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# The Significance of Constructing the Social Model of Craft in Graphic Design History Narrative

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# The Significance of Constructing the Social Model of Craft in Graphic Design History Narrative

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## Abstract

Graphic design history, a relatively new academic discipline, needs to reposition its current narrative, which emphasizes formal properties, as future graphic designers are required to understand complex social relations. A new approach blending the social aspects of craft into graphic design education will contribute to shaping the thinking of future design practitioners around a social need. Craft rooted in social interaction has positioned the philosophy of modern craft as a democratic and political activity. This includes William Morris's ideas on social reform and his espousal of crafts as a response to the disorder of the Industrial Revolution. Also, the vernacular, one of the elements in the history of craft referred to by Paul Greenhalgh (1997), could provide another alternative narrative in graphic design history survey courses. Unfortunately, the tie between craft and design has nearly dissolved since design separated from craft in the later nineteenth century (Greenhalgh, 1997). Likewise, the content of survey courses, including *Meggs's History of Graphic Design*, reflects how the concept of graphic design is more loosely tied to craft than it is to fine arts. But, the growing awareness of social design—which has the primary objective of design positively impacting society—implies a need for adding a new perspective to graphic design history survey courses that cultivate ideas about designers' social motivation in practice. In this respect, by adopting aspects of craft emphasizing social value, the narrative of graphic design history would provide design students with the opportunity to consider the influence of designed artifacts on the human condition and society.

*Keywords:* Graphic design history narrative, Graphic design history education, The social aspects of craft, William Morris, The vernacular, Meggs's History of Graphic Design.

## Introduction

Unlike art history, graphic design history has been recognized as an academic field for only three decades, which implies that narrative methods of graphic design history still need to be developed (Clark & Brody, 2009; Dhillon, 2012; Margolin, 2015). Although graphic design shares a vocabulary with the history of art, which uses a developed language and methodologies, designed artifacts should not be limited to being analyzed in only visual terms like fine art pieces. Partially, this is because of the characteristics of graphic design, which is focused on communication, requiring design theory and practice to be aware of a context where complicated social and political situations are involved. This suggests that the history of graphic design surveys needs to understand not only the form of a designed artifact but also the meaning of it in or to society (Aynsley, 1987).

Examining the narratives in survey texts about graphic design history for use in design classrooms would provide an opportunity to understand the past, present, and future of both the visual communication design discipline and practice (Conway, 1987; Huppertz & Lees-Maffei, 2013). The canonization of graphic design works found in the narrative structure indicates what attributes people in the graphic design field should consider for the future. For example, if the graphic canon puts special stress on the aesthetic quality of the piece, design students might be more likely to give weight to the stylistic value of their design works. The attempt to examine the narratives in graphic design survey texts involves challenges due to the ambiguous scope of graphic design because of its loose tie to materials, which makes it unlike other art and design fields (Aynsley, 1987). Technological progress is followed by changes in the social context that continue creating or reshaping both physical artifacts and intangible artifacts (Dhillon, 2012). In the realm of contemporary visual communication, the vast majority of communications are not physical print communications anymore, making way for new intangible digital media such as interaction design that mainly rests on the human perspective in context in order to improve human well-being. The new technological changes suggest the need for alternative narratives to foster social visions that create meaningful values, which would be commonly shared in a community. Authors of graphic design history narratives should help future design theorists and professionals better understand the social roles of graphic design in the world.

In this sense, the craft vision for a better society could align with today's design narratives that attempt to address the social needs of the broader population including minorities. Craft rooted in social interaction has positioned the philosophy of modern craft as a democratic and political activity, reflecting William Morris' ideas on social reform espousing the crafts as an answer to the disorder of the Industrial Revolution in the nineteenth century (Cooke, 2007). The new interdisciplinary approach blending the social model of craft into graphic design history education will contribute to shaping the thinking of future design practitioners toward social need.

## The scope and perspectives of graphic design narratives

Since the term graphic design was first introduced by American book and type designer, W.A. Dwiggins, many authors of graphic design history publications have tried to clarify its uncertain boundaries (Dwiggins, 1999; Livingston, 2003). One of the pioneering publications about the field of graphic design history was written by Philip Meggs in 1983 (Meggs, 1983). The so-called “Bible” of graphic design history, *Meggs’s History of Graphic Design*, has played a role as a main reference in visual communication design education (Meggs & Purvis, 2016). According to Margolin (2002), it is known for being the first design history to gain notoriety and be used as a text in design history classes. Meggs’s history is now considered important in that it significantly helps to define the graphic design discipline as well as serving as a principal reference for teaching. Both roles imply its strong impacts on forming future designers’ values and attitudes.

