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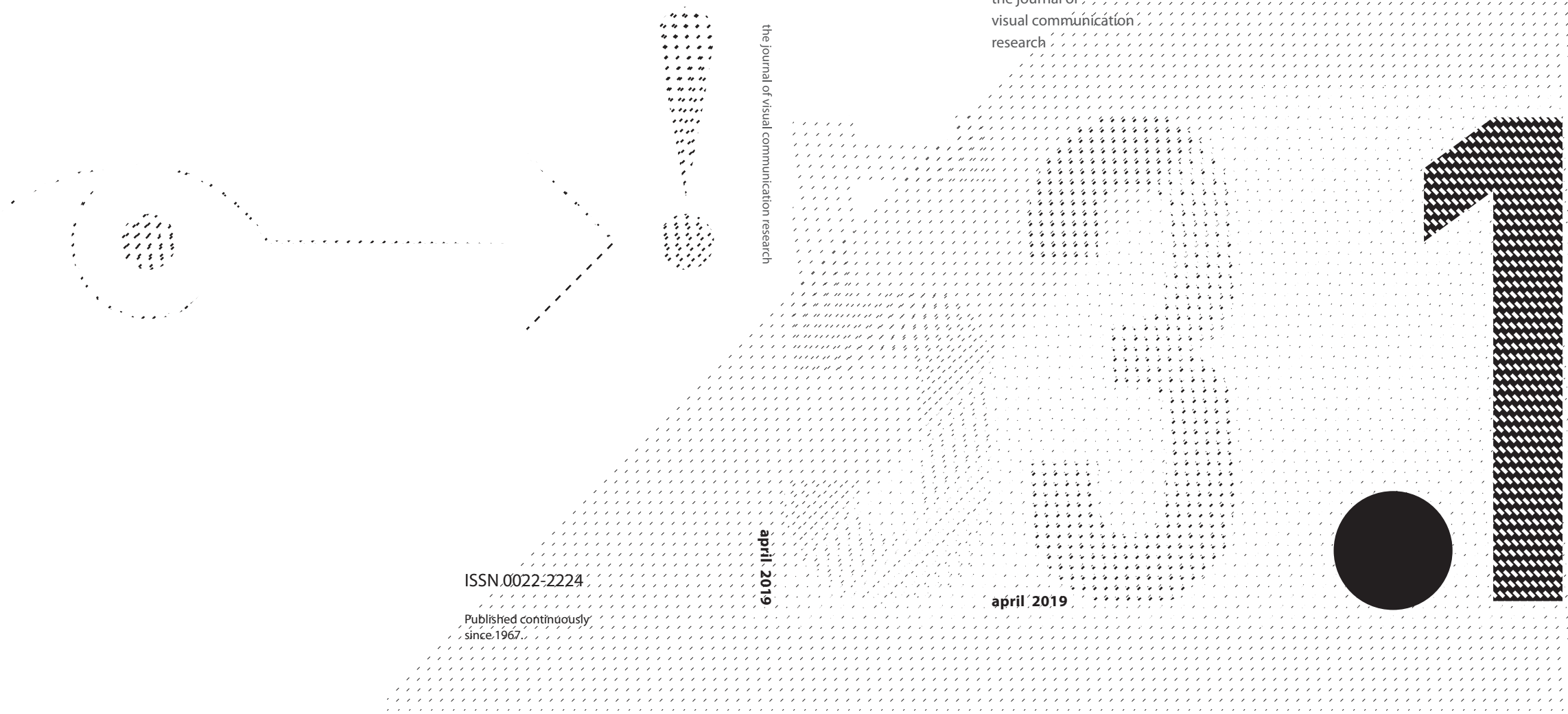
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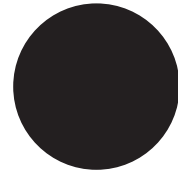
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Visible Language



**the journal of
visual communication
research**

Special Issue:
Histories of
Visual Communication Design

April 2019

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Visible Language

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Histories of visual communication design: an introduction to the special issue

Special Issue:

Histories of Visual Communication Design

Dori Griffin

In this special issue of *Visible Language*, the history of visual communication design provides an area of thematic convergence. The research represented here engages typographic communication, an area of investigation familiar to the journal's readership. Yet its significance extends beyond illuminating the historical context of singular designs or designers. Collectively, the authors in this issue join a broader and sustained interdisciplinary conversation between design history and visual communication design practice. Situating their research relative to this shared context expands its relevance beyond their discrete areas of focus. Both design and its history are characterized, at present, by a complex and multivalent convergence of questions about decolonization and cultural sovereignty, world and/or global histories, the migration of forms and the evolution of their meanings, adaptive practices for a changing environment, and evolving definitions of design as activity and artefact. In collectively situating the authors' specific research agendas in relationship to these shared questions, the special issue proposes that the history of visual communication design is a vital and integral sphere of inquiry and that scholars, practitioners, and educators within the discipline benefit from participation in the ongoing dialogues of historical research.

