

Preface

The first edition of *A History of Graphic Design* was described by Philip B. Meggs as an attempt “to chronicle the evolution of graphic design” and as “the author’s personal diary of discovery, compiled over a decade of research.” In subsequent editions the research would span more than thirty years and become increasingly comprehensive and refined.

Various approaches can be used to explore the development of graphic design: examining the visual characteristics of design, considering its economic ramifications, analyzing the connections it makes with its audiences, and finally tracing the impact of technology. Although the visual aspects of graphic design are obviously important, we should also address the designers’ philosophies, the effect their work has on audiences, and the signification of forms and their syntactic relationships. Conventional art history research methods are usually inadequate for approaching the relatively fresh and intricate history of graphic design. Concentrating solely on individual designers and their major works or placing them methodically into schools or movements does not fully serve our purposes. New developments have often been spurred by changes in technology, such as the invention of movable type or of lithography. Creative exchange among designers has also played a role, and this is especially true today, with the World Wide Web as a medium of communication.

My personal tastes and those of Philip Meggs inevitably played a role in the selection of images, but great effort was made to defer to grounds beyond our own aesthetic predilec-

tions. Ideally, selections were based on how clearly they present ideas, design concepts, or particular graphic forms, even when other examples might be considered of superior quality. Obstacles in obtaining publication rights or appropriate photographic reproductions were also factors, and some work simply arrived too late to fit into the book’s production schedule.

Although in the history of design there are moments when a collective vision has emerged that defies attribution to any one designer, there have also been individual designers who clearly forged a new direction, with fresh typographic and expressive forms and original methods for presenting information. An objective of *A History of Graphic Design* has been to document graphic design innovation and those designers who have influenced its continuing evolution. Attempting to single out particularly consequential designers, especially from the past two decades, has proved to be a challenging and intriguing task. By “consequential” I mean those who have not only produced magnificent work but also made a significant contribution to the evolution of the field. The question of what distinguishes a master from his or her talented colleagues is both perplexing and difficult. One must have a distinctive aesthetic vision, an instantly recognizable visual vocabulary, and a unique approach that transcends the problem-solving process. No doubt some have been overlooked, but there has been an unwavering attempt to avoid such omissions. History has judged for us the great masters of bygone eras. The innovative ideas and achievements of these designers have stood the test of time and continue to inform and inspire us today. The graphic design of the past decade, however, is a more complex arena, with a far more level playing field. The perimeters between various visual disciplines have also become increasingly blurred. Attribution, too, has become more complex. Especially during the last century, most designers will have produced hundreds and even thousands of publications in firms with a revolving staff of colleagues and interns. Such designs are the products of a number of individuals, and crediting everyone who was involved in a piece is not always feasible.

The visual feast that is graphic design becomes more abundant as time passes. Offering a definitive account of contemporary graphic design will always be a vexing task, as this chapter inevitably has no ending. As philosopher R. G. Collingwood wrote in 1924, “Contemporary history embarrasses a writer not only because he knows too much, but also because what he knows is too undigested, too unconnected, too atomic. It is only after close and prolonged reflection that we begin to see what was essential and what was important, to see why things happened as they did, and to write history instead of newspapers.”

Most works included in *Meggs’ History of Graphic Design* represent only a minute fraction of what was produced in any

particular era. Most of the images in this book represent either schools, movements, styles, or individual approaches, and there are seldom pieces that show the crowning achievement of any designer. In such a survey one can present the work of designers only at a particular stage in their careers, and not their overall development. Readers in pursuit of a fuller account of any aspect of the history presented here should refer to the bibliography for further research.

A History of Graphic Design was never intended to be an all-encompassing historical encyclopedia, as that would require far more than a single volume. Instead, we have attempted to provide a broad survey of notable stages and accomplishments in the evolution of graphic design. In deciding what to include, a guiding consideration was how, through the centuries, particular cultures, movements, works, and individuals affected what graphic design has become today. The contemporary graphic design field is much broader than in the past, and encompasses emerging disciplines such as motion graphics, environmental communications, and new media. Limitations of space prevented a thorough exploration of these exciting new areas. Although graphic design is closely tied to illustration, photography, printing, and computer technology, it was not possible to include an extensive examination of these related fields within a single volume.

As with any work of this magnitude, some pivotal figures and topics were omitted in previous editions. Clearly the most pressing matter, however, was to document developments since 1996, the date of the most recent images included in the third edition. Although the structure of *Meggs' History of Graphic Design* is essentially chronological, there are instances where periods intermingle and overlap. The order of chapter 2, "Alphabets," and chapter 3, "The Asian Contribution," is reversed, relative to the previous edition, to better facilitate the historical flow of the text. The closely related chapters 9, 10, and 11 of the previous edition have here been condensed and combined into a single chapter to make room for additional material at the end of the book.

For the fourth edition, we have added many illustrations, and some text and illustrations have been removed to make room for additional content. Many designers who deserve to be in this book could not be included because of space limitations, and to these I extend my apologies. Although we have become more of a global culture since research for *A History of Graphic Design* began over thirty years ago, many regions and countries were excluded for similar reasons.

