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100 Ideas That Changed Graphic Design

Book by Steven Heller & Veronique Vienne

Review by Robert E. Roth, University of Wisconsin-Madison

I love cartography because it is both an art and a science. On one hand, cartography is a deeply quantitative profession, requiring working knowledge of mathematical concepts like coordinate systems, map scale, and map projections as well as statistical concepts like sampling, aggregation, normalization, and classification. Further, this conceptual knowledge is realized in the map through use of sophisticated GIS software or, increasingly, through the logic-driven endeavor of coding. On the other hand, cartography is fundamentally a qualitative craft, requiring creativity and ingenuity to develop a compelling visual story and an aesthetically pleasing visual style. Further, the cartographer must call upon skills typically treated in graphic design, or art broadly, such as color theory, layout, symbolization, and typography. The cartographer is Exhibit A against the left-brained/right-brained construct.

Despite this fundamental duality of cartography, the majority of research within cartography over the past several decades has been presented within scientific (e.g., from perceptual, cognitive, or semiotic perspectives) or ethical (e.g., critical cartography, participatory mapping, and counter mapping) frameworks. This is not to say scientific or ethical approaches are problematic—they are essential to a robust understanding of cartography—nor to say that research on art and aesthetics within cartography is wholly absent—it is not, as evident by recent special issues on the topic in the *Cartographic Journal* and *Cartographic Perspectives*, the organized session on aesthetics in mapping at the 2012 NACIS Annual Meeting, and the newly formed ICA Commission on Map Design. Rather, I contend that the topics of art and aesthetics hold a relatively small place in the landscape of academic cartography, which in turn influences the way cartography is instructed in higher education; this gap in scholarship and curricula is particularly poignant when contrasted against the qualitative-quantitative balance of the professional cartographer.

It is because of this gap that I eagerly accepted an invitation to review the book *100 Ideas That Changed Graphic Design*, a 2012 publication by Steven Heller and Véronique Vienne. The discipline of graphic design offers a logical pathway for injecting artistic and aesthetic perspectives into cartography. Arguably, cartographers are graphic designers, constrained to the palette of the world. The book provides a crash course on the key influences that produced graphic design as it is known today; as stated by the authors, the goal of the book is to review the “100 big bangs in the history of graphic art that help explain why examples of graphic design look and feel the way they do.” The authors draw on their collective experiences as art directors and graphic design critics to provide an interpretation of each of these 100 big ideas; as the authors note, they “listed quite a few big ideas that didn’t improve the way we communicate graphically, but had a tremendous influence on the graphic design profession and the visual culture all the same.” The book therefore is a subjective history of graphic design based on the opinions, perspectives, and values of the authors. Seemingly, the experiences of the authors are eclectic, as evident by the collection of examples from multiple

cultures and in multiple languages, a considerable positive of the book. In particular, I came away with a richer understanding of the contribution of German and Russian graphic designers to the discipline. However, an 'About the Authors' section—surprisingly absent from the book—would have gone a long way in improving the trustworthiness of the authors' subjective history.

Following the authors' introduction, the book is presented in a series of two-page vignettes, with each entry describing one of the identified 100 big ideas. For each entry, one page is dedicated to a full-bleed, color figure portraying historical artwork, while the second page includes a succinct description of the given idea running 3-5 paragraphs in length as well as additional, smaller figures. The historical artwork presented in the book is spectacular both in the selection of pieces and the quality of their reproduction; it is perhaps not surprising that the focus of a book on graphic design is the included visuals. The book is approximately letter-sized and printed on a thick, semi-gloss paper. The color quality of the figures is excellent, limited only by the level of deterioration to the original artwork. I find the total number of color figures (exceeding 250) to justify the Amazon list price of approximately \$20. The cover material and binding could be improved, however, as my copy began to show wear after several sessions of perusing. Because the included artwork is perhaps the largest benefit of the book, I recommend that classroom instructors hopeful to incorporate the artwork examples into their lectures acquire the eBook version to avoid scanning, which is not included with purchase of the hardcopy.

Not all of the 100 big ideas are created equally. As I was reading, I noticed that the majority of entries fell into one of the following four categories: (1) *method* (a novel pragmatic or theoretical approach to graphic design conducted at the scale of the profession), (2) *medium* (advances in the physical—or more recently digital—materials with which or on which graphic art is produced), (3) *style* (trends in the use of a particular design aesthetic over time, exhibited across methods and media), and (4) *symbolism* (persistent use of an object or arrangement in graphic design to add explicit or implicit meaning to the piece). Table 1 provides a complete listing of all 100 entries, including my own subjective coding using the above four-part categorization. In my reading, I suspect that the 'style' entries will be the most insightful to the professional cartographer and will hold the greatest potential for enhancing the lecture material of a course on cartographic design. In addition to the 'style' entries, I anticipate integrating a small number of the 'symbolism' (e.g., #43 Riddles and Rebuses, #45 Pictograms) and 'medium' (e.g., #51 Motion Graphics, #70 The Grid) entries into my advanced course on graphic design in cartography. It is important to note that there are a subset of 'method' entries that are highly relevant to scholars researching the politics and ethics of representation (e.g., #22 Propaganda, #25 Manifestos, #64 Parody, #81 Culture Jamming, #93 French Theory).

I have two primary criticisms of the book. The first is the organization of the 100 entries. In the introduction, the authors state that they "attempted to position these ideas in chronological order," although subsequently acknowledge that the "chronology is approximate". However, this chronology is not explicit in the execution of the vignettes, either in the headings or in the textual descriptions; I did not come away from reading the book with a sense of absolute or relative time regarding the evolution of graphic design as a practice or discipline. Further, the lack of a 'section-level' organization of the entries by location (space), era (time), or genre (theme) negatively

impacted the readability of the book. Such organization would be particularly useful for the purpose of lecture planning. As a result, reading the book from cover-to-cover was considerably more tedious than expected, rendering the book best purposed for casual skimming or as an encyclopedic reference.

