Macworld Expo this past August.

Mok's knowledge of computers sometimes enables him to assist clients at the marketing level with product positioning. "Understanding the technology really helps," he said.

Earlier this year, Mok completely redesigned the product and packaging and promotion materials for MacNet, an on-line network from Connect Inc. In addition to the printed material, Connect received a HyperCard demo for the company to distribute to potential customers.

Mok hasn't always been fascinated with computers. Ten years ago, high technology was far from his life and vision of graphic design. Raised in Vancouver, British Columbia, he showed an early talent in art that won him a

graphic arts scholarship to the University of British Columbia and later led him to the well-known Art Center College of Design in Pasadena, Calif. There he was taught conventional methods of design and illustration with an emphasis on packaging.

At age 21 he landed his first job, at CBS in New York, where he designed the CBS Sports logo. But he soon grew unhappy with the heavy hand of art directors. "I was young and arrogant," he said. "No one was going to tell me what to do."

Mok left CBS after six months and was hired as a designer at Donovan and Green, a New York firm he describes as "a hybrid of an ad agency and a design studio." Although happy with his position, Mok was still using traditional, manual methods of design, but he was becoming aware of the potential of computer-generated graphics.

"I was beginning to see some amazing computer technology. Products like the Hell scanner were becoming available, and I was influenced by a host of wonderful things like the special effects of Industrial Light & Magic and the movie "Tron."

Late in 1982 Mok was hired as an illustrator at Apple. "I had no idea what the Mac was. It was just another computer. But I thought, 'what better way to learn about computers than to work for a computer company?'" But after a frustrating first year, Mok was ready to move on. Once again, he had been art directed too much, this time by Steve Jobs.

Ellen Romano, who now heads her own design firm in San Jose, Calif., worked under Mok as a junior designer on the Mac graphics team. "Once every two weeks we developed an entirely new look for the Mac material and presented it to Steve on a big circular table,"

by Karen Sorensen



she said. "We'd set up all these comps, and he would walk around the table and say 'Nothing really hits me here. Try again.'

"This went on for six months. We kept banging our heads against the wall, but Steve was so picky. He wanted to make a big statement with the Mac, but he didn't know what that statement should be. He'd just say, 'you're the designer. I'll know it when I see it.'"

"I was furious," Mok said. "We went through 15 rounds of comps for the packaging. In hindsight, I was happy with the final design, but at the time, it felt weird. I had lost all perspective and sense of what was right and what was wrong."

Mok wanted off the Mac project. As a young designer, his ego had been smashed. "I was working within a team. Personality and individual artistic expression wasn't part of the program, but I didn't understand that." Mok asked to be reassigned, and Apple put him in charge of graphic design for events. One of his first efforts was the Apple IIc roll out, a project he had complete control of. Mok was finally on his own.

"Clement did it single-handedly, and to this day, I don't know how he pulled it off," Romano said. "It was immense." Apple had taken over a large San Francisco convention center. Mok designed the theme graphics used in invitations to the event, flags for the flagpoles lining the street, signs for the various areas throughout the halls, an entire Apple museum with a product display area, and stages for presentations and seminars. Mok himself laughs when remembering the size of his undertaking. "All of the frustrations of not being able to produce, all my pent up self expression just burst wide open. I got to do everything."

But while Mok healed his creative ego, his stamina deteriorated. "I learned that you don't do a historical museum and learn all about the company and the Apple II in 57 days.

"It was a very hard lesson, but out of that experience I learned to delegate because I burned out very quickly. I realized certain pieces can be designed by other people and the effect is as strong if you provide the parameters in which things are done."

Mok continued to stage product introductions during his years at Apple. He was promoted to art director and then to creative director of corporate graphics. He continued to handle events, like conferences and sales meetings, and also designed a large variety of printed material from Christmas cards to annual reports.

"Clement's style really formed Apple's design," Romano said. "Apple is a bold company, not a sedate one, and Clement's style reflected that. He put Apple on the map in the design world and the business world."

Thomas Rielly, marketing manager at Farallon Computing and a current client of Mok's, remembers being influenced by a trade show designed by Mok. "It was the Macintosh Plus introduction. It had such a big effect on me that I decided to leave my life as a retail salesman in Chicago and come out to Silicon Valley. Clement and the other members of the original Mac design team created a mystique about Apple that affected a lot of young people."

Mok has many fond memories of his years at the company. A favorite project was the 1984 annual report in which he and designer Susan Kare taught an eclectic group

by Karen Sorensen

of computer novices how to use the Mac in their jobs. "We had such an incredible time teaching them how to use computers," he said. He got a chance to educate other designers when he created the MacPaint manual, another of his favorite projects. Before Mok's redesign, the manual was 100 pages long and did not impress the program's author, Bill Atkinson, Mok said. Through a greater emphasis on graphics, Mok simplified the manual and trimmed it down to 32 pages. "What I needed to do was to combine standard graphics that people could relate to, like bar graphs, with simple illustrations that explained the concepts of icons, menus, and painting," he said.

Of all his work, Mok gets most excited about his recent efforts with new forms of media. It was the creation of the first HyperCard brochure, a project he undertook with Hugh Dubberly, Apple computer graphics director that sparked future efforts delivered via HyperCard itself.

"Out of that process I learned how to do scripting. We got so jazzed about HyperCard as a new presentation medium." Mok and Dubberly later decided to make a HyperCard supplement to Apple's 1987 annual report. The supplement contains stacks with financial summaries, marketing strategies, company history, and descriptions and photos of Apple's executive staff and products.

