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History Lessons Rethinking the Future of Design's Past

In the spring of 2004, I had the opportunity to teach NC State's graphic design theory course to a small group of students who needed it to be graduated. Although Meredith Davis' theory course takes up the subject from a social scientific perspective, I choose instead a humanities focus. Rather than engage the question of theory from a more practice-based perspective, where theories have a more immediate, user-centered application, I decided to look at theories as artifacts themselves and to use history as their framing device. By using history to frame theory, I recognized that I was deciding to de-privilege the traditional theory + practice model that is the aim of the "theory class." Still, given ongoing student complaints about the vagaries of theory and its legendary impracticality, why not try to cultivate a lasting appreciation for it from an historical rather than a studio standpoint? Perhaps then theory might take root more meaningfully, albeit indirectly, in a student's design process. At the completion of the semester, I decided to more fully frame the theoretical import of the course under the rubric of history and to call it, more appropriately, an intellectual history of graphic design.

An intellectual history of graphic design begins with the presumption that graphic design's past is as much a history of ideas as it is a history of objects. Although graphic designers can't always either claim responsibility for or identify the ideas that shape and motivate their work, we are, in retrospect, able to historicize these processes in ways which make their legacy more pertinent. When we can explore—through designer writings, primary and secondary sources—the contemporary intellectual climate in which a designer prac-

tices, we can more effectively recognize that graphic design history can be conceptualized as much by a series of *acts performed in response to ideas* as it is already imagined as a set of *objects produced by a series of acts*.

Working with a visual survey as a base, my intellectual history course includes several themes, chiefly, a de-privileging of the object, a critical reinterpretation of modernism, and the recognition that design history itself is an artifact worthy of study. While taking advantage of the ideas that could be raised from reading images, I build a non-object based design perspective by focusing exclusively on written texts, seminar discussion and weekly writing assignments. Readings include authors from the modern and postmodern periods but also primary and secondary sources from pre-modern design contexts. Working against the accepted wisdom of modernism's historical preeminence by looking at important pre-modern graphic and design innovations provides an alternative vantage point from which to critically analyze modernism. Throughout the course we consider the larger question of how designers, in addition to being professionals, are intellectuals as well. This question puts into relief the degree to which current conceptions of graphic design history are most often origin stories for the profession. The intellectual attention to past practitioners helps to solidify for students the sense that design histories are as much artifacts of cultural and professional conditions as the objects and makers they interpret.

Though in many important ways graphic design became intellectualized the moment it was granted a history, there are still significant limitations to how that history is conceived of and taught. Over the last 25 years, graphic design history courses have become increasingly common to graphic design curricula. The visual survey of graphic design history remains the most common format for such courses. Traditional visual surveys provide an important introduction to the themes and ideas of an intellectual history of graphic design.

Rather than replace the visual survey then, an intellectual history course would require it as a foundation. The techniques of visual analysis and general understanding of canonical figures, social, economic and artistic events that students gain through visual surveys provide a valuable image bank and a set of connotations from which an intellectual history of design seeks to build. This relatively recent interest in historicizing graphic design, however, can be seen in wider sense as only the first stage in a larger project of intellectualizing graphic design. By sequencing an intellectual design history with a visual survey, a student's exposure to the question of design's past can both build on previous experience and take the experience in a much more analytical and critical direction. As an "intellectual" history, this approach postulates that two-dimensional design labor, like traditional intellectual labor, produces a valuable intellectual artifact worthy of consideration within broader histories of ideas.

In order to take up the question of the "intellectual" in relation to design history, it is important to cultivate a non-artifact centered perspective. The most obvious limitation to the visual survey as it is usually taught is the attention paid to the object or "product" as the *raison d'être* of design practice—past, present and future. An intellectual history of graphic design, in contrast, incorporates an expansive range of written texts, including the writings of traditional intellectuals, architects and designers but also contemporary social and intellectual histories and histories of architecture and technology. Shifting the focus away from the object requires developing a student's ability to recognize an intellectual climate as something that precedes, is adjacent to, envelopes and transcends the design object. For example, the idea of "honesty" or being "true to the material" in the Arts and Crafts period can be analyzed as part of the social and economic implications of Victorian moralist discourse rather than read off a Voysey side table or Morris wall covering. Such an approach dramatically augments the benefits of a visual survey. Privileging written

primary and secondary sources, roundtable discussion and an emphasis on writing, an intellectual history of design places more responsibility on the student to draw connections rather than have the visual survey make those connections for them. For example, by reading *The Communist Manifesto* and excerpts from John Ruskin's *The Stones of Venice*, a student can explore the relationship between these thinkers and the work of William Morris. By de-objectifying design's past, students are presented with a methodology for interpreting that past that more appropriately resembles the way their own design practice occurs—as part of a network of ideas, agents, belief systems, methods, choices, audiences, cultural values, political and social agendas, and of course, objects.

