

The Origins of Graphic Design in America, 1870-1920, Ellen Mazur Thomson, Yale University Press, 1997, 220 pp., 50 illus. ISBN 0-300-06835-2.

Reviewed by Victor Margolin

In her account of how graphic design developed as a profession in America, Ellen Mazur Thomson states that it “evolved at the intersection of printing, typography, advertising, and illustration..” (2) Her claim that there was no singular starting point for the ultimate professionalization of graphic designers sets her book apart from previous histories. She makes a distinction between design as an activity, which has a long history and was practiced primarily by printers who provided design services for their customers, and design as a separate profession which, she says, did not occur until around 1920. To support her argument, she relies heavily on American designer William A. Dwiggins’s newspaper article of 1922 “New Kinds of Printing Calls for New Design.” Dwiggins, who allegedly used the term “graphic design” for the first time in that article, claimed a territory for this new profession that was distinct from the printing tradition which preceded it. Following Dwiggins, Thomson provides an admirable demonstration that the emergence of graphic design as a profession represented a break with the separate strands of design activity that had come before it. By the time Dwiggins’s article appeared, she notes, “design professionals had created a discipline that combined visual art with mass communication.” (1)

Rather than feature individual practitioners as the agents of the transformation to a graphic design profession, Thomson focuses on what she calls “bridging institutions”—associations, schools, unions, journals, and services. She discusses the addition of art departments to engraving houses and advertising agencies, the emergence of magazine art direction as a new form of practice, and the different ways that associations of printers, illustrators, art directors, and designers evolved. For the most part this is new material that Thomson gleaned from her exhaustive study of little used primary sources of the period—mostly trade journals but some other materials as well.

Along with the formation of new institutions, Thomson argues strongly that emerging technologies were instrumental in creating the conditions for new types of graphic design practice. She sees technology as a liberating force that created new opportunities for designers. Lithography provided more freedom for artists and letterers while photography, used as a means of generating images as well as preparing manually produced images for reproduction, gave artists the freedom to work in a wider range of media and art directors the opportunity to scale images to their page sizes.

Thomson contrasts her approach with other studies of graphic design history that have, in her words, been characterized by “tracing careers of major designers, by descriptions of styles, and less frequently, by using semiotics to analyze individual works or categories of work.” (6) Instead she takes up many broad themes of social history and labor history as well, particularly by her attention to the emergence of new professional practices and her emphasis on how labor unions functioned to preserve jobs for white males while attempting to exclude women and minorities.

As an antidote to the laments of researchers like Cheryl Buckley and Martha Scotford that women’s contributions to design have been neglected, Thomson devotes one of her seven chapters to women. Her aim is not to evaluate their work as being worthy of canonization or not, but mainly to recognize their involvement in printing and design. With one or two exceptions, notably Ethel Reed, the Boston poster artist, and Ellen Gates Starr, who founded a book binding workshop at Hull House in Chicago, the women she mentions will not be known to most readers despite the fullness of their practices. These women include Elizabeth Colwell, the only female featured in the magazine, *Graphic Arts*, who was recognized in Chicago for her advertising work as well as lettering, bookplates, and book designs, Jesse Wilcox Smith a highly accomplished illustrator, and Helen Rosen Woodward, a New York advertising agent. Thomson draws on Woodward’s biography and other sources to document the difficulties women faced in the workplace, the unions, and in gaining admission to artists’ clubs. The Society of Illustrators, she notes, was founded in 1901 as an all-male organization and did not have any women as full members until 1920.

Thomson states in her introduction that she has not written “a full-fledged history of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century graphic design...” (2) Her focus instead is on discovering the moment when those working in various areas of the graphic arts began to identify themselves with a new profession. This emphasis on professionalization is rather new to graphic design history and is particularly welcome. It is based on the desire to explore the process by which new forms of design practice evolve and is particularly germane today as older ideas of what a graphic designer does are being supplanted by new activities such as interaction design that are blurring the boundaries between previously discrete activities such as graphic design, film, and literature. This is similar to the way graphic design emerged in the 1920s as a profession that brought together elements of typography, illustration, and advertising which had previously operated as separate strands of practice.

Rather than tell her story in a linear chronological manner, Thomson divides her chapters by topics. She begins with a discussion of technologies that changed what designers did and then writes briefly about the advertising and publishing industries that

employed many commercial artists. Subsequent chapters focus on the trade journals of the period, the career changes that led to new practices, the rise of professional associations and clubs, the split between high art and commercial art, and women in design history. Thomson pursues her thesis that graphic design as a profession developed at the intersection of separate strands of activity by maintaining the distinction between those activities within each chapter. Thus, the chapter on trade journals has separate sections on advertising journals, printing journals, art journals, and the like. In the chapter on professionalization there are similarly distinct treatments of associations for illustrators, arts and crafts societies, and associations for printing. And finally in the chapter on women we encounter separate sections on women in advertising, women illustrators, and women in the printing trades. The book's structure thus operates as a kind of matrix with distinct topics functioning as divisions in one direction while the different strands of practice—advertising, illustration, printing—operate as divisions in the other. The detailed knowledge of these separate strands thus prepares the reader for Thomson's conclusion, supported by Dwiggins' seminal article of 1922, that a new profession of graphic design was formed from elements of what were previously separate career paths.

