The Role of *Visible Language* in Building and Critiquing a Canon of Graphic Design History

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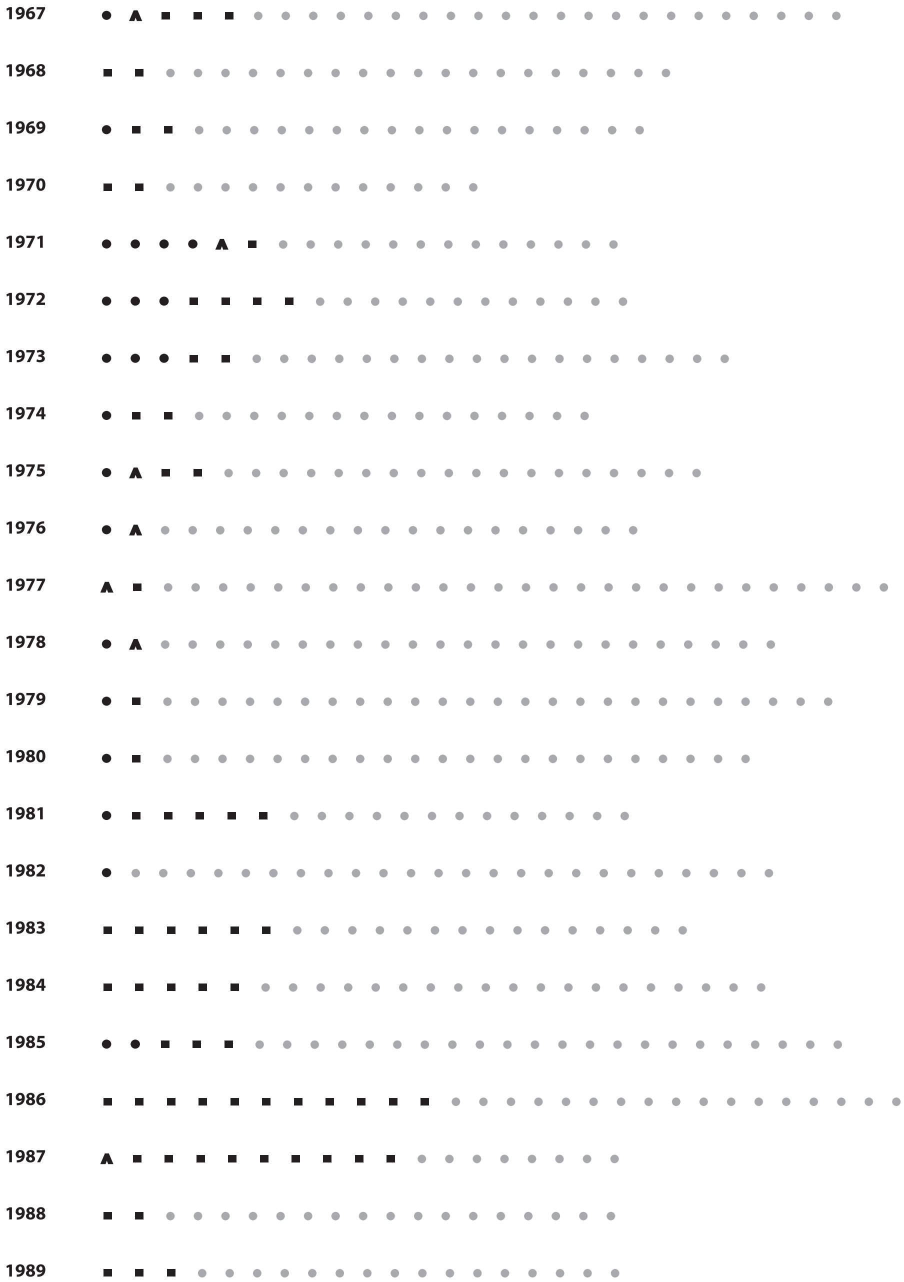
Abstract

