What is Graphic Design?

Excerpt from Design Elements by Timothy Samara

Graphic design is a complex combination of words and pictures, numbers and charts, photographs and illustrations ... A popular art and a practical art, an applied art and an ancient art. Simply put, it is the art of visualizing ideas ... But it is also an idiomatic language, a language of cues and puns, and symbols and allusions, of cultural references and perceptual. Inferences that challenge both the intellect and the eye.

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A graphic designer is a communicator: someone who takes ideas and gives them visual form so that others can understand them. The designer uses imagery, symbols, type, color, and materials (whether printed or on screen) to represent the ideas that must be conveyed and to organize them into a unified experience that is intended to evoke a particular response.

While more or less confined to the creation of typefaces and books from the Middle Ages until the Industrial Revolution of the late 1700s and early 1800s, design expanded into advertising, periodicals, signage, posters, pamphlets, and ephemera with the appearance of a new consumer marketplace. The term "graphic design" itself appeared more recently (attributed to WA Dwiggins, an American illustrator and book designer, in 1922, to describe his particular activities). The formal study of design didn't come about until the 1920s, and the term entered into wide usage only after World War II.

In contrast to other disciplines in the visual arts, graphic design's purpose is typically defined by a client—it's a service paid for by a company or other organization rather than from within the designer. Although artistic creation historically had been commissioned by patrons, it wasn't until the 1830s that the mystique of the bohemian painter as "expresser of self" arose and, consequently, a marked distinction between fine and commercial art. Designers encouraged this distinction for philosophical, as well as strategic, reasons, especially as they began to seek recognition for design as a profession that could add tremendous value to corporate endeavors.

In the fifty-odd years since, the graphic designer has been touted as everything from visual strategist to cultural arbiter (and, since the late 1970s, as an author as well), shaping not only the corporate bottom line through clever visual manipulation of a brand-hungry public, but also the larger visual language of the contemporary environment. All these functions are important to graphic design... but, lest we forget the simplicity of the designer's true nature, let us return to what a graphic designer does. A graphic designer assimilates verbal concepts and gives them form.

This "form-giving" is a discipline that integrates an enormous amount of knowledge and skill with intuition, creatively applied in different ways as the designer confronts the variables of each new project.

A designer must understand semiotic processes and relationships inherent in the perception and interpretation of meaning through visual and verbal material. He or she must have expertise in the flow of information-instructional strategies, data representation, legibility, usability, cognitive ordering, and hierarchic problem solving extending into typography, the mechanics of alphabet design, and reading. Designing requires analytical and technical mastery of image making- how shapes, colors, and textures work to depict ideas, achieve aesthetic cohesion and dynamism, and signify higher-order concepts while evoking a strong emotional response. Further, a designer must be more than casually familiar with psychology and history, both concerning cultural narratives, symbolism, and ritualized experiences, as well as to more commercial, consumer-based impulses and responses (what is often referred to as "marketing"). Last, but certainly not least, a designer must have great facility with (and often, in-depth, specialized knowledge of) multiple technologies needed to implement the designed solution: printing media and techniques, film and video, digital coding, industrial processes, architectural fabrication, and so on.

But graphic design is greater than just the various aspects that comprise it. Together, they establish a totality of tangible and often intangible experiences. A designer is responsible for the intellectual and emotional vitality of the experience he or she imposes upon the audience, and his or her task is to elevate it above the banality of literal transmission or the confusing self-indulgent egoism of mere eye candy. And yet, beauty is a function, after all, of any relevant visual message. Just as prose can be dull or straightforward or well edited and lyrical, so too can a utilitarian object be designed to be more than simply what it is. "If function is important to the intellect," writes respected Swiss designer Willi Kunz, in his book, Typography Macro-and Micro-Aesthetics", then form is important to the emotions ... Our day-to-day life is enriched or degraded by our environment."

The focus of this book is on these formal, or visual, aspects of graphic design and, implicitly, their relevance for the messages to be created using them. It's a kind of user manual for creating what is understood to be strong design and empowering readers to effectively and skillfully harness their creativity to meet the various challenges that designers encounter every day.