

01 Moving Beyond "Just Making Things": Design History in the Studio and the Survey Classroom

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ABSTRACT

The disciplinary literature of graphic design education calls for the inclusion of design history in studio students' education. Yet evidence that the discipline has successfully answered this call remains scarce. This paper asks design educators to consider how our rhetoric might be misaligned with our practice on the subject of teaching graphic design history. It also asks educators to consider the need to develop an explicit, detailed body of case study literature dealing with the ways in which historical learning can be incorporated into the studio classroom. Design educators need to document and interrogate the specific ways in which we have been incorporating design history into the studio classroom. Enabling students to construct a functional model of design history requires more than a disparate and loosely defined set of studio projects with history as their subject matter. Design educators need a way to learn about successful models and develop disciplinary best practices. Toward this end, the last section of this paper offers a detailed case study that documents one way to incorporate graphic design history into the studio classroom.

ground" draws on a sample of design programs at public research universities and tabulates the percentage of programs that actually require their students to study design history as a subject. As it turns out, these two views do not align as closely as our rhetoric would lead us to believe. This being the case, it seems critical for design educators to document and interrogate the specific ways in which we have been incorporating design history into the studio classroom.

If we genuinely want students to be able to construct a functional model of design history based on hands-on work accomplished in the studio, then their experiences cannot be based on disparate and loosely defined studio projects.

As educators, we need a way to learn about successful models and develop disciplinary best practices. Toward this end, in the last section of this paper I offer a case study from my own practice as a design educator. In it, I share one way I have attempted to incorporate graphic design history into the studio classroom.

THE VIEW FROM ABOVE: BEST PRACTICES, NASAD STANDARDS, AND THE PRIORITIES WE ARTICULATE

As a discipline, we spend a lot of time claiming that we value history, theory, and criticism. In 1983, in an essay that has since become canonical, Massimo Vignelli advanced "the call for criticism," decrying design practice divorced from any kind of critical analysis of the products of that practice. "Historical information, introspection, and interpretation are almost totally missing in our profession, and I think we feel a tremendous need to fill that gap," Vignelli wrote (Vignelli 1999, 273). In the three decades since, disciplinary luminaries have frequently quoted Vignelli as they, too, argue that graphic design must embrace historically situated criticism in order to advance. The first two Looking Closer volumes — early attempts to introduce critical and historical literature into the field of contemporary graphic design practice — capture the spirit of 1990s calls for criticism. In the first volume, the second essay in the book is Tibor Kalman, J. Abbott Miller, and Karrie Jacobs' excellent 1991 Print article "Good History / Bad History." In it, the authors argue that it is problematic for our discipline that "most design history is not written, it's shown" (Kalman, Miller, and Jacobs 1994, 26). At the end of the book, "Why Designers Can't Think," Michael Beirut laments that "the passion of design educators seems to be technology: they fear that computer illiteracy will handicap their graduates. But it's the broader kind of illiteracy that's more profoundly troubling" (Beirut 1994, 216-7). These observations bracket a text that is, at its heart, about beginning to establish critical literacy within the discipline of graphic design.

critical theory and social context in a meaningful way. Patrick Cramsie's 2010 *The Story of Graphic Design: From the Invention of Writing to the Birth of Digital Design* owes much to Drucker and McVarish including many of the same images and organizing the text in a conceptually similar fashion. Much more uniquely, there is also Meredith Davis' newly released *Graphic Design Theory: Graphic Design in Context*, published in 2012, which prioritizes theory even more explicitly and gives a theoretically-grounded historical overview in the second half of the text. With all of these choices, we can hardly complain — as we once were able — that there is no appropriate material available to us if we wish to teach design history, theory, and criticism.

It is not just individual designer-writers and textbook authors calling for greater historical and critical awareness. The National Association of Schools of Art and Design (NASAD) accreditation guidelines, too, highlight the importance of history, theory, and criticism. NASAD standards emerge from and are reinforced by a process of peer review and community consensus. They are widely accepted by graphic design educators as an appropriate and useful — if sometimes imperfect — tool for measuring performance. Therefore, this analysis of design history pedagogy works within these guidelines, rather than questioning if they are sufficient. So what does NASAD say about graphic design history?

