

# Cor Klaasen

Jackets, Covers & Sleeves

Groundbreaking design from the Sixties and Seventies





# Cor Klaasen

1926-1989

Cor Klaasen is one of a handful of designers whose influence transformed Irish graphic design in the second half of the last century. Cor combined great technical ability as an illustrator and typographer with strong ideas to create striking and original work which has lost none of its freshness and vitality to this day.

## BAUHAUS AND DE STIJL

The Bauhaus school of design developed an educational process which was to have a profound impact on twentieth century design. The Instituut voor Kunstnijverheids Onderwijs (IVKNO) in Amsterdam embraced the Bauhaus educational process and it was here that Cor Klaasen gained his understanding of design. It proved to be the single strongest influence on his career.

**"This basic thinking pattern taught in the school is still with me. I don't know how to approach any problem connected with my work, but via the rather strict rules set in those days."**

The IVKNO is now the Rietveld Academie, named after the De Stijl

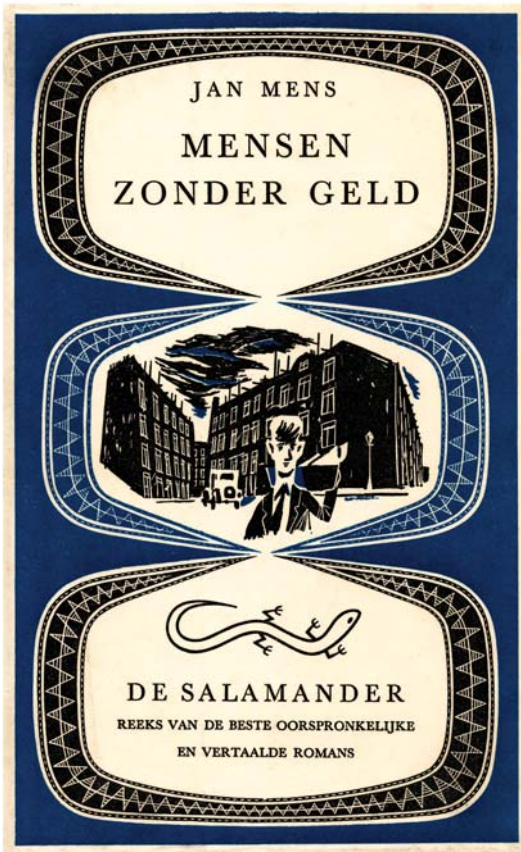


Cor Klaasen c. 1945. Photographer unknown.

architect and furniture designer Gerrit Rietveld. Another furniture designer and architect, Mart Stam (1899–1986), was director of the college when Cor attended in the 1940s.

**"I remember him as a big man, with swarthy looks and very heavy eyebrows. He was rather imposing, but extremely easy to talk with. His office furniture was, of course, designed by himself."**

The Dutch born Stam had an impeccable Modernist pedigree and ensured that the IVKNO's design education drew on Bauhaus ideas while also embracing de Stijl influences.



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**“The school in Amsterdam was not a rubber stamp of the German Bauhaus. There were other influences as well. De Stijl group had already put its ideas over very clearly, and as matter of fact, influenced the Bauhaus a great deal.”**

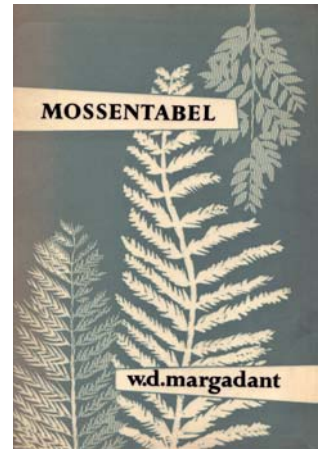
As well as breaking down the distinctions between the “fine” and “applied” arts, a key feature of this education was developing clear thinking and rational ideas to underpin design solutions.

**“We got strict training, but any knowledge gathered in this manner was also expected to be developed and further explored. We were to be creative with our new knowledge. This sounds fine in theory, but one must have a proper basis on which to build ideas. That is where de Stijl group and the Bauhaus scored.”**

This insistence on sound ideas runs through Cor’s commercial work and remained constant over the years while his style and techniques developed and changed. It also became a central tenet of his teaching, first in the National College of Art and Design (NCAD) in the 1960s and later in Dun Laoghaire College of Art and Design (now the IADT).

