

*Graphic Design:
History and Practice*

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Graphic Design: History and Practice

Graphic design history is a territory where multiple interests converge but where views may diverge, especially those of design practitioners and historians. The former have always affected not only the making of their own past but also the study and use of its narration. The history of graphic design, however, has also been practised by “pure” or academic historians who have contributed to its understanding with their own agenda and methodologies.

Up until today, the historical narrative of graphic design has been developed to a great extent by design practitioners themselves who, focusing mainly on individual professionals and artefacts, have eventually established a landscape of good design references and notable names with which to identify. And yet, since at least the 1990s, just as the role of the graphic designer and its professional survival were put under discussion, those references have come to be regarded by some as offering too limited of a representation. Calls have been made by both designers and historians for the need to expand the field of investigation and to widen the interpretive framework. From their side, historians have particularly argued for the importance of looking beyond the immediate needs of the design practice and the designer’s identity, and of drawing from diverse approaches and disciplines such as those of material and visual culture, social and cultural history, anthropological studies, gender studies, etc. At the same time, graphic designers have poured renewed energies into

looking at their field's past through the lenses of their own practice – the kind of knowledge that is built on technical expertise and sensitivity and one which designers often observe as generally lacking with pure historians.

When in 2013 we, a group of practitioners and historians, began discussing the relationship between history and practice, we realised that despite the topic having been addressed before, there still remained many crucial questions that deserved further discussion: How do historical narratives shape the definition of the field of practice? Conversely, how does graphic design practice contribute, or how can it contribute, to defining the ways to access and disseminate historical knowledge? How does history help to develop critical discourse about the design practice? How do designers use and embed history in their practice? Finally, are the visions and agendas of practitioners and academic historians really so incompatible and distant from one another?

Persuaded of the need to make space for dialogue on such questions, we decided to expand our discussion by inviting other practicing designers and design educators, along with academic historians and theorists, to confront their experiences and points of views. We also believed that doing this in the context of an educational environment, possibly in front of students, made the most sense. Indeed, education is a typical setting where the perspectives and approaches of designers and historians are brought face to face with one another. In design schools, professional designers and scholars work side by side, share rooms and students, and at times even projects and objectives. And teaching activities within design schools call history into question in various ways: lead-

ers of studio courses, for example, usually introduce students to a number of historical references that can sustain them in their designing activities. On the other hand, historians who teach in design schools are asked to set aside the purely historical questions and to establish a fruitful dialogue with students aspiring to become designers, not historians. While this overlapping of competences and interests may cause tension, schools are certainly also an ideal site for meeting and collaborating, as well as for generating new visions and opportunities. And it is from within this kind of encounter that the symposium *Graphic Design: History and Practice*, held in May 2014, and of which this book is testimony, originated.

Our invited speakers – Richard Hollis, Gerda Breuer, Esther Cleven, Annick Lantenois, Mario Piazza, Adrian Shaughnessy – are experts who, with different backgrounds, perspectives, methods, and operating contexts, have all been extensively involved with the making of design history, through writing, publishing, editorial and curatorial activities. Their unique views on the history of graphic design, featured in this publication, offer insight into such questions as narratives, methods, teaching and education, preservation and curation, gender, digital media, national contexts, and audience.

Our impression is that the symposium essentially relaunched, more than solved, the questions which were posed at its conception. Perhaps the principle conclusion that can be drawn from the symposium is the need to maintain an open dialogue and space for the development of further collaborative relationships and encounters between the competences and ambitions of designers and historians. Ultimately, history making is itself a practice, a complex and challenging one that

increasingly requires historians and designers to join forces in order to advance. It is with this perspective that we have decided to include, along with the speakers' papers and the transcript of the discussions that followed the two main panels, a final section to the book containing further reflections on specific issues that emerged during the conference (e.g. the sense and use of history in the life of a graphic designer, the difficulties and potential of teaching graphic design history within design education, and the question of the digital history of graphic design).

