

An Introduction to Graphic Design

Broadly defined, graphic designers (sometimes referred to as “communication designers”) are the visual interpreters of ideas: Their role is to translate and communicate—and occasionally even agitate—by rendering thinking as form, process, and experience.*



1. 1968 Olympics Logo, Lance Wyman
2. Josef Müller-Brockmann: *Pioneer of Swiss Graphic Design*, Lars Müller and Paul Rand, Lars Müller Publishers, 2001
3. Opening titles for *Iron Man*, Prologue Films, 2008

4. Karel Martens: *Printed Matter/drukwerk*, Karel Martens, Hyphen Press, 2002
5. *Vanity Fair*, April 2008
6. Municipal signage
7. *Strip*, NAI Publishers, 2003

8. S, M, L, XL, Rem Koolhaas, Bruce Mau, Hans Wertemann, Monacelli Press, 1997
9. Sample Ballot “Design for Democracy,” Marcia Lausen for AIGA, University of Chicago Press, 2008
10. Flamingo Motor Hotel photograph, Rick Poyner

11. Birthday Card, Daniel Eatock
12. World Wildlife Fund logo
13. Cast Aluminum Ampersand, House Industries
14. *Maeda @ Media*, John Maeda, Nicholas Negroponte, Universe Publishing, 2001

15. *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Robert Venturi, Museum of Modern Art, 1966

Graphic design is an international language composed of signs and symbols, marks and logos, banners and billboards, pictures and words.

As visual communicators, graphic designers maintain a delicate balance between clarity and innovation: If too much of the former is a snooze, too much of the latter yields chaos. In between lies a complex series of negotiations, which lead, in turn, to a host of applications—the same logo engraved on an envelope one day, emblazoned on a truck the next—and therein lies the designer’s peculiar, if paradoxical, challenge. Succeed, and the world works a little better as a result. Fail, and—well, you’ve got the butterfly ballot.

In addition to their role in the visual engineering of most printed matter, graphic designers today lend their expertise to a host of related disciplines including, but not limited to, strategy and consulting, information and expe-

rience design, branding and broadcast design, and signage and wayfinding systems. They are groomed to acquire a certain classic set of skills (which only marginally demand a facility with software) including drawing, photography, composition, and typography—the design and structural characteristics of letterforms, arguably graphic design’s lingua franca.

Long ago, to be a graphic designer was to distinguish yourself by defining your territory as fundamentally two-dimensional. Unlike artists, graphic designers had clients. Unlike architects, they delivered printed messages. Today, with the meteoric rise of desktop computing, social networking, and mobile technologies, graphic design is the ultimate DIY activity. Or is it? Albert Einstein once said that the secret to creativity is knowing how to hide your sources. So don’t ask us to explain how kerning works: Just trust us. ▶

Icons



ISOTYPE PICTOGRAMS

Isotype—an acronym for the International System of Typographic Picture Education—was developed after World War I by Austrian educator Otto Neurath. With German illustrator Gerd Arntz, Neurath created a hieroglyphic vocabulary of easily understood symbols that has been assimilated internationally.



I LOVE NY LOGO

Designed by grandfather of graphic design Milton Glaser in the 1970s, this rebus combines a red heart with the rounded slab-serif typeface based on American Typewriter.



UPS PICTOGRAPH

The UPS logo was designed in 1961 by Paul Rand as a sort of heraldic pictogram. Rand said he gauged his success when he showed the work to his daughter. (“Why, it looks just like a present, Daddy,” she said.) The logo was redesigned in 2003 by design firm Futurebrand.

Story by Jessica Helfand and William Drenttel
Photo by Peter Belanger

*“Experience” is a widow (also called an orphan), a word or fragment appearing alone at the end of a paragraph. No good graphic designer would let this go to press.

Graphic Recognition

A good identity is simple but never boring; flexible but never chaotic; playful and iterative—and always supremely recognizable.

Best: Saks Fifth Avenue; the *New York Times* online

Seen on everything from shopping bags to shipping vessels, print collateral to Web and motion graphics, an identity program balances variety with specificity. Often accompanied by “bibles”—detailed style guides outlining the proper procedures for implementing a logo or trademark—identity programs shoulder enormous responsibilities. While infinitely scalable, a good identity program is grounded in a kind of basic formal system: Color palettes, font choices, and grids (the underlying armature upon which most printed materials are placed) all help to solidify a brand’s visual recognition. Among the more recent examples of successful identity programs are Pentagram’s redesign of the Saks Fifth Avenue identity, in which the classic script signature is recombined to create a series of stunning black-and-white compositions, and the *New York Times*’ website, an editorial extension of the Old Gray Lady that both bows to and amplifies that newspaper’s classic personality for a dynamic online environment. ▶



Education

The future of design education depends on how well schools can adapt curricula to changing conditions in the field: the increasing complexity of design problems that argue for tools and systems, not objects; designing with, rather than for, people; recognizing the importance of community and context; and collaborating with peer experts in other fields.

