Searching for a Black Aesthetic in American Graphic Design Education

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What influence have African Americans had on contemporary graphic design? Is there such a thing as an African-American design aesthetic? These are questions that I have been asking designers and art historians for the last ten years. The answer I am usually given is, "I don't know." The relationship of ethnic minorities to the development of American graphic design is rarely discussed or documented by our profession because of the historic lack of racial diversity in the field. However, increasing numbers of African Americans entering the profession are calling for a fresh look at graphic design history in order to discover the aesthetic contributions of their people. In 1971, when I entered design school, there was only one other black student in attendance. Twenty-five years later, this situation has improved slightly. Today, I teach graphic design at the university level and have one or two black students in my department each year. Those students often exhibit insecurities that negatively affect their performance. In fact, they experience a problem common to many black design professionals: the feeling that they are not completely welcome in the profession. Lack of exposure to the prevailing aesthetic traditions also puts them at a disadvantage. This outsider posture leads many black designers to compulsively imitate and assimilate mainstream aesthetic traditions in order to feel accepted and be successful. More often than not, black designers and students are trapped in a strategy of imitation rather than innovation.

The graphic design profession is driven by visual innovation. The most visible and celebrated designers are those who are continuously innovating within, or in opposition to, the prevailing schools of design thought. Black designers are working at a disadvantage when they do not feel a kinship with existing design traditions and also have no evidence of an alternative African or African-American design tradition upon which to base their work. In 1995, Claude Steele completed groundbreaking research on the links between performance and self-esteem, which indicated that self-confidence may be the single most important influence in the lives of successful African Americans. For instance, the spectacular success of black musicians demonstrates the relationship between confidence, leadership, and success. Black musicians have been successful because they feel confident and secure about their work. They are secure because they are working within intimately known traditions built by others like themselves, and they are motivated by the thrill of adding to that successful body of work.

Is there a potential design tradition that can fuel black designers in the same way that black music traditions fuel black musicians? By "black tradition" I do not mean black subject matter or imagery, but the styling and expressions common to people of African descent. I believe this tradition does exist, but black contributions to America's rich graphic design history have been overlooked, so far, by design historians who have focused either on European influences or on the current phenomenon of cultural hybridity. Buried in libraries and design journals is evidence of black graphic styles and influences stretching from the New Negro movement of the 1920s through the hip-hop aesthetics of the latest generation of designers. I believe that this material, if uncovered, has the potential to nurture a new generation of designers. How do we construct and document a

black design tradition? There is already a small body of research on the lives of America's first black designers. Chronicling the work of these pioneers is an important first step, but most of these brave people were so concerned with surviving within a hostile profession that their work expresses little that is uniquely African American. I believe that the building blocks of a black design aesthetic are scattered across many disciplines and will be found in unlikely places. For instance, some of the best examples of the potential for a black design vocabulary are found in the work of white designers who have been inspired by black culture and take advantage of the market for black expressive styles.

We must also look outside the design disciplines to the performing arts and to fine arts movements, such as the Afri-Cobra, which have based visual explorations on African and jazz rhythms. We can study these disciplines for characteristic black expression (improvisation, distortion, polyrhythms, exaggeration, call and response) that can be translated into graphic form. Black design traditions must be pieced together from a variety of sources to make a complete canon of black expression.

In discussion with design educators (both black and white), many argue that to focus too much attention on black aesthetics will limit the full creative expression of black designers. They argue that black designers have spent the last twenty years working to erase race and class bias in the profession; to them a focus on blackness invites discrimination. I disagree. Black designers have access, training, and opportunity; what they lack is the drive that comes from innovation. And in order to thrive, innovation requires a tradition to either build on or oppose. It is up to us as historians and educators to research and teach in a way that addresses the unique cultural experience of all our students. Right now, black design students would benefit greatly from a study of their design traditions. Otherwise, they may be doomed to a future of bad imitations.

The notes below are excerpts from my ongoing search for black influences in American design.