Cor spent time in Switzerland in the 1950s studying under Donald Brun at the Kunstgewerbeschule Basel. While Modernism reached its zenith in clean, minimalist and often characterless work, Cor’s designs, imbued with personality and wit, share much more with Brun’s posters than the later Swiss Style. Cor’s illustration style during the 1950s also shows the strong influence of George Grosz but by the new decade he has begun to find his own voice.

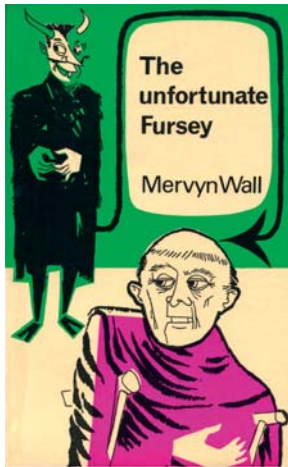
Cor believed that book covers gave more scope to the designer than other commercial jobs and he told the CLÉ Graphics Seminar in 1976 that the book designer’s work is nearer to fine art than other design. Many motifs from his personal work appear in his book and record covers and it is clear that he approached both with a similar mindset.



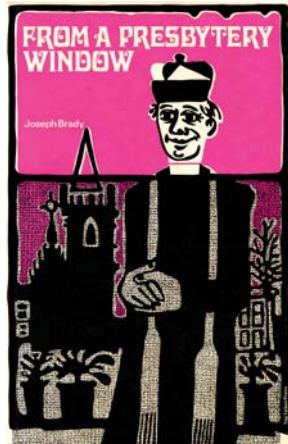
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1 Mensen Zonder Geld, Querido, Amsterdam, 1950

2 Mosseentabel, N.V. De Arbeiderspers, Amsterdam., 1949



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## THE DUTCH SCHOOL

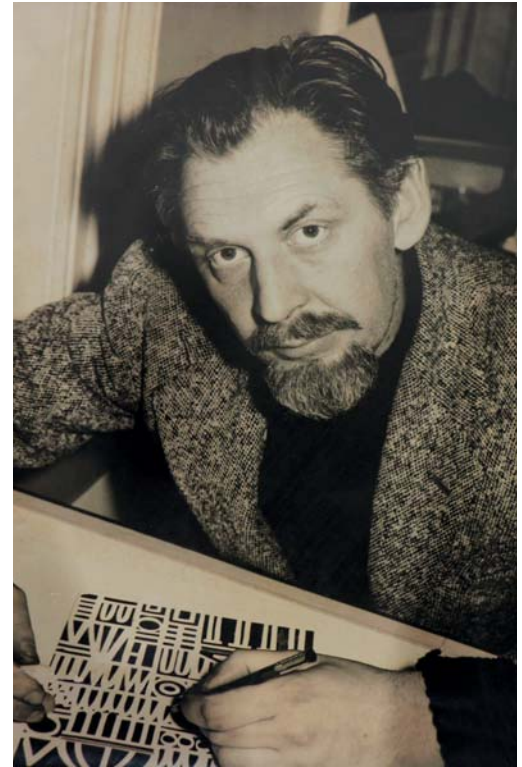
Most commercial design in Ireland in the thirties and forties was carried out by illustrators who saw themselves primarily as artists. They approached commercial work from an artistic perspective and had no interest in developing into specialist graphic designers.

From 1939 to 1959, Dutch designer Joannes Bernardus Romein was professor of design at the National College of Art (NCA). During his tenure design education at the college remained rooted in the techniques of the inter-war years and little attempt was made to embrace the new ideas taking hold in Europe.

Training at the School of Design for Industry in the NCA left graduates with few skills that they could apply in the commercial world. Many found themselves supplementing their skills with courses in copywriting, design for advertising and printing in Rathmines and Bolton Street.

Romein, though highly skilled, was forty five years old when he took the position in Dublin and his vision for design education was informed by his own training in the Dutch arts and crafts tradition. It would take a younger generation of designers from the Netherlands to bring Irish graphics and design education into a new era.

In 1951 Tadhg (Tim) O'Neill of Sun Advertising had the Aer Lingus account but was unable to find designers in Ireland with the skillset to handle such a large



Cor Klaasen working on a Christmas card, 1967

and prestigious client. O'Neill admired the publicity material produced for KLM, Royal Dutch Airlines, and arranged to visit their studio to see how the work was handled. Here he met Guus Melai and recruited him to work on the Aer Lingus account.

