

WALLACE OLINS (CBE) (“Wally Olins”)

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BIOGRAPHICAL ESSAY WRITTEN BY**

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Olins, Wallace (Wally) (1930-2014), corporate identity and branding consultant, was born on 19 December 1930 at 49 Moresby Road, Upper Clapton, London, the younger son of Alfred Olins (1896-1970) and his wife Rachel, née Muscovitch (1897-1961). His father established Dexters, a highly successful haulage business based in Hackney. Of Polish Jewish ancestry, Olins’s forebears had fled the pogroms of eastern Europe and, in the 1880s, settled in east London. His parents’ marriage was an unhappy one. Olins attributed this to his mother’s battle with depression and her eccentric behaviour. His maternal grandmother and a bachelor uncle were part of the Olins’ household and this, undoubtedly, raised matrimonial tensions. Increasingly estranged from his mother, there was a sense of relief, not sadness, on learning of her suicide. Paternal relations were better and he followed his father’s footsteps in joining the Freemasons.

Olins attended a local Jewish kindergarten in London and became a boarder at the Perse preparatory school in Cambridge. During the Second World War he was briefly evacuated to Brighton. His secondary education was at Highgate School in London. He was a badly-behaved pupil and was frequently caned. Subsequently he won a place at St. Peter’s Hall, Oxford, where, after completing his national service with the army in Germany, he read modern history, graduating with a third class degree in 1954. At university, he pursued his interest in acting. Unquestionably, Oxford was of foundational importance to his eventual

career in that his sense of the theatre and of a stage presence underscored his work as a consultant and public speaker. In addition, a historical lens meaningfully informed his writing on corporate identities and brands. Whilst at Oxford, he met (Maria) Renate Olga Laura Steinert (b. 1931), a modern languages student at Somerville College, and daughter of Heinz Moritz Jacob Steinert, businessman. They married on 11 March 1957 at Kensington register office (by which time she was an assistant buyer in a department store) and had two sons, Rufus and Ben, and a daughter, Edwina.

After graduating Olins joined the leading London-based advertising agency, S. H. Benson. In 1957 he moved to Bombay, where he was given responsibility for the agency's operations in the Indian sub-continent. It was at that time that he underwent a damascene conversation to corporate identity triggered by his visits to British, Indian, and Russian-owned steel plants. As he noted: 'what struck me was just how incredibly different they were in terms of how people behaved, looked, and communicated with each other – what you might call their identity' (interview, DesignBoom website). He became irritated by the lack of head office support and was unimpressed by the lack of professionalism of some of his advertising work colleagues. Moreover, he became contemptuous of advertising industry practices. He found these to be, 'Very superficial and cosmetic and we didn't get to the heart of anything' (*AdWeek*, 3 May 2011).

In 1962 Olins returned to London and joined the Caps Design Group, which proved to be unsuccessful. In 1965 he established the Wolff Olins corporate identity consultancy with the celebrated graphic designer and architect Michael Wolff. Olins's cerebral gifts and experience as an advertising account executive coupled with Wolff's considerable creative

design prowess made them a formidable team and, arguably, the leading forces in the nascent arena of British corporate visual identity consultancy. Their professional relationship was likened to a marriage but it was a marriage that was to end in tears when Wolff left in 1983. Subsequently there were two changes in ownership of the consultancy: a management buyout in 1997 and its acquisition for £30 million in 2001 by Omnicom, a US-based marketing communications conglomerate. The manner of Olins's final parting was acrimonious and some long-time professional relationships were fractured. Shortly afterwards, again in 2001, he became chairman of the newly-established, Spanish-based, Saffron Brand Consultants at the invitation of Jacob Benbunan, an erstwhile colleague at Wolff Olins.