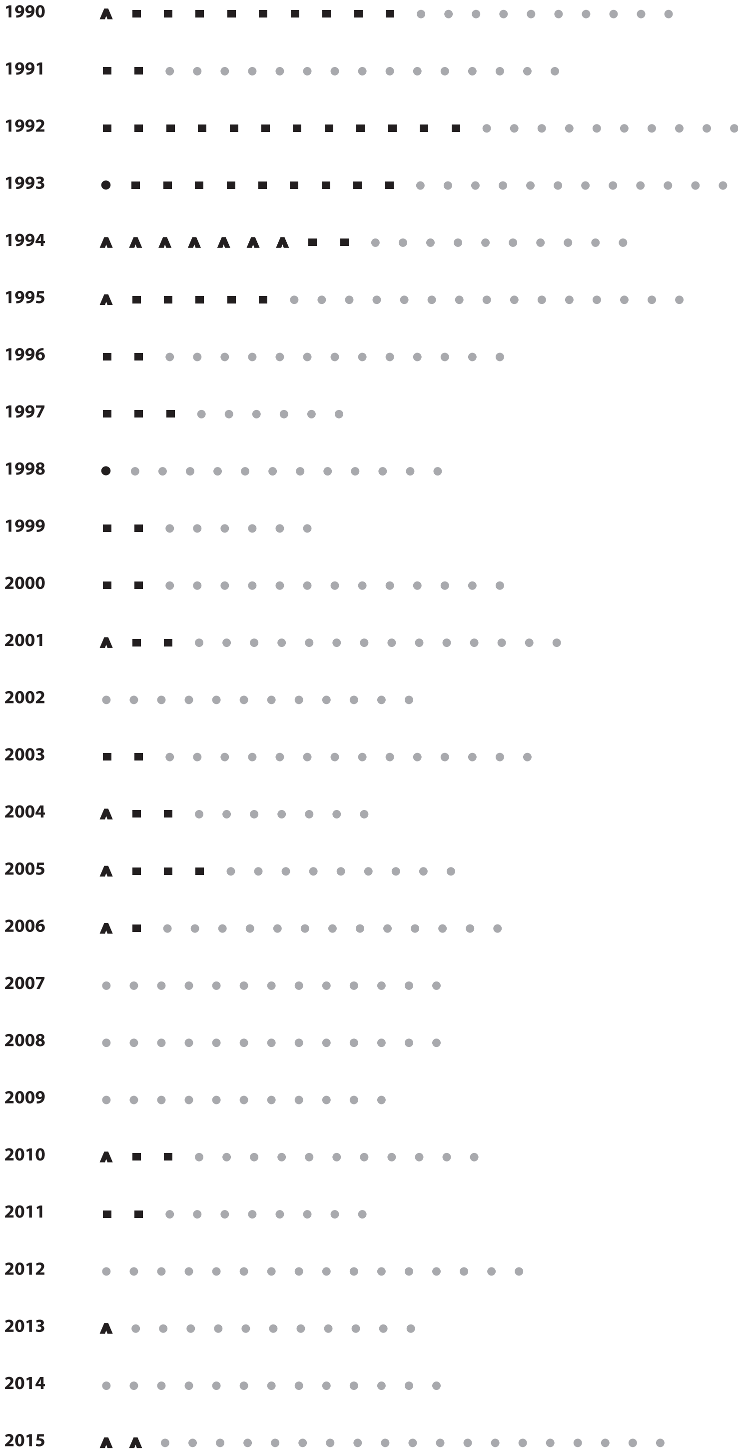
Throughout its first half-century of publication, *Visible Language* has contributed to the construction and deconstruction of a "canon" of graphic or visual communication design history. By including and excluding objects, practices, and makers from its literature, the journal has helped to establish a normative definition of what design history is and how it should function. The historical literature of *Visible Language* both participates in and, at notable moments, critiques a traditional canon: Eurocentric, male-dominated, artifact-focused, and professionally-oriented. This article views the historical literature of *Visible Language* through quantitative and qualitative lenses. Quantitatively, the article establishes how much of the journal's literature is historical in content, what explicit purposes this literature serves for the discipline, and what areas of geographical and subject-matter emphasis emerge over time. Qualitatively, the article explores how this historical literature has influenced the conceptualization and practice of graphic or visual communication design history as an activity, how it has contributed to the self-conscious construction of the formal discipline, and how the existing literature has both shaped past developments and suggested as-yet unrealized future trajectories.

Keywords

Graphic design history, visual communication design history



● Explication / history
▲ Discipline-building / history
■ Contextualization / history
● Non-historical article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Introduction

Visible Language, as the journal's online homepage puts it, "advocates the potential for the research and practice of visual communication to enhance the human experience." As a leading voice in the field of visual communication and the oldest peer-reviewed design journal, *Visible Language* has helped to shape any number of disciplinary dialogues and has framed many practical, pedagogical, historical, and theoretical design problems. This article engages with the ways in which *Visible Language* has shaped our disciplinary understanding of the history of visual communication – both as an academic subject and as a collection of objects, practices, and practitioners. To map out this territory, the abstracts of all 892 articles published in volumes 1-49 were reviewed and coded based on their primary purpose and their subject matter. The first section of this article describes the coding procedure and discusses the three types of basic purposes advanced by the historical literature: explication, contextualization, and discipline-building. The second section investigates how the historical literature has framed the self-conscious construction of the discipline itself: what are the methods, subject matters, and boundaries of the field, and what are the influential moments that helped to define these? The third section discusses the dominant thematic categories that emerge from subject-matter groupings, revealing how *Visible Language* has simultaneously constructed and deconstructed canonical notions of graphic design history. The fourth and final section looks back holistically at all of the data, contextualizing the history of visual communication as suggested by the literature included in the first forty-nine volumes of *Visible Language*.

Coding the data

To begin, the abstracts of all 892 titled articles published in volumes 1-49 of *Visible Language* were qualitatively analyzed to determine if their content was historical in nature. As necessary, in the small number of articles without abstracts, reference was made to the article's introduction. For the purposes of coding the articles, an "historical" article was defined as one that focused on explicating or contextualizing objects or practices as historical phenomena or building the discipline of design history by defining the subject area or interrogating the practice of design history. As a matter of clarity, where distinctions between historical and non-historical approaches were less clear-cut, priority was placed on the language of the abstract itself. For instance, the only abstract in a special double-issue devoted to Dada (issue 21.3-4) that was not coded as historical stated the article's purpose as

"identifying the problematics inherent in the communication by an artist, through a text, to the audience(s)." The focus is on the mechanics of how and why "the ideal correspondence between the artist's intended purposes and the audience's reception" is more or less functional in individual instances (Greenberg, 1987, p. 454). The article – though it uses historical documents as examples – explicitly concentrates its attention on the functionality and linguistic implications of specific design strategies rather than the historical contexts of the works/makers/audiences themselves. Might the article be read as historical in some sense? Certainly. But the author clearly indicates that the focus of the research lies elsewhere, and the coding procedure reflects such authorial decisions when they are indicated. Clear-cut examples of subjects not coded as historical would include legibility or functionality studies, such as "Legibility of Numerals Displayed in a 4 x 7 Dot Matrix and Seven-Segment Digits"; literary, philosophical, or psychoanalytic interpretation of specific texts, such as "Lex Icon: Freud and Rimbaud" – a Freudian reading of the work of nineteenth-century French poet Arthur Rimbaud; and what might be loosely defined as contemporary criticism – that is, engaging the oeuvre of a practicing artist/designer on a primarily formal or conceptual level, without significant emphasis on placing that individual's work into a broad historical context, such as "The Collages of William Dole" (Dole & Norland, 1975; McKenna, 1980; Wendt, Weckerle, & Orth, 1976). In volumes 1-49, 177 articles (21.35%) were coded as historical in nature (Figure 1).

