

Victor Margolin

Narrative Problems of Graphic Design History

The problem of method in the construction of narratives is particularly acute in the field of graphic design history. Various publications have brought attention to the subject of graphic design history, but have not marked a course for the full explanation of how graphic design developed as a practice. Three major texts by Philip Meggs, Enric Satué and Richard Hollis address the history of graphic design, but each raises questions about what material to include, as well as how graphic design is both related to and distinct from other visual practices such as typography, art direction and illustration. The author calls for a narrative strategy that is more attentive to these distinctions and probes more deeply into the way that graphic design has evolved.

Victor Margolin is associate professor of design history at the University of Illinois, Chicago. He is editor of Design Discourse: History, Theory, Criticism, author of The American Poster Renaissance and co-editor of Discovering Design: Explorations in Design Studies (forthcoming). Professor Margolin is also a founding editor of the journal Design Issues.

University of Illinois, Chicago
School of Art and Design

m/c 036
Chicago
Illinois 60680

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Rhode Island
School of Design

Providence
Rhode Island 02903

Narrativity becomes a problem only when we wish to give real events the form of a story.¹

Introduction

In recent years scholars have devoted considerable attention to the study of narrative structures in history and fiction.² Central to their concerns are several key issues: notably what constitutes a narrative as opposed to other forms of temporal sequencing of actions and events and how a narrative makes claims to being true or fictive. Regarding the first issue, Hayden White has identified three kinds of historical representation: the annals, the chronicle and history itself. Of these, he argues, only history has the potential to achieve narrative closure.³ By organizing our accounts of the past into stories, we attempt to “have real events display the coherence, integrity, fullness, and closure of an image of life that is and can only be imaginary.”⁴ While some theorists like White regard history as a narrative that refers to events outside itself, others, particularly those who define themselves as post-modernists, refuse to make a distinction between fact and fiction and, in effect, treat all history as fiction.⁵ That is not the position I will take in this essay, but I mention it to acknowledge a climate in which the idea of history as objective reality is heavily contested.

The distinction that White makes between the messiness of events and the order that historians seek to impose on them is important because it denaturalizes the narrative itself and obliges us to interpret the historian’s strategy as a *particular* attempt to order events rather than recognize the historical work as an objective account of the past. This brings to the fore the necessity of including an analysis of the historian’s method in the discussion of a work of history, whether or not that method has been made explicit.

The problem of method in the construction of narratives is particularly acute in the field of design history which, since Nikolaus Pevsner’s proto-history of design, *Pioneers of the Modern Movement* was first published in 1936, has been highly charged with moral judgments that have conditioned the

1
White, Hayden. 1980. “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality.” *Critical Inquiry*, 7:1 (Autumn), 8.

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The study of narrative forms is a distinct field of research called narratology. A useful introduction is David Carrier’s article “On Narratology,” in *Philosophy and Literature*, 8:1, 32-42. For a full account of the subject, see Mieke Bal, *Narratology: Introduction to the Theory of Narrative*. Translated by Christine van Boheemen. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985.

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White. “The Value of Narrativity...,” 9.

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White. “The Value of Narrativity...,” 27.

5
Linda Hutcheon provides an account of this position in *The Politics of Postmodernism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1989. See particularly the chapter entitled “Re-presenting the past.”

choices of subject matter and the narrative strategies historians have employed.⁶ Adrian Forty, for example, in a response to an article I published on the relation of design history to design studies, claimed that the judgment of quality in design is central to the enterprise of design history.⁷

I do not believe that quality is the primary concern although it raises necessary questions about how different people give value to products. However, the question of what design history is about has never been thoroughly addressed or debated, which has resulted in considerable confusion in the field, a condition which the move to establish graphic design as a separate subject area of design history has been unable to escape.⁸

