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IS THERE A CANON OF GRAPHIC DESIGN HISTORY?

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A *canon,* defined by the *American Heritage Dictionary* as it might relate to graphic design, is a basis for judgment; a standard; a criterion; an authoritative list (as of the works of an author or designer). The word was originally used to designate the books of the Bible officially recognized by the Church. The concept of *canon* is under debate right now in literary/educational circles, as its existence is alleged to produce a culturally narrow and elitist university curriculum, among other cultural problems.

Having followed the discussion about the problems arising from the study of literature produced mainly by Western white males, it occurred to me that the study of graphic design history, coming out of its infancy, may be producing its own canon, perhaps unintentionally and unconsciously. What would such a canon consist of? Are there designers and works that are used to represent whole periods, styles, and theories in graphic design history? Are some designers' works more revered than others? Why? Judgments are implied when certain designers and works become better known than others; is this process wholly legitimate and deserved? What is it based on? What problems will it cause for the future study of graphic design history?

PREMISE

I want to make it very clear at the outset that in suggesting a canon here, I do not wish to perpetuate one; only to show one may exist for the purpose of discussion. Given what I believe is its unintentional nature, it may be that there are "mistakes": this could be *a* canon, but not *the* canon of graphic design. It could very well be that some designers and their work do not belong here or that others have been overlooked.

If a canon of graphic design exists, or is developing, how can this be

proved? The specific period I am discussing here, modern graphic design, is broadly dated as beginning in 1850. Given the visual nature of the subject, it is most strongly established and communicated in a visual way, i.e., by reproduction, especially in books. Exhibitions and poster reproductions could also be studied, but books seem the most widely available and least ephemeral source at present to explore the presence of a canon.

METHOD

Five books were chosen for the study; these represent the best known general historical surveys of the past twenty years. The following is a description, alphabetical by author, of each volume and explains the criteria cited by the authors (with page reference noted) used for the inclusion of design works in each of the volumes. It also includes the limitations, if any, of each for the purposes of this study.

1. James Craig and Bruce Barton, *Thirty Centuries of Graphic Design* (Watson-Guptill Publications, New York, 1987), 224 pages; 10 pages for study period; 400 black-and-white illustrations. The subtitle, "An Illustrated Survey," accurately describes the prolific use of reproductions over text. The text is more in outline form than prose, and is often in the form of timelines, lists, and technical sidebars. The book starts with prehistory and includes more discussion and reproductions of the fine art concurrent with graphic design than do the other books in this study. "Designers and illustrators have been carefully selected to show diversity and to create a feel for a specific period." (Page 9.)

2. Alan Fern and Mildred Constantine, *Word and Image* (Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1968), 160 pages; 138 pages devoted to study period; 211 illustrations, 30 in full color. The most limited resource, in subject matter, for this study because it is restricted to posters and to those in the MoMA collection. However, it is critical because posters, collected and saved, have always been one of the most prominent and important media in graphic design and its history. In addition, this particular collection is large and well regarded. It must be accepted that there have been judgments at all levels: what was selected for the collection and then what was chosen for inclusion in the book (about 10 percent of the collection). Critical selection is what makes a canon. The preface to the books states that works for the collection have been "selected primarily for their aesthetic quality, but also include work of mainly historical or social significance." (Constantine, page 6.)

In his essay's introduction, Fern states that the book "is a brief history of the modern poster (and its close typographical relatives) as an art form . . . I have limited my investigations to those designers who have approached the poster as a means of expression as well as communication, and have explored graphic design and typography as serious creative media." (Page 11.)

3. Steven Heller and Seymour Chwast, *Graphic Style: From Victorian to Postmodern* (Harry N. Abrams, New York, 1988), 238 pages; 233 for study period;

over 700 illustrations, 225 in color. This is the most recent publication and covers exactly the period under discussion. The book is a survey like the others, but makes no attempt at scholarly analysis. Rather, it "is primarily concerned with the images, not the image maker . . . we consistently emphasize the formal, emblematic visual characteristics of a design period . . . we are tracing nothing less than the evolution of the popular tastes of the period." (Page 12.)

This is the only volume among the five to concentrate on visual form. It is notable for its many anonymous pieces and for the breadth of its visual offerings.

4. Philip B. Meggs, *A History of Graphic Design* (Van Nostrand Reinhold, New York, 1983), 511 pages; 335 pages on study period; over 1,000 illustrations, all black-and-white. The first survey published in the United States, this book appeared just as many design programs were incorporating graphic design history into their curricula. It has become the textbook for such courses and the standard reference for design professionals. The author expresses the necessity for the understanding of the past so "we will be better able to continue a cultural legacy of beautiful form and effective communication." (Page xi.) The survey begins with the invention of writing after the pictograph and petroglyphs of prehistoric times.

