

AMERICAN GRAPHIC DESIGN EXPRESSION

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The debate continues-- is graphic design an art, science, business, craft or language? Graphic design in the United States has operated under multiple identities since its inception with each of these identities dominant at one moment or another. And each may predominate from one project to the next in a designer's practice today. Often, graphic design is defined as a duality, combining two of these definitions, such as craft/language or business/art. This identity crisis is confirmed by the lack of agreement on a name for the field. Graphic design, visual communications and visual design are all thoughtful names in current use. A variety of archaic terms persist including commercial art, layout and graphics design.

Unlike its venerable cousin architecture, graphic design is a very new design expression, a phenomena of the last hundred years. A spontaneous response to the communication needs of the industrial revolution, graphic design was invented to sell the fruits of mass production to growing consumer societies in Europe and North America in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Rapidly expanding reproduction technologies provided the means for graphic design's participation in the vast economic, political, technological and social changes of that era.

American graphic design's roots lie in European type cutting and book printing. This precursor to the profession was imported to early America as part of our European cultural inheritance. For literally centuries, from the invention of moveable type in the early Renaissance to the twentieth century, bookmaking, typesetting, and type design were an integrated craft and industry centered in publishing houses. This long tradition approached typography and book design as the visual presentation of verbal language, with a premium placed on clarity and legibility. Decisions in type design emphasized clarity rather than expression, relying on the words themselves for the expression of content. Typography was neutral to the message and made no attempt to be interpretive. Craft was highly valued and books developed increasing elegance and refinement as the years progressed, codifying this classical book approach into the standardized traditional text format that continues as the standard of book text today.

However artful the book design, the element of function relegated this activity to craft status rather than fine art. The predominance of text made this tradition largely a verbal language expression. Illustrational imagery was used sparingly in early books due to technical difficulty. When used, it represented literal phenomena and rarely mixed with the text or headline typography. Interpretive symbolic imagery was left to painting, or "high art". Through the centuries painters have employed whole vocabularies of visual nonverbal symbols to convey meaning to

their audiences, who were able to decode meaning through learned associations, the result of shared cultural experience.

It was not until the early twentieth century that meaning was embedded in visual typographic form. The early Modern revolutionary artists of Futurism, Dada, Constructivism, and De Stijl turned their attention to text and visual communications as well as the more traditional areas of fine art, rejecting the traditional divisions between the fine arts, applied arts, and crafts. Functional expression was embraced as well as the "purer" self-expressive goals of high art-- function was not viewed as the enemy of art. In particular, the Russian Constructivists retained their artists' identities even as they took on the role of public communicators in the Russian Revolution. The Bauhaus unified art, craft and design in a coherent philosophy and sense of identity. Several early Modernists went on to execute some of the first serious "professional" graphic design, applying their early experiments to the pragmatic communications needs of manufacturing clients.

These revolutionaries explored new approaches to structuring language and imagery that were radical rejections the classical text tradition. Their highly visual poetry used typographic forms and composition to interpret and extend the words' meaning. One does not have to read Italian to gain an appreciation of the Futurists' energetic celebrations of industry and political confrontation. Typography finally became an expressive visual language as well as a verbal one.

This visual/verbal dichotomy can be understood through a simple diagram that charts the process (in the Western humanist tradition) of the acquisition of meaning. Seeing and reading are two modes through which we traditionally think of receiving messages. Image and text are two carriers of those messages. Typically we think of seeing as a visual process connected with images-- we see the landscape, we see a painting. This process is intuitive, emotional and simultaneous, experienced almost involuntarily. Upon encountering a vivid color photograph of a fire, a viewer might immediately sense fear and heat with little need to conceptualize. Or an image of a nude figure might stimulate sexual feelings instantly and involuntarily. Although associations gained through life experience influence this process, it is predominantly a direct experiential one, related to the philosophical theories of phenomenology.

On the other hand, the process of reading is typically connected with the verbal process of decoding text's written language signs-- letters. To do this, one must know the code. One must have learned to read the particular language of the message. This process is cerebral, rational, deliberate, and linear. If one does not carefully link the proper sequence

of signs, one cannot decode the message. Linguistics, Structuralist philosophy and PostStructuralism deal with these language dynamics.