Philip Meggs’s scope of description moves from prehistoric times to the current information age, with more than half of the book covering the twentieth century in terms of its aesthetic movements. Meggs and Purvis (2016) advocated the “farsighted view” to define the scope of the subject of graphic design in the survey (Margolin, 2002, p.191). This view stresses human communication that drives the nature of graphic design. This approach extends the narrative comprehensively, incorporating human interactions since prehistoric times. Meggs’ farsighted view, however, is more inclined to describe how the visual formation of artifacts is located in technological change and mechanical progress than how it is rooted in human interactions (Margolin, 2002). In the article “Narrative problems of graphic design history,” Victor Margolin (2002) argues that the conflation of graphic design history under the “farsighted view” entails the discontinuity between today’s design practice and prehistoric communicative actions, because current graphic design professions did not directly grow out of cave wall paintings or early writings on stones (p.191).

The “short-sighted view,” on the contrary, supports the idea of graphic design as a new activity that has existed since the outset of the industrial revolution (Margolin, 2002, p.191). The approach describes graphic design as a professional practice, as in Richard Hollis’s *Graphic Design: A Concise History* (Barnard, 2005; Hollis, 2002; Margolin, 2002). The description of graphic design as a profession involves the institutionalization of a canon adhering to high standards of quality, which could cause the exclusion of some graphic design practitioners (Margolin, 2002). This brings controversies surrounding the position of the vernacular artifacts made by nonprofessionals in graphic design history (Margolin, 2002).

Even though vernacularism is a visual communication method that is sometimes employed by professional designers, only a few graphic design narratives delve into the beneficial connection between design and the vernacular (Margolin, 2002). For example, Tibor Kalman, an influential graphic designer during the mid 1980s is well known for his vernacular design based on his sense of localism, which was mainly generated by the general public, and not much by professional designers. However, in graphic design narratives, examples of the connection between design and the vernacular mostly resort to demonstrating vernacular design as a part of stylistic expression related to the nostalgic retro look. This needs to be changed, because ver-

vernacular expression by ordinary people has become common in new media that engages participatory culture (Howard, 2008). It suggests that a shift positioning vernacular creativity in graphic design narratives is necessary in the current design context, which will require an understanding of collaborative social interaction among users (Burgess, 2006).

According to Drucker (2009), Meggs's approach towards artifacts is dominantly form-oriented and distinguished from the perspectives of other graphic design historians, including Richard Hollis whose survey focuses on narratives of the local cultures and social context rather than on aesthetics. In recent years, more surveys have adopted the narrative structure emphasizing design activities and context rather than an object's description. Likewise, some surveys comment on the designer's obligation to offer the public visual communication messages that help them understand social conditions and attitudes (Drucker & McVarish, 2013).

Contrary to this idea, many surveys still focus on the visual aspects of graphic artifacts, along with their expressivity and aesthetic principles. This analytical approach can diminish graphic design's human communicative activities. Considering the fast-changing stylistic trends of graphic design, the current iconic design objects can be quickly transformed into antiquated and useless things. In other words, the canon built on the aesthetic principles would contain less worthy objects only a few months later. This suggests that a graphic design narrative that focuses on visual trends could be overwhelmed by the proliferation of low-valued objects, which lack timeless value applicable to the design process. This possible scenario suggests that more design survey texts may need to adopt a narrative inviting social interactions as meaningful criteria for determining successful graphic design. Understanding today's design culture and practice requires considering the social environment and having empathy for human actions (In Resnick, 2016). The narratives should lead to the questions of how graphic artifacts contribute to the establishment of communities of knowledge and its social implications and values.

