

Jennifer Coutts Clay Aircraft Interiors International

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1. Never mind the bright orange seat covers, check out those orange sidewall panels!
- 2-3. Passengers could convert vacant middle seats into tables
4. Braniff was the first airline to launch an all-leather interior
5. Upper deck lounge on board a Braniff B747
6. Vertical stripes help offset the curved contour of the upper deck ceiling on a Braniff 747
7. This 727 interior features horizontal stripes to make it appear wider



flying colours

WITH ITS BOLD USE OF COLOUR AND RADICAL APPROACH TO CABIN DESIGN, BRANIFF AIRWAYS BLAZED A TRAIL UNLIKE ANY OTHER



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- 8. Braniff's 'Big Orange'
- 9. A more down-to-earth colour scheme
- 10. Flight attendant uniforms were inspired by leisure-wear, rather than the military styling more popular at the time

Legend has it there was an amazing flying vehicle that transported illustrious passengers across the deserts and mountains of India – even over the water to Sri Lanka. Readers of the great Indian epic *Ramayana* will know that the interior design of this flying palace, called the Pushpaka (literally “a garlanded pleasure-car”), was a display of the most sublime expression of oriental splendour – with money no object. As detailed in Valmiki’s *Ramayana*, in Book Five – *Sundara*, the cabin’s “skylights and windows were of gold and crystal... raised platforms were set with lovely emeralds and sapphires. [There was] a divine and intense aroma of food, drinks, and rice”. Inside was “a huge carpet, woven to resemble the surface of the earth... costly fabrics [and] the smoke of aloe incense... It banished all sorrow [and] catered to the five senses”.

Fast forward In today’s jet age, aircraft cabins tend to be slightly less colourful and more functional. But there are some examples of opulence that have earned their place in aviation history. If connoisseurs of cabin décor were asked to select the most dramatic and inspiring of all the schemes ever flown by commercial airlines, the name Braniff would almost certainly appear somewhere near the top of the popularity polls.

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Braniff firsts

- Braniff was the first airline to hire and train women to become certified airline mechanics (1941)
- Braniff was the first airline to introduce a combined first class/tourist passenger service to South America (1948)
- A chartered Braniff DC-6, for White House staff members and newspaper correspondents, was the first domestic commercial aircraft to land passengers at New York’s International Airport (Idlewild) when it was officially opened by President Harry Truman on 30 July 1948
- Braniff was the first airline to operate non-stop daylight flights between Lima, Peru and Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (March 1948)
- Braniff was the first and only airline in the world to fly the Boeing 707-227 Super Jet (1959)
- The first carrier in the USA to introduce the BAC 111 twin-jet short range jet (1965)
- Braniff revolutionised aircraft exterior and interior design with its “End of the Plain Plane” campaign in 1965
- First airline to commission a fashion couturier (Emilio Pucci) to design its flight attendant uniforms (1965)
- First airline to commission “Flying Art” when Alexander Calder painted a DC-8-62 (1973) and a Boeing 727-200 in 1975
- First and only US airline to fly the supersonic Concorde jet (1979)

True colours In 1965, Harding Lawrence, the executive vice-president of Continental Air Lines Inc, which was then based in Los Angeles, moved to Dallas, Texas, to run Braniff Airways (founded in 1927 by Paul R. Braniff). The airline had a proud design heritage: the famed designer Henry Dreyfuss had headed the work on the interiors of its Electra and Boeing 707 and 720 fleets. But Lawrence wanted a unique new selling approach – something that would produce an immediate impact nationwide, because the airline was planning to rapidly expand its fleet and network.

The assignment was given to Jack Tinker & Partners, the Madison Avenue advertising agency that had handled the “Golden Jet” campaign at Continental. One of the executives at Tinker was Mary Wells, who earlier in her career had worked on major accounts at Doyle, Dane Bernbach, where she was credited with introducing strikingly original 1960s-style sizzle and bounce to clients’ marketing programmes.