Issues in Graphic Design History

The first book on graphic design history to gain widespread recognition was Philip Meggs's *A History of Graphic Design*, first published by Van Nostrand Reinhold in 1983 and then in a revised and expanded edition in 1992. It has been extensively used as a text in design history courses and includes a wide range of material. In 1988, Enric Satué, a graphic designer in Barcelona, published *El Diseño Gráfico: Desde los Orígenes hasta Nuestros Días* (*Graphic Design: From Its Origins until Today*), which appeared originally as a series of articles in the Spanish design magazine *On*. The most recent book on the topic is Richard Hollis's *Graphic Design: A Concise History*.⁹ In addition, there have been supplementary works such as *Thirty Centuries of Graphic Design: An Illustrated Survey* by James Craig and Bruce Barton, which appeared in 1987, and *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopedia of Graphic Design + Designers* by Alan and Isabella Livingston, published in 1992.¹⁰ We have as well various chronicles and histories of graphic design in particular countries such as *Visual Design: 50 Anni di Produzione in Italia*, by Giancarlo Iliprandi, Alberto Marangoni, Franco Origoni, and Anty Pansera; *The Graphic Spirit of Japan* by Richard S. Thornton; *Chinese Graphic Design in the Twentieth Century*, by Scott Minick and Jiao Ping; and *Graphic Design in America: A Visual Language History*, the catalog of the exhibition curated by Mildred Friedman at the Walker Art Center in 1989.¹¹

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Pevsner, Nikolaus. 1936. *Pioneers of the Modern Movement from William Morris to Walter Gropius*. London: Faber & Faber. The book was subsequently republished in several revised editions as *Pioneers of Modern Design from William Morris to Walter Gropius*.

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Forty, Adrian. 1993. "A Reply to Victor Margolin." *Journal of Design History* 6:2, 131-132. My article, "Design History or Design Studies: Subject Matter and Methods" was published in *Design Studies* 13 :2, 104-116.

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Arguments for a separate history of graphic design have been voiced for more than a decade. See Steven Heller, "Towards an Historical Perspective." *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* 2:4, 5, the special issue of the Journal, entitled "The History of Graphic Design: Charting a Course." Steven Heller, editor. *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* 3:4 and Steven Heller, "Yes, Virginia, There is a Graphic Design History." *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* 10:1, 4.

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Meggs, Philip B. 1992. *A History of Graphic Design*, 2nd ed. New York: Van Nostrand Reinhold; Satué, Enric. 1988.



While this plethora of publications is commendable for the attention it brings to the subject of graphic design, it has not led to any clarification of how graphic design has been constituted by the respective authors nor has it marked a satisfactory course for the fuller development of a narrative structure that can begin to explain graphic design as a practice. The term “graphic design,” itself as it is applied in most books on the subject remains problematic. W.A. Dwiggins was the first to call himself a graphic designer, a title he used to characterize a practice that consisted primarily of typography and book design.¹² The term was subsequently adopted, beginning sometime after World War II, to replace such appellations as “commercial art” and “typographic art.”

Some authors have used “graphic design” to account for all attempts to communicate with graphic devices since the beginning of human settlements. Writing in 1985 in a special issue of the *AIGA Journal of Graphic Design* on the topic of graphic design history, Philip Meggs noted the disagreement among experts on the historical scope of the subject:

*Some advocate the short-sighted view and believe that graphic design is a new activity, born of the industrial revolution. Others advocate a farsighted view, believing the essence of graphic design is giving visual form to human communications, an activity which has a distinguished ancestry dating to the medieval manuscript and early printers of the Renaissance.*¹³

When one considers Meggs’s own book, it is clear that he has chosen the “farsighted view,” in that he identifies the cave paintings of Lascaux as the beginning of a sequence that ultimately connects with the contemporary posters of April Greiman. Likewise, Craig and Barton argue in the introduction to their illustrated survey that:

*Graphic design — or visual communication — began in prehistoric times and has been practiced over the centuries by artisans, scribes, printers, commercial artists, and even fine artists.*¹⁴

Enric Satué takes a similarly long view, beginning his own narrative with an account of “graphic design in antiquity.”

El Diseño Gráfico: Desde los Orígenes hasta Nuestros Días. Madrid: Alianza Editorial; and Hollis, Richard. 1994. *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, London and New York: Thames and Hudson. The books by Meggs, Satué, and Hollis were preceded by several volumes that were essentially visual chronicles such as Karl Gerstner and Marcus Kutter, *die Neue Graphik*, Teufen: Arthur Niggli, 1959, and Josef Müller-Brockmann, *A History of Visual Communication*, Teufen: Arthur Niggli, 1971. A brief illustrated survey of contemporary graphic design is Keith Murgatroyd’s, *Modern Graphics*, London and New York: Vista/Dutton, 1969.

