

# CURATING GRAPHIC DESIGN EXHIBITIONS

## AS AN ACT OF DISSEMINATING RESEARCH, IDEAS AND KNOWLEDGE

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*“A good history of design isn’t a history of design at all. It’s a history of ideas and therefore culture.”*

This notion, put forth by the late great design provocateur, Tibor Kalman, can serve as a means for design educators to reconsider how we use graphic design history within our studio classroom environment. Instead of placing a profound focus on heroic individuals or isolated objects or artifacts, perhaps we should consider encouraging our students to seek relationships between the visual work and their makers that reflect the social, economic and political climate of their time and that fit within a larger cultural context.

Of all the different delivery systems currently available to help our students observe and understand these relationships, the exhibition format seems the most immediate and effective means to explore the history of ideas through a focused viewpoint. Unlike fine art, which is essentially viewed through a formal lens, graphic design is best analyzed through a wider lens focused on culture, commerce and developing technologies.

A stellar example of this type of exhibition was *Graphic Design in America: A Visual Language History* curated by Mildred Friedman in 1989. This exhibition was organized by the Walker Art Center in collaboration with the American Institute of Graphic Arts (AIGA) and traced the history, function and significance of graphic design from the late 19th century to the 1980s. There were approximately 400 works plus slide-tape presentations and a program of film and TV graphics. Passionate critics of this exhibition publicly accused Mildred Friedman of ignoring an American tradition of typographic eclecticism by leaving out key design contributors, most notably Milton Glaser. Yet, the whole premise of this exhibition’s mission to identify and clarify a ubiquitous art form to a mass audience was a proud and validating moment for me as a young designer and educator. And at the same moment, I understood the enormous potential inherent in organizing and curating graphic design exhibitions as a viable means to disseminate relevant ideas and construct meaningful narratives exploring the relationship between artifacts and culture.

So inspired, I set out to explore this medium and organized three major graphic design exhibitions during the 1990s, each with a different focus and faculty partner. In this paper I’ll reveal my process and outcomes with the hope that I might inspire those of you who would like to undertake such a project in the future. My three exhibitions are:

**Russell Mills Within/Without** (1991) organized with Teresa Flavin

British graphic designer who uses his fine art to illustrate commercial products. In the exhibition both the commercial work and fine art were displayed to explore the symbiotic relationship between graphic design and fine arts in this man’s work.

**Dutch Graphic Design: 1918-1945** (1994) organized with Alston Purvis

Exhibition inspired by the publication of the same title written by Alston Purvis. The context here was to explore the nature of the international avant-garde working in Holland between the wars and it’s effect on international design culture.

**Makoto Saito: The Art of the Poster** (1999) organized with Jan Kubasiewicz

This exhibition explored this Japanese designer’s relationship with commerce through the lens of a contemporary Japanese society inspired by western cultural mores.

## Inspiration and opportunity in London

In the summer of 1990, my Illustration faculty colleague, Teresa Flavin and I took a group of 14 Mass Art Illustration and Graphic Design students to study in London for one month. The core program revolved around visits to design and illustration consultancies for the purpose of engaging British designers and illustrators in a dialogue concerning the cultural similarities and differences in practicing communication design in the U.S. and Britain.

One of these visits to London-based artist/designer/illustrator Russell Mills' studio provided the impetus for my first exhibition project. Teresa and I had initially contacted Russell Mills because we felt his work bridged both graphic design and illustration —“his near abstract images of great delicacy with its weathered surfaces and subtle textural effects, often allude to cycles of natural decay”<sup>2</sup> and yet this work serves as “illustrations” for commercial products primarily within the music industry and publishing world. What intrigued us most about Russell Mills was that he refuses to distinguish between private and commissioned work. He uses this work to defy the artificial barriers between art, illustration and design. His clear commitment and passion for his work, so apparent when he generously shared his thoughts and design process, made a very strong impression on us all.

As the students explored his studio environment filled with natural objects collected for his collages and constructions, I found myself wondering how I could employ Mills' philosophy and work to challenge the prevailing elitist posturing between the applied and fine arts departments that existed in my college and in many others. I seized the moment and invited Russell to consider having an exhibition of his work at the Massachusetts College of Art.

