DES IGN

HIST ORIES
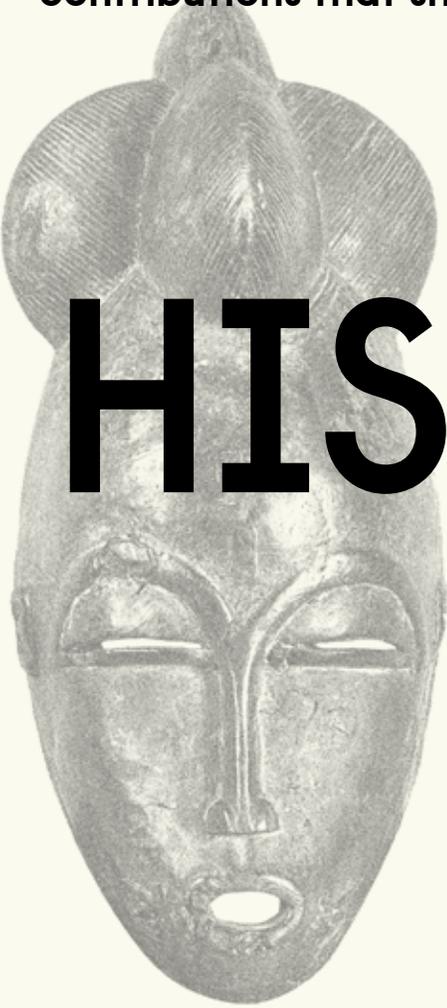
the experiences and
contributions that shape

the contemporary practice
of visual communication

MMXXI

HISTORY IS NOT BEHIND US

When we survey the history of visual communication, we are in essence tracing the evolution of graphic innovation. From the first language systems that emerged on the continents of pre-modern Africa and Asia to the first printed books produced in China during the Tang Dynasty, from the genesis of modernism at the turn of the 19th century to the first digital designs that were produced in the eighties, these inventions represent the methods of seeing, thinking, making, and connecting that were, within the context of their time and place, at the forefront of collective human experience. Each subsequent hallmark builds on the ones that came before it. Every new development uses the achievements of the past as its foundation. By studying the history of graphic design and visual communication, not only are we exposed to the ideas, values, and motivations that brought about these developments, we also gain a perspective on how these past innovations inform our present circumstances.

But innovation is a tricky concept. How do we define it? Who gets to claim it? How do we evaluate what is and isn't innovative? What is the criteria?

Innovation has long been a stand-in for what is coveted most within our capitalist system—the new. Since the beginnings of industrialization and its accompanying spheres of marketing and media, novelty has continually been employed as an effective tool for perpetuating consumerism. But is this real innovation? And what is this innovation in service of? In this continual quest for the new—new approaches, new styles, new technologies, knowing that there are so many pressing issues that face us, is the creativity and perspective of our brightest minds being put to causes worthy of their ingenuity?

As we observe the past and present, we can see that often the work that is the most visible and that is celebrated as the most innovative—and in turn the most legitimate or excellent—is created and used within oppressive systems

to generate profits and bolster the power and influence of dominant entities. The repeated visibility of these graphic contributions serves to continually recenter the presence of the clients who commissioned these works in the first place— preeminent industries and corporations—contributing to a capitalist mythology that passes for history.

Yet, there are other examples, other histories that tell a different story. There are graphic works generated outside of prevailing power structures— works created not to sell products or rally a consumer base, but to unite communities, foster culture, spread knowledge, change minds, and even save lives. Knowing that today we have so much to overcome, so many problems to solve and so many past injustices to account for—as we seek out preceding models as points of reference for our contemporary practices, aren't these the case studies which are the most relevant and most vital? These are the histories which exemplify the ability of graphic communication to empower and transform. Aren't these the types of innovations that are truly worth investigating?

A Note on History

Our present consciousness is the result of past experiences—ideas, achievements, inventions, struggles, victories, and defeats—many of which were enacted, recorded, and assimilated into our collective history long before our lifetimes. These shared mythologies play a vital role in the formation of our current perceptions. They act as archetypes which legitimize existing systems and perpetuate what is culturally agreed upon to be real and true. These milestones, once chronicled, determine who and what is acknowledged, valued, celebrated, preserved, condemned, and forgotten.