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Varying numbers of entries on graphic designers and firms have been included in other reference works such as *Contemporary Designers*, *The Conran Directory of Design*, and *The Thames and Hudson Encyclopedia of 20th Century Design and Designers*.

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A shorter account of American graphic design history can be found in the 50th anniversary issue of *Print* magazine (November/December 1969), edited by Steven Heller with articles on each decade from the 1940s to the 1980s by different authors.

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The problem with the comprehensive accounts of graphic design history that Meggs, Craig and Barton, and Satué propose is that they assert a continuity among objects and actions that are in reality discontinuous. This makes it difficult, if not impossible, to disentangle the separate strands of visual communication practice and write a more complex account of the influence they have had on one another. To do so is to begin from a different position than those in the above mentioned texts. It means looking far more closely at the activity of designing as a way of understanding the specific moves by which designers expand the boundaries of practice. This strategy is addressed by Richard Hollis in the introduction to his history of graphic design:

*Visual communication in its widest sense has a long history... As a profession, graphic design has existed only since the middle of the twentieth century; until then, advertisers and their agents used the services provided by "commercial artists."*¹⁵

Hollis begins his own narrative in the 1890s with a discussion of the illustrated poster. His distinction between graphic design and other practices that produce visual communication is helpful in that it makes possible the tracing of separate strands of practice that sometimes intertwine within a professional category but also have their own trajectories.¹⁶ By maintaining the separation, we can then look more deeply at the distinctive discourses within each practice such as advertising, illustration or typography and understand better how they are contextualized and recontextualized into new narratives.¹⁷

For example, the graphic projects of the poets and artists of the early twentieth-century avant-garde are usually incorporated within the history of graphic design even though they were frequently produced outside the client-practitioner relationship that normally characterizes professional design activity. The innovations of syntax and mixtures of typefaces such as we see in the futurist poet Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's book of visual poems *Parole in libertà* were integral components of specific poetic texts which he wrote, just as the visual forms of concrete poems written by others years later were to be.

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Shaw, Paul. 1984.
"Tradition and Innovation:
The Design Work of William
Addison Dwiggins." *Design
Issues* 1:2, 26.

13
Meggs, Philip B. 1985.
"Design History: Discipline
or Anarchy?" *AIGA Journal
of Graphic Design*, 3:4, 2.

14
Craig, James and Bruce
Barton. 1987. *Thirty
Centuries of Graphic
Design: An Illustrated
Survey*, New York:
Watson-Guptill, 9.

15
Richard Hollis,
*Graphic Design: A Concise
History*, 7.

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However, the problem
with writing a progressive
narrative that identifies
illustrated posters as
precursors for more
conceptual design work
is that it then makes the
posters less accessible for
other histories such as a
history of illustration which
does not have a similarly
progressive character.

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Howard Lethalin provides
an excellent model for how
separate strands of design
practice might be
researched in his article
"The Archeology of the Art
Director? Some Examples of
Art Direction in Mid-
Nineteenth-Century British
Publishing." *Journal of
Design History* 6:4, 229-246.

Similarly El Lissitzky's small book *Of Two Squares* originated as an argument for a new reading strategy which had implications in Lissitzky's thinking that went far beyond the formal order of the book page. When the book was assimilated into the discourse of the new typography by Jan Tschichold in 1925, it was recontextualized and its original meaning was altered from a new way to think about reading to an argument for a modern design formalism. These shifts of intention and context tend to be suppressed when diverse graphic products are drawn together within an assimilationist narrative based on a theme such as modernity or innovation.

Meggs, looking farther into the past than the moment of the modernist avant-garde, writes about graphic design of the Renaissance and of the rococo era, thus blurring the various specialized strands of professional practice that, when delineated separately, form a constellation of distinct activities rather than a single generic one. In his article previously cited, Meggs identified several factors that have contributed to an interest in graphic design history. Among them is "the graphic design discipline's quest for professional status and recognition as an important activity requiring specialized knowledge, skill, and even a measure of wisdom."¹⁸ While tracing graphic design's roots back to the printers and typographers of the Renaissance is an attempt to provide greater cultural legitimacy for the practice of graphic design, it also obscures the cultural and technical distinctions between the different practices such as printing, typography and advertising.