The doyen of corporate identity consultancy in the UK, Olins had oversight of many highly-successful visual identity change programmes resulting in new logos for a plethora of organisations including Akzo-Nobel, Aston University, the Beatles' company Apple, Bovis, British Oxygen, Cunard, English Electric, Lloyds of London, London Weekend Television, Orange, P&O, Prudential, Repsol, Renault, Tata, Volkswagen, and Vueling Airways. Corporate renaming, and not just corporate visual identification, was a key part of his oeuvre. The naming of an IT start-up company as 'Orange' was inspirational and the renaming of the Industrial & Commercial Finance corporation as '3i' was also successful; the rechristening of Guinness as Diageo generated a belligerent response by some. He also enjoyed a high profile for his nation and place branding work for London, Mauritius, Northern Ireland, Poland, Portugal, and Lithuania. Some of his work was unsuccessful: this included the cultural change programme for London's Metropolitan Police; Midland Bank's

brand portfolio programme; and rebranding of Britain work inspired by prime minister Tony Blair's 'Cool Britannia' initiative.

Olins had his detractors who questioned why graphic design change was *de rigueur* for every identity change programme. Some commentators were sceptical that a logo could completely and simultaneously communicate an organisation's *raison d'être*, ethos, strategy, vision, and culture. Others bemoaned corporate identity's close association with graphic design. For their part, established UK-based graphic designers occasionally lamented corporate identity's eclipse of the British 'house style' notion: they believed house style more clearly, and unambiguously, encapsulated the corporate graphic design and corporate visual identification territory.

Wally Olins was an effective self-publicist and sometimes courted controversy. He characterised Poland in terms of 'creative boisterousness, unusual but fun' (*Daily Telegraph*, 2 Oct 2007). An iconoclastic tendency and disregard for heritage caused him, in 1997, to assert that the British monarchy should be modernised and reformed. Not only should it be managed by a government minister but the crown should dispense with 'all the old stuff' including, 'the band of the Royal Marines ... the Christmas broadcast ... ladies-in-waiting, lords lieutenant of counties and similar superannuated refugees from Arcadian Shakespeare comedies' (*Sunday Times*, 26 Oct 1997).

Olins's books and other publications on corporate visual identity, and latterly on corporate and nation branding, were without parallel in his chosen field and included *The Corporate Personality: An Inquiry into the Nature of Corporate Identity* (1978), *The Wolff Olins Guide to*

Corporate Identity (1983), *The Wolff Olins Guide to Design Management* (1985), *Corporate Identity: Making Business Strategy Visible through Design* (1989), *The New Guide to Identity* (1996), *Trading Identities* (1999), an influential paper on 'Branding the Nation' (published in the *Journal of Brand Management*, 2002), *On Brand* (2003), *The Brand Handbook* (2008), and *Brand New: The Shape of Brands to Come* (2014). Some were translated into as many as eighteen languages. His published output (especially his work on corporate identity) was especially influential. He was particularly associated with delineating three corporate visual identification modes: 'monolithic' (where only the company name is used), 'endorsed' (when the parent company name is used alongside that of a subsidiary firm), and 'branded' (where a subsidiary company makes no reference to the holding company). He both inspired and influenced the first generation of corporate identity scholars: it is difficult to think of any other corporate identity practitioner whose work was cited so often in the academic literature.

From the 1970s to late 1990s, Olins was at the vanguard of corporate identity thought. However, he proffered two contrasting definitions of corporate identity: the first seeing corporate identity in narrow graphic design terms, in line with the perspective of many other corporate identity practitioners, but the second more holistic, defining corporate identity in terms of an organisation's attributes. Corporate visual identification (reflecting an organisation's essence, purpose, culture, mission, and vision through graphic design) was very much the *modus operandi* at Wolff Olins: a consultancy which had serried ranks of designers rather than strategists, corporate marketers, organisational behaviourists, or human resources specialists. Yet Olins's delineation of corporate identity in terms of a firm's defining attributes (rather than graphic design) was, arguably, his most enduring legacy. By

the time of his death, strategic corporate identity often formed part of the curriculum of leading business schools globally and was routinely researched at PhD level. In 1999 the first chair of corporate identity was appointed at Bradford University School of Management, with the post-holder crediting Olins as a key formative influence, in particular through his book *The Corporate Personality: An Inquiry into the Nature of Corporate Identity* (1978).

