

Teaching Design History

by Victor Margolin

In the United States today, we have hundreds of students in art schools and universities studying graphic design and product design. If these students are to be treated seriously as future professionals, they should have some exposure to the history of their chosen field as well as to the theories and critical issues within it. However, few opportunities to study design history exist beyond an introductory course.

Despite this situation, I am optimistic about the future of design history and the new field of design studies. In the past 15 years, there has been a considerable development of critical literature about design. Journals such as *Design Issues*, *The Journal of Design History*, *Design Studies*, the *AIGA Journal*, *Emigré*, and ACD's *Statements* have demonstrated that design is a subject that can sustain critical discourse just as well as art, architecture, or literature.

When I began to teach in 1981, there were few models. I developed a year-long course by the patchwork approach, mixing together topics from art history—particularly the early 20th-century avant-gardes—as well as the decorative arts and the scant materials available on the history of graphic design and product design. I made some decisions at that time which I still find pedagogically valid: rather than teach a course that subsumes the entire history of making things under the rubric of “design,” I begin with the Industrial Revolution and use the move toward mass production and mass communication as the backbone of my narrative. But I also include material from the crafts, the vernacular, architecture, engineering, and other related fields. The second decision I made was to include both graphic design and product design in my course. I have not regretted this decision. In fact, I developed my pedagogy for my principal constituencies—undergraduate majors in these two fields.

My pedagogical intentions impact heavily on my style of teaching, as well as on my narrative strategies. As we have seen in the literature over the years, design history can be treated in a number of different ways—as a history of forms or styles, as material culture, as social history, or as cultural studies.¹ In this article, I describe a teaching methodology and narrative structure that are directed to design students.

First of all, few young people have any solid understanding of design before they enter a design program. One function of a design history course is to explain to them what they have

¹ See Clive Dilnot, “The State of Design History, Part I: Mapping the Field” and “The State of Design History, Part II: Problems and Possibilities,” in *Design Discourse: History Theory Criticism*, ed. Victor Margolin (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1989), pp. 213–250.

chosen to study and to assert that design is not a fall-back profession for aspiring artists, but an independent practice with its own culture. A good course does this by example. When students are exposed to images that vary as widely as the pure form of a Mies van der Rohe chair (figure 1) and the funky eroticism of a vernacular hot dog stand (figure 2), they begin to see that design is not about a narrowly conceived opinion of “good taste.” Rather, it embraces the totality of the human-made environment. Design history can show students how many possibilities there are for making things, and, in this way, serve as a way of socializing them into their profession.

As part of this process, design history can play a subversive role as well. It is no secret that many design programs seek to instill in students a particular formal orientation and distinct convictions about the kinds of design solutions that are acceptable. Mostly, these derive from the conventions of European modernism, at least among older faculty who themselves studied in programs that emphasized such an approach. In recent years, however, postmodern strategies have emanated from selected pedagogical strongholds and have managed to sway many students. Design history can undermine the belief that there is one formal standard that supersedes others.

Another function of design history is to present students with role models of designers to whose standards they might aspire. We are all aware that the pressures of a tight economy and the vast capabilities of the computer have encouraged many students to focus on the mastery of technical skills and to ignore the deeper aesthetic and social values that ought to underlie every design project. Design history can combat this tendency by identifying designers from the past and the present whose work represents a high degree of reflection and integrity. There is a particular photo of Alexander Rodchenko (figure 3), which presents him in his custom-designed jumpsuit and high boots. I show this photo to students because I want them to understand that Rodchenko used his own clothes, as well objects, to express his commitment to the social aims of the Bolshevik revolution. At the same time, I present the new opportunities that existed for women designers after the revolution, highlighting, for example, the work of Liubov Popova and Varvara Stepanova, whose constructivist theater sets and textiles were among the more remarkable achievements of Soviet designers in the 1920s.

As much as possible students need to understand that personal initiative and the capacity for invention are important qualities for the designer, and they should see these qualities portrayed in the work people of color as well as white women and men. Neither graphic design nor product design are professions that historically have attracted people of color, but there are examples of successful black designers such as George Olden, an early art director for CBS, who can serve as valuable role models for young minority students. Thus the design history course provides evidence that all kinds of people can produce work of quality, while also demonstrating the characteristics that contribute to high standards in design practice.

One might well claim that the themes I have presented so far need not be identified exclusively with design history. They might just as well constitute a course, entitled “Introduction to Design,” in which a series of topics would be introduced to students with the aim of accomplishing the above-mentioned objectives. However, the importance of placing these themes within a historical narrative is paramount because the location of a thought, action, object, or event in history creates a context for its explanation. When the subject is placed in relation to what came before it and what follows, it is embedded in a nexus of causes and effects that contribute to its identity. For the student, encountering design within history makes the point that design—or any form of action for that matter—is dependent upon a set of circumstances that create possibilities. The relation between those circumstances and the possibilities for action that designers find in them is essential for students to understand.

