

Giving Form to Spirit

By Judy Polan

Alex Steinweiss: The Inventor of the Modern Album Cover

Taschen, hard cover, 420 pages, more than 300 color illustrations, \$70.



In our era of downloaded music — disembodied from any visual references, let alone a three-dimensional presence — the singular artistry of Alex Steinweiss, who designed midcentury album covers and magazine and film credits,

is particularly notable. In this eye-popping, cleverly designed monograph (optical illusions appear at front and back), author Kevin Reagan pays rhapsodic tribute to the Brooklyn-born graphic artist widely regarded as the originator of the modern-style phonograph record jacket. Before 1940, records were packaged in dull brown wrappers; it was 23-year-old Steinweiss's idea to enclose them in visually arresting cardboard sleeves. He created hundreds of them over decades for numerous record companies, primarily Columbia (where he was art director from 1939 to the mid-1940s) and Decca. Decorating the recordings of jazz, classical, pop and folk musicians from Fats Waller to Chopin to The Weavers, his poster-like designs sported vivid colors, bold typography (featuring his zany "Steinweiss Scrawl") and whimsical, showy imagery, all to magical effect. "I wanted the people to look at the artwork ..." wrote Steinweiss, who died July 17 at the age of 94, "and hear the music."