But recorded history is inherently incomplete. It is never full or whole. It is a construct conceived by individuals who, through processes of research, study, and scholarship, are, in the end, fabricating a story. The act of historicizing is, at best, abstract—it's an interpretation which incorporates montage, simplification, omission, linearity, and outright invention as strategies for facilitating comprehension and resolution. In actuality, there are countless histories, limitless information, and endless occurrences. Human experience is multifarious, infinite, and constant. To capture everything would be impossible. So, the historian picks and chooses, eliminates and excludes to create a digestible and coherent storyline.

These decisions of representation, of who and what is acknowledged or forgotten, are often defined by limitations—of proximity, of understanding, of access, of resources, and of accountability. They are driven by the shortcomings of the storyteller, by their deficits and biases both cultural and personal, conscious and subconscious. No individual is absolute in their capacity or free from the constraints of their cultural perception. Think for a moment of the massive untruths that have, within various points in history, been regarded as fact. Imagine how these falsehoods have impacted the perceptions of the historians and educators who have acted as the record keepers of their time and, in turn, compromised the choices that they have made. What's more, these judgments of who and what is worthy of visibility have been executed within a system that is anything but neutral. Western capitalism is rooted in competition, dominance, manipulation, and violence. Acts of omission and distortion are often implemented in alignment with the values of this system and are seldom inconsequential. If we acknowledge

that, within this system, representation is a key factor of legitimacy, and, in turn, legitimacy is a key factor in determining economic, social, and political significance, it is clear how exclusion can directly translate into inequity, discrimination, and cultural transgression. Through this lens, the seemingly innocuous act of editing or curating has the potential to reframe the canonization of historical subjects and events into transactions of propaganda and oppression.

When confronting history, how do we account for such unideal and problematic circumstances? How do we separate fact from fiction? How do we differentiate between truth and marketing? History must be approached with an acknowledgment of its boundaries and received with an anticipation of its limitations. No matter how valid an historic account is, we must never forget that there is always another story.

The role of recorded history is powerful, specifically in the field of art and design. The singular contributions that are memorialized through representation— included in a book or taught within a curriculum—establish and promote specific standards of legitimacy, talent, beauty, value, and relevance. Celebrated individuals and their accompanying works become models for present and future endeavor. But these past examples are contextual at best—their elevated positions are most often the result of advantageous positions within a particular system at a particular moment in time. Designers who are most commonly celebrated are by no means representative of the full spectrum of experience or perspectives. The ones who are left out are far from insignificant. The majority of the practitioners who have contributed to the legacy of visual communication are and will remain anonymous. We will never see their contributions or learn about their experiences. Yet, it is this collective experience that is the true force that moves our field forward.

By focusing on the role of designers as luminaries and by putting singular works on pedestals, not only do we get an incomplete picture of design, but we also lose sight of what's truly important—our current experience. Past works are most useful, not as objects of reverence, but as tools to critically examine the values, beliefs, and processes that informed their production. Instead of focusing on individuals, let's focus on the collective. Instead of canonizing singular works, let's investigate the systems within which these works were made. Instead of praising, let's question instead.

The approach of Design Histories is centered on critical examination. We will investigate the past to more fully comprehend its relationship to the present and future. Time is not linear; existence is not singular. The information we touch on in no way promotes or legitimizes any one single experience, approach, movement, or body of work, rather, the intent is to create a space to question our current experiences for the sake of understanding how we connect to the many versions of the past, present, and future that exist.

Sincerely,
Gabriel Stromberg

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

- Focus on the present.

- Promote a perspective that history can be expanded on, corrected, reframed, reinterpreted, rewritten, re-examined, and ultimately changed.

- Present visual communication as a practice that has been shaped by countless contributions from cultures across the globe for thousands of years.

- Define the canon of design as a collective lineage that is constantly evolving and expanding. Nothing is fixed, nothing is static, and nothing is sacred.