William Addison Dwiggins coined the term *graphic design* as early as 1922, but it was seldom used until after World War II—before then graphic designers were referred to as commercial artists. The profession has grown extensively during the latter half of the twentieth century, with technology playing an

increasingly important role. As we move deeper into the digital age, graphic design is undergoing dramatic changes. It is only natural that the new generation of graphic designers with provocative ideas should question existing modes of perception and established notions of aesthetics. Each time we think we are at the forefront, we find that we are only at the outset, and the future is an open vista.

We are constantly surrounded by visual messages, and those that endure must be visually arresting, intellectually challenging, and distinctively genuine. Although contemporary graphic design is largely defined by technology, there are still strong threads binding it to past crafts and aesthetics. The computer, though, has increased the speed with which graphic design problems are solved and allows designers to work more efficiently. Projects that in the past would have taken weeks are now solved in a matter of days. The new technology has even made the process of manufacturing books and posters more fluid. The Internet has engendered an unprecedented exchange of ideas among designers. The profession is no longer confined to books, posters, and advertisements but now includes movement and interactive media. Despite the exciting developments in electronic media, printed works remains as vital as ever. One has only to walk through a bookstore to see the vast number of well-designed books lining the shelves.

Graphic design is built firmly upon historical foundations, and history now occupies a central role in graphic design education. During this transition period, when traditional notions of graphic design are being challenged, it is vital that graphic designers have a historical understanding of their profession. The responsibility is to ourselves: to avoid reinvention and unintentional plagiarism, we need to be literate in the history of our profession. And it is to the field as a whole: in deriving inspiration from the work that came before, designers acknowledge and honor the evolution that, in the words of Philip Meggs, has "enabled designers to achieve a gradual transition from Renaissance design to the modern epoch."

Since it was first published in 1983, *A History of Graphic Design* has remained the most thorough book in its field. With its balanced insight and comprehensive historical background, it is widely accepted as the most authoritative and enlightened book of its kind. No other work on the subject approaches the range of its coverage. It is my objective that it maintain its position while being updated and refined. Having used *A History of Graphic Design* as a text for my own classes, I found it a distinct honor to be asked to serve as reviser for this new edition. I hope that this fourth edition, with its expanded content and fresh images, will, like those previous, enlighten and nourish both students and professionals as a foundation and continuing resource for this exciting and ever-evolving field.

Alston W. Purvis

Preface to the First Edition

There is a German word, *Zeitgeist*, that does not have an English equivalent. It means the spirit of the time, and refers to the cultural trends and tastes that are characteristic of a given era. The immediacy and ephemeral nature of graphic design, combined with its link with the social, political, and economic life of its culture, enable it to more closely express the *Zeitgeist* of an epoch than many other forms of human expression. Ivan Chermayeff, a noted designer, has said: the design of history is the history of design.

Since prehistoric times, people have searched for ways to give visual form to ideas and concepts, to store knowledge in graphic form, and to bring order and clarity to information. Over the course of history, these needs have been filled by various people, including scribes, printers, and artists. It was not until 1922, when the outstanding book designer William Addison Dwiggins coined the term *graphic design* to describe his activities as an individual who brought structural order and visual form to printed communications, that an emerging profession received an appropriate name. However, the contemporary graphic designer is heir to a distinguished ancestry. Sumerian scribes who invented writing, Egyptian artisans who combined words and images on papyrus manuscripts, Chinese block printers, medieval illuminators, and fifteenth-century printers and compositors who designed early European printed books all became part of the rich heritage and history of graphic design. By and large, this is an anonymous tradition, for the social value and aesthetic accomplishments of graphic designers, many of whom have been creative artists

of extraordinary intelligence and vision, have not been sufficiently recognized.

History is in large measure a myth, because the historian looks back over the great sprawling network of human struggle and attempts to construct a web of meaning. Oversimplification, ignorance of causes and their effects, and the lack of an objective vantage point are grave risks for the historian. When we attempt to record the accomplishments of the past, we do so from the vantage point of our own time. History becomes a reflection of the needs, sensibilities, and attitudes of the chronicler's time as surely as it represents the accomplishments of bygone eras. As much as one might strive for objectivity, the limitations of individual knowledge and insights ultimately intrude.

The concept of art for art's sake, a beautiful object that exists solely for its aesthetic value, did not develop until the nineteenth century. Before the Industrial Revolution, the beauty of the forms and images that people made were linked to their function in human society. The aesthetic qualities of Greek pottery, Egyptian hieroglyphics, and medieval manuscripts were totally integrated with useful values; art and life were unified into a cohesive whole. The din and thunder of the Industrial Revolution turned the world upside down in a process of upheaval and technological progress that continues to accelerate at an ever-quickening pace. By jolting the arts and crafts from their social and economic roles, the machine age created a gulf between people's material life and their sensory and spiritual needs. Just as voices call for a restoration of humanity's unity with the natural environment, there is a growing awareness of the need to restore human and aesthetic values to the man-made environment and mass communications. The design arts—architecture and product, fashion, interior, and graphic design—offer one means for this restoration. Once more a society's shelter, artifacts, and communications might bind a people together. The endangered aesthetic and spiritual values might be restored. A wholeness of need and spirit, reunited through the process of design, can contribute in great measure to the quality and *raison d'être* of life in urban societies.

This chronicle of graphic design is written in the belief that if we understand the past, we will be better able to continue a culture legacy of beautiful form and effective communication. If we ignore this legacy, we run the risk of becoming buried in a mindless morass of a commercialism whose mole-like vision ignores human values and needs as it burrows forward into darkness.

Philip B. Meggs