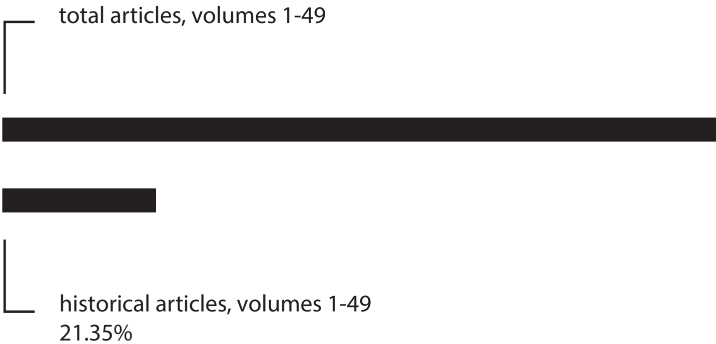

Figure 1

Out of a total of 892 articles in volumes 1–49 of *Visible Language*, 177 articles (21.35%) are historical in focus. Here, an "historical" article is defined as one that either (a) explicates or contextualizes objects or practices as historical phenomena or (b) builds the discipline of design history by defining the subject area and/or interrogating the practice of design history.

Once identified, the 177 historical articles were further coded into three broad categories based on their primary goal: explication, discipline-building, and contextualization. While these categories are broad, they do offer a way to differentiate between varying purposes within the literature of graphic design history. Articles with a primary focus on explication define or describe an historical object or practice, primarily in relationship to itself or others of its precise kind. Those concerned with discipline-building interrogate or define the subject matter and/or methods of graphic design history with an eye toward improving future outcomes in the field of historical research. Those with a focus on contextualization place objects or practices into a broader temporal and/or social framework, indicating how and why a specific instance (or set of instances) fits into a wider historical narrative. Quantitative analysis reveals that, by far, the most extensive category is that of contextualization – 130 historical articles out of a total of 177 (73.45%). Explication and discipline-building are almost equal, representing 13.56% and 12.99% of the literature respectively (Figure 2).

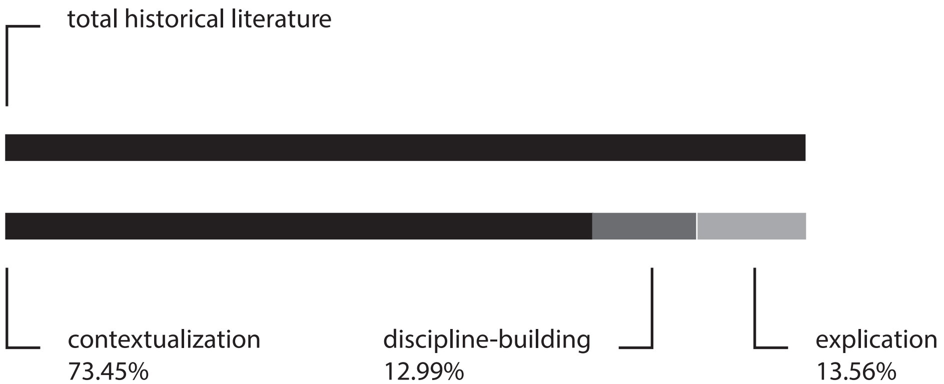

Figure 2

Of the articles coded as historical, 73.45% have as their primary purpose the contextualization objects or practices within a broad temporal and/or social framework. 12.99% focus on discipline-building by questioning or defining the subject matter and/ or methods of graphic design history. 13.56% have as their primary purpose explication: describing an historical object or practice in relationship to itself or others of its kind.

Only two articles coded as explicative were published after 1985, indicating that description without critical contextualization grew less acceptable over time (Hailstone, 1993; Navarro Tapia, 1998). The discipline-building literature, on the other hand, is dispersed throughout the five decades of the journal's publication. It is interesting to notice how the presence of design history as subject matter has waxed and waned over the past half-century. 28.57% of volume years reflect historical content at or above 25% of that volume's total content: volumes 5-6 (1971-72), 15 (1981), 17 (1983), 20-21 (1986-87), 24 (1990), 26-29 (1992-1995), 31 (1997), and 38-39 (2004-05).

Measured by percentage throughout all its years of publication, the most significant historical contribution of *Visible Language* is that of expanding the body of literature devoted to the meaningful contextualization of historical figures, objects, and practices within or related to the field of visual communication. Within this body of literature, further qualitative

content analysis revealed a set of more specific groupings by subject matter, which will be discussed in the third section. Though it is numerically a much smaller contribution, however, the role of *Visible Language* in shaping the disciplinary understanding and practice of graphic design history should not be overlooked. The inclusions and exclusions of this field of research have been shaped by the 23 historically-focused articles that address discipline-building. What is the territory of graphic design history, and how should that territory be investigated? Which ideas, objects, practices, and practitioners are most relevant to the history of visual communication? *Visible Language* has been influential in asking and answering these foundational questions.