Over the next decade a dozen or so Dutch designers were enticed to live and work in Ireland by Irish advertising firms. The 'Dutch School' as it came to be known included Jan de Fouw, Bert van Embden, Willem van Velzen, Gerrit van Gelderen, Piet Sluis, Louis Pieterse, Chris Vis, Nick van Vliet, Pier Stroethof and Cor Klaasen.

1 The Unfortunate Fursey, Helicon, Dublin, 1965

2 From A Presbytery Window, The Talbot Press, Dublin, 1971



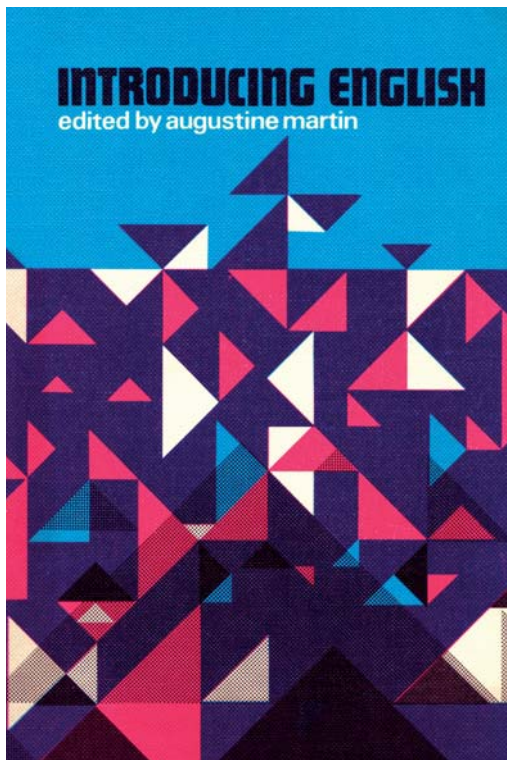
## DESIGNER & EDUCATOR

Cor Klaasen came to Ireland in 1956, after answering an advertisement placed by O’Kennedy Brindley in an Amsterdam newspaper. At that stage he already had experience designing book covers for N.V. De Arbeiderspers and Querido publishers in Amsterdam. He had also worked in design education, teaching layout and typesetting at IVKNO from 1945 to 1952. His contribution to Irish design would be most felt in these two areas.

During the sixties and seventies, Cor’s designs set the trend in Irish book covers. He was at his most inspired and prolific between 1968 and 1972 – designing covers for well over 100 books and most of the 27 LP covers for the Catholic Record Club.

His enthusiasm and generosity as an educator was to have a direct impact on a generation of Irish graphic designers. Cor recognised that the future lay in younger minds and he took great satisfaction in imparting his skills and in nurturing young talent. Many of his students are still active in Irish design and advertising.

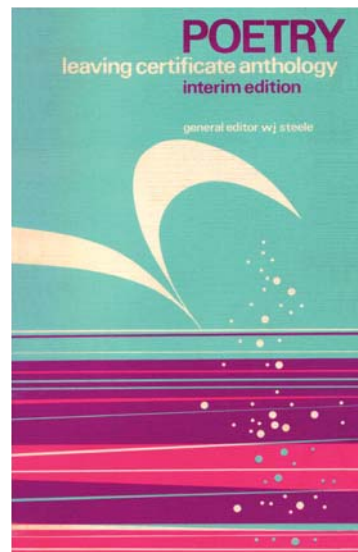
Cor’s work is an exciting strand of Irish visual culture and an important part of



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Irish design history. For too long it has lain hidden, known to his contemporaries and students but unseen by the wider audience which it richly deserves.

**NIALL McCORMACK**



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## REFERENCES

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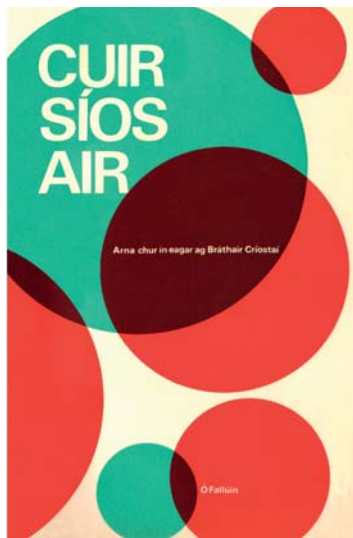
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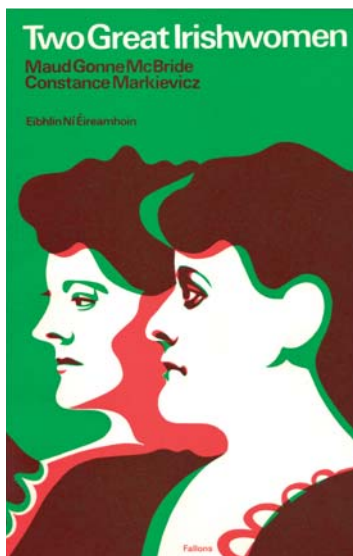
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- 2 Poetry Leaving Certificate Anthology, Fallons, Dublin, 1969
- 3 Breischéim, Fallons, Dublin, 1971