After 2000, and behind the curve, Olins turned his back on corporate identity and concentrated his attention on corporate branding. Whilst a laggard in the corporate branding field, he soon (through his presentations, writing, and consultancy), emerged as corporate brand consultancy's leading figure. Again, a graphic design mode was accentuated. So successful was this transition (Olins studiously avoided referring to corporate identity henceforth) that many assumed he had always been a proponent, if not the progenitor, of corporate branding. In a similar fashion, his championship of graphic design led to the equally erroneous assumption that he was a graphic designer.

When required, Olins could be fearless in his dealings with senior managers. His robust views and bluntness were variously loved or hated by managers: he used to tell senior managers that they must 'share the power of his convictions' (Balmer, 'Wally Olins (1930–2014)', 461). Elaborating on this point, he noted: 'I try to be direct and clear. I simply tell my clients the truth as I see it, without too much gloss or varnish because that's what I'm there for' (*Creative Review*, 15 April 2014). His public presentations and university lectures were informative and enjoyable, and invariably had a theatrical quality. He also crafted a distinctive and soigné sartorial style comprising an elegant suit or coloured jacket, a snazzy bow tie, and vibrantly coloured socks. In later years, black, thickly-rimmed Corbusier

spectacles and a fedora were added. Although he claimed his attire was of no consequence, this seems implausible, especially from a visual identity consultant. Unquestionably, he had a keen sense of 'la bella figura'. His attire seemingly underscored his power, authority, presence, creativity, and meticulousness.

In professional life, Olins had a confident, combative, and abrasive persona. In other settings, he could be suave, charming, and humorous. Abroad, he appeared to be the archetypal Brit – even something of an English milord. He had many admirers, acolytes, and friends. However, his assuredness belied some lifelong and deep-seated insecurities. Remarkably, he viewed himself as an outsider, and confessed he not only lacked any meaningful identification with Britain; he was indifferent to England and, moreover, was even ambivalent towards Goring-on-Thames, the idyllic English village where he lived. As a non-practising Jew, there was to be no comfort from his familial faith. This was perhaps a little sad, given how frequently he stressed the importance of companies, brands, and nations in giving individuals a sense of identity. Thus, whilst he solved and established identities of others he, ostensibly, never fully resolved or completely found his own. Conversely, identity ambiguity – or feigned ambiguity – may be deemed an enviable trait for an identity consultant. That said, he did have a strong affinity with London, and with India. Moreover, he had a lifelong affection for St. Peter's College, Oxford, and cried when the master divulged he was to be given an honorary fellowship in 2012. Arguably, his strongest and most enduring sense of identification was with his work and profession. He never retired.

Olins was appointed CBE in 1999. He was a council member of the Royal Society of Arts and was given the society's centenary medal in 2000. He was a visiting professor at Imperial College, London, the Said Business School, Oxford, Lancaster University, and Copenhagen Business School, and a visiting lecturer at London Business School, amongst others. His first marriage was dissolved in 1989, and on 19 April 1990 he married Doreen Margaret (Dornie) Watts (b. 1951), a television producer, and daughter of Charles Alan Watts, civil servant. They had one daughter, Harrie. He died at the Royal Berkshire Hospital, Reading, from cancer on 14 April 2014 and was survived by his wife Dornie and his four children. 14 April is St Tiburtius' Day, and by tradition the first day the cuckoo sings: its distinctive song, once heard, is never forgotten, very much like Wally Olins, another *rara avis*, but one who in many other regards was no cuckoo.

John M.T. Balmer

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Personal knowledge

Private information

B cert

108553

M certs

D cert

Sound

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Film

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etc

Likenesses

Photographs in obits