5. Josef Müller-Brockmann, *A History of Visual Communication* (Niggli/Teufen, Switzerland, 1971), 334 pages; 214 for study period; 570 illustrations, 6 in color. The only European publication among the five, this was the first historical survey of the subject to be published. It explores the wide scope of the field that its well-known author/designer considers more accurately termed *visual communication* than *graphic design.* He states that the survey is not complete, but he has "concentrated on those aspects of particular interest to me: factual advertising, experiments which influence our thinking, and artistic works which set the stylistic trend." (Page 6.) The book begins its discussion with prehistoric cave paintings and early writing forms.

CRITERIA FOR ANALYSIS

Having selected these books for study, what are the criteria for tabulating what is published in them? One, of course, is the visual imprint—how certain works and designers are made more memorable than others by differences controlled by size, color, and repetition. A caveat is in order: I have no pretensions to being a social scientist and have developed the tabulation system here as a way to prove relative rather than absolute presence of designers and works. I have been as accurate as possible with the tabulation, and the numerical interpretation (using the median and setting the categories) is governed by my desire to be inclusive. It is hoped that no one will waste time recounting the numbers. That is not the point.

The study began with the creation of a list (alphabetical by author), tabulating each reproduction of a design work and noting whether that reproduction is black-and-white or color, and its relative size to other work in the book. In

general, small is any size up to one-quarter page; medium is one third to two thirds of a page; large is two thirds to full page. Once this list of 286 designers/partners was compiled for each book, and the information from all books was combined, the list was edited to cull a list of all the designers (205) who were represented at least twice among the five books: either a single work reproduced in two different books, or two different works shown in one or two books. The list was then studied to discover what patterns of appearance might exist among the designers and the works that could prove a canon existed. It could then describe what it contained. Once this tabulation was complete, these findings were broken down even further to study other criteria for each designer:

1. Total number of individual works reproduced.
2. Total number of all works reproduced.
3. Number of repeats (#2 minus #1).
4. Total number of large reproductions.
5. Total number of medium reproductions.
6. Number of large and medium reproductions (#4 plus #5).
7. Total number of color reproductions.
8. Total number of large reproductions in color.
9. Total number of single works reproduced four times (four books).
10. Total number of single works reproduced three times.
11. Total number of single works reproduced twice in color.
12. Country of birth/significant practice.
13. Gender.
14. Born before 1900.
15. Born 1900–1919.
16. Born 1920–1929.
17. Born 1930–1939.
18. Born after 1940.
19. Deceased.

From the edited list of 205 designers, a smaller list (63) was made of designers/partners who had a significant appearance in at least one category of the first eleven. *Significant* was defined as having a number two-below the median for that category or higher. The results of this operation were studied and the absolute lack of women was duly noted. I decided to include on the list those women designers (6 out of 14) having the highest frequency of reproduced works. As well, a very few other well-known designers were allowed, whose numbers were just below the cutoff point and were interesting in relation to the others. I fully realize this might be a canon trap in itself; my reasoning is that one instinctively looks for certain designers and would want to see these numbers for comparison. I think these inclusions strengthen the example.

DISCOVERING THE CANON

The table on the opposite page gives the corresponding numbers for the sixty-three designers/partners and each criteria. These are not scores or ratings; this is not a contest. These numbers reveal the relative weight/importance that these specific five books have placed on certain designers and works.

The numbers in bold are those that are considered significant for the final cut of the list; these fall at or above the median for each category. This again seems the broadest way to include individuals. You will notice a range in the amount of bold numbers among the designers. There are eleven categories; it was decided that if a designer had bold numbers in five or more categories (that is, a significant showing in eleven criteria), that designer had been consistently "featured" by the majority of the books and could be considered part of the canon of graphic design. The table here produces a canon of eight designers (in alphabetical order): Herbert Bayer, A. M. Cassandre, El Lissitzky, Herbert Matter, László Moholy-Nagy, Josef Müller-Brockmann, Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec, and Piet Zwart.

INTERPRETING THE CANON

What do we notice about this group? First, and more about this later, the canon is all male. They were all born before 1920, several before 1900, and all but one (Müller-Brockmann) are deceased. They are all native Europeans: two are from Eastern Europe (Lissitzky and Moholy-Nagy; Cassandre was born in Russia to French parents, but left Russia to attend school); two are French (Cassandre and Toulouse-Lautrec); two are Swiss (Müller-Brockmann and Matter); one is Austrian (Bayer); and one is Dutch (Zwart).

Are there surprises here? Perhaps the only surprise is Toulouse-Lautrec, who, though considering him important to poster history, most would not expect to make the graphic design canon. One should question the inclusion of Müller-Brockmann because he is the author of one of the books; however, records seem to indicate he has been approximately as generous to himself as was Meggs.