Meredith Davis, professor,
North Carolina State University

International Design

In the 21st-century global economy, communication designers will make the complex clear. They must also focus on human-centered needs, sustainability, and the challenges of communicating across cultures. Communication designers will become strategic resources for the way we approach problems. Creativity can defeat habit.

Richard Grefé, executive director,
AIGA

Design in Business

The future of design in business is promising, from both strategic and tactical perspectives. Design can help frame a business problem, develop and support a clear and compelling message, and align it with business objectives and customer preferences. Many companies are discovering that design can add value and drive revenue.

Joel Podolny, dean, Yale School
of Management

Type

New font formats are encouraging type designs with larger and more varied character sets, particularly where Roman alphabets are not used. There are more good type designers now than ever, and more teaching of type design at college level—a bright future.

Matthew Carter, type designer

Graphic Design in Your Daily Life:

Some facts and figures you may not know about what we see in the world around us.

1 The term “graphic design” was first coined by the American book designer William Addison Dwiggins in 1922.

2 The average yearly income of graphic designers was \$45,340 in 2007, according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics.

Identity Crisis

A bad identity lacks formal distinctiveness, making it hard to place and even harder to remember. It's too complex. Or it's just ugly.

Worst: The Wal-Mart logo; PowerPoint; the food pyramid; and the 2012 Olympics

Identity programs thrive particularly when there is a lively relationship between that which is constant and that which is variable. The opposite, consequently, reveals itself in programs that favor one (too much constancy) or the other (too much commotion). Regarding the former, Wal-Mart's recent repositioning features a bland logo that could easily be mistaken for countless other brands, and Microsoft's PowerPoint has an interface that's little more than a recipe for boredom. (It would not be an exaggeration to suggest that PowerPoint is anathema to most designers.)

In the commotion category, the 2005 redesign of the U.S. Department of Agriculture's food pyramid is hard to read and uses a generic stick figure bounding up a staircase of color bars to represent an individual's ideal nutritional intake. (Considerably easier, if ultimately lethal, to duck into a local McDonald's: golden arches or stick figure with color bars? You make the call!) It is possible that Wolff Olins, the designers of the controversial 2012 London Olympics mark, similarly aspired to such graphic representations of athleticism: pink, blue, green, orange! And sliced-off corners! The jigsaw-puzzle letterforms (shown here in pink and yellow) unleashed a torrent of public vitriol (including pleas from some 45,000 petitioners) and generated at least one study suggesting the mark in animated form was likely to induce seizures among epileptics. ▶▶

Walmart



Design for Social Change

- Structure new business models to diversify withholdings and manage assets
- Gravitate to situation-oriented business models
- Find new eco-friendly methodologies for entertaining consumer-oriented byproducts

Weird Assets




Craft

The future of aesthetics lies in random generative software such as Processing, but it will become less random as designers gain control of its abilities. The digital will merge with the handmade, like electric guitars and bagpipes, and together they will break down the rigid tempo imposed by increasingly prescriptive and powerful template software.

Marian Bantjes, graphic designer

Sustainability

Most designers are in the representation business, so their first response has been to design a poster about sustainability or launch a media campaign. But the transition to sustainability is not about messages, it's about activity—helping real people in real places change a material aspect of their everyday lives.

John Thackara, director, Doors of Perception

Visual Language

One of the most important roles for graphic design in the future will be to help us make sense of what's happening in the world around us by interpreting developments in science and technology in a visual language we can understand. Graphic designers have always done this by presenting complex information clearly and legibly, in maps and charts, for example, but increasingly they will do the same for theories, as the software designer Ben Fry has already done with his visualizations of the human genome. **Alice Rawsthorn, design critic, International Herald Tribune**

③ The typefaces used in this magazine are Greta, Greta Mono, and Avenir Next.

④ There are many graduate programs in graphic design in the U.S., but only a handful of them grant PhDs. These currently include North Carolina State

University, Carnegie Mellon University, and Illinois Institute of Technology.

Poster Service

From 19th-century broadsides to 20th-century propaganda flyers, the poster has played a defining role in the evolution of graphic design and public perception of current events.

Posters have always been situated in that tension-filled space between culture and commerce, precariously touching both the fine and applied arts. If 19th-century posters pushed propaganda, 20th-century posters combined expressive typography and theatrical juxtaposition to produce new and unusual formal languages. Posters—and their progeny, banners and billboards—have endured in no small way by sheer virtue of their typically immense scale. Even at a small size, a poster can be easily duplicated and propagated on the street. The power of this medium to draw public attention may explain in part why it is often perceived, among designers, as the jewel in the crown of our metier. “Some one sole unique advertisement,” as James Joyce once wrote, “to cause passers to stop in wonder, a poster novelty, with all extraneous accretions excluded, reduced to its simplest and most efficient terms not exceeding the span of casual vision and congruous with the velocity of modern life.” ▶



Everybody Installation, designed by Tibor Kalman with Scott Stowell, and Andy Jacobson, M&Co., Times Square, 1993



Folies-Bergère theater poster, designed by Jules Chéret, 1893



Broadside advertising wild cherry tonic, circa 1870s



Weniger Lärm Swiss poster, designed by Josef Müller-Brockman, 1960



Obama Hope poster, designed by Shepard Fairey, 2008



Russian Constructivist film poster designed by Georgi and Vladimir Stenberg, 1929

⑤ The Nike swoosh was designed by Portland State University student Carolyn Davidson in 1971. She was paid \$35.

