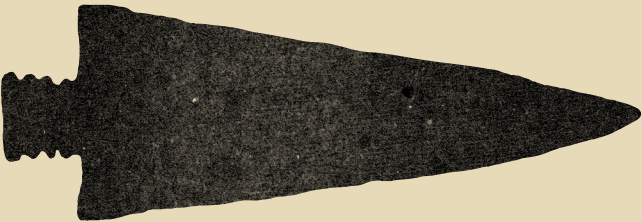


Design Histories

An Historic Analysis of the Contemporary
Practice of Visual Communication



2025

The Past is Not Behind Us

The practice of visual communication is inherently social and political.

Works of graphic design are most often commissioned by dominant entities within our social sphere. Businesses, corporations and cultural institutions, through these works, transmit ideas in service of generating economic gain and cultural influence. Advertisements, campaigns, and other formats of graphic discourse have the potential to reach considerable audiences and produce significant impact. En masse, these works contribute to the systems and structures that shape our collective experience.

Whether an individual designer is conscious of the effects of their output is irrelevant. When visual concepts are disseminated through public platforms of media and marketing, they inevitably create thought, shape perspective, and, in turn, alter reality.

Because of this transformative capacity latent in the act of design, it is crucial that designers be informed, accountable and intentional in their approach. This entails, among other things, developing a general knowledge of history—a basic comprehension of the movements and events that have formed the framework of contemporary society.

These past milestones—achievements, struggles, innovations, conflicts, victories, and defeats—once assimilated into our common mythology, serve to legitimize what is culturally agreed upon to be real and true. They determine who and what is acknowledged, valued, celebrated, preserved, condemned, and forgotten.

In other words, the past is not behind us.

The approach of Design Histories is centered on critically examining our collective canon of thought within the sphere of design and beyond. There is a particular focus on socio-economic systems, technologies, and cultural conventions—all of which contribute to the visual character of a particular movement, style, or period. Using graphic design as an entry point, we interrogate the correlation between aesthetics, cultural perceptions of value, and underlying structures of political and economic power.

During the course of the semester, 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 objective of the class is not to promote or legitimize any one single point of view, methodology, movement, or body of work; rather, the intent is to create a space to question our current experiences for the sake of better understanding how we connect to the many versions of the past, present, and future that exist.

Instructor: Gabriel Stromberg

Room: Tues Rm 5142, Thurs Rm 5140

Email: gabriel.stromberg@seattlecolleges.edu

Website: gabrielstromberg.com

COURSE RUBRIC:

- Participation (Project 1, Group Exercises and Discussions): 15%
- Group Project (Project 2): 30%
- 3 Quizzes (Multiple Choice): 25%
- Final Project (Project 3): 30%

COURSE OBJECTIVES:

Research: Using history as an entry point, this class provides the opportunity to utilize research as a tool for comprehension and conceptual development.

The process of gathering information, then translating that data into cohesive, accessible content in the form of presentations and written briefs, can be found in brand design, UX and UI strategy, as well as within leadership roles in creative direction and client and project management.

Discussion: Discussion is an important aspect of any vocation within the field of design. Whether you are working as an individual contractor, or part of an in-house studio within a large company, being able to communicate your viewpoints in a way that is thoughtful, informed, and collaborative is important for successful outcomes. Discussion also involves listening which just might be *the* most vital skill for a designer.

Critical Thinking: As we survey various time periods, movements, and historic figures, it will be up to you to develop your own conclusions and perspectives. Information, data, and statistics will be presented in a neutral format to give you the opportunity to make up your own mind and think for yourself.

Design: History is a primary element within the practice of design. You will learn to identify visual styles and approaches from a range of time periods and learn about the historic circumstances that generated their development.

The class also surveys the innovations and perspectives of cultures from across the globe that have contributed to the contemporary field of graphic design and visual communication.

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COURSE POLICIES:

Attendance: All classes will be in-person. All students are expected to be present at the start of class at 9am. Remote accommodations can be made for students who are experiencing extenuating circumstances.

If you are going to be late, please message me on Slack and let me know as far ahead of time as possible. **If you miss more than half an hour of class without any prior arrangement, it will count as an absence.**

Mask Policies (subject to change in response to updated COVID data):

Masks are optional.

Disabilities:

Americans with Disability Act Accommodations Students with documented disabilities requesting class accommodations, requiring special arrangements in case of building evacuation, or have emergency medical information the instructor should know about are asked to contact the Disability Support Services office in room BE 1112. Once the disability is verified the student will be given a letter of accommodation to be given to the instructor as soon as possible. For more information, please visit the Disability Support Services website at: <http://www.seattlecentral.edu/disability-support/eligibility.php>.

WEEK 1: Tues Sept 30 | Thurs Oct 2**Introduction:**

This first class is an easy introduction into the curriculum. We will go over the syllabus and review the midterm project.

WEEK 2: Tues Oct 7 | Thurs Oct 9**Marketing, Media, and Modernism:**

In the wake of the destruction of World War 2, many cultures use 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.

READ BEFORE CLASS:

Marketing, Media, and Modernism

(gabrielstromberg.com)

**PROJECT 1
REVIEW****WEEK 3: Tues Oct 14 | Thurs Oct 16****Postmodernism and Digital Culture Part 1:**

An exploration of the new technologies that emerged in the sixties and seventies that expanded the field of design practitioners and eventually brought an end to the homogeny of modernism.