More surprises in the inclusion area: chauvinistically, we might murmur, "What, no Americans?" And there are several poster "masters"—you can fill in your favorites—who might be expected on the list. Each period/style has its heroes, but, across the broad survey period, it is difficult for these individuals to stand out consistently. There are also several designers who have very respectable showings in the category of "number of reproductions," but who have not been set apart by size or color of such.

A possible explanation for some of these exclusions may be the nature of the work. For instance, Armin Hofmann's revered posters are originally in black and white, so featuring him by a color category is difficult. (This is one example of the possible disservice to individual designers by the criteria used for this list.) Another designer in a similar situation is William Morris. He worked as a graphic designer primarily in book design; books are mostly printed in black and white.

DESIGNER
MEDIAN
Baumberger
Bayer
Beardsley
Beggarstaff
Behrens
Bernhard
Bill
Binder
Bonnard
Bradley
Brodovitch
Carlu
Casey*
Cassandre
Cheret
Chermayeff &
Erdt
Glaser
Golden
Grasset
Greiman*
Heartfield
Hofmann
Hohlwein
Huber
Huszar
Kamekura
Kauffer
Lissitzky
Lubalin
Macintosh
Marinetti
Matter
Moholy-Nag
Morris
Moscoso
Moser
Mucha
Müller-Broc
Neuberg
Philips
Rand
Ray
Rodchenko
Roller
Rudin*
Schlemmer
Schuitema
Schmidt
Schultz-Neu
Schwitters
Sutnar
Thompson
Tissi*
Toulouse-L
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VanDoesbe
Vivarelli
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DESIGNER	Total # individual works reproduced	Total # works reproduced	Total # repeats	Total # large	Total # medium	Large & Medium	Total # in color	Total# large & in color	Total # × 4	Total# × 3	Total# × 2 and in color	Born before 1900	Born 1900–1919	Born 1920–1929	Born 1930–1939	Born 1940	Deceased	Country of birth/significant practice
MEDIAN	*18*	*23*	*5*	*3*	*8*	*11*	*3*	*1*	*1*	*2*	*1*							
Baumberger	4	4	0	*3*	1	4	1	*1*	0	0	0	•					•	Switzerland
Bayer	***30***	***40***	***10***	***4***	***17***	***21***	**0**	**0**	***2***	**1**	**0**		•				•	**Austria/Germany**
Beardsley	16	16	0	1	3	4	1	0	0	0	0	•					•	Great Britian
Beggarstaff	5	8	*3*	*3*	2	5	0	0	0	1	0	•					•	Great Britian
Behrens	11	17	*6*	1	6	7	0	0	*1*	0	0	•					•	Germany
Bernhard	9	12	3	2	2	4	*3*	*1*	0	1	*1*	•					•	Germany
Bill	15	19	4	*3*	*9*	*12*	0	0	0	1	0		•				?	Switzerland
Binder	5	9	4	0	2	2	0	0	*1*	0	0	•					•	Austria
Bonnard	3	6	3	1	4	5	1	0	0	1	0	•					•	France
Bradley	*18*	19	1	0	6	6	1	0	0	0	0	•					•	United States
Brodovitch	14	15	1	0	5	5	1	0	0	0	0	•					•	Russia/France/U.S.
Carlu	5	9	4	2	3	5	2	*1*	*1*	0	0		•				•	France
Casey*	4	4	0	0	2	2	0	0	0	0	0			•				United States
Cassandre	***19***	***27***	***8***	***6***	***12***	***18***	***7***	***2***	**0**	***3***	***1***		•				•	**Russia/France**
Cheret	11	15	4	1	7	8	2	0	0	*2*	0	•					•	France
Chermayeff & Geismar	15	15	0	0	5	5	0	0	0	0	0				•			Great Britain/U.S.