⑥ There are 40,000 students in four-year and graduate design programs in the U.S., and one million in China, according to AIGA and Central Academy of Fine Arts, Beijing.

⑦ Designers have always been involved in civic experience. The U.S. Constitution was edited by the Committee on Style after adoption by the Constitutional Convention.

Bookshelf

A History of Graphic Design

by Philip Meggs

Now in its third edition, and still the leading text on graphic design history from the cave paintings at Lascaux to digital technology, Meggs's book capably and accurately assesses the broad legacy of graphic design.

Envisioning Information

by Edward Tufte

Former Yale statistician Tufte reconsiders the successes and failures of information graphics—those charts and graphs that illustrate quantifiable data—and illuminates the practices as well as the pitfalls inherent in the visualization of information.

Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant-Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century

by Steven Heller

The best book on the design and history of magazines. Period.

No More Rules: Graphic Design and Postmodernism

by Rick Poynor

Poynor provides readers with a comprehensive overview of the origins of graphic

design, postmodernism, and deconstructionism in the digital age.

79 Short Essays on Design

by Michael Bierut

Using wide-ranging topics including business, art, economics, history, war, politics, film, and books, Bierut explores the relationship between graphic design and the multiple facets of contemporary culture.

Thinking with Type

by Ellen Lupton

Lupton's encyclopedic knowledge of typographic form and history endows her writing with a supreme readability. This book, written as a primer for design students, should be required reading for anyone with a personal computer.

Understanding Comics

by Scott McCloud

McCloud's book remains the first choice for understanding the relationship between time, space, and delivering messages to an unseen audience. Highly recommended for those interested in the design of motion graphics and websites.

Click on It

AIGA

The largest professional design association in the U.S., which was founded as the American Institute for Graphic Arts in 1914 and today boasts over 22,000 members. aiga.org

Core77

An online industrial design magazine and resource known for its frequent blog posts from worldwide contributors, extensive listings, and 1 Hour Design Challenge. core77.com

Design Observer

A website dedicated to the discussion and critique of design and culture, cofounded by prominent graphic communication writers Michael Bierut, William Drentel, Jessica Helfand, and Rick Poynor. designobserver.com

Kottke

Online musings about "liberal arts 2.0," founded and edited by New York City-based Jason Kottke. kottke.org

Big Words

Anti-design: A response to the "slow strangulation of design by 'branding,' and to the partial rediscovery of a political instinct among graphic designers." (As defined by art director and writer Adrian Shaughnessy.)

Bleed: When an image or color extends beyond the trimmed edge of a page.

Blobject: An object that is curvaceous and flowing in design, such as the Porsche 911 or the Womb chair.

CMYK: An abbreviation for cyan, magenta, yellow, and black, which, in varying combinations, produce most colors. This is a color system used for printing—usually referred to as four-color process.

Designism: Design as activism, that is, design that instigates social change.

Design management: A methodology for helping organizations make design choices in a market- and customer-oriented manner.

Experience design: A holistic approach to the experience of a design environment.

Font: A specific size and style of type within a given typeface. All characters that make up 10-point Helvetica italic comprise a font (not to be confused with typeface).

Grid: An underlying structure of columns, rows, margins, and lines that dictates the way information is organized on a page.

Hickey: Extraneous matter such as dust, splashes of ink, or small pieces of lint that makes marks on a printed piece.

Kerning: Adjusting the space between individual characters in a font on a line.

Lorem ipsum: Used as placeholder text because it approximates a typical distribution of characters in English. A bastardization of "Neque porro quisquam est qui dolorem ipsum" ("Neither is there anyone who loves grief"—the perfect metaphor for graphic design), from Cicero's *De Finibus Bonorum et Malorum*.

Point: A unit of measurement for fonts and line spacing: 1 point equals 0.351 mm.

Sans serif: Any typeface without horizontal lines on the ends of each stroke, such as Helvetica or Avenir (this font).

Serif: The small horizontal lines on the ends of each stroke of a typeface, such as Times Roman or Courier.

Squeeze-and-tease: In broadcast design, "the process of squeezing a show's closing credits into one-third of the screen in order to maximize the remaining space for promotional purposes." (As defined by writer James Gleick.)

Typeface: A series of fonts and a full range of characters including numbers, letters, and punctuation.

Widow: A short line or word that has been separated from its paragraph or stands alone in the paragraph's last line. The latter instance is also called an orphan.

WYSIWYG: Acronym for "what you see is what you get": an estimated screen representation of how a final image will look. ■■■

© Adobe Photoshop 1.0 was released in 1990 for Macintosh exclusively.

© Until communication designers agitated to change it after the 2000 election, a law in Illinois prevented the use of lowercase letters in candidates' names on ballots.