Our hope is that the following pages will contribute to addressing what remains perhaps the main challenge for graphic design history: to be of relevance to a wider audience, beyond that of only engaged historians and designers.

Antonino Benincasa, Giorgio Camuffo,
Maddalena Dalla Mura, Christian Upmeier,
Carlo Vinti

How does history
affect and shape
the definition
of graphic design?

How do designers
use history and
incorporate it into
their practice?

How does graphic
design contribute
to accessing
and disseminating
history?

What kind of
audiences does
graphic design
history have
and how can they
be broadened?

Are the visions
and agendas
of practitioners
and historians
really distant from
one another?

1.

Richard Hollis
Gerda Breuer
Esther Cleven

History and the Graphic Designer

Richard Hollis

When talking at a university-organised conference on graphic design it is always encouraging to observe a room full of people interested in the history of the subject. My experience, however, tells me that in general not too many people are. Whilst checking on the web, I found very few courses offered at university level. Some institutions with courses in graphic design – for example, the School of Visual Arts in New York – simply state that students will “understand scale, texture, symmetry,

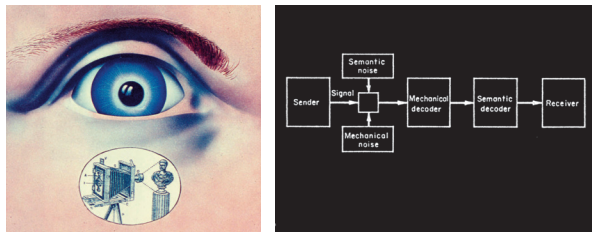
tension, line, colour, tone, and contrast, pattern and perspective.” To my mind it is naïve to present these aspects as central to a course because the implication is that graphic design is merely about making and manipulating images.

As to education or professional training, it is worth comparing designers with writers. As an aspiring writer, you read as much as you write. You read not only the best contemporary writing, but also the accepted canon of the great works. In the same way, graphic designers can learn by looking at the most admired works of the past, although to be really valuable, students need to look critically and try to understand the context in which a work was produced.

The discussion of context is clarified by illustration. Thus what follows is a visual commentary on my thoughts/words and vice versa.

The human eye has not changed for millennia. I do not mean that Ötzi, the ice-age man in Bolzano, had an eye identical to our own, but since his day the technology for recording what the eye sees has changed [1]. Indeed the way in which images are reproduced, or just the way they are seen, has changed due to changes in technology.

Students on a university-level course in the 1960s had to learn how communication worked [2]. Most importantly they studied gestalt psychology and what that had to teach.



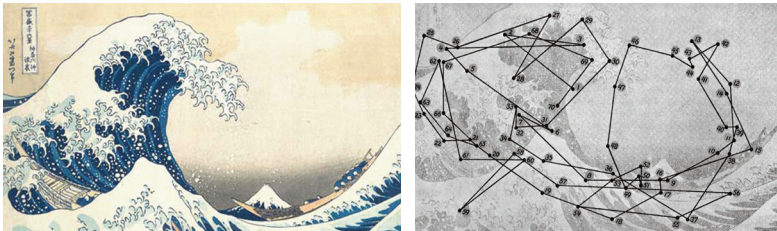
Indeed, in the most celebrated twentieth-century school of design at Ulm, there was a distorting Ames room [3].



3

This provided the physical experience of understanding the difference between what you expected to see and what you actually saw. Taking into account the reader or viewer's previous experience was a concept embedded in a student's understanding of communication.

Studies have been made of how the eye works [4]. Surely it is crucially important for visual designers to understand also



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how people interpret what they see. In graphic design what the eye sees are images and words. Students need to be able to write, to relate words and images to make a coherent message, to understand how that message is understood, and to take into account the kinds of likely readers of the message.

A few days ago two pages of a booklet came through my letterbox: it was a timeline of the Tate Gallery exhibitions this summer [5]. This kind of timeline is a graphic convention which has existed for a couple of centuries. Here is another