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Looking back to the future – Why Graphic Designers should know about «their» history

When I took up my post as Head of the Master of Arts in Communication Design at BUA in 2011, one of my first tasks was to write my own personal profile for the institutional website. The last sentence reads as follows:

«She considers an understanding of the history of graphic design and its fields of application not only a matter of looking back, but also a basis for assessing new trends and their impact on the future of graphic design as a profession.»

My attitude is that graphic design history is never only a looking back, nor simply an examination and analysis of the status quo, but also a basic requirement for appraising our own work and that of others. As a Head of a study Programme, I have to ask myself everyday what will happen to our profession in the near future. How do we need teach our students so they are fit for their future profession? Combining a historical perspective with a close look at the changes that happened during the digital revolution and are now underway, provides an insight into the near future. During the last 25 years as a independent graphic designer and a teacher, I have closely followed the history of our profession and its related media in terms of the manifold – cultural, technological, economic, social, and aesthetic changes.

My own enthusiasm for history was shaped decisively by two teachers I had the privilege of studying with during my training at the present-day ZHdK (Zurich University of the Arts): the typography lecturer Hans Rudolf Bosshard and his Monday morning talks on the history of typography; and the art historian Carl-Peter Brägger, who brought together art history and contemporary design phenomena. He taught us that the narrative of Giotto’s frescoes stands in a close
relationship with today’s comics and brought alive the 14th century right up before our eyes. We were quite «high» after attending his classes...

Both courses have had lasting effect on me. They have shaped my awareness that my work as a designer is partly nurtured by a historical «humus» and at the same time marked by the «Zeitgeist». Bosshard and Brägger taught me not to tackle tasks within a fashionable vacuum, but always to take a broader approach, to always consider possible solutions within the overall context, as we say today. I have learned not to base my choice of a font for a print product or for a building inscription on purely formal criteria or taste, but instead to derive their use from the existing content or from the nature of the surrounding architecture, the urban context. This means conducting broad research before engaging in a conceptual or design process. Visual thinking during the reflection process and making sketches came most naturally to me. Historical knowledge always gave me – obviously not without creative crises – a certain amount of security in the design process. And that’s why I consider the teaching of graphic design history as centrally important and greatly beneficial for budding designers.

My education was thus more influenced by historical approaches than by theoretical ones. Quite simply because the latter did not yet exist at the time in Switzerland. Only André Vladimir Heiz lectured on semiotics in the 1980s; we were, however, unable to sustain his insights in our work despite the fascination with this headstrong figure. The «theory books» that we knew – about the basics of typography or composition problems – were written by «reflective practitioners» and contained – in addition to tangible information and instructions – rather casually written historical contexts. Most important were also the exhibitions curated by Martin Heller at that time in the Museum für Gestaltung, located in the same building.

So far, the history of Swiss graphic design and its teaching has been approached rather unsystematically. It has focused on the influential figures – most of them
were male – and their preferences. For this reason, we need to integrate the knowledge of the practitioners into the first-ever scientific discourse on the history of graphic design in Switzerland. We need to do so because graphic design history is not just about facts and figures, which can be collated in a database or a neat, interactive infographic. This history, I wish to emphasise, is also nurtured by the many stories about the specific features and idiosyncrasies of this complex professional field. The debate on «good» typography between Tschichold and Bill in the 1920ies, the pamphlets on functional versus soulful graphics in the 1960s from Müller-Brockmann, the dialogues between Wolfgang Weingart and his contemporary colleagues and so on impassioned our predecessors and led them to take into account such knowledge and the related arguments in their professional and teaching practice.

The subjects may have shifted because of recent technological changes. Today, professional designers are interested in the consequences of the digital revolution, which have changed and continue to change the structure of their professional field. Markets fail, new ones have to be created, and designers need to grow the need for their work themselves. For quite some time, we have been involved in a design discourse that I call «2nd Order». By «2nd Order», I mean that designers no longer solve «only» formal or analog problems, but they are confronted with interdisciplinarity, collaboration and cross-media. Another aspect today is the increasingly complex communication of subjects and issues. Possibly, graphic designers employ generative design or acquire programming skills, or indeed they gain qualifications as authors capable of conveying complex knowledge; or they might even be launching new projects and businesses.

Whereas some of my ex-fellow students completed the theory class at ZHdK (newly established in the 1990s), I developed my knowledge of the history and theory of graphic design through self-study and «on the job». I would call myself and many of my colleagues as «reflective practitioners». Besides intensive reading, I have always greatly valued close dialogue with teaching colleagues,
fellow practitioners, alumni, former faculty, scientists, artists and above all architects as colleagues that also deal with a draft-based profession.