### The crafts' social vision as an additional narrative in graphic design surveys

The historical craft vision for a better society could be seen as tightly aligned with impulses evident in certain strands of contemporary design practice to address the social and environmental needs of a broader population, including minorities (Margolin & Margolin, 2002). Specifically, the British Arts and Crafts movement of the late nineteenth century and in particular the ideology of William Morris, are good examples of craft's social visions. Morris espoused craft as social reform, "against the social, moral, and artistic confusion of the Industrial Revolution" in the nineteenth century (Meggs & Purvis, 2016, p.187). Since the Industrial Revolution between 1760 and 1830, technical improvements caused the abrupt transition "from the medieval to the state of the applied art" (Pevsner, 1991, p.43). Morris's counteractions from the Great Exhibition of 1851 that displayed machinery artifacts with poor aesthetic quality entailed the revival of handicrafts, along with the corresponding values embodied in medieval society and craft. The distinctive feature of Morris's protest was his deep understanding of the social implication of craft and his social duty as not an artist but a craftsman-designer (Pevsner, 1991). Instead of taking the side of "the philosophy of Art for Art's sake," Morris's decision to take the craftsman-

designer side stressed the crafts' function to reveal a social message rather than an artistic expression (Pevsner, 1991, p.152). The restoration of decorative honesty by Morris represented the social concern related to his ideal of making a better society. Likewise, examining such notions of the social and moral implications of craft could help design students reflect on how graphic design objects might operate within a society.

The moral value of crafts, the essence of "the well-being of society," echoes the honesty of materials used in graphic design artifacts, which becomes essential in sustainable design for positive social impact (Greenhalgh, 1997, p.33). Morris's statement, "I don't want art for a few, any more than education for a few, or freedom for a few" reflects not only the avant-garde aspect of the Arts and Crafts movement that rejected middle-class taste, but also the communicative aspect that involves a broader inclusion of more diverse social groups (Pevsner, 1991, p.22). Unfortunately, it was ironic that the emphasis on handcrafts revealed that universal access to objects by all users was still limited. Delicate handcraft items of high quality were too expensive for people who were not in the middle class. However, Morris's core vision of enhancing the quality of life for a better society still resonates with socially focused strands in today's graphic design philosophies. Morris was strongly concerned with the relationship between the maker and the user, highlighting how the makers' intent involves a product's "morality in terms of the feelings of those who produced it and of those who use it" (Stansky, 1985, p.33). This relationship pushes past old boundaries of graphic design to include all people as well as aligns with the designer's relationship with clients or consumers. A very responsible graphic designer, as a message maker and an agent of social change, could share the belief of the Arts and Crafts movement that considered "the shoddiness of everyday objects" as "a moral failing" (Drucker & McVarish, 2012, p.152).

Regardless of their scope, almost all graphic design narratives include The Arts and Crafts movement as a means to introduce its enormous influence on publication design. But, the description of its heritage, the craft ideal, shared among many societies and communities that united for the common good in the late 1880s and 1890s is found in a neglected state in many narratives. For example, in Meggs's survey the section about the Century Guild, which was founded by Arthur H. Mackmurdo and strongly inspired by William Morris with the aim of preserving craft authenticity, concentrates on the search for a new design aesthetic and typographic achievements, excluding the part explaining the influence of social and political values in the Century Guild. Similarly, descriptions of graphic design's relationship with crafts' social value in movements such as Art Nouveau, the German Jugendstil movement, the Vienna Secession, etc. are largely neglected.

A survey that does not connect crafts with their social value may interfere with a reader's comprehensive view and understanding of the underlying philosophy of historical movements. Therefore, it is important to discuss how societies and communities pursuing the rhetoric of the Arts and Crafts movement achieved and eventually diluted the social value and philosophy of craft. Providing the context of how the ideas of social reform motivated members in societies and communities would help future designers understand how design practice can accomplish new visions of society.

A design historian, Paul Greenhalgh (1997) described the three elements of crafts as the



politics of works, the vernacular, and decorative arts. According to Greenhalgh (1997), thinkers and makers, who were motivated by the social and moral values of the Arts and Crafts movement, brought these elements together in the late nineteenth century. Above all, William Morris was a central pioneer, who accomplished the politics of works by carrying out a social vision that encompassed the political ideal of the centrality of human rights (Greenhalgh, 1997).

In addition, the vernacular, one of the elements of crafts referred to by Greenhalgh (1997) in the history of craft, could provide another alternative narrative in the graphic design history survey that is also connected to the social model of craft. The vernacular means the particular regional culture in which a locality is collectively produced. Vernacularism has been considered a cultural phenomenon since the Gothic revivalists in the early nineteenth century rejected urbanism's encroachment on authentic virtues (Greenhalgh, 1997). The phenomenon was symbolically significant to William Morris and the Arts and Crafts movement, given Morris's attempts to guard "the rural and handmade aspects of craft production" (Greenhalgh, 1997). Later, the vernacular was welcomed among anti-modernist groups, who wanted to preserve heritage. It was denounced by Modernists, and by the 1970s, in the postmodern age, the vernacular was utilized to extend a design potential. (Greenhalgh, 1997; Margolin, 2002).

