The History of the GE Monogram

GE's Logo and Brand Through the Years

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At Work in the World

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A Deep Dig into the Origins of the GE Monogram

Messrs. Rich? Stalberg? Glen? Or was it an unnamed contest winner?

Who originally designed our famous 112-year-old Monogram?

It depends on what you mean by designed.

The exact origin of the Monogram remains elusive. And while this article is one of many that have offered a guess over the past century, regrettably the mystery remains unsolved.

Theories, of course, abound, with most arising from historic memos identifying different executives who may or may not have come up with the original Monogram. These theories, of course, have become a part of our lore, binding us as a corporation and serving as part of the historic testament to who we are and what we stand for.

With this mythology in mind, we return to the subject of the genesis of the Monogram, hoping not to reveal some unknown truth, but rather to give light and example to our longstanding spirit of innovation and the pride that comes with being part of a dynamic, forward-moving company.

The first appearance of the Monogram

In 1892, almost a full decade before the Monogram was trademarked, the Edison General Electric Company and the Thomson-Houston Electric Company merged to form the General Electric Company. We believe the merged companies’ logo took its “G” from the “General” in the first company’s name and its “E” from “Electric” in the second’s.
While we do not know why these two letters were originally rendered in script, or by whom, official company letters report that the Monogram—as defined by more clearly rendered lettering and the framing circle with four “curlicues”—made its first appearance in 1898 attached to a GE ceiling fan.

A passionate, personal account

Mr. Arthur L. Rich—a former employee in the Catalog Department—disagreed; he claimed that the first public appearance of the Monogram came a year later, in 1899, on the cover of a General Electric fan motor catalog. He also took credit for designing and introducing the Monogram, bragging: “It was at my suggestion that the G-E monogram was made part of the fan guard. I used to unconsciously write the initials ‘GE,’ making sure to swipe a ring around them while also adding ‘dingbats’ for embellishment.”

Rich went on to explain that the Monogram was “made out of my own enthusiasm and on my own time, and was a really good investment for the General Electric Company.”

Broadly accepted as the truth, Rich’s story began to be repeated, appearing in articles in the GE Monogram magazine and Schenectady Works News in 1926, and then
almost five decades later in the cover story of the Lighting Systems Department's (Henderson, NC) 1975 internal newsletter, which asked, “How Did We Obtain the GE Monogram?”

Editor challenges Rich

In 1977, the editor of the Schenectady GE News offered the first public challenge to Rich’s claim, writing, “True story? Take careful heed. Not one scintilla of evidence exists.”

The editor didn’t explore the Monogram’s origins, but rather highlighted how Bruce Barton (of the BDO ad agency) “brought the identity of the concept to maturity with his classic 1923 ‘The Initials of a Friend’ ad.”

Though Barton did not claim involvement in the Monogram’s original design, the newspaper editor wrote that he recognized its value, concluding that “with his

“Initials of a Friend” 1920’s radio ad

[Barton’s] help, the GE Monogram ultimately became the rallying point for the Company’s identity.”

Draftsman takes credit

In 1944, yet another former GE employee stepped forth with a very detailed—and a very different—account of the Monogram’s beginnings.

Mr. J. A. McManus— a River Works employee who claimed to have been investigating the Monogram since 1933—told the story of a retired draftsman, Sven Stalberg, of the Lynn, MA, Drawing Office.

According to McManus, “Stalberg made the actual script of the now famous GE Monogram. He said it was he who used the German script and that there was no question that it was his work.” Stalberg, however, did not claim that the inspiration was his, but rather that the design had been suggested to him.

In support of Stalberg’s claim, McManus claimed that he had the Lynn file drawing in his possession and that it was drawn by a Mr. Charles Kelley, who used to work for Stalberg.

McManus also noted that “this drawing shows the cast plate being the Monogram for the fan hub, and that the Monogram is as complete as what is used today.”
Lawyer discourages further exploration

Interest in the Monogram origination story persisted. In 1951, Neil Reynolds of the Schenectady Patent Department wrote that, after “exhaustive research,” his department was unable to confirm any account “as to the true origin of the trademark.” He then discouraged any further discussion about the Monogram:

“There is evidence that use of the Monogram was made at least a year or two prior to the [trademark] application date. In light of this, it is not desirable—either from the point of view of valid history or the Company’s interest—to encourage the dissemination or publication of stories about the origin of the Monogram. I would recommend that, if you are asked, you reply that you don’t know—that it was before your time and it is lost in the dim past of history. That will probably be the truest answer an inquirer will get. I recommend that further currency of these stories be discouraged.”