Constructing a Discipline

Though only 13% of the historical articles in *Visible Language* are engaged primarily with discipline-building, their collective contribution to the shape of graphic design history is significant. In particular, the three-issue special series "Critical Histories of Graphic Design," guest-edited by Andrew Blauvelt in 1994, has exerted a great deal of influence. In 1983, Philip B. Meggs' *A History of Graphic Design* had answered numerous calls for a comprehensive survey of the discipline's history. That same year, Massimo Vignelli offered his much-anthologized keynote address at the "First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design" at the Rochester Institute of Technology. Rick Poynor notes, without offering a counter-argument, that the 2012 edited volume *Graphic Design: History in the Writing* dates the birth of the discipline itself to this moment (Poynor, 2012). Almost a decade after that symposium, Martha Scotford Lange's 1991 article for the AIGA *Journal*, "Is There a Canon of Graphic Design History?" – now a canonical reading, itself – pointed to the tendency of survey texts to highlight certain moments in the history of graphic design and erase others from view (Lange, 1991). Meggs' text, of course, was one of those that she quantitatively analyzed in order to arrive at the conclusion that, yes, graphic design history had seemingly developed an operational canon of key designers and works. Scotford argued that the curatorial conneisureship and authorial priorities represented in the discipline's foremost survey textbooks had constructed a canon focused almost exclusively on white, male, western European and American designers. Her articulation of a canon of graphic design history resonated, both with those who shared her wish to critique such a canon and with those who accepted its construction as necessary. A number of frequently-anthologized responses followed, including Philip Meggs' direct rejoinder, "Is a Design History Canon Really Dangerous?" (Meggs, 1997). In 1994, *Visible Language* entered this discussion with Blauvelt's series of issues dedicated to the subject of "Critical Histories of Graphic Design." Here, some of the most respected voices in the field discussed questions of discipline-building. They examined

how and why histories of graphic design had been and were being constructed. They also explored how future conceptualizations, methods, and outcomes might be improved. As a contribution to the ongoing disciplinary discussion sparked in part by Scotford's question, the series was pivotal.

The voices included in this three-part dialogue asked questions that helped to shift the trajectory of graphic design history as a discipline. Ellen Lupton and J. Abbot Miller probed the relationship between deconstruction – easily the most influential theoretical model for typography at that moment – and graphic design history; Victor Margolin questioned the methods through which historical narratives of graphic design had been constructed; and Martha Scotford critiqued conventional histories focused on mainstream, male accomplishments (Lupton & Miller, 1994; Margolin, 1994; Scotford, 1994). In particular, Margolin's focus on narrative methods illuminated questions that the second generation of graphic design history survey texts would strive to answer. "What then might a history of graphic design that respected the varied discursive locations of visual design activity be like?" Margolin asked. His answer follows:

> 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 (Margolin, 1994, pp. 242–3).

Like Margolin, all of the authors in this three-part series, in their own way, engaged with one critical subject: methods. By drawing attention to the methodological dimension of graphic design history, the series strove to move the discipline beyond simplistic chronological and descriptive narratives. In the words of Gérard Mermoz, "chronicles of 'natural,' untheorized objects" should no longer be allowed to "assume the role and claim the status of history-writing" (Mermoz, 1994, p. 261). In many ways, the series asked the very questions that the next generation of historical survey texts would strive to answer. Eskilson's 2007 *Graphic Design: A New History* and Drucker and McVarish's 2008 *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* can both be read in this light – as answers to the questions that *Visible Language*'s critical histories series asked. In particular, these textbooks responded to Blauvelt's call for "a reconfigured alternative to the prevailing conceptions and practices of graphic design history" and Margolin's simultaneous call for a "narrative strategy" that accounts for the evolution of graphic design as a practice not fully explained by its constituent parts, such as typography or illustration (Blauvelt, 1994a, p. 199; Margolin, 1994, p. 233). In short, the disciplinary conversations underway in the mid-1990s advocated for more complicated, complex, even contentious histories. They called for scholarly rigor and

theoretical sophistication. In both of these regards, *Visible Language*'s critical histories series was very much of its moment in time.

In the critical histories series, untheorized chronological narratives and individual theories applied without justification to isolated objects had been called into question. This is not to say that theory was absent from the historical literature of *Visible Language* before 1994. Using a specific theory as the primary tool to explicate or contextualize particular objects and practices had been a part of the literature in *Visible Language* almost since its inception. Linguistics, semiotics, philosophy, psychology, and literary theory all played a role in its early historical content. Gerald L. Bruns's 1969 treatment of Mallarmé was an early example; the article explored issues of language and meaning in Mallarmé's 1887 poem *Un Coup de dés* (Bruns, 1969). Semiotics played a key role in John J. White's 1976 "The Argument for a Semiotic Approach to Shape Writing: The Case of Italian Futurist Typography" (White, 1976). In 1988, a special issue on theory was devoted to offering explicitly theoretical, often didactic readings of objects, images, texts, and communication practices (issue 22.4). These examples, far from being an inclusive list, simply offer a snapshot of how theory either contributed to historical contextualization or constituted a separate area of inquiry in *Visible Language* prior to the mid-nineties. However, Blauvelt's 1994 series marked a turning point in the way that theory was methodologically applied to the broader questions of graphic design history as a discipline – both for the journal and as part of a larger shift for the field. Prior to the 1994 series, all of the discipline-building articles coded as "historical" in this study had engaged with highly specific, non-theoretical methodological questions. Examples include articles about bibliographic tools for typography research, calligraphic analysis as a tool for determining cartographic attribution, or research methods for studying Renaissance manuscripts (Kristeller, 1975; Osley, 1971; Tanselle, 1967). After the publication of the 1994 series, on the other hand, most discipline-building articles evidenced a much more critical orientation. Examples include the problematics of using typographic printing and/or typographic style as a factor in determining the relative sophistication of graphic artifacts; the interaction between human identity and historical narrative; and using emergent technology as a technique for cultivating historical understanding (McKee, 2010; Salen, 2001; Sayers, 2015; Williamson, 1995). This more explicitly critical approach of the mid 1990s and beyond highlighted, among other issues, the ways in which, "by allowing only one definition of practice to be operative, graphic design history has effectively foreclosed the possibility of locating and understanding alternative practices that fall beyond the range of its [current] interests" (Blauvelt, 1994b, p. 289). In other words, a newly critical lens allowed for an expansion of the operative definition of "graphic design history."