Through the study of design history, students can relate their own interests to past activities and begin to locate themselves within the continuity of design practice. A student who is attracted to the geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller may wish to work in the area of portable structures, while someone intrigued by the work of Eric Gill may consider a career in typography. In seeking opportunities for practice, students are also defining particular continuities of activities that they identify as precedents—with concomitant standards of quality—for their own future work.

While architecture and art also embrace a broad subject matter, historians in these fields have inherited narratives in which select groups of monumental works have been canonized for a long time. However, the canonical categories in art and architectural history are now subject to considerable criticism. When buildings such as barns and vernacular houses don't fit the architectural canon, they must be studied outside architectural history in fields such as material culture, where the criteria for inclusion do not depend upon judgments of “canon worthiness.” Design history is too new to have such clearly codified precepts, and this, I would argue, is an advantage. It is still a subject open to debate and new approaches.

Following Hayden White and other theorists of narrative, I assert that there can be no single design history. Instead, there are a multitude of stories that depend on who is doing the telling and listening, and why the story is being told. Therefore, a successful history of design for design students must contain elements that will be particularly meaningful to them. At the same time, students must understand that the story they are encountering is not the only one; other ways of interpreting the history of design are also possible.

The basic premise of the story that I tell in my survey course is: design is no less than the conception and planning of the artificial world. Its products include objects, processes, systems, and environments; in short, everything. This broad identification of subject matter is necessary because it prevents the establishment of rigid boundaries or categories that limit

design to exclusive narratives, such as the history of furniture, the history of graphic design, or the history of decorative arts. Students should be encouraged to locate their interests in as wide a field as possible, and to engage with the fullness of design culture rather than with only one of its segments.

Because design is a practice that is continually inventing itself, we need to take this dynamic trajectory into account when we introduce students to the subject matter of design history. It is important to communicate to them that the central topic of design history is the practice of design rather than the products that result. But practices are multiple, and comparisons need to be made between the different types of people who design. For example, engineers, artists, craftspeople, and inventors are a few of the professions that complement graphic and product design.

The practice of design is also embedded in a design culture which includes schools, publications, associations, conferences, exhibitions, and other activities that impact designers' work. The recognition of design culture is essential for the socialization process of students who need to understand that designing is not a solitary activity. It is a part of a larger social community of discourse. The history of postwar design in Italy is a particular case in point. The reason Italian design gained world prominence beginning in the late 1960s was that various parties in the Italian design community—designers, manufacturers, critics, and journalists—were able to assert a cultural presence and significance for design through exhibitions, publications, and other promotional events. This activity resulted from long experience with institutionalized exhibitions such as the Triennale, design prizes such as the *Compasso d'Oro* (figure 4), magazines, such as *Domus* and *Casabella*, and an active designers' association (ADI) which has continually asserted the cultural importance of design.

Indeed, one of the arguments that a design history course needs to make is that design is an activity which is valued or should be valued by society. To do this, it has to include an account of important exhibitions, publications, conferences, examples of design promotion in museums and government, and the efforts of the *grandes écoles*, such as the Bauhaus and the hfg Ulm, to establish design on a new footing. Exposure to this kind of material should help students orient themselves and their own practices to larger situations than those created by an immediate task at hand. Students should be told that they have an opportunity to expand and develop their chosen professions, rather than plan on careers as followers and subordinates.

By moving away from a history of objects—which provides no guidelines for what to include other than aesthetic canonical ones—toward a history of practice—which, I should add, does not negate an attentiveness to objects—one should be able to tell a coherent story of design from the Industrial Revolution to the present. That story can emphasize the varieties of practice without honoring one form or another on the basis of canonical judgments.

Such a course must also be a true world history of design, which is only possible when we suspend aesthetic value as the principle criterion for inclusion. This has not yet happened in art history surveys, despite calls for an expansion of the traditional chronicle of Western monuments. What typically occurs is that some material from historic non-Western cultures in Asia, Latin America, or Africa is patched into a survey course, without any recognition of modern or contemporary art in these cultures. A world history of design needs to give attention to design practice in South America, Africa, and the Middle East, for example, about which we know little to date (figure 5). Again, focusing on practice rather than objects, we can find narrative strategies to incorporate material from these regions without having to do so on the basis of aesthetics alone.

I want to conclude with a statement about the most essential quality that makes a design history course successful—the teacher’s own love of the subject. Teaching is performance, and students watch us closely as we impart our knowledge. We can reveal our own biases, telling students what we like and don’t like without presenting those biases as absolutes. When we convey to students that we know how to look, that we are concerned about what gets designed, and that we take pleasure in design’s historical narrative, we can kindle their enthusiasm for an enterprise that affects us all, and whose significance has too often been underestimated.

Photo Captions

Figure 1: Ludwig Mies van der Rohe, Weissenhof chair, 1927

Figure 2: Tail o’ the Pup, Los Angeles, c. 1949

Figure 3: Mikhail Kaufman, Portrait of Rodchenko, 1922

Figure 4: “The Aesthetic of the Product,” exhibit at La Rinascente Department Store, Milan, 1953

Figure 5: David Tartakover, “Who Will Utter the Mighty Acts of Israel,” poster published after the massacre of the Sabra and Shatilla refugee camps, September 1982

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