In addition, there are two other linkages possible between seeing and reading and image and text. The early Modernists discovered that text can be seen as well as read, as the Futurists' experimental poetry proved. And images can be read. Neolithic cave painters at Lascaux knew this, as well as most painters until many Modernists rejected imagery in favor of abstraction. This process was reconfirmed by the Surrealists, by the emerging graphic designers of the 1930s and 1940s, by the New York school of advertising, and again by recent PostModern artists and photographers dealing with text/image relationships.

How an artist, designer or craftsman defines oneself has much to do with their use of these text/image processes. Nineteenth century book designer/printers dealt largely with the reading of text, and aligned themselves with the literary field of language. Many early Modernists dealt with all four modes and saw themselves as integrated creators of communications balancing the identities of artist, designer, businessman and craftsman.

American book designer/printers continued the European classical noninterpretive traditions with extremely literal presentations of both imagery and text. But with a public that was increasingly literate, the printer's activities broadened to include early manifestations of the mass media: political and commercial handbills in the late eighteenth century, and newspaper advertising, popular magazines, advertising cards and posters in the late nineteenth century. These required headline-scaled typefaces. By the Victorian years a great multiplicity of ornamental faces had been born and American wood type was developed as an inexpensive and accessible means of embellishment for popular communications. This much more decorative expression spoke with a louder voice than the subtlety of traditional books, making the reader's experience far more visual. Yet this larger scale of typography contained no coding in its visual form; the process remained one of reading text.

The late nineteenth century's early advertising, magazines, and posters stimulated a new and growing field of illustration. These illustrators rendered highly artful literal depictions of objects, scenes and narratives with growing skill and rapidly evolving reproduction processes. But they employed little symbolism. And because they served the tainted world of commerce rather than practicing "serious" art, these first "commercial" artists were relegated to a class of servant, despite the large public following of many.

American graphic design was finally born out of two new factors. As the 20th century got underway, an explosion of new reproduction technologies stimulated specialization, separating conception and formgiving from the technical production activities of typesetting and printing. Simultaneously the United States received its first European Modernists emigres, the migration reaching its height in the 1930s. These men understood design as a balanced process involving the powerful multiple

modes of seeing and reading, and sensed the possibility of theory and method as guiding the creative process-- the first rudimentary seeds of professionalism. These designers, including Bayer, Sutnar, Burtin, Moholy-Nagy, and Matter, brought with them Modernism's dual paths of ambiguity and objectivity. They shared an interest in ambiguity and the unconscious with new work in fine art, literature, and psychology. Interpretive typography and asymmetrical compositions seemed more appropriate in a new world where tradition was rapidly disappearing. Surrealism offered symbolic forms of conceptual communication that went beyond the power of the word.

On the other hand, these European designs believed that rationalism and objectivity were appropriate for a new world ordered by commerce and industry. They continued early Modernism's interest in abstraction and dynamic compositions. For the first time in the United States, they persuaded their clients to minimize copy into brief essential statements, rather than the text-heavy literal description favored in early American advertising. Rudimentary ideas of systematic problem solving and design compositions were offered by Ladislav Sutnar and Andrew Kner. The role of designer was defined as a highly skilled interpreter of messages, a far more authoritative stance than the hired hand following the dictates of an autocratic client. Interpretation was central to the idea of communication. Systematic rationalism drew on science, while inventive compositions and symbolic interpretation related to art, balancing this identity between art, science, craft and business.

These emigres had a tremendous impact on a number of young American designers, such as Paul Rand and Bradbury Thompson. As they grew into maturity in the 1950s these men developed new approaches to composition, photography and text/image relationships. Many of their discoveries formed the basis of the "big idea" method of conceptualizing design solutions which placed a premium on the flash of intuition and the individual designer's creativity-- the ah ha! method of problem solving. Centered in New York of the 50s and 60s, this individualistic process idealized the creative genius, symbolized by the maverick designer in his garret studio. (Ralph Caplan has critiqued designers for their willingness to play this role-- what he calls the "exotic menial", the brilliant individual serving the needs of clients, but a servant nonetheless.)