Thematic Categories – (De)constructing a Canon

Many of the discipline-building historical articles of the mid-1990s and beyond critiqued the notion of a canon of graphic design history. Either implicitly or explicitly, they asked for a re-evaluation of the discipline's territory and an expansion of its borders. Whose histories are being shown and told? What standards are being used to determine inclusion and exclusion in the historical narrative? What and who has been overlooked through the racist, sexist, classist, or naive methodologies of prior historical research? In other words, what is our canon, and how should we move beyond it? The canon of graphic design history that Martha Scotford identified in 1991 was a notion that she continued to critique, and one forum for this critique was *Visible Language*. In her 1994 article "Messy History vs. Neat History," she called into question the ways in which "canons of designers and design works have been established and accepted through publication and exhibition" and suggested that historians should begin "to study design activity, to study design roles, to study response to design, rather than to concentrate on individual designers and their artifacts and use these as the sole filter for graphic design history" (Scotford, 1994, pp. 369, 386). Though significant time has passed since Scotford first introduced the question, the construction of a canon of graphic design history remains relevant today. In 2011, Teal Triggs introduced a thematic collection of *Design Issues* articles devoted to graphic design history by positing that "graphic design, it seems, is still searching for its past"– and, furthermore, is still engaged with "the question of the canon and 'whose history'" is being shown and told as the discipline develops (Triggs, 2011, pp. 3, 5). The precise boundaries of a canonical history can be slippery to define, particularly as they continue to evolve – albeit slowly – in relationship to calls for increased inclusivity and diversity. Yet there certainly exists a set of familiar historical works: one which is repeated with minor variation and which reflects less cultural diversity than it might. Documenting the physical shape of a body of literature, revealing its inclusions and exclusions, its priorities and assumptions, sheds light on the still-critical question of "whose history?"

As the oldest peer-reviewed design journal, *Visible Language* has participated directly and indirectly in establishing a historical narrative of graphic design as a discipline. In dialogic relationship with other journals in the field, *Visible Language* has both contributed to and critiqued emergent canons of graphic design history. The explicative and contextual articles that make up 87% of the publication's historical content make no claims to define the full scope of graphic design's history. Indeed, the vast majority engage with discrete sets of objects or practices, seeking to place these within the context of a specific place or time or within the context of

related objects and practices. Even collectively, as an edited body of literature, they make no claim to outlining a complete narrative with well-defined boundaries. Yet the subject matter that they include and exclude is suggestive. It points toward a wider historical narrative that embraces a given set of designers, objects, and practices while excluding others. In this way, the historical content of *Visible Language* participates in the definition and critique of a canon. The journal's content both falls within and extends beyond the familiar boundaries of such a canon. A quantitative and qualitative overview of the specific areas of historical inquiry to which *Visible Language* has made notable contributions reveals how the journal has helped to define "the history of graphic design."

Quantitatively, three areas of interest emerge as dominant in the historical literature of *Visible Language*: concrete or visual poetry, the European Avant Garde of the first half of the twentieth century, and the emergence of early writing systems, particularly in Mesopotamia and Meso-America (Figure 3).

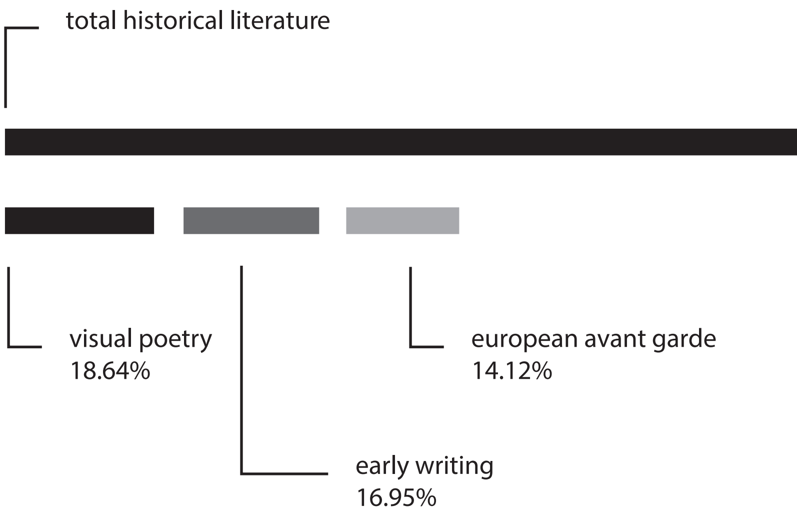

Figure 3

There are three primary areas of interest represented in the historical literature of *Visible Language:* concrete or visual poetry; the emergence of early writing systems, particularly in Mesopotamia and Meso-America; and the European Avant Garde of the first half of the twentieth century.