Thomson's claim that there was no single starting point for the professionalization of graphic design has serious implications for the future writing of graphic design history. In previous histories, authors have tended to adopt an unspoken definition of graphic design and then selectively include material that falls outside that definition, notably the work of advertising artists or illustrators, according to some unspoken criteria of visual value. Thus the advertising posters of Lucian Bernhard or the witty Volkswagen ads of Doyle, Dane, Bernbach are included in the major histories by Meggs, Hollis, and Satué because of their graphic excellence but run of the mill ads are not. Such accounts, unlike that of Thomson, are driven more by the perceived quality of the work than by the framing conditions that led to its production. They are written as histories of how particular graphic forms contributed to a canon of design work that came to represent professional achievement. While there has been opposition to the "canonization" model, it tends to be prompted not by a dissatisfaction with the method of singling out particular works for attention but by a disagreement about which works should be considered canonical. A piece of wartime propaganda or a hippy poster might not be examples of good design but would be included for their social import.

Thomson is clearly more comfortable working with texts than with images and the range of sources she has consulted is quite remarkable. In an appendix, she includes a long list of journals in art, advertising, printing, and typography. Some such as *The Inland Printer* and *Bradley: His Book* are well known but others such as *Judicious Advertising*, *Modern*

Engraver, and *Typographic Advertiser* are not. As a result she identifies themes and topics that have not appeared in previous graphic design history texts and provides the reader with an extensive bibliography for future research.

In order to write a social history rather than a history of forms, Thomson scarcely engages with the formal and narrative content of individual design pieces, while giving priority instead to the technologies and situations of practice that produced them. She does provide valuable information about how specific professional tasks were defined as a response to the creation of new technologies and media but there is little attention to the appearance of the work as an indicator of evolving design thought. In this regard authors such as Meggs, Hollis, and Satué who begin with the work rather than the framing conditions, have been more successful in explaining to the reader how and why visual forms have changed.

What we have then are several different approaches to graphic design history: Meggs in *A History of Graphic Design*, Hollis in *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, and Satué in *El Diseño Gráfico: Desde los Orígenes hasta Nuestros Días* give great emphasis to the design thinking behind particular forms; Crowley and Jobling in *Graphic Design: Reproduction and Representation since 1800* attend to the reception of graphic design and how it accrues meaning as it circulates in the public sphere. And Thomson turns her attention to how conditions of graphic design practice are constructed instead of focusing on the resulting designed pieces as do the above-mentioned authors.

We learn less about individual designers in *The Origins of Graphic Design in America* than we do in other design history texts. There are brief mentions of Will Bradley, Bruce Rogers, and Frederic Goudy, as well as a number of other figures who are lesser known. Unlike other histories of graphic design, the author also devotes attention to non-designers such as the advertising theorist Walter Dill Scott, the journalist and publisher Henry Louis Johnson, and the publisher George P. Rowell. What becomes evident in this book is that graphic design does not occur in a vacuum. It is embedded in a culture of opinion and debate as we see in the chapter on trade journals where we are introduced to some of these debates as they appeared in publications of the period. Of particular interest is Thomson's account of the debate about artistic hierarchies in the chapter entitled "The Great Divide." Here she describes several aspects of popular graphics that offended proponents of high art and then offers detailed accounts of some of the debates around particular media such the poster which for some critics transcended the divide between high and low art.

For a book on graphic art, this volume does not have a strong visual appeal. Photographs and line drawings are printed on a cream-colored paper which results in many of them coming out rather dark with the gray tones running together. Chapter titles are

preceded by small hard to see versions of larger photos that appear elsewhere in the book, a design device that strikes this reviewer as being redundant. Some of the photographs are of buildings or machines or unidentified members of one association or another. These might well have been replaced by more images of designs created by those working in the different strands that Thomson writes about. Then one could have had a visual record to parallel the textual argument. The cover, which juxtaposes a halftone dot screen with a photograph of a 19th century type designer for a purpose that is unclear, also misses an opportunity to represent the theme of the book visually.

Ellen Thomson attracted attention in the design history community with several articles drawn from her book which appeared in *Design Issues* and the *Journal of Design History* before the book's publication. As a follow-up to those articles, this volume is a major contribution to the design history literature. It stakes out new territory by focusing on issues of professionalization and should remain a valuable source of information and insight for years to come.

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