Erdt	2	4	2	1	1	2	1	0	0	1	0	•					•	Germany
Glaser	11	12	1	1	1	2	0	0	0	0	0			•				United States
Golden	5	7	2	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	0		•				•	United States
Grasset	8	10	2	0	3	3	0	0	0	1	0	•					•	France
Greiman*	8	9	1	1	2	3	0	0	0	0	0				•			United States
Heartfield	*19*	19	0	0	5	5	2	0	0	0	0	•					•	Germany
Hofmann	11	12	1	1	3	4	2	0	0	0	0			•				Switzerland
Hohlwein	12	17	*5*	2	*10*	*12*	*3*	0	0	1	0	•					•	Germany
Huber	7	1	2	2	4	0	0	0	0	0	0		•					Switzerland/Italy
Huszar	7	10	3	0	4	4	1	0	0	1	0	•					•	Netherlands
Kamekura	10	12	2	1	2	3	0	0	0	1	0		•					Japan
Kauffer	16	20	4	*4*	4	8	*5*	*2*	0	0	0	•					•	U.S./Great Britain
Lissitzky	***39***	***49***	***10***	***6***	***17***	***23***	***4***	***3***	***1***	***4***	***1***	•					•	**Russia/Germany**
Lubalin	*21*	21	0	0	5	5	0	0	0	0	0		•					United States
Macintosh	5	9	4	0	8	8	2	0	0	1	0	•					•	Great Britain
Marinetti	6	10	4	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	•					•	Italy
Matter	**16**	***25***	***9***	***4***	***9***	***13***	***3***	***1***	***1***	**1**	**0**		•				•	**Switzerland/U.S.**
Moholy-Nagy	***18***	***23***	***5***	**1**	***11***	***12***	**2**	***1***	**0**	**1**	**0**	•					•	**Hungary/Germany/US**
Morris	9	13	4	*3*	3	6	0	0	0	0	0	•					•	Great Britain
Moscoso	5	6	1	0	3	3	*4*	0	0	0	0			•			•	United States
Moser	16	7	0	7	7	2	0	*1*	1	0	0	•					•	Austria
Mucha	12	12	0	1	5	6	2	0	0	0	0	•					•	Czechoslovakia/France
Müller-Brockmann	**14**	***23***	***9***	***3***	***12***	***15***	***4***	***1***	**0**	***3***	***1***		•					**Switzerland**
Neuberg	7	7	0	2	2	4	1	*1*	0	0	0		•				?	Switzerland
Philips	5	5	0	1	0	1	*5*	*1*	0	0	0	•					•	United States
Rand	*24*	*28*	4	2	7	9	0	0	0	0	0		•					United States
Ray	5	3	2	0	4	4	0	0	0	1	0	•					•	U.S./France
Rodchenko	*18*	18	0	1	7	8	*5*	0	0	0	0	•					•	Russia
Roller	6	8	2	0	3	3	1	0	0	1	0	•					•	Austria
Rudin*	5	5	0	2	4	5	0	0	0	0	0			•				Switzerland
Schlemmer	3	5	2	0	2	2	0	0	0	1	0	•					•	Germany
Schuitema	7	7	0	2	3	5	0	0	0	0	0	•					•	Netherlands
Schmidt	8	13	*5*	0	7	7	0	0	*1*	0	0	•					•	Germany
Schultz-Neu	1	3	2	0	2	2	1	0	0	1	0	•					•	Germany
Schwitters	11	13	2	2	2	4	*3*	*1*	0	0	0	•					•	Germany
Sutnar	*23*	*25*	2	0	7	7	0	0	0	0	0	•					•	Czechoslovakia/U.S.
Thompson	10	10	0	0	5	5	1	0	0	0	0		•					United States
Tissi*	5	6	1	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0			•				Switzerland
Toulouse-Lautrec	**11**	***17***	***6***	**2**	***12***	***14***	***5***	***2***	**0**	**0**	***1***	•					•	**France**
Tschichold	*20*	20	4	2	*8*	10	1	*1*	0	1	0		•				•	Germany/Switzerland
van de Velde	6	9	3	0	5	5	1	0	*1*	0	0	•					•	Belgium
VanDoesberg	9	12	3	1	3	4	*4*	*1*	0	1	0	•					•	Netherlands
Vivarelli	7	10	3	1	6	7	0	0	*1*	0	0		•				?	Switzerland
Weingart	14	14	0	0	3	3	2	0	0	0	0				•			Switzerland
Wyman & Terr	7	8	1	*3*	5	8	0	0	0	0	0			•				United States
Yokoo	7	8	1	1	2	3	*4*	*1*	0	0	0			•				Japan
Zwart	*21*	*29*	*8*	1	*14*	*15*	**0**	**0**	**0**	1	**0**	•					•	**Netherlands**