Less dominant but still numerically significant are the Fluxus movement, handwriting and calligraphy, printing technologies, and systems of non-alphabetic graphic notation such as punctuation or musical notation (Figure 4). Highlighting the more and less familiar contributions to these areas of inquiry sheds light on how *Visible Language* has simultaneously contributed to and critiqued the notion of a canon of graphic design history.

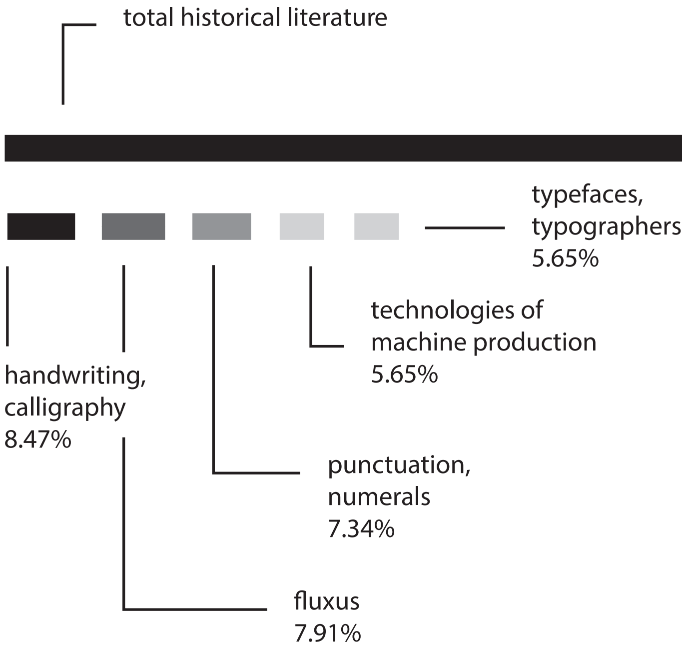

Figure 4

Five subjects fall within an area of secondary interest, each representing between 5% and 8.5% of the total historical literature: handwriting and calligraphy, punctuation and numerals, technologies of machine production, individual typefaces and typographers, and the Fluxus movement.

Unsurprisingly, *Visible Language* has made an extensive contribution to documenting the literal intersection of visibility and language – concrete or visual poetry. 18.64% of the historical articles in volumes 1-49 are devoted to the subject, beginning in volume 1 (1967) and continuing through to volume 35 (2001). Numerically, this is the most significant area of interest within the literature printed in the journal. Special issues 17.3, 20.1, and 27.4 are devoted to Lettrisme, pattern poetry, and international visual poetry, respectively. These three special issues account for roughly a third 63.64% of the literature on the subject. As one might expect, the early twentieth century Avant Garde movements of France, Germany, Italy, and Russia figure prominently into the narrative, constituting 15.15% of the articles for this subject. But the depth of inquiry into visual poetry extends well beyond the expected examples from the Dada, Futurist, and Constructivist movements. Alongside French, German, Spanish, and English examples from the Renaissance through the Baroque, the literature also addresses labyrinth poems in the Greco-Roman and medieval Christian and Jewish traditions;

Chinese patterned poems; and early computer poetry (Bootz, 1996; Franke, 1986; Rypson, 1986) 27.27% of this literature address places and cultures outside of western Europe and the United States – not bad odds, though Russian Constructivism boosts this number. Special issues devoted to the mid-twentieth century French Letterisme movement (17.3, July 1983) and to international visual poetry (27.4, October 1993) further expand the subject beyond its most familiar boundaries. In particular, the anthology of international visual poetry demarcates a more inclusive geography: Brazil, Cuba, Mexico, and Uruguay are present alongside the more-expected Italy, Portugal, and the United States. Each of the articles in the issue begins with a historical overview of visual poetry in that country, then places a selection of more recent work into the context of that history.

The emergence of early writing systems is the second area of numerically dominant focus, constituting 16.95% of the total historical literature. Beginning in 1971 and continuing through 2006, the journal has devoted considerable space to a wide-ranging and diverse exploration of early writing systems. With one exception, all of the articles are authored by different scholars; three articles are by Denise Schmandt-Besserat (Schmandt-Besserat, 1981, 1984, 1986). And while two special issues, numbers 15.4 and 24.1, account for some of the numerical density, the journal's contributions to this field of inquiry are otherwise spread throughout the years from 1971 to 2006. Primarily, the literature focuses on Mesopotamia and Meso-America; each comprises 40% of the literature on the topic. The remaining 20% discusses developments in Egypt, Greece, Rome, and Palestine. Here, *Visible Language* has again expanded upon the canonical range of objects and cultures. Survey textbooks that begin with cave art rather than the Industrial Revolution certainly mention early writing systems, though not in any great detail. Tracing a relatively direct lineage for the Latin alphabet is usually the goal in most historical surveys; alternative models are presented as exotic outliers. Drucker and McVarish, for instance, show only one Meso-American image in their survey text, the Dresden Codex, a noted pre-Columbian Mayan text most familiarly known by the name of the German city in which it has resided since 1739 (Drucker & McVarish, 2012, p. 7). Such reductivism is not the case in *Visible Language*, where the sum total of the literature can be seen as complicating, rather than simplifying, the question of origins. A fully robust approach to the historical roots of visual communication would also include a variety of early examples from Asia, a subject that the literature in *Visible Language* unfortunately excludes. But the focus on Meso-America, in particular, pushes the literature well beyond the boundaries of the canonical.