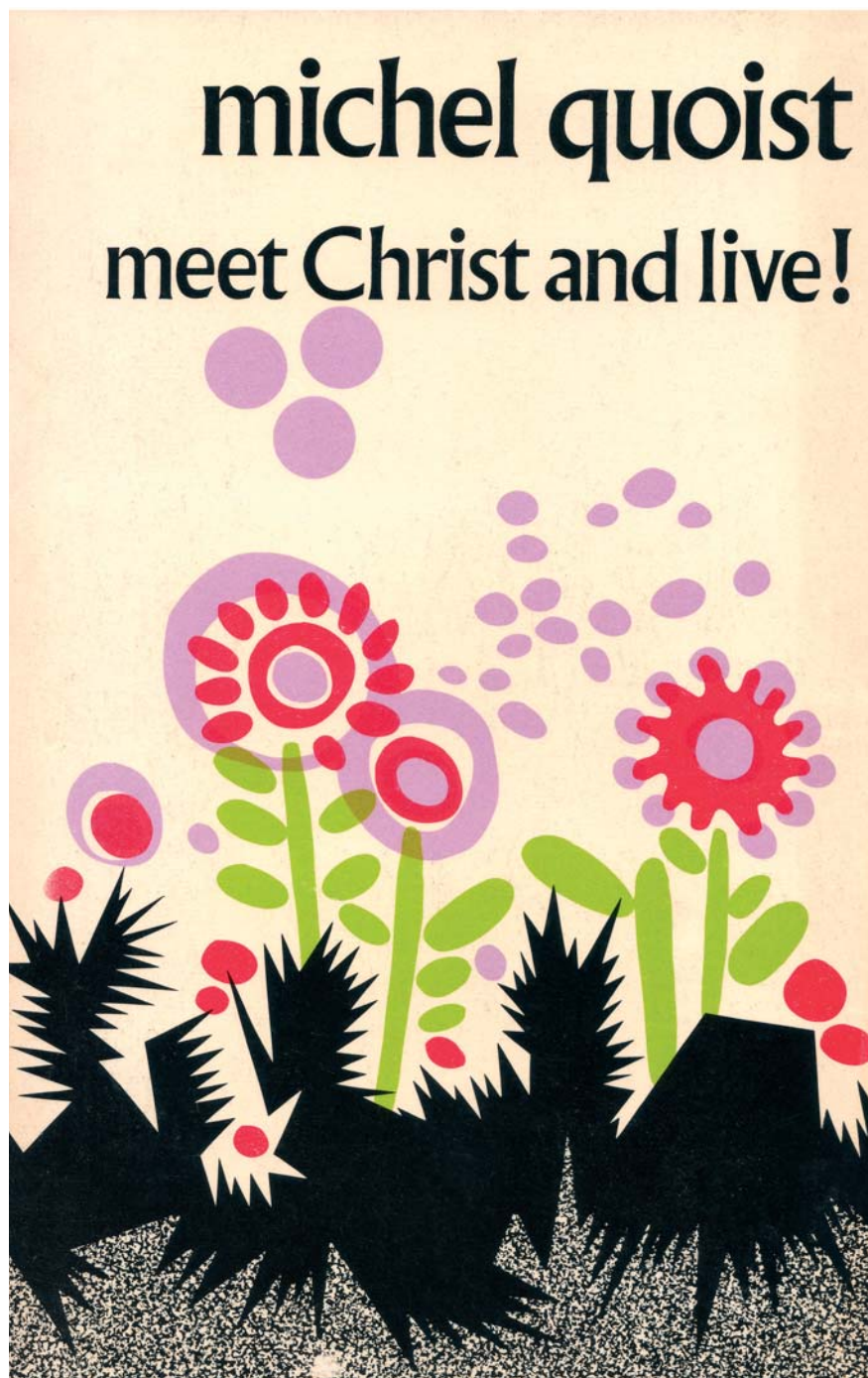


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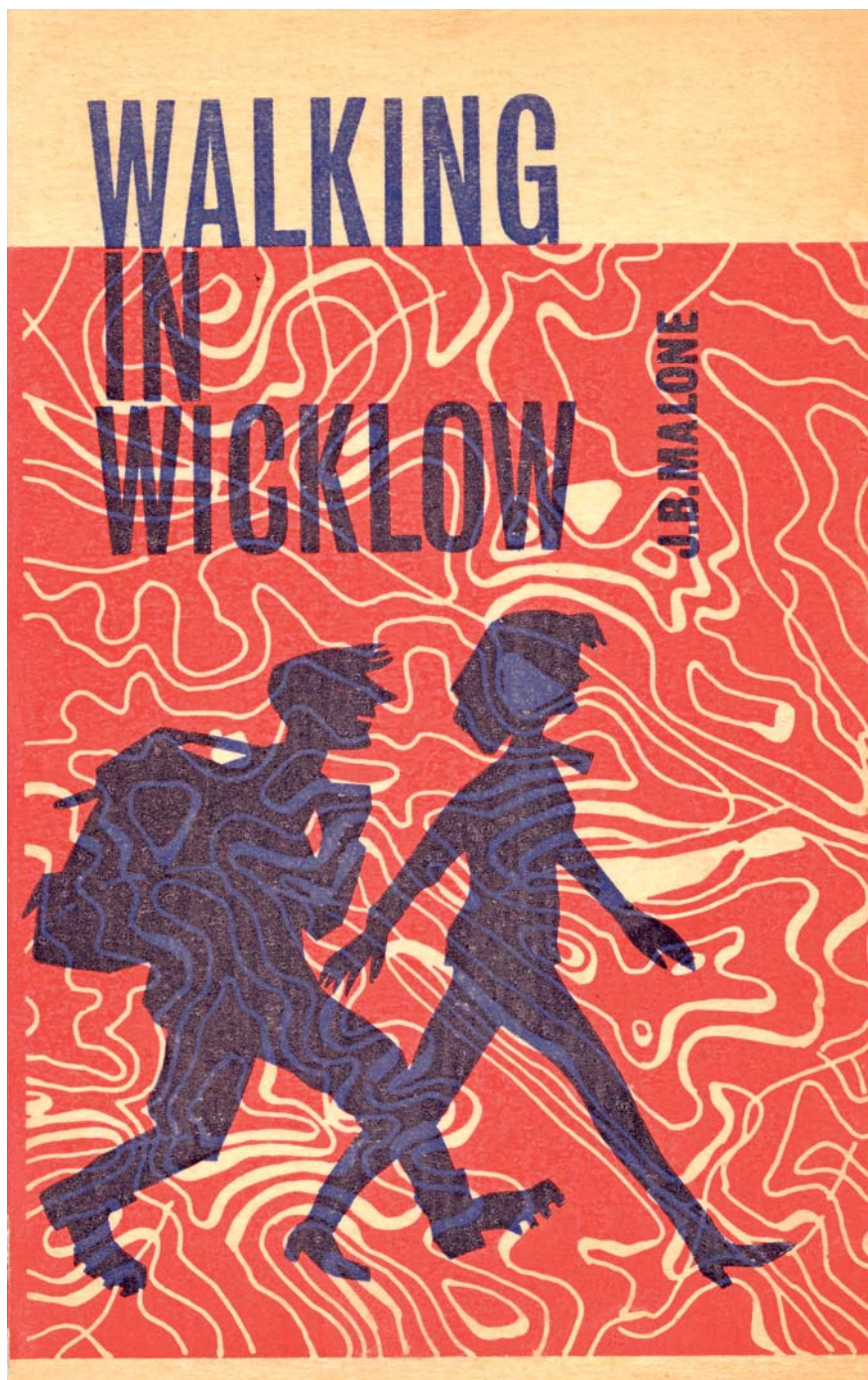
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- 1 Meet Christ and Live!,  
Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1973
- 2 Cuir Síos Air, Fallons, Dublin, n.d.
- 3 Two Great Irishwomen,  
Fallons, Dublin, 1971