The following June of 1991, after months of planning correspondence defining the exhibition's point-of-reference, Teresa and I meet with Russell in London to curate the exhibition. Three months later in September, *Within/Without: The Art of Russell Mills* opened to the college and professional Boston design community to rave reviews. With this exhibition, there seemed to be something for everyone—for the fine arts students and faculty, here was a body of very personal work they could all relate to and be inspired by. For the design students and faculty, the notion that one could create original personal art for a commercial purpose was a genuine “ah-ha” moment for many. The ensuing critical success of this event reinforced my belief that the exhibition construct was an excellent pedagogical tool for a wide range of constituencies.

## Continuing to learn

My personal focus during the early 1990s was to study early 20th century design history. My influences were mirrored in the materials I was discovering for the first time—British editor Herbert Spencer and his publications *Pioneers of Modern Typography* and *The Liberated Page* which elucidated the historical European avant-garde movements that revolutionized the way we communicate. I read Laszlo Moholy-Nagy's *Painting, Photography, Film*, and many books about the De Stijl, Futurism, Dadaism and Constructivism movements, the typographic language of Dutch designers Piet Zwart and N.H. Werkman and memoirs from Bauhaus insiders. *Cut with a Kitchen Knife* Maud Lavin's rich historical accounting of the early feminist artist and Weimar political photomontagist Hannah Hoch.

Another excellent source of information was *Modernism and Eclecticism*, Steven Heller's annual graphic design history symposium in New York City. The title “Modernism and Eclecticism” was derived from the two concurrent concerns radiating through American art and design history at that time: the influence of modernist European culture and the emerging eclectic American search for a cultural identity. In 1990, at the third of these annual symposiums and the first one I personally attended, Tibor Kalman, that “perverse optimist” gave the keynote speech he wrote with Karrie Jacobs and J. Abbott Miller titled *Good History/Bad History*. Kalman passionately argued for a design history that went beyond celebrating the actual artifact to understanding its purpose within the culture and the process of its creation. Tibor's provocative advocacy for his subject was nothing less than astonishing. Somehow this all made immediate sense to me.

## Going Dutch Treat

My second exhibition project was directly inspired by Alston Purvis' book **Dutch Graphic Design: 1918-1945** published by Van Nostrand Reinhold in early 1992. The book details the 20th century graphic design renaissance that took place in The Netherlands during the period from the end of World War 1 to the end of World War 2. In the book's prologue Alston asserts that "the renaissance...did not develop in isolation or autonomously, but was closely related to other events and movements outside of The Netherlands: Aspects of Dadaism, Futurism, and Constructivism influenced even reclusive figures such as the printer-painter H. N. Werkman."<sup>3</sup>

Here was a rich narrative of ideas strongly influenced by the socio-political and economic conditions of an entire cultural generation of Northern European peoples. I wanted to learn more about this time period. Over a working lunch with Alston in the spring of 1992, I pitched the idea to him to create an exhibition based from the content of his book. I wrote the exhibition's proposal that miraculously was accepted by a fine arts-based faculty and administration exhibitions committee, and so Alston and I began our partnership in earnest.

All told, I took three consecutive summer trips to The Netherlands to absorb the culture, history, and politics of this tiny nation. "The Netherlands has always exerted a cultural, historical, and mercantile influence far out of proportion to its size, and had the Dutch language been even more widely spoken the nation's dominance would have been even greater."<sup>4</sup> We organized the exhibition chronologically to tell the story of Dutch graphic design by beginning with the turn-of-the-century posters so influenced by the tendrils of Art Nouveau to the starker experimental styles of World War 2 era. These objects clearly enabled the viewer to see how Dutch graphic design was a confluence of Art Deco, Constructivism, Frank Lloyd Wright and many others of the historical avant-garde movements and masters.

The exhibition **Dutch Graphic Design: 1918-1945** opened in Bakalar Gallery of the Massachusetts College of Art in September of 1994. In her glowing review of the exhibition, Boston Globe arts critic Christine Temin called it "a visually stunning exhibition." The exhibition provided a very unique opportunity to view works from private collections—collectors from both Holland and the U.S. agreed to lend us their treasures, in particular the work of Piet Zwart, Paul Schuitema, R.H. Roland Holst, Williem Sandburg and H. N. Werkman. The exhibition included over 200 posters, books and pamphlets, many of which had never been exhibited in the U.S. Curatorial staff from the venerable Museum of Art, Boston visited the exhibition and they were nothing short of astonished at the rare museum quality objects we had assembled. Alston and I felt we had organized the most extensive survey of the subject and time period to date by any American cultural institution.