Shared Contexts

At its inception, the history of visual communication design relied on the intuition of practitioners and the connoisseurship of collectors; its narrative prioritized aesthetic styles and eminent designers. The first sustained calls to move beyond such a conceptualization emerged in 1983 at "Coming of Age: The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design" (Hodik and Remington 1985). At conferences, in journals, and through book publications over the subsequent years, historians across the design disciplines have emphasized the need for empirical evidence, cultural contextualization, and diverse global narratives. Other scholars have traced the evolution of these disciplinary conversations, with significant emphasis on historiography and literature review (Bailey 2005; Clark and Brody 2009; Triggs 2009; Huppatz and Lees-Maffei 2013; Williams and Rieger 2015). Yet a perceived emphasis

on historical evidence and its critical contextualization remains less common to visual communication design research than to humanities and social sciences research, or to research in adjacent design fields such as architecture or industrial design.

When visual communication design practitioners define the field's historical literature internally, they frequently underrepresent historical evidence and critical methodologies (Woodham 1995, 22–24). Andrew Blauvelt's 1994-5 *Critical Histories of Graphic Design* series of special issues for *Visible Language* sought to correct "uncritical and overly simple approaches to the subject" through the introduction of "historiographic and methodological concerns" to inform future research. A largely positive review in the *Journal of Design History* highlighted the "selective recall" necessary to claim the absence of such a critically-engaged history from the existing literature (Crowley 1996, 228). Some fifteen years later, Teal Triggs's 2011 editorial project on graphic design history for *Design Issues* undertook a similar task. Triggs wrote in her introduction that "there remains a sense that graphic design history is less established as a discipline, and perhaps less exploratory in terms of defining new ways of writing about this history" than other design disciplines (Triggs 2011, 3). Again, as with Blauvelt's project, reflexive knowledge of the "intellectual venture" underlying the construction of graphic design history was described as "generative," offering "new questions to ask and innovative ways of answering them" (Brown et al. 2011, 1). The issue thus implied that such research had not been undertaken previously; indeed, one of the issue's articles explicitly claimed that "[h]istorical perspectives about graphic design," citing mostly survey texts as examples, "do not venture beyond the products of graphic design as visual data" (Harland 2011, 26).

Blauvelt and Triggs framed their projects relative to evolving notions of disciplinary history and a growing imperative to participate more fully in research culture. Unsurprisingly, they found methodological, philosophical, and subject-matter gaps in the literature, though the extent to which they characterized these gaps as voids might be questioned. When published, both projects significantly contributed to the literature of visual communication design history; subsequently, they have remained relevant to scholars intent on continuing the work of building the discipline. Yet their shared inference, that critically-aware and evidence-based histories of visual communication design are largely absent from the literature, is not useful to repeat moving forward. While survey texts might emphasize "visual data," the larger historical literature of design includes analyses of visual communication design from a variety of methodological, theoretical, and critical perspectives. These encompass its artefacts as well as its makers, users, and cultural contexts. In addition to the earlier examples cited by Crowley in his 1996 review of Blauvelt's *Critical Histories* series, relevant examples from familiar disciplinary journals include histories of professionalization mechanisms in Australia (Bryans 1996), Canada (Donnelly 2006), and the United States (Thomson 1994); graphic style and national identity in print design from Britain (Heward 1999), Mexico (Gravier and Brandt 2002), France (Jubert and Cullars 2006), and Japan (Weisenfeld 2009); and design catalogues

and magazines in the United States (Shanken 2005) and Germany (Aynsley 2005). Less familiar journals in adjacent fields likewise offer critical histories explicitly connected to visual communication design. Particularly engaging examples emerge in relationship to data visualization (Burke 2009; Costigan-Eaves and Macdonald-Ross 1990; Kimball 2006; Pillen 2008). The years since 2011 have seen continued historical research; examples abound and even a short list must be far from inclusive (Al Najdi and McCrea 2012; Bartal 2013; Black 2012; Carey 2011; Christensen 2015; Kramer 2013; Young 2015). And of course this is only the English-language literature; French histories of visual communication design, for instance, offer alternative perspectives (André 2016; Bigelow 2017).