Current historical conceptions of graphic design give too great an emphasis on the modernist movements and subsequently on the post-war period. Modernism is seductive in its seamless suturing of theory and practice. Our continued attentions to it in history courses, however, represents less an ability to isolate seminal historic moments than an inability to build backward from them. The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries continue to be some of the most formative stages in graphic design history, theory, practice and pedagogy. By focusing significant study and visual analysis here, however, graphic design visual surveys gloss over significant pre-modern social and technological transformations. Following in the footsteps of our modernist predecessors, we tend to overlook issues involving the spread of visual and written representation, the growth of literacy, and the origins of concepts such as consciousness, subjectivity, style and culture. The aim of a history requirement is the expansion of a student's historical imagination; the over-emphasis on modern design history, however, too often circumscribes what should be expanded.

In contrast, an intellectual history of graphic design opens up new inquiries into pre-modern design precedents. Although the relationships between intellectual culture and

graphic design are relatively well-documented from the proto-modern period forward, the connections between “the graphic” and “design” become more indirect and speculative as one goes further back from the industrial period. Recent design historiography, however, explores pre-modernist design precedents and helps suggest a vantage point from which to critically analyze the preeminence of modernism itself. Texts such as Mario Carpo’s *Architecture in the Age of Printing* and Armando Petrucci’s *Public Lettering* are recent works probing ancient, medieval and renaissance contexts in ways useful to design history courses. Here design and technology are discussed in relation to Reformation controversies over the distribution of printed matter and the role of epigraphy in shaping urban, civic and social identities in ancient Rome. Coupling the work of intellectual historians with primary texts can also help provide insight into pre-modern design precedents. For example, excerpts from Michel Foucault’s *Discipline and Punish* and Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* can usefully frame a discussion of the Enlightenment period. Here the design values of neoclassical typography—material with which students are already familiar—can be explored in relation to broader issues of empiricism, scientific method, visuality and subjectivity.

In addition to exploring pre-modernist precedents, an intellectual history of design moves beyond a focus on the designer as professional to question the status of the designer as intellectual. Unlike philosophers, poets, social and natural scientists, whose ideas are formulated and articulated through traditional conceptions of authorship, graphic designers have straddled more ambiguous zones between ideas and their material means of production, distribution and reception. The idea of authorship has traditionally taken for granted the technological aspects of writing and literacy; design practice, conversely, has taken writing and literacy for granted in order to exploit their technological aspects. In doing so, history has tended to overlook the work of designers as intellectuals. In an intellectual

history course, however, students can consider the ways that designers over the course of the last century have moved more self-consciously to inhabit the role of the intellectual. Reading prominent modernist writings, for instance, along with *Émigré* articles, scholarly publications, and web logs such as *DesignObserver*, students begin to appreciate how the work of the designer constitutes a new form of intellectual practice.

Although these new forms of intellectual practice suggest that the designer as intellectual is a recent development, pre-modern practitioners may also be interpreted in this light. In many ways, re-examining past designers as intellectuals disrupts the traditional teleology of graphic design history, which progresses from the avant-garde artists and poets of the early twentieth century and culminates with the professional designer of the later twentieth century. This alternative to the artist/craftsman turned professional model not only widens the terrain of what constitutes suitable historical representations of graphic design but also considers how the professionalization of design is often the condition of its history in the first place (as Andrew Blauvelt has argued elsewhere). An intellectual history of graphic design encourages students to consider how all historical investigations, including intellectual history itself, are embedded in larger historical conditions. Rather than see the past as a collection of individuals contributing to the formation of the profession, we consider how the profession is another effect or by-product of the way *we* historicize the work of individuals.

Although one may see a confrontation between the values of graphic design history and the advent of the digital, it is the digital revolution itself, I would argue, that compels us to take up questions of history with a new urgency. In inaugurating a new set of design practices, the digital revolution encourages us to attend more closely to the technology of writing and image reproduction, subjectivity as an historical formation, and the role of literacy,

both visual and textual, in shaping the function of graphically designed artifacts. In many ways, the issues I've raised in relation to an intellectual history are resonant with the challenges digital design itself poses. Shifts brought on by the digital revolution suggest a reconsideration of the boundaries formed in the wake of traditional print-based technologies. Like the intellectual history I've outlined above, digital design moves in many ways to de-center the object, de-privilege modernism, and blur the boundaries of the profession. Interactivity and time-based media move the field away from its traditional approach to the design object, while the widespread availability of the tools of design come without the theoretical principles to guide their use. Without occupational or aesthetic loyalties then, and marking a near total corporate commodification of design itself, digital design compels us towards a reconsideration of design history. In addition, by introducing new modes of production and distribution, the digital revolution encourages us to reconsider traditional distinctions between intellectual and non-intellectual labor and to expand our conception of what constitutes intellectual practice itself.

During our current digital incunabula we may witness the redundancy of many traditional theory + practice approaches to studio-based design pedagogy. It is in this environment of graphic design's theoretical obsolescence that the historicizing of theory becomes as necessary as its studio application. To complement an increasingly software-based pedagogical model, an intellectual history of graphic design provides the student a separate venue for both reading the great works of design history and the tools for critically analyzing the rhetoric of that history. Graphic design students are taught to manipulate some of the most powerful mediating devices of human creation and yet we as their educators often measure the value of our teaching only according to their successes in professional practice. In developing a course on the intellectual history of graphic design, I would like to give my students a sense for the power of ideas and the power of ideas in shaping design practices—past, present and future.