- Investigate the economic, social, and political practices of various cultures and time periods to observe how they shaped dominant visual styles and approaches.

- Question concepts like talent, success, legitimacy, and innovation and understand their relationship to capitalistic strategies like scarcity, marketability, and propriety.

- Champion the idea that new or "outside" perspectives move the field forward.

- Don't be afraid or ashamed of limitations or boundaries of understanding. Let's address and discuss them. We are all in the process of becoming.

INSTRUCTOR: GABRIEL STROMBERG

gabriel.stromberg@seattlecolleges.edu

The history of visual communication is most important as a factor for devloping a critical perspective within the contemporary practice of graphic design. We investigate the past to undestand the present and work toward a more conscious and accountable future.

APPROACH:

There are four main lenses through which the course will concentrate:

Values: What is the specific content that design is in service of delivering? What is the information that is worthy of graphic expression? How do class, religion, and politics influence the graphic work of a given period and how do these factors effect the accessibility of that work?

Context: What movements and cultures, past and present, are informing the perspectives of the time? What are the key ideas and philosophies that are serving as the foundation on which the prevailing viewpoints are being built upon?

Technology: What are the prevalent technologies of the time and how do the principles and processes inherent in these methods inform the visual embodiment of graphic artifacts from the period.

Artifacts: What are the artifacts of the period and what role do they play within the culture? Are they accessible to all or exclusive to a particular class or group?

COURSE RUBRIC:

- 2 Outside Projects: 25%

- Midterm Group Project: 25%

- 3 Tests (Multiple Choice): 25%

- Final Project: 25%

WEEK 1: MON 9/27——TUES 9/28

Introduction

I designed the syllabus so that this first class is an easy introduction into the curriculum. We will go over the syllabus and review an outline of the midterm project. The midterm project will be done in groups—groups will be assigned during this introduction.

WEEK 2: MON 10/4 ——TUES 10/5

The Power of Language

This survey of the evolution of written language systems examines contributions from multiple cultures and civilizations. Beginning with prehistoric examples, we will discuss the function that language serves and investigate the ways in which language systems impact the history and legacy of a culture. There will be a focus on the connection between the visual embodiment of writing systems and the values, beliefs, and technologies within which they develop. There will also be a presentation explaining Outside Project 1.

Read: The Power of Language (gabrielstromberg.com)
Watch: Ted Talk: Genevieve von Petzinger
Watch: Design Lecture, Saki Mafundikwa

WEEK 3: MON 10/11——TUES 10/12

The Printed Word

We will first review the factors that laid the groundwork for the genesis of printing and movable type during the late middle ages including the development of technologies in China which were imported into Europe. We will then explore the evolution of the printed letterform and discuss how printing became a tool for progress and innovation.

Read: The Printed Word (gabrielstromberg.com)
Watch: *F* The Stereotype: Revitalizing Indigenous Perspective in Design, Sadie Red Wing*

WEEK 4: MON 10/18 ——TUES 10/19

The Catalyst of Industry

There will be a survey of the technological innovations that came out of the industrial revolution. We will discuss how these developments impacted culture and design in the Victorian era and generated counter movements throughout Europe, Asia, and the US.

Test 1
Read: The Catalyst of Industry (gabrielstromberg.com)
Read: Excerpt from *Anatomy of a Typeface*, Alexander S. Lawson

WEEK 5: MON 10/25——TUES 10/26

The Lens of Colonialism

We will examine the emergence of colonialism in the 1400's and discuss how conquest and political dominance shaped the European perspective. There will be a specific focus on works from Japan and numerous African countries that became the foundational catalyst for the modernist movement in Europe during the late 1800's and early 1900's.

Deadline: Outside Project 1
Read: The Lens of Colonialism (gabrielstromberg.com)
Read: *The Original Influencer*, History Today

WEEK 6: MON 11/1——TUES 11/2

Open Work Day

This class will be dedicated to finishing up your midterm projects. I will check in with every group to evaluate their progress and address any questions or concerns.