boldface = Canon **Female* *(Median) numbers in italic*

Other designers, working mainly with typography, are using smaller formats that are seldom reproduced in a large format.

One case struck me as a serious misrepresentation of the designer's work, not in the number of reproductions, but the nature of them. Cheret's posters were and are important for their pioneering use of color, both technically in historical terms and aesthetically for the richness of the effects he achieved in lithography. Yet, these five books present only two of his works in color.

Interestingly, after the initial curiosity of discovering the canon's identity, the rest of the list shows how different designers are represented in the books, and brings to mind those designers who have not made the edited (and amended) list of sixty-three. Here, in my opinion, are the more intriguing cases of inclusion and exclusion.

The most obvious distinction, about which I do not intend to get polemical, is that of gender. There are no women in this canon. There are six women represented on the edited/amended list, four of them independent designers. (Margaret and Frances McDonald were part of the Mackintosh group and had less to do with graphics than other design formats.) The numbers for the independent four indicate they are poorly represented in all categories. There may be explanations, but not many excuses: the women are all younger than the men (two of the women born in the 1920s, one in the 1930s, one in the 1940s) and therefore have had shorter careers (less production is not always a correlation). But even comparing the two oldest, Casey and Rudin, with male designers of their generation, Glaser and Hofmann, produces a serious discrepancy. And the youngest woman, Greiman, is reproduced more frequently than the rest, but not featured as well as the second youngest, Tissi. Once we have passed into the post–World War II generation, there are many more female designers from which to choose, but this option has not been exercised. Possibly, there are problems with critical distance, yet the contributions of Muriel Cooper, Barbara Stauffacher Solomon, and Sheila Levrant de Bretteville (among others) have been recognized elsewhere.

As stated before, I believe the canon that exists was unintentionally created. That is, each book in the study is an individual set of decisions. But what were all those decisions based on? Aesthetics? Economics? And who made the decisions? Authors? Publishers? Book designers? Clive Dilnot pointed to this problem in 1984, before several of the books used for this study were published: "At present, there is no real discipline of design criticism, but a canonical list of 'important' design and designers is rapidly being established, despite that the critical arguments for their inclusion in such a list remain almost unstated. We are seeing this sharp differentiation into 'important' and 'unimportant' design works, which is tending to exclude the unimportant works from the definition of design and to restrict the material we actually discuss."[1]

Each book is a different and separate case, and no specific research has been done by me on this aspect. But one anecdotal piece of evidence leads me to suspect the general logic I would otherwise credit to the authors: the relative and

real sizes of the reproductions in each book are related to the design format of that book. One assumes the authors of each are selecting the pieces to be reproduced, and that they have some reasonable idea of what they consider more or less important for their particular presentation—and would seek to express this by size and color. However, Phil Meggs has told me that the publisher's designer did the layouts for his book and, as that particular inexperienced designer was not a historian, the design works were used to fill six pages as needed. For purposes of the canon, this is the reality that the reader finds, assuming there are few other resources for the beginning graphic design student.

There may be some other practical issues affecting the canon. The availability of works for reproduction is affected by several factors. Some works that a conscientious author would want to show are not available due to collection restrictions, or the cost of permission is prohibitive. There may be copyright restrictions. In many cases, where no source is given for the work, it is from a private collection that may also be that of the author. How does this affect selection? In only one area might it be salutary: the increased inclusion of anonymous work.

What about color? Two of the five books have no color reproductions at all; one (Müller-Brockmann) has very few. The decision is mainly about economics, the trade-off being the ability to print more black-and-white illustrations rather than fewer in black and white plus a few in full color. A cursory inspection of *Word and Image* shows that the appearance of a poster in color may have more to do with its location relative to page imposition than with aesthetics or critical importance. Looking through *Graphic Style* also reveals that specific pages in each signature are available for color; it is hard to assess how much this dictates to the authors and how much they will work within this production limitation. *The History of Visual Communication*, with so few reproductions in color (only six), may be the only book to express an accurate opinion with color.

Does this dismiss color as a criteria? Yes and no. Since it is my belief that this canon and the list it generates are unconsciously created, we need not be concerned with the lack of control on the author's part over color, but we do need to deal with the reality of the reader. Not knowing and/or not concerned about bookmaking, the reader may naturally assume color has significance and will pay more attention to and remember works shown in color. If we consider color a noncategory, given this discussion, what happens to the canon if color is removed as a criterion? Left with eight criteria (the median then becomes four), are there significant changes? No, the eight designers remain and no one is added. The color categories remain.

As I have mentioned, many designers' works have been reproduced in healthy numbers; that is, the books have provided a reasonably broad presentation of the possible designer pool (exceptions as noted). Some designers you might have expected in the canon have a strong presence in the books, based on frequency of appearance: Beardsley, Bill, Bradley, Brodovitch, Chermayeff and

Geismar, Heartfield, Hohlwein, Kauffer, Lubalin, Rand, Rodchenko, Sutnar, Tschichold, and Weingart. If this group is added to the Canon Eight, we get a much broader selection by geography/nationality and by generation (but still no women).

You will undoubtedly have thought of some designers you consider important and will have attempted to find them on the list here. Lustig and Danziger are two that come to mind. They both have considerable western U.S. connections. Is there bias for the East Coast in this list? De Harak and Vignelli are two others who do not appear on the final list. It is true that it takes time for judgments of historical and contemporary importance of individual designers to be made. This is the most obvious reason we see so few postwar generation designers represented: careers are not long enough yet; the time-distance is not sufficient, and there are so many more to choose among than in the case of earlier generation designers. The same cannot be said for the generation born in the twenties and thirties; they are quite sparse on the list here and have certainly developed their work/careers sufficiently for us to assess it.