The intuitive conceptual "big idea" method became a uniquely American visual communications expression, and was closely associated with the New York School of advertising of the 1950s and 1960s. Exemplified by Doyle Dane Bernbach's classic Volkswagen Beetle series, this advertising created intelligent and clever interplays between verbal and visual concepts. Short ironic conversational headlines were juxtaposed with provocative images, drawing on the lessons of Surrealism, and particularly Magritte. Unexpected combinations of images and/or contexts created ambiguity and surprise. This "picture is worth a thousand words" approach maximized the process of reading. Both text and image were to be decoded and read by the viewer, relying on semantic

meaning with little interest in page structure or systematic organization. Unfortunately many designers today associate this powerful approach with advertising's commercialism and fail to take advantage on the power of the conceptual image/copy concept method.

As this highly successful form of advertising began to dominate American visual communications, the first wave of Swiss design thinking and forms arrived on the American scene. First transmitted in the early 1960s through a few design magazines and books-- *Graphis* and the "bibles" by Muller-Brockmann, Karl Gerstner, Armin Hoffman and Emil Ruder-- a few young American designers began to assimilate these ideas. Rudy DeHarak, the most notable of the American designers hungry for some structure, adopted the Swiss method on his own after seeing these influential examples in the design media. Then in the mid 1960s, several professional design offices began to practice these ideas to solve the needs of large corporate clients in Holland, England, Canada and the U.S. A number of corporations and institutions including Container Corporation, Ciba-Geigy, Herman Miller, IBM and Massachusetts Institute of Technology adopted this method and aesthetic. Eventually U.S. corporate culture adopted "Swiss" graphic design as the ideal corporate style. What was originally very difficult to sell to business clients is very difficult to avoid today.

This graphic aesthetic and method was the second wave of European Modernism to influence the U.S. Essentially different from the "big idea" approach, it is based on an assumption of Modernist rational "method", a codified approach not so dependent on the individualistic inspiration and talent of the designer. This had a profoundly professionalizing influence in American graphic design, further replacing the commercial artist's servant image with one of a disciplined, educated professional. As this method influenced the field, graphic design began to split apart from advertising design, a major division that remains today.

This classic "Swiss" method prescribed an ordered process rather than the genius of inspiration, and promised far more dependable, however predictable, results. It assumed a rational systems process based on semi-scientific analysis and problem solving. The ideal was the objective (dead serious) presentation of information, rather than the subjective expression of an attitude, emotion or humor. "Swiss" was found to be more suitable for the corporation's demand for factual accuracy-- the perfect style for an annual report-- while the big idea was more suitable for advertising's persuasive goals. Swiss tended to rely on representational photography and minimalist typography, while the "big idea" was far more image-oriented, employing illustration and symbolic photography. "Swiss" graphic expression stressed the syntactic grammar of graphic design with structured grids and typographic relationships. This form of Modernism neglected some of early Modernism's discoveries with visually expressive typography and surrealist imagery. For the most part, classic Swiss typography was meant to be read and its imagery to be seen only in the conventional modes.

Semiotics, the science of signs in visual language, was a theory explored in the late 1960s in Europe, especially at the Ulm school in Germany. This scientific approach to the analysis of meaning in communications was very compatible with the rationality of the Swiss method. Promising an alternative to intuitive design, semiotic theory began to inform some of the Swiss adherents in the U.S. Although this difficult and complex theory was little understood, the "scientific" flavor reinforced that "objective" tone of Swiss design, and reinforced the idea that graphic design was more than a personal art form. Semiotics became the first codified theory of graphic design, a major step in the evolution to professionalism. As Massimo Vignelli has so often reminded us, theory as well as history and criticism are the essential trinity that distinguish a profession from a craft or trade.

The "big idea" originated in New York, an American synthesis. The visual symbolism owes some debts to surrealism, but the copy concept verbal approach came from American wit and casual vernacular speech. Although "Swiss" found its first big growth in Chicago's heartland, introduced by Container Corporation and Unimark International, it is an essentially northern European, or Germanic, sensibility, expression and paradigm. Its importation to Chicago repeated the route followed by many of the Bauhaus emigres of the late 1930s-- Mies, Bayer and Moholy-Nagy.