WEEK 7: MON 11/8——TUES 11/9

Capitalism and Globalization

This lecture will focus on how modernism emerged in Europe during the twenties and thirties and evolved from a series of avant garde movements within art and design to a dynamic visual language used for marketing the new goods and services of a global post-war economy.

Read: Capitalism and Globalization (gabrielstromberg.com)
Watch: *No*, a film by Pablo Larraín

WEEK 8: MON 11/15——TUES 11/16

Midterm Presentations

This class will be dedicated to midterm presentations and the completion of outside project number 2.

WEEK 9: MON 11/22——TUES 11/23

Marketing, Media, and Modernism

In the wake of the destruction of World War 2, many cultures used the visual language of modernism as a tool for signifying legitimacy and prosperity. We will investigate the role of modernism in the construction of the global post-war identity.

Test 2
Read: Marketing, Media, and Modernism (gabrielstromberg.com)
Listen: 99% *Invisible* Episode 264: Mexico 68
Deadline: Outside Project 2

WEEK 10: MON 11/29——TUES 11/30

Propaganda and Protest

We will review how design can be used as a force for transformation and connection in both positive and negative ways. There will be a specific focus on different ways that design has been an element in collective action.

Read: Propaganda and Protest (gabrielstromberg.com)
Watch: *How to Survive a Plague,* documentary by David France

WEEK 11: MON 12/6——TUES 12/7

Postmodernism and Digital Culture

A look at the history and evolution of technologies used in the practice and production of works of graphic design beginning with the postmodern movement. We will review how specific technologies relate to specific visual approaches and conventions. This class will end with a discussion of future developing technologies and how these new ways of working will effect our practice.

Read: Postmodernism and Digital Culture (gabrielstromberg.com)
Read: First Things First Manifesto, Ken Garland
Watch: Jerome Harris Lecture

WEEK 12: MON 12/13——TUES 12/14

Finals

Test 3
Deadline: Outside Project 3

MIDTERM PROJECT:

The objective of this assignment is to research a specific period, genre, or movement in the history of graphic design and investigate that era through the lens of critical thinking. The final deliverable will be a recorded design presentation that will first survey the origin of that era then dissect and examine the aesthetic components that define how it is visually perceived, i.e., what it looks like. Graphic elements like color, typography, and form language—pattern, shapes, iconography, and symbology—should be connected to factors like technology, production methods, cultural trends, social customs, political milestones, and historical circumstances.

Visual styles are an important element within the contemporary practice of visual communication. Practitioners working in the field must have a complex understanding of the aesthetic codes, signifiers, and characteristics that correspond with various sectors of culture, subculture, and media both past and present. A designer can employ different styles across different projects— perhaps according to the type of client or subject being designed for— or, claim and adhere to a singular style that defines their approach overall.

The execution of a particular style usually translates into a series of choices— typography, color, form language, texture, composition, and the specific way that these components are utilized. There are also conceptual approaches like camp, irony, humor, deconstruction, cultural reference, and social critique that can be integrated. Within our current practice, there are endless possibilities for using visual and conceptual components to create meaning.

The most effective designers are fully in control of the meaning that their work generates and accountable for the ideas and beliefs that it transmits. Having an understanding of history is a key factor in developing these abilities. The Design Histories midterm project is meant to foster a deeper comprehension of historic genres within the canon of graphic design. In researching the history and development of these movements, you gain a vital understanding of the ideas, values, beliefs, and perspectives that shape visual expression.

What contributions inspired the organic forms of Art Nouveau? What historic factors generated a cultural affinity for the geometry of Art Deco? What technological innovations aligned with the features of postmodernism? In answering these questions, we begin to see the connection between the practice of design, it's visual characteristics, and the social, political, and economic systems we are working within. Once these relationships are understood, we become mindful of how works of design function within these systems. We develop the capacity to consciously choose whether we use our design practice to perpetuate these systems or change them.

DEADLINE:

Week 8, Mon 11/15—Tues 11/16, 9 am (no later)

DELIVERABLES

Deliverable 1: A 15 minute, pre-recorded presentation on your subject.
Deliverable 2: An accompanying written transcript/outline with imagery and citations. Final documented should be in PDF format.