Clearly, it is not the case that histories of visual communication design, beyond style or connoisseurship or visual data, do not exist. Rather, they inhabit spaces conceptualized as external to the core of the discipline. We – that is, "communication design scholars and practitioners," as *Visible Language's* remit states it, and to which definition educators might be added – tend to visualize history as peripheral to practice. Yet it can be useful to center historical inquiry as a way of informing practice and participating in wider scholarly conversations. This issue of *Visible Language*, which focuses once more on the history of visual communication design, thus undertakes a different project from its aforementioned predecessors. It seeks to establish design history as an ongoing and integral element in the journal's larger initiative toward fostering and disseminating evidence-based inquiry in visual communication design research. The broader collective argument implied by the articles published here is not that histories of visual communication design must be constructed *ex nihilo*, or that prior efforts have been fundamentally flawed. Rather, this issue takes as its premise that the work of historical inquiry, documentation, and analysis is an ongoing effort. Furthermore, communication design researchers and practitioners might usefully participate in this work through a dialogic process of reading, writing, and publishing.

Foundational Questions

Contemporary dialogues within the broader discipline of design history engage two foundational questions which are particularly relevant to the research published in this issue. First, how do we construct a history of design that moves not only beyond Euro-American geographic locations but also beyond the value systems and interpretive modes associated with these traditionally-defined locations for the activity of design? And second, what is the relationship of this global design history to the realm(s) of design practice?

Not all designers, practices, and objects are represented within traditional accounts of design history. If "history lends significance" through a process of narrative inclusion and exclusion, then some design practices and objects are rendered more important than others through the construc-

tion of an historical narrative (Baljon 2002, 333). Throughout the twenty-first century, the discipline as a whole has sought to establish a more inclusive approach. Dilnot proposes that such a project “brings that which or those who are outside, or overlooked by, history [...] into visibility and thereby allows them to participate in the world.” In an environment “defined by representation,” as in his view our environment is, Dilnot equates visibility as a subject with the “capacity for resistance” to prevailing notions of design and its history (Dilnot 2009, 387). At this point, the philosophical differences between pursuing a *world* and a *global* history of design become fundamental to the expansion of the discipline beyond its Euro-American framework. The former is more often read as a search for a comprehensive narrative, one which would encompass all of human experience within a single – though complex and multivocal – account. Margolin proposes that a “world history of design” should emerge from “a narrative that is driven by political, economic and social factors rather than treating it within a chronology of objects or styles that are distributed over time across a geographic terrain, no matter how wide” (Margolin 2005, 241). While “scholarship has become more interdisciplinary, and the geographical foci of global discourses have been reassessed, certainly beyond Euro-American concerns,” it remains critical to direct our attention toward previously under-represented areas of inquiry, to “consider the margins, without marginalization” (Clark and Brody 2009, 304–5). The multi-volume *World History of Design* (Margolin 2016) takes precisely this approach.

In contrast to Margolin’s proposed “world history” of design, Huppatz argues that “global” histories of design “consciously resist the totalizing ideals of a ‘world history’ or an overarching narrative” (Huppatz 2015, 190). Global histories reject the idea of a well-defined center outside of which we might encounter margins. This approach challenges Euro-American institutional definitions of history, acknowledging that the West’s perceived “ownership of knowledge is connected to centuries of economic domination and control of technologies and the resulting collection of artefacts.” Thus it allows us to “develop a genuinely global field of enquiry” (Bailey 2005, 231, 233). The anthology *Global Design History* undertakes this approach (Adamson, Riello, and Teasley 2011). Huppatz proposes that “[e]stablishing a global framework for design history is important,” yet “it is not necessarily a singular project or one that requires comprehensive geographic coverage.” Furthermore, it need not “reject existing methods, but might more usefully build upon existing knowledge and methods” (Huppatz 2015, 195). Fallan and Lees-Maffei further observe that “[d]esign is simultaneously global, regional, national, and local, and it has been so for centuries.” Design history, in their view, need not cultivate zero-sum conflict among these varied ways of situating design, but instead should attend to “exploring the interactions and influences between these different scales” (Lees-Maffei and Fallan 2016, 14). Adopting either a “world” or “global” perspective remains a continuing task. Writing in 2005 about diversification within design history curricula, Gieben-Gamal suggested that recent despite progress does “far more remains to be done” (Gieben-Gamal 2005, 293). Over

a decade later, this statement remains accurate, and the work of expanding received notions of design history continues.