For Braniff, she proposed an entirely new branding programme based on colour schemes that said ‘Wow!’ As she explained in her autobiography, *A Big Life in Advertising*: “This was the 1960s... when colour was a hot marketing tool. I started talking about colour to Jack and everyone at Tinker, and then to Harding when he would call. He liked thinking about colour; he reminded me that Braniff would be flying to places

History in the making

Oklahoma insurance man Thomas E. Braniff founded Braniff International Airways in 1928 with his brother Paul Revere Braniff, a former WWI pilot who obtained his pilot's license from Orville Wright!

Braniff's first passenger route was launched on 20 June 1928 – a 116-mile trip between Tulsa and Oklahoma City.

New standards of luxury and comfort were introduced with the acquisition of Douglas DC-2 aircraft in 1937, followed by the larger 21-passenger DC-3. These aircraft required the introduction of air hostesses, as well as new creature comforts such as heated and soundproofed cabins, power brakes and constant speed propellers.

Tragically, Thomas E. Braniff died in a private aircraft crash in January 1954, seven months after Braniff celebrated its 25th anniversary.

The airline launched its "end of the plain plane" campaign in 1965 with a completely new image and marketing campaign that tapped into the talents of American graphic and interior designer, Alexander Girard, and the Florentine couturier, Emilio Pucci.

In 1977, Braniff unveiled its "Ultra" look, featuring new uniforms designed by American fashion designer Halston, and a new colour livery of rich earth tones and luxurious leather seats.

In 1980, Braniff lost US\$131 million, an industry record at the time. Weeks after agreeing to lease its Latin American routes to Eastern Airlines for US\$30 million, Braniff ceased all operations and became the nation's first major airline to file for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection on 12 May 1982.

associated with brilliant colour: Mexico and South America," wrote Wells. "I saw the opportunity in colour... I saw Braniff in a wash of beautiful colour."

To review the Braniff passenger experience, Tinker & Partners employed Alexander Girard, an architect and graphic designer who had achieved great success with his décor schemes at the fashionable New York restaurant La Fonda del Sol. Inspired by his experiences in New Mexico and various South American countries, Girard had developed decorations featuring a montage of exotic ethnic artifacts in brilliant colours. These dramatic displays became a key element in the new identity programmes for Braniff.

Girard went on to design more than 17,000 visually related items, ranging from sugar packets and ashtrays to layouts for the entire Braniff fleet. Using fabrics from the Herman Miller company (where he had worked as textile director), he devised seven different schemes for Braniff aircraft interiors encompassing a wild array of eye-splitting colours and patterns: solids, stripes and checkerboards.

No fewer than 56 different fabrics were installed in the aircraft cabins, to the delight of passengers and the press, but to the despair of engineering and maintenance staff, who could not possibly stock all the spare parts in each colour combination at every down-line station on the Braniff route network. Just imagine the associated dollar costs!

For the launch of the campaign, called 'The End of the Plain Plane', Emilio Pucci, the famous Italian couturier, was asked to design fashionable uniforms for Braniff employees network-wide. In all, he implemented six uniform programmes in the space of eleven years. For the hostesses, there was an interchangeable wardrobe in dazzling lollipop shades of lime, pink, turquoise and plum: reversible coats, space-bubble helmets, Trevira dresses, miniskirts with matching tops, nylon

culottes and leggings in vivid patterns, pyjama trousers, and hot pants, as well as luggage, leotards and lingerie.

Braniff style Other experts came to work at Braniff – for example, the advertising was handled by George Lois, and then by the Chicago-based Clinton E. Frank agency. During the next decade, the airline generated a stream of exciting product development programmes, with associated slogans: 'If you've got it, flaunt it'; 'You'll like flying Braniff style'; 'The most exclusive address in the sky'; '747 Braniff Place'; 'The airline look of the 1970s'; and 'Braniff gets you there with flying colours'.

To re-spark the brand image and create an extra blaze of publicity, the renowned American artist Alexander Calder was commissioned to paint the exterior of a DC8 aircraft for the 'South America with Flying Colours' campaign.