"Normally," the 2011-12 NASAD handbook advises, "studies in art and design history and analysis occupy at least 10% of the total curriculum" for BFA students in graphic design (NASAD 2012, 103). The handbook further suggests "an understanding of design history, theory, and criticism from a variety of perspectives including those of art history, linguistics, communication and information theory, technology, and the social and cultural use of design objects" (NASAD 2012, 114). The stakes of NASAD accreditation being what they are, graphic design programs take great care to meet the 10% requirement. However, NASAD does not outline particular requirements in relationship to how many (if any) art history hours should be devoted to design history. So devoting 10% of their major credit hours to historical studies does not mean that graphic design students are studying any graphic design history. Instead, they are much more likely to be taking a two-semester survey of art history, then choosing among a collection of upper-division electives, which might include design history — but then again, might include Baroque painting or Renaissance sculpture. This is not to claim that the latter are without value to the student of design. But painting and sculpture students are not graduating without any required coursework specific to the history of painting or sculpture. Why do we allow the history of graphic design to slip through the pedagogical cracks?

position within the marketplace over time" (Center for Measuring University Performance 2011, 3). This analysis uses the Center's most current data — the list published in the 2011 annual report, which is based on data from the 2009 fiscal year. However, the stability of top performing universities over time, which the report discusses at some length, indicates that the 2011 list has been, and will be broadly useful over a relatively long period of time (Center for Measuring University Performance 2011, 6-8). In other words, this discussion of graphic design history pedagogy will not become defunct when next year's list is published.

Secondly, the MUP list compares universities based on quantifiable data, ranking them in relationship to the following nine measures: "Total Research, Federal Research, Endowment Assets, Annual Giving, National Academy Members, Faculty Awards, Doctorates Granted, Postdoctoral Appointees, and SAT scores" (Center for Measuring University Performance 2011, 15). These measures do not directly address the particulars of graphic design pedagogy, particularly in institutions where design is affiliated closely with the fine arts. But as aggregate indicators of overall performance, the nine measures do offer a quantifiable way to arrive at a generalized list of respected and successful institutions.

Thirdly, the MUP list offers a broad sample. As graphic design educators, we are familiar with the sticky question of whether graphic design should be taught — indeed, should be conceptualized — as a fine art or a social science. In considering the role that design history plays in graphic design pedagogy, it is not necessary to limit the discussion to one approach or the other. Thus, using the MUP list extends the question of graphic design history pedagogy beyond the confines of a fine arts school. Other rankings lists do not allow a similar breadth of conceptualization. The US News and World Report ranking system, for instance, considers graphic design a sub-division of fine arts at the graduate level and lists art schools separately from its ranked institutions at the undergraduate level. (Interestingly, US News also divides graphic design and multi-media visual communications into two different categories, while the schools on the MUP list have programs that can fall into either or both of these categories.) At many universities, graphic design is housed in departments, schools, and colleges of art; but this is not a universal practice. Thus, use of the MUP list allows for the disciplinary multiplicity that we, as design educators, experience in everyday practice.

Lastly, it is important to note that the MUP list used as the data sample here considers only public universities. This brackets out the question of how design history pedagogy differs between public and private institutions. While that difference may indeed prove

23/39 REQUIRE GD HISTORY



GRAPH 1

23/39 OFFER GD HISTORY



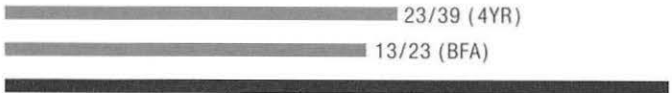
GRAPH 2

13/23 BFA PROGRAMS REQUIRE GD HISTORY



GRAPH 3

23/39 REQUIRE GD HISTORY



GRAPH 4

3/39 REQUIRE 4+ HRS GD HISTORY



GRAPH 5

In general, then, while more than half of the schools in the sample require graphic design students to take a single three-hour survey course in design history, the number is still substantially under two-thirds.

