

Graphic Design History: Past, Present, and Future

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Graphic design, it seems, is still searching for its past. Other design disciplines, such as fashion and industrial design, have an established tradition of archiving, documenting, critically writing, and publishing history, as well as engaging with social, cultural, and political contexts. Such histories have, for example, focused on the study of designed objects as well as design movements; celebrated “named” designers and the profession’s history; and explored design in relationship to other areas, such as material culture. This is not to say that graphic design has not had its share of commentators who have been defining approaches to studying its own history.¹ However, there remains a sense that graphic design history is less established as a discipline, and perhaps less exploratory in terms of defining new ways of writing about this history. The intent of this collection is to look again at the issues surrounding how we might define graphic design history, as well as to propose new ways forward.

The first conference to bring together academics, educators, and design practitioners on a formal platform was “The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design: Coming of Age,” held at the Rochester Institute of Technology in 1983. Organizers Barbara Hodik and Roger Remington wrote that up to this point, “the history of graphic design has been scattered among the pasts of art, printing, typography, photography, and advertising.”² The remit of the symposium was to “share information,” but also to recognize the need for pausing and taking stock of “the events, forces, and individuals that contributed to what we now know as graphic design.”³ Part of this reflection was to acknowledge the need to move away from art history and recognize a design history that took into account other disciplines, such as “sociology, anthropology, aesthetics, politics, economics....”⁴ This move also extended into highlighting the need for a distinct graphic design criticism to express “applied ideas.”⁵

Other conferences followed, specifically focusing on graphic design history, including Steven Heller and Richard Wilde’s successful ten-year series, “Modernism and Eclecticism: A History of American Graphic Design” (1990s) under the School of Visual Arts. Heller also organized “How We Learn What We Learn” (1997), the proceedings from which formed the foundation of his edited book, *The Education of a Graphic Designer*, and subsequent publications in the specialist areas of illustration, typography, and e-design.

- 1 The past few years have seen an invigorating plethora of textbooks designed primarily for an undergraduate readership, which take as their starting point the idea that history can be told as a narrative. Phrases from some of the books’ titles provide a clue as to their authorial viewpoint: *The Story of...* (Cramsie, 2010); *...A Critical Guide* (Drucker and McVarish, 2009); *...A New History* (Eskilson, 2007); *...From Antiquity to the Present* (Jubert, 2006). These tomes join the bookshelf with the well-worn pages of graphic design history’s earlier benchmarks: *...A Concise History* (Hollis, 1994) and *A History of...* (Meggs, 1983). Such accounts inevitably raise questions about “whose history?” and “written by whom?”
- 2 Barbara Hodik and Roger Remington, *The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design: The Coming of Age* (Rochester Institute of Technology, 1983), 5.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Victor Margolin, “The Scope and Methodology of Design History,” in Barbara Hodik and Roger Remington, *The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design: The Coming of Age* (Rochester Institute of Technology, 1983), 26.
- 5 “Summary and Future Projections,” in Barbara Hodik and Roger Remington, *The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design: The Coming of Age* (Rochester Institute of Technology, 1983), 57.

Graphic design was once again discussed in terms of distinct parts rather than as a coherent whole.

In 2005, *New Views: Repositioning Graphic Design History*, was held at the London College of Communication. This event proposed to “look beyond the familiar assortment of critical biographies, historical narratives, and anthologised readers in order to review and question conventional histories and design practices.”⁶ One reviewer remarked that it is impossible to “reposition” graphic design history without knowing the original position in the first place.⁷ This statement may have been true in part, but the conference was successful in exploring “whose history is it?” with papers about the richness of graphic design history in countries such as Germany, Greece, India, Iran, and Mexico.

Identifying a “need” for a graphic design history has a history itself and has been clearly articulated in texts by noted writers and designers, including Steven Heller, Andrew Blauvelt, and Victor Margolin. Others, including Ralph Caplan, have proposed we should be writing about ‘the history of graphic design as a history of ideas’ as a way of broadening out the subject to include a wider context.⁸ Despite attempts to raise the level of debate, graphic design history seems strangely elusive in forging a place for itself among the stalwarts of academy and within publishing houses. A point of view that design critic Rick Poynor supported in his keynote during the New Views symposium.

The phenomenon of the practitioner-historian is part of this discussion. In an interview with Steven Heller, Louis Danziger is credited as one of the first designers to teach a course in Graphic Design History at CalArts in c.1972 - although Danziger is quick to acknowledge that another designer Keith Goddard established the course a year earlier.⁹ More recently, practitioner-historians including Lorraine Wild, Michael Rock, Ellen Lupton, Joanna Drucker, Denise Gonzales Crisp and Kenneth Fitzgerald have played a significant role in helping to establish what a graphic design history might be through their own writings and teachings on the subject.