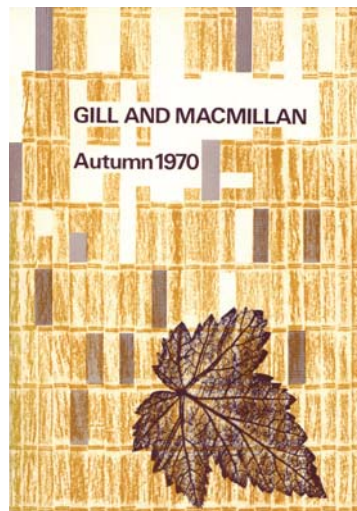


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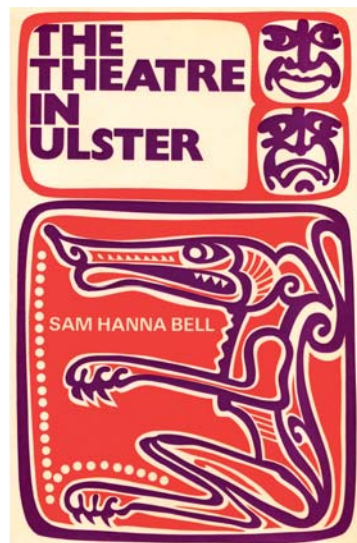




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- 1 Walking in Wicklow, Helicon, Dublin, 1964
- 2 Gill & Macmillan Autumn Catalogue, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1970
- 3 The Theatre in Ulster, Gill & Macmillan, Dublin, 1972

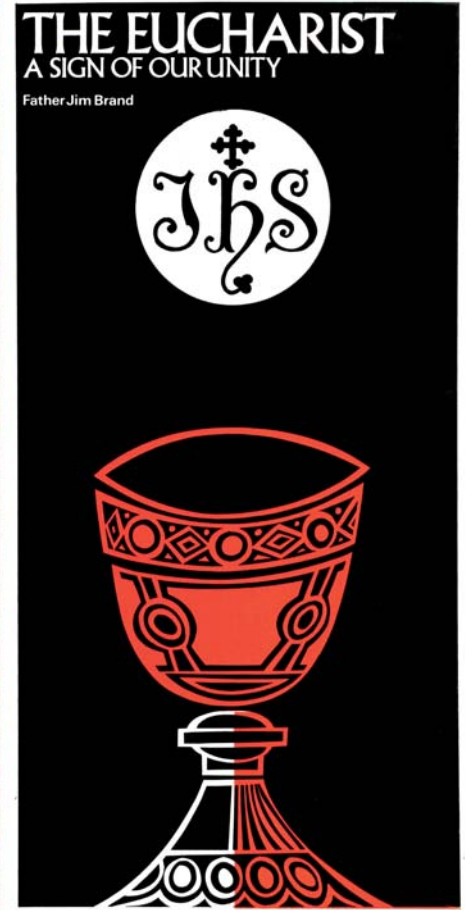
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Record Sleeves, Catholic Record Club, Mercier Press, Cork, 1967-1971





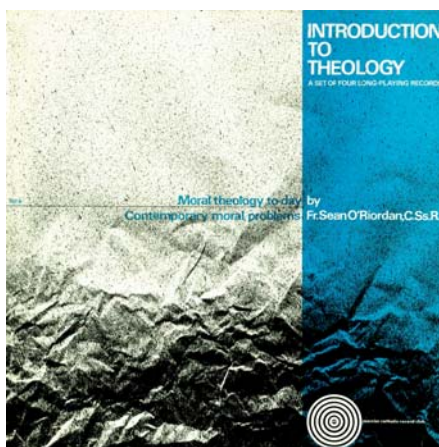
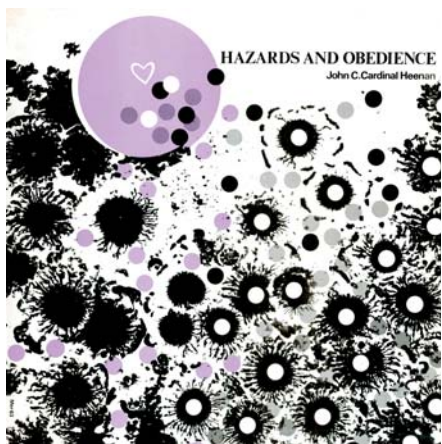
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**Cor Klaasen: Jackets, Covers & Sleeves**

Curated by Niall McCormack – Vintage Irish Book Covers. [www.hitone.ie/blog](http://www.hitone.ie/blog)

Exhibition opened on 3 November, 2010 by Brian Lalor.

Catalogue designed by Niall McCormack.

Printed by Hudson Killeen on Munken Polar.

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**[www.corklaasen.com](http://www.corklaasen.com)**





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