The canon and the list are Western biased (First and Second worlds). Some of the books have sought to partially redress the imbalance with some work from the Far East and Third World nations. Japan, as the Eastern nation with the most highly developed (in a Western sense) graphic design, is represented by two designers: Kamakura, of the first generation to adapt Western/Swiss design, and Yokoo, much younger and influential here in the early seventies. They are better represented than any of the women.

Other questions and comparisons will occur to you. Feel free to use the table to satisfy your curiosity. There are even some silly discoveries: accounting for variations among languages, the most popular name for a designer is William (eight); the second most popular is John, and the third is a tie between Herbert and Henry. For national chauvinists, looking at geographical distribution and birthplace, we find the U.S. with thirteen, Switzerland with eleven, and Germany with ten. Consider population size.

PROBLEMS FOR THE FUTURE

Is the existence of a canon a problem? Is this canon a problem? A canon creates heroes, superstars, and iconographies. In singling out individual designers and works, we may lose sight of the range of communication, expression, concepts, techniques, and formats that make up the wealth of graphic design history. As we attempt to become more objective and critical, it will also be harder to assess the "stars."

The existence of a graphic design canon, so early in the development of graphic design history and criticism, may focus too much attention and research in certain areas, to the exclusion of others equally significant. A canon reduces a lot of material (designers, works, facts, biographies, influences, etc.) to a smaller and perhaps more manageable package. Fewer names and works may make it

easier to teach and learn and even to imitate, but reduces the rich, complex, and interrelated history that truly exists. If we narrow the field now, it will take much longer and be much more difficult to properly study and understand our cultural and professional heritage. For students new to the study of graphic design, a canon creates the impression that they need go no further; the best is known, the rest is not worth knowing. This is unfair, dangerous, and shortsighted.

The existence of a canon is the result of a natural reliance on art history (and on the example of architectural history) as a model for studying graphic design history. There are other ways of looking at, and exploring, graphic design history. These may well result in other ways of understanding and categorizing design works: by explicit and/or implicit content, by communication intent, by communication concept, by audience, by visual/verbal language, etc. The master/masterpiece approach also dismisses the existence (and possible importance) of anonymous works. How can the study of ephemera ignore the significance and influence of this category of works? Graphic design work will always, and finally, reveal its cultural origins. These origins need not be a particular person to be appreciated and understood; the origins can well be a specific time and place and people. With a perspective closer to *cultural* history than to *art* history (with its implied elitist flavor), we might come closer to a realistic and meaningful evaluation of our design cultural heritage.

Whether we agree that there should be a canon or not, I submit one exists and is being created, and that this process will continue at an increased pace as graphic design history develops further through publications, exhibitions, scholarship, and collections. We need to evaluate and control the process; if we need a canon, if we really need to label and separate, we need to assess better what canon exists and to amend it to make it intentional, conscious, responsible, and truly meaningful for all.

Note

1. Dilnot, Clive, "The State of Design History, Part II: Problem and Possibilities," *Design Issues* vol. 1, no. 2, Fall 1984.

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IS A DESIGN HISTORY CANON REALLY DANGEROUS?

Philip B. Meggs

Martha Scotford's article "Is There a Canon of Graphic Design History?" makes fascinating use of statistical data. By studying the number, size, and black-and-white versus color reproduction of works by 205 designers, included in more than one of five design history books, she suggests that a canon may be emerging and warns of its dangers.

Significant philosophical and cultural differences exist between the authors of these books. Josef Müller-Brockmann (*A History of Visual Communication*, 1971) is a Swiss modernist whose life and work centers upon constructivism and geometric purism, while Steven Heller (*Graphic Style: From Victorian to Postmodern,* 1988) is a New York art director with a strong interest in illustration, political statement, and expressionism. As one might expect, the designers and works selected by these authors are vastly different. Müller-Brockmann's book focuses upon Central Europeans who immigrated to America (Bayer, Burtin, Moholy-Nagy, and Matter), while Heller's book includes over eighty Americans.

William Morris, who played key roles in defining the late nineteenth-century design agenda, has faded with the passage of time, while the history of the late twentieth-century is still being formed. Contemporary designers whose work might lead to their being singled out as major design forces are still evolving. Anthropologist Edmund Carpenter observed that he didn't know who discovered water, but it sure wasn't the fish. This quip crystallizes our difficulties in recording history as it is being made; the most ubiquitous works might actually be highly significant to the next generation of designers and design historians, but overlooked today as contemporary design critics respond to the shock of the new.