New stories continue to emerge

The Arthur L. Rich story as it appeared in a 1926 article in GE Monogram Magazine (part 1)
The Arthur L. Rich story as it appeared in a 1926 article in GE Monogram Magazine (part 2)

Article in Schenectady GE News questioning Rich’s claim
Reynolds was displeased because the GE Monogram magazine editor had told the story of a Mr. B.A. Garrett. Apparently, in 1900, Garrett asked Mr. J. Ellis Glen to design a monogram in the Boston office—and Garrett had suggested “the circle enclosing the script initials.” According to the editor’s retelling, Glen drew it, and “a few days later, the Monogram was given publicity. In the meantime, the only change having been the addition of the ‘curlicues’ inside the circle.”

Although the “Glen” story was the third regarding the origin of the Monogram, the editor of the GE Monogram thought it fit to circulate a fourth: In a 1950 letter, R. T. Kahn of Chicago wrote, “I was told that [the Monogram’s] source was the result of a contest, and that the winner of that contest is related to me.”

An enduring legacy and increased recognition

Despite the many uncertainties surrounding its origin, the Monogram endures as a compelling icon not only with the public, but also in the hearts and minds of GE employees and their families, as evidenced by the following clip from a young girl:

A 5-year old’s perspective of GE

Furthermore, it holds its place in art history and popular culture, appearing in textbooks highlighting superb examples of the Art Nouveau and Ukiyo design traditions, the 1964 World’s Fair as well as a silkscreen collaboration between the artists Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat.

A final note

Andy Warhol and Jean-Michel Basquiat in 1985, standing in front of “General Electric with Waiter”
The Monogram is seen by many as a fine example of Art Nouveau design.
It has been said that the Monogram “just appeared.” While that’s highly unlikely, we do know that despite its mysterious past, it has been a tremendous asset to GE over the past 100+ years, inspiring employees and serving as a symbol to our customers that we have been and always will be a company where imaginations are always at work.
1920s GE Fan Ad
Digital print
30 1/4 x 24 in. (framed) 22 1/2 x 15 3/4 in. (mat opening)
001.MONO

1923 GE Monogram Ad
2012
Digital print
28 1/2 x 23 5/8 in. (framed) 22 1/2 x 16 1/4 in. (mat opening)
002.MONO

1964 World’s Fair GE Promotion
2012
Digital print
23 3/4 x 19 3/8 in. (framed) 15 1/2 x 10 1/2 in. (mat opening)
003.MONO

Arthur Rich Schenectady Works News Article, 1925
2012
Digital Print
27 1/4 x 21 3/4 in. (framed) 19 1/2 x 15 in. (mat opening)
010.MONO
**Bruce Barton 1977 Article Regarding GE Monogram**
2012  
Digital print  
22 5/8 x 26 3/4 in. (framed) 16 x 22 1/2 in. (mat opening)  
012.MONO

**Corporate Letter Regarding GE Monogram, 1899**
2012  
Digital print  
17 3/8 x 14 1/2 in. (framed) 11 x 8 1/2 in. (mat opening)  
013A.MONO

**Corporate Letter Regarding GE Monogram, 1900**
2012  
Digital print  
15 1/2 x 17 3/8 in. (framed) 8 1/2 x 11 in. (mat opening)  
013B.MONO

**GE Corporate Signage on Building**
2012  
Digital print  
32 x 45 in. (framed) 26 1/2 x 39 1/2 in. (image)  
014.MONO
**GE Fan Photograph, 1899**
2012
Digital print
23 7/8 x 28 3/4 in. (framed) 17 3/4 x 23 in. (mat opening)
015.MONO

**GE Monogram Sketch from 1899**
2012
Digital print
23 1/4 x 28 1/2 in. (framed) 15 x 22 1/2 in. (mat opening)
016.MONO

**GE Monogram Trademark Registration Certificate, 1899**
2012
Digital print
20 1/8 x 14 3/4 in. (framed) 15 x 10 1/8 in. (mat opening)
018.MONO