Table 1: The 100 ideas that changed graphic design, categorized according to method, medium, style, or symbolism.

#1	The Book	#26	Graphic Design Magazines	#51	Motion Graphics	#76	Big Book Look
#2	Body Type	#27	Botanical Geometry	#52	Night Spectaculars	#77	Nostalgia
#3	Rub-On Designs	#28	Calligrams	#53	Shadow Play	#78	Illegibility
#4	Rays	#29	Loud Typography	#54	Good Design	#79	Scan Lines
#5	Pastiche	#30	Asymmetric Typography	#55	Forced Obsolescence	#80	Teen Magazines
#6	Pointing Fingers	#31	Red with Black	#56	Vibrating Color	#81	Culture Jamming
#7	Vanitas	#32	Supergraphics	#57	Strips and Panels	#82	High Contrast
#8	Clenched Fists	#33	Supreme Geometry	#58	Frame by Frame	#83	Psychedelia
#9	Monumental Images	#34	Funny Faces	#59	Perfect Rectangles	#84	Split Foundain
#10	Female Archetypes	#35	Expression of Speed	#60	Abstract Graphs	#85	Underground Comics
#11	Color Blocks	#36	Corporate Identity	#61	Dynamic Diagonals	#86	Record Album Covers
#12	Ornamentation	#37	Dust Jackets	#62	Stencil Type	#87	Street Slogans
#13	Decorative Logotypes	#38	Found Typography	#63	Comic Lettering	#88	Sexual Taboo Busting
#14	Naive Mascots	#39	Ransom Notes	#64	Parody	#89	Self-Promotional Publishing
#15	Entrepreneurship	#40	Design Handbooks	#65	Sustainable Packaging	#90	Tags
#16	Metaphoric Lettering	#41	Avant-Garde Zines	#66	Public Service Campaigns	#91	Universal Pricing Code
#17	Swashes on Caps	#42	Collages	#67	Branding Campaigns	#92	Vernacular
#18	Texts as Images	#43	Riddles and Rebuses	#68	Layering and Overprinting	#93	French Theory
#19	Visual Puns	#44	Photomontage	#69	Design Thinking	#94	Do It Yourself
#20	The Square Format	#45	Pictograms	#70	The Grid	#95	The Fine Print
#21	Primitive Figuration	#46	Floating Heads	#71	Brand Narratives	#96	Magazine Coverlines
#22	Propaganda	#47	Abstraction	#72	White Space	#97	Guerrilla Advertising
#23	The Object Poster	#48	Triangulation	#73	Less is More	#98	Pixelation
#24	Paper Cutouts	#49	Extreme Close-Ups	#74	Monoalphabets	#99	Ambigrams
#25	Manifestos	#50	The Provocative Gesture	#75	Film Title Sequences	#100	Designers' Websites

Category
Method
Medium
Style
Symbolism

My second criticism is the relevance of the book to an audience of cartographers. Only one entry deals with cartographic design in a substantial manner: the description of Henry Beck's octilinear London Tube map in the #60 Abstract Graphs entry. Cartography or mapmaking is mentioned briefly in only one other entry (#45 Pictograms) and examples of maps or globes are found in only three other entries (#4 Rays, #7 Vanitas, #51 Motion Graphics). The minimal relation to cartographic design may seem unusual, given the fundamental influence of cartographic design to scholars working in the design field of information visualization, such as Tufte. However, this minimal relation perhaps is not surprising, given the relatively small engagement with art and aesthetics in contemporary cartography. That is not to say that the book does not grapple with topics relevant to cartography; the aforementioned ubiquitous design topics of color theory, layout, symbolization, and typography are treated throughout the book. However, the reader is left to interpret how this general discussion translates to the specific context of cartographic design. The textual description also presumes an existing familiarity of the reader with graphic design or art generally, as many of the entries describe the example artwork by referencing genres such as Art Deco, Art Nouveau, Dadaism, Futurism, Surrealism, etc., without providing explanation of these genres beyond the glossary at the end of the book. As stated above, I think that organizing the entries into sections according to these genres would have improved the utility and readability of the book.

In summary, *100 Ideas That Changed Graphic Design* serves as a general introduction to graphic design, using historical stepping stones of what graphic design *was* as a way to contextualize what it currently *is*. The book covers a diverse set of topics impacting the discipline of graphic design—cycling among novel methods, advances in media, trends in aesthetic styles, and persistent symbolism—and includes a multitude of beautiful and inspiring artwork examples—drawing from a broad range of locations, eras, and genres. In my opinion, the book suffers from two primary limitations: the lack of a coherent, higher-level organizing structure and, for the cartographic audience, the lack of an explicit connection to design that is primarily cartographic. Given the depth and organization of the book, I recommend it for the coffee table of the cartographer with an interest in art and aesthetics, but not for use as a classroom reading or scholarly reference. Alternative books specific to cartography, such as the *Atlas of Design*, likely offer a more efficient pathway for a professional or student cartographer to improve the aesthetics of their mapping products.

That said, cartographers should be looking outward for resources like this as a way to append the existing perspectives of science and ethics with those of art and aesthetics. The case for an expanded treatment of aesthetics in cartography is great, and the moment is opportune. The authors' statement that "Graphic design needs more critics" extends to cartographic design as well: cartography needs scholarship and practical examples that hone our critical eye not just for function and suitability, but for beauty and style as well. In this regard, *100 Ideas That Changed Graphic Design* is a success, as the cartographers finishes the book with a broader sense of what is visually possible than he or she had at its start.