I would argue that this demonstrates a disciplinary resistance to teaching graphic design history as an important subject in its own right, albeit one to which studio majors receive a necessarily modest introduction.

tance of history and research, how to use historical models, understand the context design was produced in, and understand the influence on contemporary designers by looking at connections between the past, present, and future, formally and conceptually" (Worthington 2003, 61). Tellingly, these students take a historical survey of graphic design at the same time. Instances like these suggest that including history in the studio classroom is an increasingly common pedagogical strategy, particularly — though not only — in typography.

It is useful, then, to explore how studio projects with historical subject matter can enrich and expand a limited graphic design history survey experience. It is vital not to confuse enriching students' experience of graphic design history with teaching the broad and inclusive outline of that history through a systematic and critical survey. However, surveys by their very nature engage so many "objects, ideas, and practices" that few if any can be studied in great depth.

: *Engaging history as the subject matter of studio*
: *projects provides the opportunity to expand design*
: *history education in several useful ways.*

The remainder of this paper will explore a case study from my own teaching practice, considering how studio encounters with design history can provide an opportunity for critical analysis, multi-modal learning, depth of study, and practical encounters with the uses for and limitations of visual style.

The course documented here, entitled Digital Visualization, was originally developed to teach Adobe Illustrator skills to sophomore-level graphic design students. Students complete a set of skills-based technical exercises and a series of more complex design projects. Historically, these projects have emphasized icon design and three-dimensional vector illustration. When I assumed responsibility for the course in the fall semester of 2012, I structured the course projects around the theme of graphic design history. My first, most basic goal was to have students encounter the history of their discipline. Their degree program requires them to take a one-semester graphic design history survey course, which is certainly better than no formal introduction to design history, but it leaves much room for expansion. Therefore, like many studio educators seeking to increase their students' historical knowledge, I redesigned the project briefs for Digital Visualization to center around the subject matter of design history. Students signed up to work with one of several available designers from a list that I had compiled. The list from the first semester included William Morris, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, Joseph Hoffmann, Joseph and Anni Albers, Charles and Rae Eames, and Frank Lloyd Wright.

of contemporary production methods. In other words, how does the process of creating vector graphics about (for instance) William Morris impact our understanding of the Arts and Crafts as both a philosophy and aesthetic? During process critiques, I asked students to probe how technological interfaces, like Adobe Illustrator, inform the formal design decisions that they make. To ground our discussion of the relationship between technology and practice, I have students read Ellen Lupton's essay "Learning to Love Software." This allows us to discuss, as Lupton puts it, "how the interfaces we use both limit and enable our work" (Lupton 2007, 157). While Lupton cites Lev Manovich's important 2002 article "Generation Flash," I have found that Lupton's much more journalistic "Learning to Love Software" pushes the critical capacities of most sophomores, so it is the apex of our reading experience. This reading primarily addresses software, and we use it as a framework for probing how technology frames the solutions that students develop in response to the Digital Imaging project briefs.

Since the subject matter of their own studio work is design history, we also discuss how technology and materials influenced the work of students' assigned historical designers. The most common realization during these discussions is that the letterpress easily accommodates horizontal and vertical typographic orientation but diagonals require some ingenuity. Students who work with Alexander Rodchenko are quick to point this out, particularly since Rodchenko's signature diagonal line functions as a leitmotif for much of their own work (*figures 1 and 2*). The differences between designing for print and screen also emerge quickly and fairly intuitively. I never include contemporary designers or exclusively graphic designers on the list we explore in this course. Therefore, it is usually the students who work with Charles and Rae Eames who address this issue, often by way of the designers' short films, particularly the 1977 film *Powers of Ten* (*figures 3 and 4*). For beginning students, it can be transformative to understand that technological innovations and limitations have always played a role in design practice.