In 2003, Pierre Thomé from Lucerne University of the Arts (HSLU) asked me to develop four modules on the history of illustration. I did this together with a group of experts on illustration, comic history and scientific visualisation. Our stated objectives for these courses were first to show – on the basis of the latest insights – the historical phenomena for the same topic, second to convey the related theories (if any existed), and third to look ahead to the future together with our students. Key questions included: how did the book evolve as a medium? Which new narrative forms were made possible by digital techniques? Will freehand drawing survive in the future?

We called the lecture series «Illustration History: From the Picture to the Text to a Story in Pictures». It was offered as a theory option and was soon extremely popular and successful among students because it was closely oriented toward their practical everyday experience. As a result, this practical orientation made students open for higher-level, more abstract, theoretical questions. History, in my opinion, is precisely the link, and the bridge, between practice and theory.

Based on my experience with the course on Illustration History, and out of frustration with what I considered the inadequate teaching of graphic design history at art and design schools, in 2006 I drafted a rough concept for a new, specific «history of graphic design». In 2008, I was asked by Roli Fischbacher to design a curriculum for the Bachelor in Visual Communication at Bern University of the Arts (BUA). The core objective was to tell the story not in a traditional, chronological manner and not primarily from the perspective of the related disciplines history of art, product design and architecture. This approach resulted in a «new» method for teaching the history of graphic design, which Robert Lzicar and I elaborated on specific courses for the BA Viskom from 2009. Three lectures dealt with the basics of design – typography, image and layout – and their history,
state of the art and possible future. We also contextualised the various «media»: Editorial design, corporate design, poster design, screen design, and so on – in terms of their historical, present and future relevance. The final point was a lecture on the changes of the profession itself and on the options available to designers for actively position themselves in the future markets.

As you will have gathered, the history of the teaching of graphic design history at this school has its own history. But let us turn to the future. It was very nice for me to see how Robert has built on the existing foundation to systematically develop and deepen the teaching of history of graphic design at this institution and to draw fruitfully on an academic approach to design historiography. He has meanwhile – as you all know – finished the first part of his own research project (Mapping Swiss Graphic Design History).

So here we are, inspecting the first results of his research and discussing a larger, more nationally and internationally anchored, first-ever academic project on the history of graphic design in Switzerland. Speakers and researchers from all over Switzerland came to Bern and talk today about their research-ideas or ongoing projects. I am very excited to see what will emerge from the initiated Swiss-wide collaboration, from the collective approach to exploring the culture of graphic design across Switzerland. This promises a «new» perspective on this crucial subject: no longer primarily or solely from the cultural centres, but also and above of all from the supposed «edges», especially the french and italian part of Switzerland.

If one thinks about the worldfamous «Swiss Style» of the 1950ies/60ies as a genuine national achievement, he is wrong. But a lot of swiss designers and design historians still love this myth, that was also nurtured by authors like Christoph Bignens, who published in 2000 the book «Swiss Style – Die grosse Zeit der Gebrauchsgrafik in der Schweiz 1914 – 1964» and others. He writes more about the raise and worldwide export of Swiss Graphic Design in the 50ies/60ies (together with army knifes, chocolate and cheese) than about the import of
foreign influences since the turn of the century. Migration processes always had an essential (!) influence on the development of Swiss Graphic Design. Maybe we have to rewrite the Swiss Graphic Design History by just changing slightly our point of view on this topic? Switzerland never was an isolated Island in Europe. Swiss designers went abroad for their education – for example to Bauhaus (Bill, Schawisky) or they worked at offices in Paris, Milano and New York. They brought back new ideas on designing and teaching. Foreign Designers like Tschichold, Lissitzky, Stankowski came to Switzerland and fructified the national design scene. Some designers came to Switzerland during the World Wars and settleed down.

What were the exact reasons, that lead for example to the phenomena «rational typographic style»: Was it born and brought to perfection, because we always and simply had to organize three or for different languages in editorial projects? Did swiss graphic designers just bring this design problem to its functional reduction, so that everyone is able to do «good typography», that means proper, well organized logotypes, letterheads and editorials?

A lot of questions are open: What’s about the pictorial qualities or phantasies in Swiss Graphic Design? How has Swiss Graphic Design changed since the end of Swiss Style in the End of the 1960ies? And where does it stand today in the context of cultural globalization? These are some of the questions that I am itching to learn more about.

Robert Lzicar took over the series of lectures on graphic design history while I was appointed Head of the MA in ComDes. Today, my primary teaching and research interests are in the field of Communication Design in Space (Archigraphy – lettering on buildings and in public spaces). To act in complexe projects in analogue or digital Space, to collaborate in interdisciplinary teams, to have an own opinion as a Graphic Designer towards socio-political topics that is the core of the education in our Master-Programme. To narrate complexe stories in simple but not banal visuals, is one of our core goals. And I like to imagine, that
we as graphic designers tell our own story or stories – in collaboration with design and art historians – through graphic design «storytelling» medias.

© Agnès Laube, Head of MA Communication Design
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