GRADING CRITERIA

You will be graded on the following:

25% Meeting outlined requirements—minimum word counts, specified subject matter—and aligning to an established structure.

25% Teamwork—using time efficiently, being organized, dividing up workload and accountability in an intentional and successful manner.

25% Presentation—presenting in a way that is clear, cohesive, and thoughtful. Creating an experience that is coordinated, well managed, and interesting.

25% Content—specific interpretation of the assignment, accuracy of research, personal connection to the work, presence of narrative

SCHEDULE:

Week 1—4: Research

Use this time for research and investigation. Work to accumulate as much information as possible on your period. Seek out multiple sources. You must use at least three sources to derive your information —you can use both online and analog references.

Week 4—6: Creative Brief Development

This time should be dedicated to the construction of the printed creative brief for review during week 6.

Week 6: Creative Brief Review

By the beginning of this class you should have your creative brief completed and be able to review your final printed document in InDesign. I will review each team's progress and give feedback to be integrated into the final presentation. Any questions or issues should be discussed during this time so they can be resolved before presentation day.

Week 8: Presentation

Each group will give a 15 to 20 minute presentation.

MIDTERM PROJECT
SUGGESTED OUTLINE:

1. INTRODUCTION/OVERVIEW

Minimum word count: 200

Give a brief overview of the assigned period or movement. Explain the key aesthetic and conceptual characteristics of the contributions from this period. Explain how the work fits into the overall history of design. Discuss what preceding developments were being built upon or reacted against. Possible points of discussion are world events, political climate, technological developments, accomplishments in the arts and sciences, and/or prominent instances of social change and revolution. Highlight individuals who significantly contributed to the zeitgeist of the time. If the period is concentrated within a specific region or location, illustrate how the impact of the work from this particular area impacted other parts of the world. If the movement was global, illustrate how the core approach was interpreted within different countries and/or cultures.

2. KEY FACTORS

Minimum 3 slides, minimum word count: 450

Motivation: Explain what impelled the key figures who defined the visual embodiment of the era or movement to create their work. Were they motivated by money, tradition, activism, revolution, or artistic expression? Were they embracing and attempting to facilitate change and evolution or were they reacting against specific developments or points of view? What were the cultural values that these creatives were responding to and how did design in particular fit into this value system?

Perspective: What previous or concurrent developments in creative practice or thought were significant influences on creative work at the time? Investigate the prevailing cultural dogmas of the time and detail if the designers worked within these tenets or stood in opposition against them.

Circumstance: What world events or societal factors shaped the set of resources and opportunities that were available to the designers at the time. What was the prevailing structure of power and was it oppressive or supportive to creative and intellectual pursuits within the space of design?

3. PERSONAS

3 examples, 4 bullet points for each example

Create 3 profiles based on people of the time. Derive these from actual examples if you can. Attempt to represent a wide range of cultural and economic demographics to create an accurate cross section of life from the era.

4. VISUAL VOCABULARY

Materials, technology, and production: Create a visual survey communicating the materials, technology, and production methods that defined the visual embodiment of design from your chosen period. You could include creative work other than design in this summary. Fine art, product design, and architecture are all relevant examples that contribute to the aesthetic attributes of an historical moment.

Form language: What were the shapes, patterns, forms, and visual vocabulary that defined the look of the time? Explain the connection of form language to materials, production, creative philosophies and practices, and cultural trends of the period.
Provide at least 4 visual references.

Typography: What were the type styles that are associated with the specified period or movement. How did they develop and how were they used within production methods of the time?
Provide at least 4 visual references.

Color: What colors were popular or widely used. Explain the historical significance of these colors. Discuss what connection they have to existing production methods of the time.
Provide at least 4 visual references.

5. PRESENTATION

Time: 15 minutes

Give a creative presentation that outlines your research results. Each presentation should be around 15 minutes.

DES IGN HIST ORIES

Mon & Tues

9am—2pm

Fall 2021

DES110

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