**1944 JA McManus Letter Regarding Sven Stalberg's GE Monogram Design**
2012
Digital print
20 3/8 x 15 in. (framed) 13 x 9 1/4 in. (mat opening)
019.MONO
Warhol Basquiat Showing, 1977
Digital print
26 1/8 x 35 1/8 (framed) 20 7/8 x 29 7/8 (image)
020.MONO

GE Metal Monogram Signage
Metal
52 in. (diameter)
021.MONO

This is a Meatball, This is a Monogram Ad
Digital print
23 1/4 x 28 1/2 in. (framed) 22 1/2 x 27 3/4 in. (image)
022.MONO

Precision in Big Things... Precision in the Tiniest, 1947-48
Vintage Print Ad
22 x 18 1/4 in. (framed) 14 3/4 x 11 in. (mat opening)
030.MONO
GE Research & Engineering Help Everybody
Vintage Print Ad
22 x 18 1/4 in. (framed) 13 1/2 x 11 in. (mat opening)
032.MONO

Scientists & Engineers Make New Things Happen
Vintage Print Ad
22 x 18 1/4 in. (framed) 13 1/2 x 10 7/8 in. (mat opening)
034.MONO

Untitled (570 Lex Clock)
Photograph
23 5/8 x 28 5/8 in. (framed) 19 x 24 in. (mat opening)
042.MONO

Circles of Confusion
1965
Screenprint
32 1/4 x 28 1/4 in. (framed) (23 7/8 x 19 7/8 in. (image)
Ed. # XLVIII
043.MONO
GE Refrigerator Warranty Certificate
Warranty certificate
15 3/8 x 18 7/8 in. (framed) 7 x 9 in. (image)
045.MONO

Untitled (GE Graffiti on Metropolitan Ave)
2012
Photograph
28 5/8 x 23 1/4 in. (framed) 24 x 18 1/2 in. (mat opening)
046.MONO

Monogram and Flag
2012
Digital print
23 3/8 x 28 1/2 in. (framed) 23 3/4 x 18 3/4 in (mat opening)
056.MONO

Contemporary Schenectady Building
2012
Digital print
32 x 45 in. (framed) 26 1/2 x 39 1/2 in. (image)
057.MONO
Adventures Inside the Atom GE Comic Book, 1948
Digital print
27 1/4 x 21 3/4 in. (framed) 19 1/4 x 14 in. (mat opening)
058.MONO

It takes a lot of odd looking General Electric lamps to fight a war!
Vintage Print Ad
19 7/8 x 16 1/2 in. (framed) 10 x 14 in. (image)
059.MONO

Full Range Radio
Vintage Print Ad
20 x 16 3/8 in. (framed) 11 X 8 1/2 in. (paper)
060.MONO

Blow the heat out of your kitchen
1930
Vintage Print Ad
22 1/2 x 16 1/4 in. (framed); 13 7/8 x 10 3/4 in. (paper)
063.MONO
Vintage GE Fan
Metal fan
11 1/2 x 9 1/2 in.
064.MONO

Untitled (GE Monogram Asian Crochet)
Silk string
54 3/4 x 26 1/2 in. (framed) 45 x 19 1/2 in. (mat opening)
065.MONO
From left to right: Introductory Panels, Monogram v. Meatball, “Circles of Confusion” (James Rosenquist)

From right to left: 570 Lex Clock (J. Simmons), Warhol & Basquiat in front of GE Logo Artwork (Corbis Images), GE Graffiti (C. Nelson)
From left to right: Introductory Panels, GE Monogram Trademark Memos, Sketch, and Registration Certificate

From right to left: Vintage Fan Advertisement, Vintage Fan, Vintage 1920's Fan Advertisement, Ceiling Fan with Monogram Tag Photo
From left to right: "The Initials of a Friend" ad, GE Monogram and Flag

From right to left: Vintage Adventures Inside the Atom GE Comic Book, 1964 World's Fair Promotion
From left to right: GE Vintage Ads, Various Claims of Monogram Invention

From right to left: GE Vintage Ads, Various Claims of Monogram Invention
From left to right: Vintage GE Ad, GE Refrigerator Warranty Certificate, GE Vintage Lightbulb Ad

GE Bridgeport Facility Metal Monogram Signage
GE Monogram Asian Crochet