This first wave of Swiss was strongly identified with the Swiss designers of Zurich, Muller-Brockmann and Gertsner, applying Bauhaus early Modernist ideals. Their strict minimalist codified expression of functional messages could be described as Classic Modernism. No sooner than the Zurich Swiss become established in the U.S., a second more mannered form of Swiss developed that could be called Late Modernism. Work from the Kunstgewerbeschule in Basel was a far more experimental and complex, adding many "nonfunctional" design forms. Coming from a school where students and faculty had the luxury of time and experimentation, many rules were broken and the time was taken to develop the sensibility to a high level of aesthetic refinement and complexity. The irreverent Wolfgang Weingart rebelled against the minimalism of his predecessor, Emil Ruder, in the late 1960s and initiated a body of work with his students that pushed early Modernism's constructivist experiments to their logical extremes. Enlarging on the earlier Swiss issues of structure and composition, he explored increasingly complex grids and typography in experimental compositions that became quite painterly. Yet the typographic play was mainly about the grammar of typography, and neglected semantic expression. This highly formal work was not very conceptual and has been criticized as merely decorative in the final analysis. Depending on one's critique, this movement could be labeled baroque, mannerist or even decadent Modernism.

The Basel school's faculty and graduates began to come to the U.S. in the mid 1960s, with a real impact realized in the early 1970s when young American graphic designers 'in the know' began to migrate to

Basel for postgraduate training in graphic design. By the mid 1970s some of this complexity began to embellish basic American "Swiss" graphic design in the form of bars and rules and playful mixing of type sizes, weights and faces in an essentially formalist agenda.

As classical 'Swiss' discipline was gaining followers and even before Basel became an influence, Robert Venturi shook the U.S. cultural scene with his 1965 polemical treatise, "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture". Although most graphic designers remained unaware of his premises for many years-- and many may not yet realize his profound influence-- his challenges to Modernist dogma sent shock waves rippling throughout the architecture and design world, stimulating new work that came to be called "PostModern." His arguments in favor of historical pre-Modern architectural forms and crudely energetic commercial American vernaculars eventually contributed to a new phase of American graphic design.

The emergence of graphic design history in the 1970s dovetailed with Venturi's rediscovery of pre-Modern design. It was a definite sign of maturation when graphic design discovered that it had a history. Until then graphic designers felt they were still inventing the discipline. The field seemed completely new with no history, a premise supported by the Bauhaus Modern ideal of constant newness. The first books and conference on design history provided a banquet of historical forms for designers. The results ranged from historical homage, appropriation and quotation to eclecticism, imitation and outright cannibalism.

But Pushpin Studios of the 1960s, a stream paralleling American Swiss, already knew about the pleasures of history. This New York studio's popular eclectic celebrations revived, exploited, imitated and occasionally parodied decades of design styles, but with an essential difference of intention from this new more academic "PostModern" sensibility. Pushpin pursued a hedonistic "if it feels good, do it" free borrowing from history's nostalgia, essentially the same intention as the Victorian American eclecticism they so often imitated. PostModernism's historicism was a more intellectualized self-conscious critique on the meaning of history. Venturi, a professor as well as architect, applied a semiotic analysis to historical and vernacular style, interpreting form as language invested with cultural meaning. Buildings were signs meant to read by their audiences.

Popular culture vernaculars, history and the Basel school's mannerist Modernism came together in the mid 1970s to create a new, highly formal expression most often called "PostModernism" or "New Wave" graphic design. Bored with the rigidity and minimalism of corporate American "Swiss", American designers, particularly certain educators associated with several of the better schools of graphic design began to experiment. Working from a Modernist "Swiss" foundation, they began to dissect, multiply or ignore the grid and to explore new spacial compositions, introducing complexity and pattern, and frankly nonfunctional design elements. Hand-drawn gestures and vernacu-

lar bad taste were artfully introduced in highly aestheticized layered compositions. This phase could easily be labeled a baroque or decadent American Modernism rather than PostModernism. The expression was still strongly linked with Modernism's interest in syntax and structural expressionism, although by now it had become personal hedonistic formal celebrations rather than impersonal disciplined presentations of functional information. The typography shared Basel's visual complexity and was mainly expressive of itself with little semantically-encoded symbolic meaning. The use of American vernaculars was also mainly a formal, a borrowing of pop forms with little of Venturi's understanding of context or intention.