1920s: THE NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT

In his first design history book, A History of Graphic Design, Philip Meggs stated that "a collision between cubist painting and futurist poetry spawned twentieth-century graphic design." Early twentieth-century cubist artists were obsessed with visualizing modern technological and social freedom. The style of the non-Western people of the world, particularly those who had perfected forms of abstraction and symbolism, were quickly drawn into the stylistic vortex created by this modernist revolution. In this way, black graphic expressions made their debut in the Western world indirectly, through the works of cubist artists such as Georges Braque, Pablo Picasso, and Fernand Léger. All these artists later acknowledged the significant impact of African art on their work; however, most scholarly writing about cubism has obscured its African roots. Postmodern art scholarship, starting with William Rubin's book "Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern, has begun to record and study the role of African art in the invention of cubism and the success of the modernist movement. starting with William Rubin's book "Primitivism" in Twentieth-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the

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By the 1920s, "jazz" became not only a musical term, but a stylistic one. European designers, who were influenced by the pioneering work of cubist painters, struggled to capture the spirit of modernism through the expression of jazz rhythms and motifs. The expression of jazz style in the design of popular communications in the 1920s represents the first appearance of what can clearly be considered a black-inspired graphic design style. The jazz-era climate of relative freedom in the North created an environment for blacks to publish and design their own publications. During this "renaissance," Alain Locke cited the emergence of the "New Negro" and declared that black culture was the appropriate source of inspiration and content for African-American artists. He argued that the art of black people was a powerful inspiration to successful white artists, so why shouldn't black artists also work with this powerful force? One of the first designers to give graphic expression to this call was a European modernist, Winold Reiss, who created African-inspired logotypes and titles for the book The New Negro. Young black artists, most notably Aaron Douglas, were encouraged by Reiss and Locke to expand the emerging modernist trends and lead the emerging New Negro art and design movement.

The line between artist and designer was still blurred in the 1920s. Many artists were illustrators, and illustrators were often typographers. The best examples of the African aesthetic in the designs of the 1920s are seen in black-owned journals. The designers of these publications were often black artists, influenced by European cubist painters, who were, in turn, influenced by African art. Artists such as Aaron Douglas, one of the best of these artists/designers of the time, learned to recognize and resonate with the African in cubism. Douglas and other black designers had a unique opportunity to express black style in a world that was starved for fresh, anti-Victorian imagery. Douglas's covers for the quarterly magazine Fire!! show the emergence of a unique graphic design expression that combines the syntax of cubism with the forms of African art.

1930s: REVIVAL OF BLACK FOLK TRADITIONS AND THE ICONOGRAPHY OF BLACK LABOR

The prolific jazz-age production of black art and design was cut short by the Depression of the 1930s. However, during the 1930s and early 1940s, a revival of black folk traditions occurred, prompted by the direct observations of anthropologists and folklorists such as Zora Neale Hurston, Southern white writers such as DuBose Heyward, and interviewers for the WPA oral history project on slavery. Artists supported by federal arts programs and socialist groups interpreted black folk and labor themes in programs, posters, fliers, and other printed materials. It is not clear how much of this material was designed by blacks; examples buried in archives await inspection, interpretation, and inclusion in the design history texts.

1940s TO 1950s: COMMERCIAL ART

Printing and publishing before and during World War II were significantly segregated. Unlike the fine arts professions, publishing institutions were restricted by racism and classism. Most printed publications and commercial art that circulated in black communities was generated by white-owned presses and designers. However, we do know that some black printers and photographers worked successfully in black communities; their products, including letterpress posters for popular music performances, were based on vernacular traditions and contributed directly to a continuing black graphic aesthetic.

1970s: THE AESTHETICS OF BLACK POWER

It is interesting to note that the bursts of black graphic production in the twentieth century occurred during eras in which young people were preoccupied with concepts of freedom. It is no surprise that the 1960s saw a renewed interest in African-American visual expression fueled by black cultural nationalism. Some of the work of this period combined socialist protest-art forms with black in-your-face bodaciousness to create a graphic design product that was uniquely African American. This decade of black graphics reflects the aesthetics of resistance and black power.

1980s TO 1990s: TRIBAL CHIC

Popular designers and illustrators such as Keith Haring and David Carson benefited from the lack of black participation in the design profession during the late 1980s surge of interest in rebellious urban style. They shaped new styles and lucrative careers based on bold public vernacular expression such as graffiti and rap, class rebellions and black rhythms, and tribal symbolism. At the first Organization of Black Designers conference, filmmaker Arthur Jaffa cited David Carson's Ray Gun magazine as offering the best example of a visual jazz aesthetic.

1990s: THE NEW NEW NEGRO MOVEMENT

There are a handful of black designers who are designing for black audiences and, in doing so, are continuing black visual traditions into the next century. For instance, designers for new black media, including the magazine YSB, give graphic form to contemporary black culture. Like the artists of the original New Negro movement of the twenties, these designers use black vernacular stylings and African expression to inform their aesthetic decisions. The designers of this new generation are not isolated. They are working within a long tradition that, though they may not be aware of it, stretches across the century.

These notes are presented as snapshots and pointers to the research waiting to be undertaken. It is my hope that American designers and scholars will contribute to this body of knowledge and support a generation of designers hungry to see their people and experience reflected in the mirror of our profession.

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