

## **Toward a History of Graphic Design**

Interview with Victor Margolin

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### **1. What is graphic design?**

Graphic design does not have a fixed meaning. In a broad sense it is the production of visual statements. The term was first used by the American book and advertising designer W.A. Dwiggins in 1922. At that time it served the purpose of pointing toward a new profession that was broader than either typography, book design, or advertising design alone. For many years the term “graphic design” held because the range of media that graphic designers worked in did not change dramatically. By the early 1960s you had graphic designers working on large exhibitions, urban signage projects, and corporate identity programs. At that point, the practice outstripped the traditional name for it. New terms like “visual communication” or “communication design” came into use. Today, there has been another rapid expansion of the designer’s work in the digital realm. Designers are working with images, text, and sound and visual communication is overlapping with filmmaking and sound design. We probably need another new term to describe what communication designers do but I don’t know what that is.

### **2. What makes current graphic design different from that of earlier times.**

The proliferation of new media. Designing good web sites, for example, requires a deeper understanding of cognitive psychology, learning theory, and other social science disciplines than most communication designers have. Consequently, the information routes through a web site are frequently rather crude. The graphics often are too because not enough thought has been given to the relation between formal images and the communication of information.

In another sense, however, there is much today that is similar to the past. We still enjoy great posters, well-designed newspapers and magazines, wonderful books, excellent typography. The great accomplishments of designers from the past are very much alive and are extremely relevant to most work that is done today. When a web designer has poor training in typography, for example, it is evident.

### **3. When did graphic design first make itself known?**

I don’t believe in a single moment when something called “graphic design” appeared. There are separate practices such as typography or book design whose histories have different durations.

Typography begins at the end of the fifteenth century but by that time there is already a long history of designing books. The history of lettering in the West goes back to the Romans at least. We also have heraldic signs and crests that preceded today's logotypes. Most of these objects were designed by different kinds of people. Typographers created type; artists created heraldic shields and business cards; printers and engravers designed advertisements. With the expansion of mass communication in the 19th century, some of these strands began to come together in new forms of practice whose unity was often established by a common medium such as wood engraving or lithography. We have a long history of famous book designers and typographers—Aldus Manutius, Baskerville, Didot, Bodoni - but famous poster designers like Chéret or Mucha, for example, only become recognized in the late 19th century. In Germany, before World War I, we find the beginnings of a graphic design profession as characterized in the work of the journal *Das Plakat* (The Poster) which urged artists to work for industry. *Das Plakat* promoted the idea that posters, logotypes, and lettering could all be done by the same commercial artist.

#### **4. How far back does the desire to preserve the history of graphic design go?**

Well, books have been preserved in libraries since ancient times. The recognition of the book's value as a container of knowledge was the impetus to preserve objects which today we admire for their design as well. Every graphic designer or visual communicator, for example, should go to Dublin to see the *Book of Kells* in the Trinity College Library. As far as preserving more recent forms of design go, we have drawings for typefaces that have been collected in printing libraries such as St. Bride's in London. Posters were collected by the new applied art museums and museums of decorative arts that began to open in Europe from the mid-19th century on. The collection of less significant material is more recent. Some of the great ephemera collections today were started by single individuals. After the first collections of printed ephemera, which were often motivated by the quality of the wood engraving or lithography, museums of social and cultural history began collecting miscellaneous examples of printing as examples of how people lived rather than design quality. Actually the creation of design archives came rather late and many designers threw out all their sketches and correspondence because no one expressed any interest in them. Within the past twenty five years a number of graphic design archives, frequently based at colleges and universities, have been collecting the papers of graphic designers as well as their final products. We have such an archive at the University of Illinois, Chicago, where I teach. One of the best is at the Rochester Institute of Technology where you can find the papers and design work of some of America's outstanding graphic

designers from the 1930s on—Alvin Lustig, Cipe Pineles, Will Burton, to name a few. Today, at least in the United States, there is a growing recognition that a designer's archives might be a valuable resource for historic research. But until design history began to establish itself in design schools and universities, there were few people to undertake this kind of research. I believe that the best young graphic designers today are more interested in the past than at any previous time.