READ BEFORE CLASS:

Postmodernism and Digital Culture

(gabrielstromberg.com)

WEEK 4: Tues Oct 21 | Thurs Oct 23**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 a catalyst for collective action throughout the world.

READ BEFORE CLASS:

Propaganda and Protest (gabrielstromberg.com)

QUIZ 1**WEEK 5: Tues Oct 28 | Thurs Oct 30****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 BEFORE CLASS:

Capitalism and Globalization (gabrielstromberg.com)

WEEK 6: Tues Nov 4 | Thurs Nov 6**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 in Europe including the development of technologies in China which were foundational in the modern era. We will then explore the evolution of the printed letterform and discuss how printing became a tool for progress and innovation.

READ BEFORE CLASS:

The Printed Word (gabrielstromberg.com)

WEEK 7: Tues Nov 11 | Thurs Nov 13**Open Work Day (No Class Tuesday):**

This week will be open—an opportunity for groups to put the finishing touches on their project 2 presentations. You will not be required to attend our scheduled class period. Instead, I will schedule individual check-ins with student groups outside of class time.

WEEK 8: Tues Nov 18 | Thurs Nov 20**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.

READ BEFORE CLASS:

The Lens of Colonialism (gabrielstromberg.com)

QUIZ 2

WEEK 9: Tues Nov 25 | Thurs Nov 27**Open Work Day (No Class Thursday):**

This week will be open—an opportunity for students to begin project number 3. You will not be required to attend our scheduled class period. Instead, I will schedule individual check-ins with students outside of class time.

WEEK 10: Tues Dec 2 | Thurs Dec 4**The American Identity:**

We will survey the histories and social dynamics that have shaped contemporary American culture. There will be a focus on Indigenous art and activism as well as a review of the circumstances that generated the Harlem Renaissance of the twenties and thirties.

READ BEFORE CLASS:

The American Identity (gabrielstromberg.com)

WATCH BEFORE CLASS:

F* The Stereotype: Revitalizing Indigenous Perspective in Design, Sadie Red Wing

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QUIZ 3

WEEK 11: Tues Dec 9 | Thurs Dec 11**Postmodernism and Digital Culture Part 2:**

Our final lecture will be an investigation of the effects of digital technologies on the field of visual communication. We will start with the first digital designs of the eighties and discuss current digital tools and platforms within the space of marketing and media.

READ BEFORE CLASS:

Excerpt from *CAPS LOCK*, Ruben Pater

WEEK 12, FINALS: DAY AND TIME TBD**Finals:**

We will meet together as a class for our final quiz and final project review.

READ BEFORE FINAL:

First Things First, Ken Garland

PROJECT 3
HANDOFF

PROJECT 1 (Individual): Due Week 3—Tues Oct 8, Thurs Oct 10

Assignment: Create an emoji or set of emojis that conveys your creative journey/experience. Use the format of graphic iconography to tell your story as a designer. There are countless approaches you could take. Your final design might convey a linear narrative, evoke a specific feeling or emotion, or be a mysterious and cryptic representation of a particular concept or experience that is meaningful to you. You can focus on the past, present, or future. You can be as abstract or as literal as you like.

Deliverables: Color or black and white, format your final work as a 1920 x 1080 pixel, horizontal slide labeled with your name. Slide should be in JPEG format and uploaded to the final Google slide presentation. Link for upload to come.

Suggested time-frame for execution: 1 to 2 hours

Due: Week 3—be prepared to present your final solution in class.

Grading Criteria:

Participation, aligning to specified parameters, quality of work, and strength of your final concept.

PROJECT 2 (Group): Due Week 7—Tues Nov 5, Thurs Nov 7

Assignment: Groups will be given a particular design period, genre, or movement to research. Together, they will create a piece of media detailing the basic elements of your subject. Presentation should primarily focus on visual communication and graphic design (as opposed to other creative fields like architecture or fashion).

Deliverables/Formats: 1. A 10-minute pre-recorded presentation

Due: We will view all presentations as a class on Week 8

Below is an outline of the specific points that you should cover in your research.

When: Outline the time period that your subject was prevalent. Discuss how and when it began, how long it lasted, and the factors that brought about its end.

Where: Specify what country or region in which the subject originated and where it spread. Communicate any specific geographic or cultural elements that impacted its development.

How: Recount the world events, technologies, and cultural circumstances that were key factors in the formation of your movement or period.

Who: Present at least three figures who were in some way significant within the movement or period.

Why: Explain why this movement is ultimately consequential within the canon of design history and how it has influenced succeeding movements and contemporary perspectives.

Grading Criteria:

25% Meeting outlined requirements: length, specified subject matter, factual accuracy, 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.

CLASS SOURCES:

De Bondt, Sara, and Catherine de Smet. *Graphic Design: History in the Writing* (1983–2011). Occasional Papers, 2012.

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Duchateau, Armand. *Benin: Royal Art of Africa*. Prestel, 1994.

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Heller, Steven, and Georgette Ballance. *Graphic Design History*. Allworth, 2001.

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Wilk, Christopher. *Modernism: Designing a New World*. Victoria & Albert Museum, 2006.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *Caste: The Origins of Our Discontents*. Random House, 2020.

Wilkerson, Isabel. *The Warmth of Other Suns: The Epic Story of America's Great Migration*. Random House, 2010.