Finally, there is a numerically significant focus on the early twentieth century European Avant-Garde. 14.12% of the historical articles in volumes 1-49 of *Visible Language* are devoted to the subject, beginning in the first year of publication and continuing through 1996. The artists and designers of the Bauhaus, Constructivism, Dada, and Futurism figure

prominently into commonly-accepted canons of graphic design history, and they play a correspondingly large role in the narrative set forth by the historical content of *Visible Language*. The journal reflects the professional and intellectual priorities of a set of disciplines long conditioned to read early Modernism as a touchstone moment in the history of visual communication, so it is unsurprising that its historical literature reveals this prioritization. The early European Avant-Garde is perhaps one of the most notable examples of problematic canonization as Scotford describes it. It is a brief and exclusivist, albeit profound and visually engaging, moment in time that exerts a significant influence on how disciplinary history is seen and understood. Quite literally, the European Avant-Garde disappears from *Visible Language*'s historical literature after 1996 (Storkerson, 1996) This might be read as yet another response to the discipline-wide call in the mid 1990s for a more critical and inclusive history, one moving beyond familiar favorites and opening up room to consider as-yet unexplored objects, makers, and practices.

Concrete or visual poetry accounts for 18.64% of the historical literature in *Visible Language*; the emergence of early writing systems accounts for 16.95%; and the early European Avant Garde accounts for 14.12%. These three subjects, then, can been read as defining the core territory of the history of visual communication as represented in *Visible Language*. Content analysis also reveals a secondary level of emphasis, which encompasses five subjects: handwriting and calligraphy (8.47% of the historical literature), punctuation and numerals (7.34%), technologies of machine production (5.65%), individual typefaces and typographers (5.65%), and the Fluxus movement (7.91%).

Within the thematic categories of secondary interest, most maintain a focus on European and American subject matter. However, *Visible Language*'s treatment of the historical dimensions of handwriting and calligraphy is its most culturally and geographically diverse engagement with a single subject area. Beginning in 1967 and continuing through 1993, the literature investigated the history of handwriting practices and handwritten texts in Chinese, Hebrew, Japanese, Maori, and Maya, as well as Latin, Italian, French, and English. 40% of the articles represent cultures outside of the typical reach of the western European / North American canon. None of the articles emerge from a special issue and only one author is represented twice (A.S. Osley, in issues 5.1 and 13.1). Punctuation and numerals account for 7.34% of the historical literature, starting in 1972 and continuing through 2011. Here, western examples dominate, with the exception of one article devoted to the adoption of punctuation in Japanese script (Twine, 1984). Technologies of machine production account for 5.65% of the historical literature, beginning in 1967 and continuing through 1990. All of the articles address western printing technologies. Exactly half of the articles discuss the introduction of the Gutenberg press and its impact on the production of texts in western Europe. Individual typefaces and typographers likewise account for 5.65% of the literature, beginning in 1968 and continuing through

2010. Three articles address Russian faces or designers, two are twentieth-century American, and the rest are western European. Finally, the Fluxus movement registers as a numerically significant area of secondary interest, representing 7.91% of the total historical literature. Two special issues (double-issue 26.1-2 and issue 39.3) account for all but one of the articles. As was the movement itself, the literature is largely focused on activity in New York during the 1960s and 1970s. Fluxus is unlike any of the other areas of interest identified by the quantitative content analysis, in that thematic special issues account entirely for its numerical significance.

Other possible thematic groupings of the literature lend sets of articles that fall well below the threshold of 5% of the total literature. Icons and information graphics, for instance, represent only 2.82% of the historical literature, and book design (the largest category not coded as an area of emphasis in this study) represents 3.95%.

Contextual Meanings

What does a numerically-oriented content analysis reveal about the nature of a canonical history as constructed (and deconstructed) in the pages of *Visible Language*? First, and perhaps most importantly, it shows how scholars in the field have both made and responded to calls for a more "critical, engaged, historically grounded [discipline], fueled by the emerging voices of hitherto excluded constituencies, and enriched by participation in massively significant reorientations of thought and practice in the humanities in general" (Pollock, 2014, p. 9). It is easy to call for a fuller and more critical history and difficult to do the work of building one. Throughout its history, *Visible Language* has been engaged with the latter as a forum for diverse scholarship. In spite of genuine engagement with diversity, however, the dominant paradigm of a conventional canon remains difficult to escape. 82.5% of the historical content in *Visible Language* is centered around western Europe and the United States (Figure 5). Within this territory, familiar narrative choices are evident, such as the dominance of Gutenberg in histories of printing or an emphasis on early twentieth century European Avant Garde Modernism. However, in other areas, such as early graphic writing systems and handwritten or calligraphic forms, less familiar choices have opened up the dialogue into more inclusive territory. These choices represent important opportunities, not only for the specific subjects themselves but for the discipline as a whole to recognize the importance and vitality of a diverse history. In this regard, *Visible Language* has contributed to the cultural and geographic diversification of graphic design history as a disciplinary practice and as a body of objects/makers. 17.5% of the articles coded as "historical" in this study deal with places and cultures outside of western Europe and the United States. This includes all of Asia, Africa, and South America, as well as

Figure 5

Visible Language has, throughout its years of publication, made significant contributions to building a genuinely global history. Still, the familiar paradigm of a conventional canon is difficult to escape, and western Europe and the United States dominate the historical narrative to date.

eastern Europe (primarily Russia) and Mexico (technically North American but underrepresented in surveys). Should this number grow as the discipline moves forward and corrects for past oversights and discriminations? Certainly. But all efforts at diversification must start from somewhere, and the historical literature of *Visible Language* progresses beyond tokenism when engaging with cultural and geographic diversity. Furthermore, this has been the case throughout the journal's half-century of publication; attention to global diversification is not a new development.