But it was a lot more fun than classical Swiss, and New Wave quickly spread across the U.S. to become an accepted graphic style. Just as Modernism's classic Swiss was accepted, this too became accepted in the business arena and persists today in a wide variety of corporate applications. In fact it is so accepted, one design historian, Philip Meggs, calls it the New Academy, as prescribed a method as the Beaux Arts school of 19th century French architecture.

New Wave's type of graphic PostModernism is essentially formalist with a rather minor involvement with content-- content being more a jumping off point for graphic celebrations of style than the core of the matter. Certainly the "big idea" school of earlier years was far more dedicated to the communication of content. In fine art, a more profound aspect of PostModernism has emerged as a body of self-conscious critical theory and expression. In fact, in much PostModern art, photography and music the central expression is a critique of our accumulated body of culture and symbol. Appropriation and pastiche recycle our experience in highly referential work that owes everything to what has gone before. All this has its roots in structuralist semiotics of the 1960s, as well as Venturi's ideas. Although semiotics never became a practical design method, it and Structuralism's successor, post-Structuralism, have recently provided a real method and expression in the visual arts and graphic design. Coming out of literary theory, visual phenomena are analyzed as language encoded for meaning. Meanings are deconstructed, exposing the dynamics of power and the manipulation of meaning.

PostStructuralism and recent fine art have influenced a promising new direction that is more truly PostModern. Graphic design is analyzed in linguistic terminology as a visual language. The audience is approached as readers as well as viewers. In the best of this new design, content is again at center stage. Images are to be read and interpreted, as well as seen; typography is to be seen as well as read. M & Co.'s provocative narratives exploit the power of familiar clichés, vernacular typography and closeknit text/image connections. Rick Valicenti's auditory typography speaks with a tone of voice and mixes image and letter in rebus-like "sentences." The connection of word and image is again as rich as the New York School's, but with a visual compositional interaction as well as a conceptual verbal one. The best new work draws on the formal les-

sons of Basel and New Wave while drawing on all four seeing/ reading/ text/ image modes simultaneously in powerful visual/verbal conceptual expressions. There are layers of meaning as well as layers of form.

This work has an intellectual rigor, demanding more of the audience, but also rewarding the audience with more content and autonomy. The focus is on the audience to make individual interpretations in graphic design that “decenters” the message. Pieces are a provocation to consider a range of interpretations, based on Deconstruction's contention that meaning is inherently unstable and that objectivity is an impossibility, a myth maintained to control the audience. Graphic designers have become dissatisfied with obedient delivery of the client's message. Influenced by recent fine art, many are taking the role of interpreter a giant step beyond the “problem-solving” tradition by authoring additional content and a self-conscious critique to the message, reviving roles associated with both art and literature. Gone are both the commercial artist's servant role and the Swiss designer's transparent neutrality. Wit, humor and irony are reappearing in irreverent and sometimes self-deprecating pieces that often speak directly to the reader in the second person plural, often with multiple voices. Venturi's view of history and vernacular as symbolic languages is finally being explored. Stylistic forms are appropriated with a critical self-consciousness of their original content and context.

This new work is smart and cerebral, challenging its audience to slow down and read carefully in a world of fast forward and instant replay, USA Today and sound bites. The emphasis is on audience interpretation and the construction of meaning, beyond raw data to the reception of messages. This direction seems aligned to our times and technology, as we enter an era of communications revolution and complex global pluralism. Desktop publishing is placing the production of low end print communications in the hands of office workers and paraprofessionals. Even the simplest corporate report is now typeset and formatted, raising the visual expectations of our audiences. To distinguish high end graphic communications from the vast output of desktop publishing, a new demand for highly personal, interpretive and eccentric design expressions is surfacing.

With this new interest in personal content, the graphic design may once more turn toward the fine arts, but built on decades of progress in methodology, theory and formal strategies. The multivalent character of graphic design continues to shift between opposing values. Is this fluidity an indicator of the field's persistent immaturity, or a confirmation of its relevance to a rapidly changing world? Oppositions-- art/ business, visual/verbal, European/American, scientific/intuitive-- are graphic design's strength and richness.

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