In 1977, the New York-based couturier, Halston, launched a new uniform using artificial suede fabric. "The flight attendants looked fabulous," remembers Russ Thayer, president of Braniff at the time. "They loved the uniform so much they used to wear the outfits when they went out to dinner parties!" (Artificial leather and Ultrasuede gained immediate popularity after their debut in the fashion world in the early 1970s: non-crease and feather-light, garments made of these fabrics could be washed and hung out to drip-dry overnight. Now used widely for upholstery and wall coverings, these fabrics have been developed to meet current aviation flammability certification standards.)

Play and display In conjunction with the game-maker Atari, Braniff pioneered the introduction of video games on board the aircraft – a forerunner of the in-flight entertainment (IFE) systems we take for granted these days. Before the advent of cocoon-shaped seats and modern avionics equipment, designers used to emphasise sightlines within the aircraft cabin

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11-12 Braniff lounges featured unusual works of art sourced from the exotic locations it served



using decorative patterns on cabin dividers and sidewall panels, colourful textured curtains and seat-cover fabrics, and contrasting touches on employee uniforms. All these detailed applications functioned as potential conversation starters that could strengthen the conviviality quotient of the in-flight experience. By comparison, the featureless vanilla-style cabin treatments that are considered sophisticated today provide a relatively downplayed background – a restrained setting that never diverts the attention of passengers from the excitement and action displayed on their personal in-seat TV screens.

True original To handle the rapidly expanding number of stations and ground facilities in the Americas, Asia and Europe, Braniff employed the New York-based design firm Harper & George. “In the VIP lounges we used vivid colour-splash fabrics from Jack Larsen and exotic works of art from countries such as Mexico and Brazil,” recalls Irving Harper. “We carried this design approach across to airport check-in and boarding-gate areas, city ticket offices, training centres and ground-service applications. Braniff’s prime aim was to gain visibility, and management was extremely receptive to original ideas. This was very different to the corporate mode typical of the bigger airlines of the day, such as Pan American.”

Phil George outlines the company’s approach to aircraft interiors: “To achieve dollar savings, we reduced the earlier multifabric and two-tone specifications to one fabric in first class and one in economy class (there were no business-class cabins in those days). During 1977, we installed all-leather seat covers, initially in the first-class cabins and subsequently in the economy-class cabins on both narrow- and wide-body aircraft – a Braniff first for the industry.”

To celebrate the switch, the airline introduced new slogans: ‘The ultra look

of leather’; and ‘Braniff flies you in leather’. From having used every colour of the rainbow, Braniff had moved through the spectrum to a monochromatic terracotta colour, which, when applied to the exterior of the Boeing 747, earned the aircraft the nickname ‘the Big Orange’.

Overall, George is convinced that the use of “colour, drama and flair” at Braniff was responsible for starting a whole new way of thinking about airline branding: “The programme provided an entire generation of air travellers with the excitement of an air voyage, using an approach that included virtually every element of the travel experience: colours; handsome fabrics; decorated side panels; leather seats; coordinated passenger amenities; chef-prepared menus; special amenities; installation of art and folk art in airports and ticket offices – the list was endless,” he says. “It affected every way in which a passenger was in contact with Braniff during a trip.”

Pioneer spirit As a result of too-rapid expansion, long-term accumulated debt, rising fuel costs, and problems associated with the newly deregulated aviation environment, Braniff was forced to shut down in May 1982, just a few months after the sad demise of the British low-fare airline, Laker Airways.

While no one seems to remember the dozens of other airlines that went into bankruptcy during the 1980s, almost everyone who works in aviation has some knowledge of the shooting-star trajectory of this Texas-based carrier. The name Braniff lives on as an example of how to design and develop a unique airline product. Who can say how many airlines operating today will turn out to be as memorable as Braniff? **END**

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- 13. In 1968, Braniff installed clocks designed by Howard Miller – one is just visible in the upper left corner
- 14. A proposed livery scheme that failed to make it off the drawing board



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All pictures courtesy of Braniff/George Design Studio