EXHIBITION
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Can graphic design save your life?

It's a big claim, but the Wellcome Collection's latest show makes a persuasive case, offering pleasures both naughty and nice along the way, writes John Jervis

THE WELLCOME COLLECTION'S exhibitions are ambitious and eclectic – sometimes overly so. Its latest effort, Can Graphic Design Save Your Life?, comes as something of a relief. Despite its modish title and stylish, uncluttered display, the set-up is traditional. Divided into six thematic sections – Persuasion, Contagion and so on – it gathers a considered (and vaguely chronological) selection of material in each, some of it beautiful, all of it engaging.

Education, for instance, opens with Fritz Kahn's famed poster of Man as Industrial Palace (1926) – with human innards depicted as a chemical plant – before getting down to the grubby business of anatomy. This turns out to be a delight, from the 120 hinged flaps that lift to reveal Adam and Eve's inner workings in Johann Remmelin's 17th-century manual, right up to the intricacies of the latest anatomical apps for medical students. Other stops on the route include the fertile mid-century invention of Cornelius DeWitt's colourful The Human Body and Gillian Crampton Smith's Jackie-style comics alerting 1970s Wandsworth to the dangers of teenage pregnancy ('Don't Rush Me' …).

It is undeniable that much of the show's appeal comes from the visual allure and interest of the exhibits. International Style groupies in particular are well catered for, thanks to a rich display of packaging and advertising produced by Swiss pharmaceutical firm Geigy in

ABOVE Dual-language packaging designed for Teva Pharmaceuticals by Dan Reisinger (1986)

ABOVE RIGHT
Advertisement for Eurax by Igildo Biesele for Geigy, (c.1955)

LEFT Anti-smoking stamp from the People's Republic of China (1980)
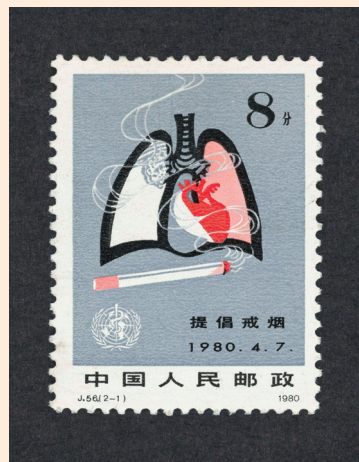
"120 hinged flaps lift to reveal Adam and Eve's inner workings in this 17th-century manual"

the 1950s and 60s. Max Schmid in Basel and Fred Toller in New York employed such talents as Karl Gerstner, Armin Hofmann and Josef Müller-Brockmann to create a clean graphic language that evolved from playful collage to standardised scientific abstraction under their aegis. Their influence was profound, as evidenced by the rigorous combinations of pictogram, logo, colour, type and box shape established by Dan Reisinger for Teva Pharmaceuticals in the 1980s. ▶