I doubt that indexes such as the size, position, and color of reproductions in books mean anything, because factors other than the insignificance of the work influence these decisions. In Müller-Brockmann's book, a rigorous three-column grid on a horizontal page becomes a governing force. Heller told me that there were things in his book he wanted to accomplish editorially that conflicted with things designer Seymour Chwast wished to do with the layout: Heller's editorial desires prevailed on some spreads; Chwast's layout concepts prevailed on others.

A striking example of pictorial layout not conforming to historical importance is found in the first edition of my book *A History of Graphic Design.* The publisher's staff designer actually took 218 line images provided by the author and pasted the originals directly onto the mechanicals. He did not resize them to conform to the format grid or express the relative importance of the

works. This resulted in awkward layouts and imposed an arbitrary hierarchy with simple line work such as logos and type specimens becoming very large, while complex and important works were reproduced very small. Any attempt to assign significance to the size of works after such a capricious process will be grossly distorted.

The dangers of a canon should be acknowledged; however, there are risks in repudiating canonical figures whose philosophies or works had seminal or pivotal impact upon the evolution of graphic design. To repudiate seminal works or designers to avoid a canon—with this repudiation based on nationalistic, ethnic, political, or gender issues separate from the evolution of graphic design and its cultural role—is an equal danger. Until the fledgling design history movement evolves more cohesive methodologies and criteria, picture counts and reproduction size may provide, not a canon, but a popularity contest.

By making her tabulation and calling attention to the potential dangers of a canon, Scotford has provided a great service to the design profession and the evolution of design history research. Elitism and exclusion pose serious hazards within a democratic and pluralistic culture. If design history and design education embrace a canon, this could lead to a design profession that responded to its own internal criteria instead of evolving in creative interaction with the needs of society, shifts in the cultural milieu, and technological innovations. Graphic design often provides an important voice for cultural segments, as evidenced by the sixties psychedelic poster and recent Soviet graphics supporting glasnost and perestroika. The potential for women, minorities, and younger generations to have graphic statements to support their causes and help define their experiences could be seriously undermined.

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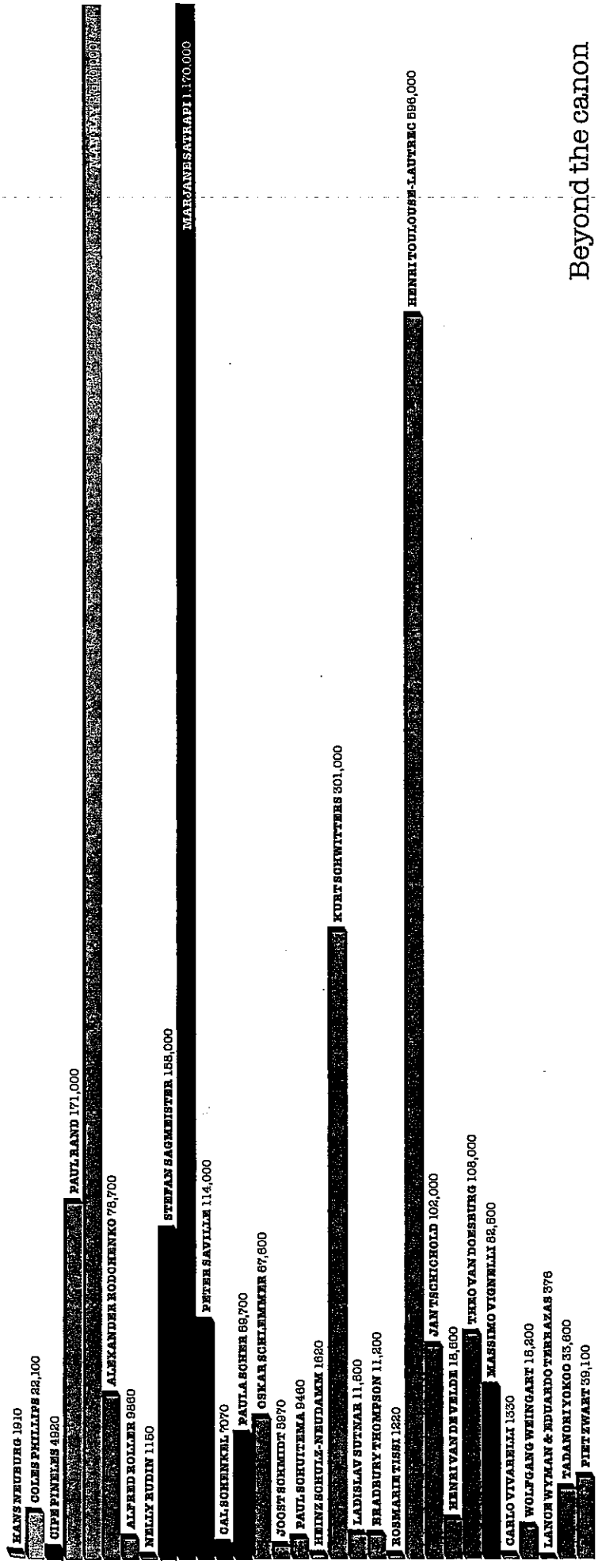
Googling the design canon