Another problem is the conflation of graphic design and visual communication as we see in the introduction by Craig and Barton. Graphic design is a specific professional practice, while visual communication denotes a fundamental activity of visual representation (I would include here coded body language and gestures as well as artifacts) in which everyone engages. Visual communication is a larger category than graphic design, which it includes. A history of visual communication also suggests a completely different narrative strategy from a history of graphic design. The former rightly begins with the cave paintings of Lascaux and Altamira and continues up to the present

18

Meggs, Philip B.
 "Design History: Discipline
 or Anarchy?", 2.

development of home multimedia systems. The emphasis in a history of visual communication is inherently sociological and does not exclude anyone on professional grounds. While such a history may focus as well on the semantic issues of how things transmit communicative intentions, its principal subject matter is the act of communicating itself.¹⁹

Conversely, if we are to adhere more strictly to the meaning of “graphic design” as a description of professional practice, we are obliged to consider the way such practice has been institutionalized in order to include some people and exclude others. This would certainly establish subject matter boundaries that leave out vernacular material done by non-professionals whose talents are considered inferior to those of professionals.²⁰ We would also have to address the ways that different forms of practice have been professionalized. Are typographers, calligraphers, art directors and illustrators to be considered graphic designers, even when they have their own societies, exhibitions, publications and the like?²¹ Unless a history of graphic design honors the distinctions among these practices, there is no way of delineating how the profession has developed socially. Ironically, the cultural identity of the graphic designer will be strengthened more through such an approach than by conflating graphic design with all the other activities that produce visual communication.

Following the latter strategy, the texts by Meggs and Craig and Barton, in particular, result neither in a history of graphic design as a professional activity nor in a history of visual communication as an explanation of human communicative acts. Instead, they mystify the differences between the two, and suppress the distinctions among the images they incorporate, which range from Egyptian hieroglyphs to Ohrbach’s advertisements.

Narrative Strategies of Graphic Design History Texts

We can now turn to the three major texts by Meggs, Satué and Hollis to better understand how they tell the story of graphic design. We should first note the different emphases that the authors give to the pre-industrial, industrial and

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An excellent example of a sociological approach to the history of communication is J. L. Aranguren, *Human Communication*, New York and Toronto: McGraw-Hill, 1967, (World University Library). Aranguren discusses both linguistic and visual communication as well as transmission instruments.

20

This does not preclude work that adheres to institutional standards of quality being considered within the canon even if its makers are not trained professionals. But it does exclude work that can be easily defined as vernacular because of its difference from work by professionals. In fact, graphic design is not a profession with a body of technical knowledge that can easily exclude non-professionals. If anything, the proliferation of desktop software makes it more and more possible for non-professionals to approximate, or at least appear to approximate, professional standards.

21

Specialized histories of these practices were among the building blocks that preceded Meggs’s own more comprehensive history. Books by those engaged with typography such as Frederic Goudy’s *Typologia*, Daniel Berkeley Updike’s *Printing Types: Their History, Forms, and*



post-industrial periods. Meggs makes the strongest argument for a continuity between these, giving the lengthiest account of the pre-industrial era. He establishes analogies between works in earlier and later periods on the basis of such characteristics as formal arrangement, and unifies communicative activities in different periods by attributing to them such common qualities as “genius” and “expressivity.”²² Satué moves in three brief chapters to the beginning of the nineteenth century while Hollis, as mentioned earlier, begins his history with the 1890s.²³ Regarding the material included for the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, the three authors have much in common, particularly in the sections that begin with the Arts and Crafts Movement and then continue through the European avant-gardes, the new typography in Germany, wartime propaganda, the émigré designers in America and the subsequent emergence of an American mass communications style, corporate identity, Swiss typography and its revisions, European pictorial posters and protest design of the 1960s.