Steven McCarthy elaborates on the point about an inherent tension that exists between the academic-historian and the practitioner-historian and the ways in which such positions might affect any writing about graphic design history. In his essay, “Designer-Authored Histories: Graphic Design at the Goldstein Museum of Design,” McCarthy presents a selection of case studies from the museum’s publishing collection, including early twentieth-century design classics, *Production Manager* (PM, 1934–1942), *Portfolio* (1950–1951), and *Dot Zero* (1966–1968). He also features later publications, such as *Octavo* (1986–1992), *Zed* (1994–2000), and *News of the Whirled* (1997–), in which designers also took on the role of editor. This interconnectedness between author, designer, and editor makes these and other similar publications significant in how they might lead a critique about the very world in which their commercial practice resides.

6 Teal Triggs and Kerry Purcell, “Introduction,” *New Views: Repositioning Graphic Design History*, London College of Communication, (2005), 3.

7 Alice Tremlow, “End of history? Graphic design hasn’t started,” *Eye* 59 (Spring 2006): 80.

8 Ralph Caplan, ‘Why Graphic Design History’, paper abstract in *Modernism and Eclecticism: A History of American Graphic Design* (New York: School of Visual Arts, n.d.), n.p.

9 Steven Heller, ‘Epilogue: Interview with Louis Danziger’ in Steven Heller and Georgette Balance (eds) *Graphic Design History* (New York: Allworth Press, 2001), 329.

Designer-authored histories also play a role in forming a canon of graphic design history. Hilary Kenna, a PhD student at the University of the Arts London, takes as her starting point Emil Ruder's book, *Typographie: A Manual for Design* (1967), which has long been an established part of the key literature on basic design principles. In her essay, "Emil Ruder: A Future for Design Principles in Screen Typography," Kenna asks: how might history affect graphic design practice and our understanding of critical design principles as designers move from print to screen-based activities. Emil Ruder's approach becomes central to her own practice-led research process, offering both "a means to learning the rules and to breaking them" as she strives for innovation in typographic screen-based experiments.

At the same time, Robert Harland argues that, as a practitioner-turned-educator, the diagrammatic representation of graphic design will help us better understand the "subject's plural domains." In his essay, "The Dimensions of Graphic Design and Its Sphere of Influence," Harland assesses the positioning of graphic design history and theory in relationship to new ways of thinking about graphic design more generally. Graphic design "must now be equally thought of as a tool for social as well as economic development" and its history understood not necessarily as solely the domain of studying "objects of graphic design."

This brings us back to the question of the canon and "whose history." The last two case studies included in this collection, which can be differentiated from the more polemical content, begin to address the challenges faced by historians today. Identifying a starting point for any graphic design history is problematic, and especially in cultures where oral-based traditions have been the basis of a system of communication. Piers Carey, in "From the Outside In: A Place for Indigenous Graphic Traditions in Contemporary South African Graphic Design," argues for the inclusion of indigenous African graphic systems in any graphic design history of South Africa. At the same time, Carey recognizes the value of applying a historical understanding to the way graphic systems may be applied to contemporary communication challenges. This case study revisits the Siyazama Project, which raises awareness of HIV/AIDS through traditional use of Zulu graphic symbols in beadwork (first examined in the Spring 2004 issue of *Design Issues*).¹⁰ Carey argues that designers and historians face a challenge as globalization increases and the inequality of cultural power is perpetuated. He calls for a graphic design history of South Africa to take note, not only of a history of "Westernized" graphic design, but equally of "pre-colonial indigenous societies."

On the other hand, Leong K. Chan takes as his starting point "graphic design as a tool for national ideology and policy in Singapore" and explores the notion of nation building through the government's "policy of multi-racialism." In his case study,

10 Kate Wells, Edgard Sienaert, and Joan Conolly, "The *Siyazama* Project: A Traditional Beadwork and AIDS Intervention Program," *Design Issues* 20:2 (Spring 2004): 73–89.

11 Don Beer, "Book Review: Past Futures. The Impossible Necessity of History (based on the Joanne Goodman Lectures)," (review no.484) *Reviews in History* (accessed 3 October 2010) <http://www.history.ac.uk/reviews/review/484>.

"Visualising Multi-Racialism in Singapore: Graphic Design as a Tool for Ideology and Policy in Nation Building," one of several historical examples includes looking at late 1970s government campaigns, such as "Speak Mandarin" (1979), which attempted to secure, through the adoption of an appropriate visual language and narrative, an emphasis on unification, as well as on cultural identity. How might an understanding of history give us insights into the future building of nations and nationhood?

But, what is the role of the graphic design historian? The prevalent view of the historian is of somebody who is meant to "locate events in time" and to provide an explanation as to "why events happened when they did."¹¹ They establish links between the present and the past and "contribute to an understanding of design as it is currently practiced." I would argue that graphic design is in a unique position. While we need more trained design historians to provide a context to the understanding of graphic objects, movements, and people, we should also celebrate the practitioner-historians who also have the capacity to locate, explain, and contribute to the development of graphic design practice. Graphic design history in the present is looking for its past; in doing so, it paves the way for the future of graphic design.

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