#### **5. What makes it difficult to maintain the history of graphic design?**

There is still little understanding by university and art school administrators of what value graphic design history or a wider history of design has. Occasionally there is a mad scramble for someone to teach design history and no qualified people can be found. This derives from the refusal of administrators to commit to new programs in design history or design studies. Actually the history, theory, and criticism of design have never been more important or relevant to design education. This is recognized in a few places such as the Jan Van Eyck Akademie in the Netherlands which features post graduate theory and criticism courses in art and design. In developing countries, the emphasis is on training graphic designers for the market. Quality is secondary. Look at how much poor work you see today. I feel it. You feel it. But poor typography or badly-designed web sites are hardly critical issues for people in general. What needs to be done in the academic setting is to implant the idea that design, whether visual communication or product design, is a cultural activity before it is a commercial one. Young designers need to locate themselves in their respective cultures, whether in the United States, Mexico, or Palestine. To do so means knowing how to interpret culture in its present manifestations as well as those of the past. An educated person of any profession should be able to locate himself or herself along a historical continuum. This is what a lot of school administrators don't understand when it comes to design.

#### **6. Do you consider the history of graphic design to be an integral part of the history of art?**

No. I think it is something separate. I do recognize a continuity between art and design and believe there is a lot of cross-over from one to the other. But generally the reasons for making art or design are different and require separate narratives to explain them. A course in art should acknowledge the design context for particular works such as stained glass windows for a cathedral or the propagandistic aim of Picasso's *Guernica*, just as a design history course

should recognize the importance of Cubism and Marcel Duchamp for the development of conceptual graphics.

### **7. What makes the history of graphic design different from the history of painting?**

Most graphic design is less ambitious than painting. It is created to satisfy the needs of a client and is usually contingent on the client's message, which tends to be pragmatic - selling something, announcing an exhibition, providing information. Painting begins with the free choice of the artist to make a statement about anything he or she wishes. There is work that overlaps art and design such as a poster for an art exhibition or the design of a book. Some of my favorite posters were done by artists such as Robert Rauschenberg or Claes Oldenburg. I think the difference between art and design has to do with the conditions for making statements. There is also the question of technique. Most graphic design is reproduced by offset printing while art has historically been produced in media that shows the trace of the artist's or technician's hand - painting, lithography, etching etc. The computer has blurred the boundaries between art and design and will probably abolish the difference between them eventually. Computer graphics ignore the old divisions of art and design. Will a history of computer graphics be a history of art or design? I think it will transcend these categories.

### **8. How do you account for the scarcity of publications which cover the history of graphic design?**

There are several reasons. First, historians of the visual arts have not traditionally taken much interest in graphic design because it may seem too ephemeral or insignificant. There has been more interest when design could be treated like art as in the case of Art Nouveau posters. Second, the culture of design has not been a culture of writing and few practitioners have written graphic design histories. We now have a few survey texts in graphic design history written by designers: Phil Meggs in the USA, Richard Hollis in England, and Enric Satué in Spain. These provide a beginning for more developed histories of the future. Conversely, scholars like Michele Bogart, Roland Marchand, and Ellen Masur Thomson tend to focus on specific topics such as advertising or the roles of women. Journals such as *Design Issues* and the *Journal of Design History* have also published scholarly articles on graphic design history. What we are missing are good scholarly surveys that are written for lay audiences. That is what I hope to do in the World History of Design which I am now planning.

**9. What tendency do you consider most adequate in evaluating the history of graphic design?**

Graphic design needs to be seen in its full and complex historical context. Simply writing a history of forms or styles doesn't tell us enough. What we are calling "graphic design" arises in many different situations and these must be exposed and explained. We also need to pay more attention to the actual content of designed pieces and not just to formal issues. Some scholars have drawn on semiotics and rhetoric which are useful tend to treat the work outside its historical location. We need to locate graphic design practice in the historical circumstances of its production and work from there to do formal or textual analyses.

**10. How can the effects of graphic design be best evaluated in social circles?**

It is necessary to take graphic design more seriously and to treat it critically as one would art or architecture. This means more exhibitions in museums, conferences and forums where serious discussion takes place, and more scholarly books and journal articles. The existence of serious graphic design scholarship and criticism will demonstrate to the public that graphic design is an important social phenomenon.

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