It is worth noting here that all the authors were trained as graphic designers and share similar values about the canon of their profession. This canon has neither developed randomly nor was it institutionalized the way a literary canon was in academia. Rather it resulted from a selection process that has celebrated noteworthy designs in professional magazines such as *Gebräuschgrafik*, *Graphis* and *Print* as well as in numerous picture books and occasional museum exhibitions.²⁴ An important factor in the canonization of graphic design pieces is the visual satisfaction they give to the trained graphic designer. As the three books under discussion show, there is a considerable consensus among the authors regarding the visual quality of the work they include. What is generally missing, however, are accounts of work by lesser known designers who played important roles in the development of the profession. I think here of Fritz Ehmke in Germany or Oswald Cooper in the United States. Ehmke was important because he wanted to preserve design traditions at a moment when Jan Tschichold and others were promoting the new typography. In Chicago, Cooper was the best of the lettering and layout men who preceded the emergence of graphic design as we have come to know it.

Use, or Stanley Morison's *A Tally of Types* provide coherent accounts of how typographic design developed and also assert standards of quality. Frank Presbry's pioneering work *The History and Development of Advertising* is an account of professional advertising practice that describes the changes which led from selling space to comprehensive campaigns.

22

Thus Meggs applies the term “Spanish pictorial expressionism” to Spanish manuscripts of the 10th century which features letterforms as pictorial objects, while “American typographic expressionism” refers to New York graphic design of the 1950s and 1960s.

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For a discussion of Hollis's thoughts on graphic design and how they affected the writing of his book, see Robin Kinross's “Conversation with Richard Hollis on Graphic Design History.” *Journal of Design History*, 5:1, 73-90.

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Martha Scotford discusses the problems of canonization in graphic design history in her article “Is There a Canon of Graphic Design History?” in *ALGA Journal of Graphic Design*, 9 :2, 3-5, 13. Among the points she makes is that women are noticeably lacking in the canon. This subject sorely needs more attention.

One significant difference among Meggs, Satué and Hollis is the varying amount of attention they give to geographic areas outside the European and American mainstream.²⁵ Satué is considerably more aware than either of the other two authors of how graphic design developed in the Spanish-speaking countries as well as in Brazil. He devotes almost one hundred pages to this material while Meggs dedicates four pages to “The Third World Poster”, a section that mainly refers to Cuban posters of the 1960s with a brief mention of posters in Nicaragua, South Africa and the Middle East. Hollis, by contrast, devotes a little less than two pages to Cuban posters in a section entitled “Psychedelia, Protest and New Techniques of the Late 1960s.” In the texts of Meggs and Hollis, Japanese graphic design is discussed briefly, but the authors refer only to postwar activity. Satué does not talk about Japan at all. None of the authors make any reference to China or other Asian countries nor do they mention graphic design or vernacular visual communication in Africa.²⁶

Although Meggs presents typographers such as Baskerville, Fournier and Bodoni, who worked in the eighteenth century, as geniuses, typography as a practice becomes merged with other design activities once he reaches the twentieth century, where he neglects, as do the other two authors, some of the most prominent modern typographers such as Victor Hammer, Jan van Krimpen, Giovanni Mardersteig and Robert Hunter Middleton.²⁷

The authors’ relation to other visual practices such as advertising vary somewhat. According to Hollis:

*However effective, such work [Hollis refers here to the early 20th-century German posters of Bernhard, Erdt, Gipkins, and Hohlwein] belongs to a history of advertising. Only when advertising has a single visual concept, as it developed in the United States in the 1950s...does it have a significant place in the history of graphic design.*²⁸

Meggs, by contrast, does not even identify these posters as advertising artifacts. He accounts for them in terms of a formal style which he calls “pictorial modernism.” Satué too treats this work as exemplary of a modern visual style.

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I refer specifically to American rather than North American work. Although Canada has a rich history of graphic design, including some outstanding designers in the postwar era, none of the authors mention it as a distinct site of graphic design practice. An excellent presentation on the history of graphic design in Canada was made by Peter Bartl at the ICOGRADA (International Council of Graphic Design Associations) Congress in Dublin in 1983.

26

See *Dialogue on Graphic Design Problems in Africa*, edited by Haig David-West, London: ICOGRADA, 1983. This publication reports on a 1982 conference held in Port Harcourt, Nigeria under the sponsorship of ICOGRADA.