The domain of design history includes not only the past, but also the present and the potential future. Huppatz and Lees-Maffei define the field of inquiry as “the study of designed artefacts, practices and behaviours, and the discourses surrounding these, in order to understand the past, contextualize the present, and map possible trajectories for the future” (Huppatz and Lees-Maffei 2013, 311). Their inclusion of possible futures within a definition of design history points toward another important strand within twenty-first century design historical scholarship: that of contemplating the relationship between history and professional practice. Margolin and Forty’s famous and wide-ranging early 1990s debate about the relationship between design history and design studies (Margolin 1992; Forty 1993; Margolin 1995; Findeli 1995) prompted disciplinary interrogation of design history’s purpose, leading many authors to situate history in direct relationship to practice. Early in this debate, Meikle offered an awareness of design history as a tool for illuminating current problems in the realm of design practice (Meikle 1995, 74–75). Such an approach has its perils. As Baljon observes, design history has been conceptualized popularly as a “pattern book to be plundered at will,” or an elusive and often loosely-defined search for “contextualization” (Baljon 2002, 334–35). Yet historical inquiry can be a powerful tool for bringing criticality to the design process. Dilnot proposes that design historians can – and should – contribute to “a dialogue between history, culture and the future.” In his view, historians should leave behind an approach wherein design history self-defines as “part of the legitimization of design in its dominant professional forms” and choose instead to contribute to the imagination of new forms of design practice (Dilnot 2009, 386). Similarly, Otto argues that “the act of designing involves the articulation of a particular concept of the future – in the form of a new product, practice or value – and the connection of the concept with a particular past” (Otto 2016, 60). Thus defining or re-defining the terrain of design history offers an opportunity to envision the designed future; in Otto’s words, “a possible future needs a possible past to match” (68).

Perhaps nowhere is the relationship between history and practice more immediately observable than in the realm of design education. How should design history be taught, and what should students gain from studying the subject? Findeli argues that design history should serve the practical purpose of “improving [students’] design ability” (Findeli 1995, 65), while Huppatz and Lees-Maffei propose that studying design history “contextualiz[es] students’ design practice through the study of the work of past designers, as well as the investigation of forces that shape design, production and consumption issues and the impact of design on society” (Huppatz and Lees-Maffei 2013, 311). Williams and Rieger similarly claim that studying design history “help[s] sharpen the focus on complexity, community, consumption, mediation, and production, which helps design students embrace criticality” (Williams and Rieger 2015, 17). Vyas offers a model of design history education that is “a vehicle for a discussion of the

historical imperatives specific to the design idioms and ethos of a particular culture or community,” suggesting that design history education should embrace particularization rather than seeking a totalizing, world-historical narrative (Vyas 2006, 31). All of these arguments, while originally advanced to situate design history within studio pedagogy, might be applied to visual communication design practitioners and to researchers whose focus is not historical. Interrogating the complexity and cultural significance of practice through a design-historical lens benefits the wider community of visual communication design scholars and practitioners. Such an interrogation makes visible persons, processes, networks, and positionalities which might otherwise remain invisible.

Expanded Narratives

The authors represented in this issue all participate in the process of making visible the previously under-explored historical contexts of visual communication design. Separately, each opens a window into the unique characteristics of design for and in a particular location – cultural, temporal, and geographic. But each case study also contributes to a wider definition of what design is (or might be), how it was (or is) practiced, by (and for) whom, and to what ends. Collectively, then, the authors enlarge the definition of visual communication design history. Through their focus on documentary evidence, they contextualize typography and typographic practice within a historical framework that both addresses and transcends aesthetic, material, and process-oriented concerns. They simultaneously expand familiar narratives beyond their expected boundaries and introduce narratives traditionally excluded from the received definition of visual communication design history.

In “The Implications of Media,” Hala Auji undertakes a close contextual and material reading of *Nafir Suriya*, a series of Arabic-language broadsides originally printed in Beirut in 1860 and re-issued in 1990. Auji’s project corrects a dislocation of content from medium, re-introducing the object and its physical qualities as integral to understanding a significant text in the construction of Syro-Lebanese national identity. For an Anglo-phone readership of communication design scholars and practitioners, accustomed to prioritizing questions of materiality, Auji’s research offers an opportunity to encounter the material dimension of typographic communication within a context that our disciplinary community has traditionally marginalized. Auji’s material consideration of *Nafir Suriya* expands a familiar narrative beyond its expected geographical and cultural range; the history of the broadside as a publicly-read text is common in Anglo-European contexts, but as Auji observes, the broadside was a novelty format in nineteenth century Beirut’s print culture, and thus opportunities for cross-cultural understandings of the form have been limited. Simultaneously, Auji’s research contributes to a neglected area of inquiry within the English-language literature of typographic and printing history: the relationship between

materiality, print culture, and Arabic-language typography (Nemeth 2017). Her archival encounter with the 1860 printing of *Nafir Suriya*, and her subsequent contextualization of that text relative to its materiality, emphasizes the role that design decisions can play as documentary evidence.