Nearly two decades ago, historian Martha Scotford analysed five key books to discover what the canon of graphic design history might be. For this diagram we Googled 93 designers' names – 63 from her original research plus 30 others. The names were placed in the search field in inverted commas: e.g. "Saul Bass", "Piet Zwart". Linear plotting means that popular figures such as Man Ray, William Morris and Marjane Satrapi (see Eye 50) run off the page. Don't try this at home.

■ List of 63 designers from Scotford's original list, derived from five design history books: Craig and Barton, Thirty Centuries of Graphic Design, 1987; Fern and Constantine, Word and Image, 1968; Heller and Chwast, Graphic Style: From Victorian to Postmodern, 1988; Meggs, A History of Graphic Design, 1983; Müller-Brockmann, A History of Visual Communication, 1971.

■ Another 30 graphic designers who have achieved prominence, fame or notoriety over the past couple of decades. Names were chosen on a strictly unscientific basis, but taking Eye references (Cooper, Fella, Frutiger, Hipgnosis, Kalman, Lois, Pineles, Schenkel, etc.) into account. On second thoughts, perhaps it's a parlour game you should try at home. Hours of fun for all the family.



Beyond the canon

Afterword

By Martha Scotford

In the late 1980s, US designer and historian Martha Scotford set out on a mission to discover what might constitute a canon of graphic design through the relative weight of the graphic work shown in five books, including Meggs' History (see second column, opposite, for the full list). She looked at the weight of each designer's entry by measuring and counting the images reproduced, and used this research for her article 'Is There a Canon of Graphic Design History?' (AIGA Design Journal, vol. 9, no. 2, 1991, reprinted in Design Culture, ed. Steven Heller and Marie Finamore, 1997). Now, in this short commentary, Martha revisits her theme in the light of figures that Eye derived by Googling a 'design canon' which adds 30 new names to the 63 in Martha's original list.

When I researched my 1991 article by counting images, I claimed that the authors of the five books involved had unintentionally created a canon. Moving the activity to the internet results in little agreement. From books we get facts, descriptions, interpretations, insights, specifically chosen images, and text read and edited by someone with an education.

On the internet, however, we get images, texts (well, words) written by who knows, produced for what purpose? Books are published to inform, to persuade and to delight. The Web is the perfect confluence of misinformation, disinformation and useless information: words and images that are seldom reviewed by anyone other than the writer / creator of the site. Much is opinion and self-expression, rather than trustworthy information.

To combat 'Web naivety', I give an assignment in my history of graphic design class (where Wikipedia and other quick-search sites are forbidden), by asking the student to choose a designer from a list (my 'canon'), and to research that person on the Web. The questions they should ask are: Who is writing? What are the writer's credentials or associations? Who or what is responsible for the website? Do the various websites agree about certain facts? Does this add credibility or suggest the same, possibly wrong, sources? What is the primary purpose of the website – academic, commercial, self-promotional?

If you look at the top twenty names revealed by Eye's search, only El Lissitzky and Toulouse-Lautrec appear from my original 'canon' (the other six names were Bayer, Cassandre, Lissitzky, Matter, Moholy-Nagy, Müller-Brockmann and Zwart.) So, hurrah for the Constructivists (tough, Modern, political); and everyone loves a dancer-singer poster.

Putting aside the flaws inherent in the project, some explanations come to mind: many designers are (or were) also artists; Art Nouveau has many fans (Mucha); posters are popular; Surrealism and photography have many followers (Man Ray); for some, the 1960s will never end (Peter Max); connections to movies are good (Marjane Satrapi); and the Web is the perfect index of what is new, hip and transitory.

From a book you can get a cohesive design history; from the Web, never. But there is no turning back. While books and journals will continue to be important repositories, appreciated for their credibility, capacity and user experience, the Web will increase in volume and in usage.

So Web users need to be more critical and demanding. Suppliers of Web content should be held to higher standards. Writers should make no distinction between print and Web distribution in their use of citations. Institutions, businesses, publications and others who seek respect must demonstrate credibility. Universities can make rules for their students' work; scholars can be scrupulous. Schoolchildren's Web lessons should include the topic 'credibility'.

So take note, students – or anyone searching the Web. There are wonderful archives and many responsible organisations, institutions and businesses, but there's also a huge amount of selling and promoting, and certainly too many enthusiasts with too little credibility. Be careful out there, people.@