Even though he was able to pursue a broad range of projects at Apple, Mok felt that he had to move on to gain greater freedom in his work. "I outgrew Apple," he said. "I'm the kind of person who wants to keep learning, and I wasn't learning any more there." Insiders at Apple have said that the politics in the Creative Services Group and an "MBA barrier" in the marketing department have limited the creativity once enjoyed by designers. Mok maintains that he left to seek new challenges. "In an in-house group, you have to do promotions, and eventually it feels like you're selling the same product, with the same features, using the same points. After awhile you wonder, 'How many times can I look at this differently?'"

Now, with his own design company, he is free to choose different types of projects. Mok said he thinks he will grow and improve as a designer. "The best solutions are the ones you're not really sure of. You do your best design for something you don't know a whole lot about because you work harder trying to understand it."

It's through his search for the new and unusual that Mok's playful attitude arises. "I've been known to do things that are a bit unconventional," he admitted.

The lizard isn't the only amusing solution Mok has come up with on short notice. Once, for an AppleWorld conference, he put live models in glass display cases. "People were streaming into the show and here were these people in glass booths, working on Macs. The manager running the show freaked out when he found out what I was doing. The press went crazy, saying 'How can Apple do this?'" But the manager trusted Mok to make the call, and Apple got what it wanted: attention.

While Mok's yearning for the unusual will continue to be his trademark in his art direction and design, it will also keep him at the forefront of technology. In the future, he hopes to incorporate CD-ROM, video and sound into his product design. He also hopes to take such technology into other areas, like set design for theater.

But Mok hopes that he won't always be considered irregular for his use of technology. He is on the board of directors of both the national and San Francisco chapter of American Institute of Graphic Arts and works actively to encourage the use of computers in the design community.

"His mission in life is to get some of the best designers, both locally and nationally, to use technology in a way that doesn't limit their creativity," said AIGA's David Meckel. Earlier this year, Mok organized and hosted a regional AIGA event called "Forum for designers who are computer virgins." Held at Apple's Cupertino, Calif., headquarters, 125 designers attended the sold-out seminar. Mok plans to organize forums in the future at other locations across the country. "The nature of the medium evolves and changes about every six months," he said. "It's like tax laws; you need refresher courses." He said that he hopes the forums will help convince the design community that computers can be used as creative tools for design as well as cost-reducing tools for production. "Right now, I don't have the resources to turn to when I'm in a crunch. There just aren't very many people working on the same wavelength who know the tools I work with."

Personal computers like the Mac have become well known for low-cost desktop publishing and typesetting, a reputation that actually impedes their use in graphic design, he said. "Too often computers are looked on as an adjunct to help production when they are infinitely more than that."

But even Mok admits that computers have their limits. Some effects, like that produced by watercolor, can still be accomplished more easily with traditional methods, he said. Still, he hopes computers will eventually be considered as just another tool. "There

by Karen Sorensen  
and Stuart Silverstone

shouldn't be computer design competitions. There should just be design competitions." Mok may well get his wish someday. But his quest for the new is likely to keep him ahead of others in the field.

"Clement really goes that extra step to look at a problem in a new way," Rielly said. "He's always willing to push you to do something daring, distinctive and unique."

The computer world should take heed. With Mok around, one never knows when a



reptile will turn up in a photo.

Clement Mok considers his packaging and identity design for Caere's new OmniPage OCR software one of the most exciting projects of his 10-year career.

"It was different in that it was an integrated process, where the design and the technology used were one," Mok said. "The client was also an ex-Apple person. We had a shared understanding and trust: 'Let's go out on a limb to build a personality for this product.'"

The product's logo is unique, combining different type styles and sizes. "People say, 'Oh, nice,' when they start looking at the business card or letterhead," Mok said. "But as they understand the product more, they realize that every single feature of the product is there in the design—multi-formats, different font types and sizes, centered text, flush left, flush right. All of those benefits the product can provide are there on a single piece of communication."

"It's also one of the busiest and most complicated things that I have done. The reason is that the design echoes, reflects and illustrates what the product is truly about. It's about type, so it's a type solution."

"The solution is more right brain. It is intended to place a bit more of the emotional, or ethereal, part into the design equation," said

Mok.

Mok likes to use the very design tools for which he creates identity programs. "The design required infinite control over minute adjustments in order to work. Given the time component for coming up with both an idea and getting it to final art, there was no way we could have generated so many possibilities and refined the design to such a high quality of work with-out the Mac tools."

Even OmniPage was used: "Some of the data for the soft-ware licensing on the back of the box came from [Caere's] lawyers, so that was scanned and dropped in," Mok said.

"I feel very comfortable and at ease with the Mac tools. I don't think about the software or the hardware. I see a design in my head and try to visualize how it will look while I am also developing it on the screen concurrently."

With a vision toward future design technologies, Mok can imagine them augmenting his creativity: "It would be great if I could just do six versions of an idea, with artificial intelligence—once I taught it the kinds of things that I'm looking for—being able to work out different layout permutations. Say that it's voice activated: 'I would like to see this idea with a text-heavy treatment and with the picture about one-quarter of the page.' It would be an agent that you need to teach, just as you do with young designers. You're teaching about rules and about your expectations."

"The bottom-line is that the design process has nothing to do with better machines. It has to do with bringing past experience and present experience all together and synthesizing that into some coherent 'mess' that is both interesting and, hope-fully, has a life of its own." —By Stuart Silverstone