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# WHAT'S IN A NAME? THE FATE OF “GRAPHIC DESIGN”

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What's In A Name? The Fate Of "Graphic Design"

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## ABSTRACT

The field of Graphic Design is in the throngs of major change, and intriguing questions have been raised regarding what name could properly describe a profession that has expanded far beyond the limits of the term “graphic design.” Part editorial, part graphic design history lesson, and part info-graphic, this essay and visual diagram explore the nomenclature of the graphic design profession.

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## FULL TEXT

An intriguing question was recently raised by Rick Poynor [A Report from the Place Formerly Known as Graphic Design, PRINT October 2011]. What name could properly describe a profession that has expanded far beyond the limits of the term “graphic design”? Rick points out that “Graphic design stopped looking like graphic design, as we once knew it, several years ago.”<sup>1</sup> Indeed, the discipline that began for so many of us with type and image arranged on the printed page, or even on screen as a web page, is undergoing a significant evolution.

This is a profession that has never been easy to define, not for lack of an abundance of opinions on the subject. I appreciate Victor Margolin’s broad explanation that graphic design is “the production of visual statements”.<sup>2</sup> And I believe Jessica Helfand’s definition—“Graphic design is a popular art and a practical art, an applied art and an ancient art. Simply put, it is the art of visualizing ideas”<sup>3</sup>—has resonated with many of us. These definitions may be a bit vague, but, finally, after years of college students having to explain their Graphic Design major, parents everywhere have stopped scratching their heads over what that term means.

Historically, the term “designer” has been used to describe the professional activities of others from as far back as Medieval days. It’s important to recognize, though, that the graphic arts were separated into individual specialties for centuries before our notion of a graphic designer emerged. For instance, in the beginning days of printing, producing a book with text and images required a typesetter, an artist, a woodblock cutter or copper engraver, and perhaps an illuminator who applied color to the printed pages, beyond those involved in the type-casting, paper-making and printing processes. One could make a case that renaissance man Geoffrey Tory (1480–1533) exemplified what became later known as a graphic designer, for his skills included type design, illustration, ornament and trademark design, book layout, and close collaboration with printers.<sup>4</sup>

Throughout history one can point to such men and women, reputable for their contributions to design and printing. However, it is the Industrial Revolution that ultimately lead to the recognition of new professional definitions. As the practice of design and production separated, and the range of typographic and photographic printing greatly expanded, a new practitioner was called upon to concentrate on the design of visual information. Competition caused by growth in manufactured goods and the decline of prices called for branding and packaging. Increasingly more literate and urban populations necessitated advertising and editorial design. The year 1841 marks the first advertising agency, and the 1850s saw the emergence of pictorial magazines, and thus art editors, later to be known as art directors.<sup>5</sup>

Evidence of the development of nomenclature regarding this profession is hard to unearth, but there are some clear contributors. In 1849, Henry Cole became one of the major forces in design education in Great Britain, informing the government of the importance of design in his Journal of De-

sign and Manufactures.<sup>6</sup> Beginning with William Morris and the Art & Crafts movement, designers in the 1890s pushed for works of graphic design to be recognized on the same plane as fine art, and they proved that a market existed for such works.<sup>7</sup> Across the ocean in the United States, two of the most important educational institutions were established: the Rhode Island School of Design (1877), and the college that became later known as Parsons (1904) started up with a “commercial illustration” degree, later changed to advertising and graphic design.

It is hard to say exactly when terms such as “commercial art” and “graphic arts” emerged or came into favor, but the AIGA—originally an acronym for American Institute of Graphic Arts—was started in 1914. A few years later, in 1922, William Addison Dwiggins coined the term “graphic design”. A 1927 book simply titled *Graphic Design*, by W.G. Raffe, is said to be the first book with graphic design in its’ title. The School of Graphic Design at the Royal College of Art in London was formed in 1948, at a time when the term “graphic design” was barely known in Britain. As Rick Poynor reflects, “There was a period from the 1930s to the 1990s when the idea of the “graphic designer” as a term of professional self-definition and identity took hold and flourished.”<sup>8</sup>

Naming trends around and beyond that period lean toward the multidisciplinary, and perhaps more intellectual, “communication design,” “visual communication,” and today “design thinking.” The AIGA, in 2006, changed their name to “the professional organization for design” and proposed to the Standard Occupational Classification Policy Committee to change the title “graphic designers” to “communication designers.”<sup>9</sup> A collaborative effort is under way to define the designer of 2015.<sup>10</sup> (And, yet, we won’t be any closer to agreeing on terminology.) Designers today are engaged in very diverse activities—from deep research to designing mobile applications to constructing experiences to very individual entrepreneurial pursuits. In design education, there is a slow but steady movement to redefine how we educate designers as well, and Meredith Davis has made a strong case for why this is critical.<sup>11</sup> In part, it is because “the interest graphic design generated fifteen or twenty years ago, at the height of its professional confidence, is moving on to other subjects now,”<sup>12</sup> and we need to adapt.

This current state of ambiguity brings back uncomfortable memories from those early days of the profession. How are we to be understood by the people who require our services, if we as a profession are continually trying to understand ourselves? Nomenclature within professional fields [and educational programs], like in any system, is essential. Naming things gives them meaning and provides a basis for communication about them. On the other hand, according to Rick Poynor’s summarization of Richard Buchanan’s ideas, “professional identity, with all its institutionalized concerns and assumptions, can become a cage that restricts the occupant’s view of what else might be possible outside.”<sup>13</sup> Does our profession require one broader name to encompass all (Poynor suggests the Rietveld Academy’s MFA course name, “Language and Image” as better than the outmoded graphic design)? Or do we evolve multiple new ways to describe the specializations emerging that no longer fit the traditional notion of graphic design? Either way, I am certain the current soul-searching in the industry will result in many more engaging conversations.

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<sup>1</sup>Poynor, Rick. *A Report from the Place Formerly Known as Graphic Design*, PRINT magazine October 2011

<sup>2</sup>Margolin, Victor / Béltran, Félix. *Toward a History of Graphic Design*, an Interview with Victor Margolin, 2000.

<sup>3</sup>For Jessica’s expanded definition and accompanying video visit [www.aiga.org/what-is-design/](http://www.aiga.org/what-is-design/)

<sup>4</sup>Meggs, Phil. *A History of Graphic Design*, copyright 1998 Wiley & Sons

<sup>5</sup>Meggs.

<sup>6,7</sup>Wikipedia. *Graphic Design*, [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graphic\\_design](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Graphic_design)

<sup>8</sup>Poynor, Rick.

<sup>9</sup>Sihan, Chia, *[Re]Graphic Design[ated]*, TAXI – <http://designtaxi.com/article/334/Re-Graphic-Design-ated/>

<sup>10</sup>AIGA – <http://www.aiga.org/designer-of-2015/>

<sup>11</sup>Davis, Meredith, *Toto, I've got a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore...*, AIGA Presentation 2008

<sup>12,13</sup>Rick Poynor, *It's the End of Graphic Design as We Know It*, eye magazine issue 69, 2008

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The accompanying diagram was created to ponder and demonstrate some of the many events that inspired and/or signaled a change in the way we identify ourselves.

# What's In A Name?