## Asian Graphic Design

My third exhibition project was inspired directly from the classroom environment. Our junior graphic design students are encouraged to research a topic they are curious or passionate about and write a statement on which they base their senior degree project. In 1996, one of my students, Rika Ichiki, proposed the following project statement: "Japanese graphic design of the post-World War 2 era was influenced by foreign design movements such as Constructivism and the teachings from the Bauhaus." This was not the first time an international student had proposed a topic that encouraged them to learn about their cultural design heritage. Although I certainly knew my share of European and American design history by this time, I was unprepared to advise Rika on Japanese design history or even contemporary Japanese graphic design practice. As an educator, I quickly realized that this was a large gaping hole in my knowledge base, so I set out to learn more about Asian design.

I began my study with **The Graphic Spirit of Japan**, Richard Thornton's excellent book covering a century in Japanese graphic arts and design. With this basic foundation in place, I searched for articles on several seminal Japanese designers in the pages of *Graphis* and other international design publications. The Mass Art library had several years' worth of current Tokyo Art Director's Club Annuals, helping me to identify names with design work I especially admired. In 1997, my husband, notorious for his refusal to travel in airplanes,

surprised me with his desire to visit Japan. This gave me the impetus to read books on Japanese culture, specifically ones that emphasized the role of nature, design and aesthetics in Japanese culture.

One of the joys of traveling to different countries and cultures is taking the opportunity to meet with designers and design educators to share ideas and engage in conversation about the state of design in our perspective countries or cultures. I wanted to do this in Tokyo and Osaka just as I had previously done in London, Paris and Amsterdam. By April of 1998, four months before our trip, I had assembled a short list of Japanese designers whose work I had admired and who I set out to meet. Topping my list was Makoto Saito.

Makoto Saito defies categorization, not unlike Russell Mills. Saito is a commercial art director, creative director, product designer as well as a graphic designer, but he considers the poster as is his signature medium. His work is both complex and challenging as he attempts to integrate both the graphic and fine art worlds. On close inspection, his images, often collaged and overlapping, create a visual richness and sophistication equal to that of a painting or print. The quality and uniqueness of his work coupled with his intent to blur defined boundaries of art and design made an immediate impression on me.

In August of 1998, I met with Saito in his Tokyo design office. During our conversation (facilitated by a translator as Saito does not speak English), I offered him an exhibition in Boston. Fortunately, I had brought along photographs of Mass Art's two premiere gallery spaces, one of which is a large, rather cavernous two-story space that delighted him instantly. By the time our meeting was over he gave me the green light to begin the exhibition proposal approval process.

Back in Boston, I invited my faculty colleague, Jan Kubasiewicz to co-author a proposal that was easily passed by the exhibitions committee based on my previous and successful track record. In June 1999, Jan and I traveled to Tokyo to work with Saito in planning the exhibition. It was important for the three of us to agree on a point-of-view for the exhibition. After much discussion we decided to focus on his poster work reflecting his 20-years in design. We talked about the logistics of producing a catalogue, but where would the funding be found? The answer came from Noreen Morioka of AdamsMorioka who connected me with her Japanese friend, Kaz Fukuda, an owner of a Tokyo-based printing company, who was looking for sponsorship possibilities in the US market. While we were in Tokyo, Jan and I met with Kaz Fukuda. He generously agreed to provide the paper and printing for 800 eighty-page perfect-bound color exhibition catalogues. Once we knew we would have a catalogue, we conducted an interview with Saito before we left. This interview was published, with some editing, in EYE Magazine no. 35 (spring 2000) bringing international attention to MassArt's commitment to supporting innovative design exhibition programming.

*Makoto Saito: The Art of the Poster* opened in Boston on November 9, 1999. In her review, Boston Globe arts critic Christine Temin wrote: "Makoto Saito is a design revolutionary in a country where you're supposed to conform, a proudly abrasive personality in a nation that reveres politeness. He creates posters advertising everything from department stores to print companies to a technical high school's centennial, with sliced and diced body parts and faces tinted yellows and reds. He's Japan's Andy Warhol."<sup>5</sup>

The invaluable knowledge and experience I have gained in working on these three projects and the subsequent positive responses received from students and the general public, continues to affirm my fervent belief that graphic design IS an important artistic and cultural form worthy of exhibition status.

1 "Good History/Bad History" by Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, Karrie Jacobs, Print Magazine March/April 1991

2 "Material and Metaphor" by Marco Livingston, EYE magazine volume 5, 1991

3-4 Purvis, Alston W. Dutch Graphic Design: 1918-1945. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold, 1992

5 The Boston Globe, "Posters from the Japanese Andy Warhol", by Christine Temin, Friday, December 10, 1999