Second, the data suggests that the interests of the journal's founding editor, Merald Wrolstad, have shaped the journal's de facto definition of "visual communication design history" in ways that continue to resonate. The inaugural issue of *The Journal of Typographic Research* (as it was called for its first four years) opened with a clear and succinct statement of purpose: "to report and to encourage scientific investigation of our alpabetic and related symbols." This subject matter was to be explored through the lenses of "pure communications theory, practical application of legibility results, [and] artistic intuition of experimental typographic design" (Wrolstad, 1967, p. 3). The majority of historical articles within the journal's first four years were of two broad types. First, there were considerations of the typographic oeuvre of important figures in the history of art and design: Modernist painter Paul Klee, Constructivist designer El Lissitzsky, and Renaissance painter Andrea Mantegna and calligrapher Felice Feliciano (Leering-van Moorsel, 1968; Meiss, 1969; Pierce, 1967). Second, there were accounts of the historical development of new categories of alphabetic or typographic form, often in relationship to new technologies of production or emergent social structures: the development of Russian Civil Type; the change of letterform designs in relationship to printing technologies; the emergence of Gothic handwriting styles; the Siloam Inscription's relevance to the origins

of the alphabet; and an overview of Japanese calligraphy (Boyle, 1970; Kaldor, 1969, 1970; Patteson, 1970; Tomohiko, 1967; Zapf, 1968). This focus on typographic and alphabetic research demarcated a clear territory for – or perhaps within – the history of visual communication, one that has continued to inform the conceptualization of which objects and practices are most relevant to that history. In 1971, when the journal's titled changed to *Visible Language*, Wrolstad wrote that "no matter how broadly we attempt to define 'typographic research,' it no longer adequately describes the research efforts in the field or the major concerns of this Journal." Rather, the journal and its contributors were involved with "the investigation of any expression of a language in visual form" (Wrolstad, 1971, p. 5).

When Sharon Poggenpohl assumed the editorial role after Wrolstad's death in 1987, the journal was described on its opening page as "concerned with research and ideas that help define the unique role and properties of written language" (volume 21.1, winter 1987). Andrew Blauvelt's 1994 "Critical Histories" series broadened the journal's focus; both the individual historical articles in that series and the historical content that followed in subsequent years expanded beyond the typographic and linguistic (Remington, 2004; Scotford, 1994; Williamson, 1995). But it was only as Mike Zender assumed editorship in 2013 that the journal's self-described editorial focus explicitly "transition[ed] to sharper focus on research in visual communication" more broadly defined. An exploration of "all forms of visual communication: perception, symbols, 3-D objects, user experiences, contexts and interactive systems" joined the long-established exploration of "all things typographic and literate" (Poggenpohl & Zender, 2013, pp. 9–10).

Throughout most of its history, the journal's foundational and persistent interest in the typographic expression of linguistic communication has been reflected in its historical content. Therefore, the primary and secondary areas of historical focus revealed by the content analysis do not function as a comprehensive survey of visual communication, nor were they ever intended to. Rather, they – like all curated texts – reveal a distinct editorial focus. There are entire subject areas that do not register as numerically significant players in the history of visual communication as outlined by the historical literature of *Visible Language*. Posters, advertising, and illustration are familiar categories within the history of visual communication, though they are not (always) explicitly alphabetic or writing-based. Way-finding, mapping, symbol systems, and book and periodical design are, however, explicitly language-based, and these are likewise notably absent from a numerical evaluation of the literature's emphasis areas. As the journal continues to explore "all forms of visual communication," its historical focus will no doubt continue to evolve in ways that reflect the evolution of both practice and scholarship within the field of visual communication.

As a graphic design historian and teacher of graphic design – and as the researcher who has framed the construction of both the qualitative and quantitative data in this study – I view both of these broad

observations in much the same way. They are indicators that the work of graphic design history is ongoing. Today, the discipline's intentions, as well as its theoretical and methodological foundations, are increasingly well-defined. The body of work that we tend to read as "canonical" is firmly established. Furthermore, this work is accessible through a variety of outlets, including multiple survey textbooks and online media outlets of varying levels of scholarly reliability and cost to access. (To use early twentieth century European Avant Garde Modernist typography as an example, Jan Tschichold's full typographic teaching collection is viewable online both through the MoMA website, which is open-access, and ARTstor, which is subscription-based.) Needless to say, this observation about wide availability is not one that could have been made when *Visible Language* first began publication, and it is an indicator that the field has grown significantly since that time. Alongside simple growth, the discipline of graphic design history has made progress toward interrogating and expanding its canon to more fully reflect the range of human diversity. However, the difficult work of recovering lost, forgotten, and intentionally neglected objects, makers, and practices continues. Elizabeth Beidler has pointed toward the tendency of graphic design historians to offer the "relentless deduction that the history produced thus far isn't enough, isn't right and ultimately fails to deliver" (Beidler, 2012), particularly when discussing historiography, methods, or the state of the discipline. Over the past half-century, *Visible Language* has certainly contributed to disciplinary critique of this kind. More importantly, however, the journal has made significant contributions to building a body of literature that genuinely expands our understanding of the history of visual communication. This contribution continues – one object, one maker, one practice at a time.

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