: I use the historical subject matter of Digital
: Visualization studio projects as an opportunity to have
: students critically engage the relationship between
: design decisions and means of production.

conceptualized universality differently than did Scandinavian Modernism, but both movements embraced the notion of a universal language of form (*figures 5 and 6*). The formal and aesthetic qualities of the two movements diverge dramatically, of course, and this often sparks a broader conversation about how both the concepts and the forms attached to “universality” have evolved over time and in response to various historical contexts. In the context of the Digital Visualization course, this conversation usually occurs during the first project, as students design a set of icons to represent their designer’s biography. We begin our project by learning about Gerd Arntz and Otto Neurath’s Isotype project of the 1930s and 1940s. As a result, students tend to frame their own goal in terms of universal communication. Articulating how “universal” design has changed over time complicates this undertaking, emphasizing the culturally and temporally situated position of our own contemporary design solutions. This is a useful realization for beginning design students. By coming to this realization through studio production, they actively discover how their own supposedly universal solutions are in fact highly contextual.



ALEXANDER RODCHENKO

FIGURE 5 *Alexander Rodchenko icons by Gabriella Moran (2013)*



ALVAR AALTO

FIGURE 6 *Alvar Aalto icons by Zackary Hooper (2013)*

Active, studio-based historical learning is another valuable benefit of including history in the studio classroom. Certainly, history and theory lecture courses can include opportunities for meaningful discussion (Remington 2003, 202-4) and/or studio projects (McMahon 2003, 205-7). But the studio classroom accommodates the work of visual production and process critique much more easily than the survey course classroom because it has been designed for this purpose.

encounters with the uses for and limitations of style. This is valuable for students in two very different ways: It exposes them to a canonical selection of styles, and it allows them to question the ultimate value of style as a historical variable. Stylistic categories, though ultimately shallow, can be useful. Well-educated graphic designers should be equipped to differentiate visually between, for instance, the Arts and Crafts movement and post-Bauhaus Modernism (*figures 7 and 8*).

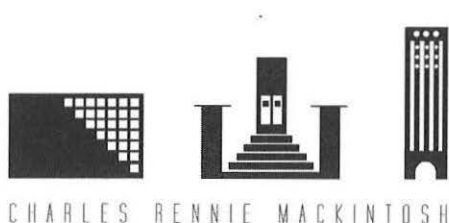


FIGURE 7 Charles Rennie Mackintosh icons by Neil Carey (2012)



FIGURE 8 Charles and Rae Eames icons by Shannon Threadgill (2012)

Engaging the stylistic qualities of historical movements in an active way allows students to become familiar with the stylistic concerns that inform the history of our discipline.

The process of designing the biographical icons, for instance, underscores the difference between copying a style directly and understanding it deeply enough to reference it without replicating it. During the sketching stage of this project, most students articulate the desire to move beyond stylistic copying as they engage the problem. In many cases, this desire stems from a dual interest in making the icons appeal to a broad contemporary audience and in making the icons say something about the student's personal encounter with the historical work. Being able to identify obvious stylistic markers in a design artifact is a useful first step in being able to create a reference to the look and feel of a moment in time.

Studio projects alone, however enriching and valuable they might be, are not a replacement for design history coursework. It would be unfair to expect students to develop a structured and critical sense of their discipline's history through fragmentary encounters in the studio. Surely the history coursework that graphic design students are required to take should include an organized and cohesive overview of the "significant ideas, events, objects and practices" relevant to graphic design. This allows students to place studio-based encounters with history inside a broader chronological and conceptual context. Without such an introduction, we are expecting them to build their own historical foundation by encountering a selection of famous typographers one semester, a collection of mid-twentieth century editorial designers the next. We are expecting them to synthesize a great deal of disparate information independently, without helping them build a conceptual framework for this activity. Meanwhile, if historical encounters only ever happen in the studio, we are expecting students to solve complex formal and conceptual design problems while they simultaneously construct this independent synthetic framework. Even for the most profoundly gifted students, this is a tall order. If we want students to understand the scope and sequence of graphic design history, as well as the varying ways it has been interpreted and used over time and across cultures, we should equip them for this task by providing a comprehensive and well-designed survey course. A required one or two semester graphic design history survey course would not seek to turn students into design historians any more than the two semesters most now spend with Gardner or Jansen turn them into art historians.

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Instead, an introductory survey would prepare graphic design students to engage historical projects in the context of the studio in a much more useful and meaningful way.

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