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This obscuring of the typographic tradition and the lack of sufficient recognition for twentieth-century typographers has been rectified to a large degree by the recent publication of Robin Kinross’s *Modern Typography: An Essay in Critical History*, London: Hyphen Press, 1992.

28

Richard Hollis, *Graphic Design: A Concise History*, 31.

Of the three authors, Hollis is most attentive to the differences among visual practices, making reference, for example, to the calligraphic training of Edward Johnston, who designed an alphabet for the London Underground. He also mentions the contribution art directors in America made to the emergence of graphic design as a profession. At the same time he removes noteworthy practitioners, firms and work from the discourses in which their practice was embedded — such as the discourse of advertising — and inserts them into a different narrative. Hence, we encounter the “new advertising,” not as a response to the limits of the old advertising, but as a contribution to the development of a sophisticated visual sensibility within the graphic design profession.

While none of the authors writes an exclusively connoisseurist history, each is particularly attentive to visual quality. This plays an important role in the construction of their stories, which are propelled along by changes in the look and form of designs as well as by other factors. I make this observation not to espouse a social history of graphic design that subordinates discussions of form to arguments about social meaning, but to stress that describing how artifacts look does not sufficiently address the question of why they look as they do. This can only be answered by extracting them from narratives that draw them together for the purpose of creating a tradition of innovation that never existed. The artifacts must be reinserted in the various discourses within which they originated — whether those be related to art, advertising, typography or printing — and then related in new ways.

Conclusion

What then might a history of graphic design that respected the varied discursive locations of visual design activity be like? It would preserve many elements of the narrative sequences established by Meggs, Satué and Hollis, but it would be more attentive to a close reading of professional practices in order to discriminate between the different types of work. As a result, we would understand better how graphic design practice has

been shaped by borrowings and appropriations from other discourses instead of seeing it as a single strand of activity that embraces a multiplicity of things. By recognizing the many routes into graphic design from other fields and practices, we can learn to see it as more differentiated than we have previously acknowledged it to be. This will enable us to better relate emerging fields of endeavor such as information design, interface design and environmental graphics to what has come before.²⁹

Clearly, the history of graphic design does not follow a neat linear path that can be characterized by a unifying theme such as innovation, excellence or modernity. Because there have been no shared standards that define professional development, nor has there been a common knowledge base to ground a definition of what graphic design is, its development has been largely intuitive and does not conform to a singular set of principles shared by all designers. While the scope of what we today call graphic design has considerably expanded from what it once was, it has not done so in any singular way.³⁰ Frequently individual designers have simply moved into new areas of practice and are then followed by others.

Not all graphic designers work on the same kinds of projects. Some specialize in posters and function like artists. Others are involved with strategic planning and draw more on management skills. And some designers specialize in information graphics which requires a strong knowledge of social science.³¹ What a history of graphic design should explain is how the various activities that fall within the construct of graphic design practice are differentiated. It should acknowledge the tension that arises from the attempt to hold these activities together through a discourse of professional unity while designers continue to move in new directions. A recognition of this tension will ultimately teach us much more about graphic design and its development than the attempt to create a falsely concordant narrative of graphic design history.

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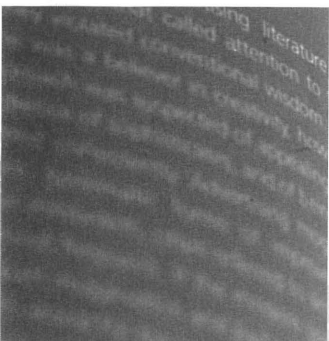
Gui Bonsiepe has recently proposed that a new designation, *information designer*, would more appropriately characterize the designer's ability to work in the emerging information environment. See his article "A Step Toward the Reinvention of Graphic Design," in *Design Issues*, 10:1, 47-52.

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Some designers and design educators now prefer the term "communication design."

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For a critique of graphic design as an art-based profession, see Jorge Frascara, "Graphic Design: Fine Art or Social Science?" in *Design Issues*, 5:1, 18-29. In this article, Frascara proposes to shift the definition of quality from the way things look to their effect on the intended audience.



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140 Advertisement for Ohrbach's department store, 1950

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