As mentioned earlier, vernacularism tends to be undervalued in graphic design narratives. In terms of the vernacular, Meggs's survey demonstrates vernacular design as a part of stylistic expression:

The term vernacular design refers to artistic and technical expression broadly characteristic of a locale or historical period; it closely relates to retro design. Vernacular design is the paraphrasing of earlier commonplace graphic forms, such as baseball cards, matchbook covers, and unskilled commercial illustrations and printing from past decades (Meggs & Purvis, 2016, p.506).

However, highlighting only the formal element of vernacularism in a text survey can prevent design practitioners from perceiving the vernacular as an interactive design process. What is also missing from Meggs's survey is the growing phenomenon of "vernacular expressions," that is, the participatory action in today's media culture (Gürsimsek, 2016, p.331). Ironically, this democratic phenomenon, led by the ordinary media audience, is associated with Meggs's premise of graphic design as visual communication, which is strongly tied to the social connection inherent to craft. Survey courses should embrace critical discussion of diverse vernacular design that ranges from its historical formation and progress to the social interaction encouraged by new media. As seen with Tibor Kalman, who considered himself a social activist trying to achieve good design based on social responsibility to the surrounding culture, the concept of the vernacular might offer new insights into designers' works that lead to more minority groups getting involved in graphic design (Heller, 1999).

Interestingly, the decorative arts, the last element of crafts defined by Greenhalgh (1997), involves the disenfranchised status of crafts in art history. Unlike paintings and sculptures, the functionality and practicality of crafts have given them unstable ground in the hierarchy of fine arts, since the Second World War (Shubert, 1993). Due to the rise of Romanticism, the creative thoughts formed by cognitive activity, which once were seen as an inseparable part of creative

practice, began to be separated from physical activity (Greenhalgh, 1997). Since then, the “way of seeing things” in the realm of fine arts has become superior to the “way of doing things” in crafts (Greenhalgh, 1997, p.41).

Likewise, the content of surveys reflects how the concept of graphic design is more loosely tied to craft than it is to fine arts. For example, Meggs prioritizes not graphic design’s relationship with craft but with art, emphasizing the stylistic progress of fine arts such as the influence of modern art styles like cubism, futurism, dada, surrealism, and photography. In addition, Meggs gives less weight to the heritage of The Arts and Crafts movement than to the entire chapter about the influence of modern art. The fact that the greatest portion of the book is about the modern and contemporary periods after the end of World War I could account for Meggs’s emphasis on the relationship between graphic design and fine arts. Undoubtedly, assessing formalism or aesthetic properties in design practice is important because of such assessments’ strong influence on boosting sales in the market. However, today a “social model” of design practice that calls for designers’ responsible actions keeps emerging as opposed to the “market model” that caused unbridled capitalism (Margolin & Margolin, 2002, p.25). Accordingly, Meggs’s narrative should propose design’s common ground with craft, which is associated with social needs that could later help shape social agendas in graphic design practice.

## Conclusion

Rooting craft in social interaction has positioned modern craft as a democratic and political activity (Cooke, 2007). Likewise, designers’ notions of social reform can position them as active agents to pursue the wellbeing of society. Two of the elements of crafts proposed by Greenhalgh (1997) —the politics of works and the vernacular—can benefit the design field by offering a lens to question social and political contexts critically. The growing awareness of social design—which has the primary objective of design positively impacting society—expands design studio classes gradually from the commercial practice-based model to a social cause-based model (In Resnick, 2016; Margolin & Margolin, 2002). This shift in the class model that cultivates citizen designers who have moral and social responsibility implies a need for adding a new perspective to the graphic design history survey that cultivates ideas about fulfillment of designers’ social motivation in practice (Heller & Vienne, 2003). In this regard, the new approach blending the social aspects of craft into graphic design education will contribute to shaping the thinking of future design practitioners toward a social need. A possible pathway is to focus on the social value and philosophy of craft in the graphic design history narrative, which can become an alternative approach that contributes to envisioning design for social needs.

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