In “Ismar David’s Quest for Original Hebrew Typographic Signs,” Shani Avni contextualizes David’s design process for the David Hebrew type family, completed in 1954. Her article documents David’s negotiation of the tension between tradition and innovation through a research-based design process. David, as Avni’s archival research reveals, sought to enrich the Hebrew typographic vocabulary through engagement with the Latin character set while maintaining culturally-specific visual language conventions particular to Hebrew. Avni’s research simultaneously expands the customary narrative of the typographer and his/her design process relative to the typeface and introduces the much less familiar landscape of twentieth-century Hebrew typographic design to English-language readers. Her investigation of David Hebrew’s history provides a case study in what she describes as a methodology “to fill a typographic void with an informed and experimental design process,” an enduring and well-represented area of interest within visual communications. Yet histories of Hebrew type design are quite rare in the English-language literature. Furthermore, as Avni observes, David’s Hebrew currency signs themselves – to say nothing of their history – previously have not been accessible outside David’s archive at the Rochester Institute of Technology’s Cary Graphic Arts Collection. Avni’s research thus invites readers into a new avenue for historical inquiry.

In “Mana Mātātuhi,” Johnson Witehira documents Māori visual culture’s incorporation of Latin-alphabet lettering and typography into culturally specific ways of seeing, knowing, and expressing. Witehira demonstrates Māori culture’s active engagement with letterforms through the nineteenth-century integration of newly introduced forms into traditional visual languages. As documentary evidence, Witehira considers both historical records – written and photographic – as well as typographic and alphabetic visual expression inscribed onto built environments in New Zealand, some of which persist into the present day. Rejecting the notion that cultural practices introduced by colonizers can only oppress indigenous communities, he then examines how these hybrid forms have facilitated the transmission of specifically Māori cultural values. Through his documentation and contextualization of indigenous visual communication practices in New Zealand, Witehira’s research contributes to the ongoing “decolonization” (Schultz et al. 2018b, 2018a) of visual communication design’s history.

Finally, in “Lower Case in the Flatlands,” Trond Klevgaard explores the adaptation and application of Avant Garde Modernist strategies in locations traditionally defined as “peripheral.” Klevgaard engages a familiar typographic historical narrative, that of the New Typography, but highlights its application to Danish orthographic, typographic, and graphic design practice. His research on the New Typography in Denmark highlights the non-monolithic nature of Modernist visual production inside the western European context and points to the ways that familiar received narratives are often more complex than earlier scholarship on Modernist

typography indicated. Scandinavian printers' domestication of German typographic practices demonstrates the pluralism possible within Modernist visual communication design, even that which sought to be universally prescriptive. Klevgaard's research counters a received narrative of universalism with documentary evidence of diversity, encouraging readers to challenge preconceived notions of Modernist typography.

Together, the four authors in this issue demonstrate the complexity of visual communication design's historical narratives. Their research uncovers complicated intersections between the received histories, values, and visual conventions of Euro-American design and the diverse ways in which design is conceptualized, practiced, and received in varying local, regional, national, and global contexts. Their contributions highlight the richness of multilingual narratives in the literal sense of the word and the multivocality of interdisciplinary approaches to visual communication design's history in a more figurative sense. Each author introduces new points of reference into the historical framework used to conceptualize visual communication design as a practice and a related subject of scholarly inquiry. Their collective participation in the ongoing project of expanding the discipline's history will, the editorial staff of *Visible Language* hopes, inspire future considerations of historical evidence within the pages of the journal.

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A u t h o r

Dori Griffin is an assistant professor in the School of Art + Design at Ohio University where she teaches graphic design and design history. Much of her research centers around the visual rhetoric of popular print media during the early twentieth century, exploring the ways in which visual communication design participated in the construction of social identity relative to place and culture. She is currently at work on a visual history of the type specimen, a project which emerges from research conducted during her 2015 Cary Fellowship at the Rochester Institute of Technology's Cary Graphic Arts Collection. Intended for students, educators, and practitioners of graphic design, this book will contextualize the specimen as a visual form and a professional practice.