

KEYNOTE ADDRESS

MASSIMO VIGNELLI

1983

This symposium on the history of graphic design is definitely a historical event. That is a rhetorical way of saying, 'Thank God, it was about time. We need it!' I don't know why it took so long. I just can't believe that for centuries, certainly for decades, graphic designers have been happy and content with simply producing and looking at pretty pictures. Perhaps that attitude of the here and now is the heritage of the modern movement; but even before that, there seems to have been very little engagement with and study about the meaning of graphic design.

I have with me a shopping list of needs that we have. One of them is to find out more about the history of graphic design. We need to find out what the Romans were doing during Roman times. Why did we start with Helvetica? We need to know more about graphics in the Middle Ages. We need to find out more about the beautiful graphics of the Renaissance; for example, the marvelous typefaces we see in the buildings of that time. We need to know more about what kind of relationship there was among the graphic designers who were doing books after Gutenberg, the architects, the environment, and the philosophy of the time. Graphic design has been kept in the dark. We need a little flashlight, if not a floodlight, cast on history. We need to know a little more about the strong currents of the eighteenth century, the emergence of the Enlightenment, the impact of its meaning as reflected in the design publications of that time, the contrasts and the contradictions implied in the periods of cultural transformations, and the origin of modern times, communication, and industrialization.

We need to study what happened to graphic design with the invention of advertising which had a powerful influence on our profession. We need to find out more about all these things through the ages that had an impact on our graphic design.

We need to investigate more about communication theories. It is certain that until we have theory we will not have a profession. We cannot continue to talk about how nice a picture is, or how nice the work of one or another designer is. I want to know why it was done, how, what motivated it all. As professionals we can no longer continue in this state of ignorance in which we have been going thus far.

Criticism is the other thing which we need tremendously. We need to produce continuous criticism which will push us forward into the right place, showing us the appropriate directions. Other professions like architecture, to name one, are really sustained and forwarded by criticism. There are plenty of magazines on architecture and interiors. They criticize architecture to death, but we're never doing that. If you open a graphics magazine from the last thirty years, there never seems to be a page of criticism, just attractive little biographies and that is it. Open *Graphis*, you'll find the same thing. Open any other design magazine. There is nothing, not one line of criticism. Do you think we can go on without criticism? Without criticism we will never have a profession.

We also need documentation. We need to document everything we do. We need to find out. We need to perceive ourselves as steps in a historical process. The need for documentation is not only for us; it is for the generations that will follow us. If the generations preceding ours would have documented themselves better, we would derive better conclusions of what we are and where we should go. So the need for documentation is extremely important and needs to be added to the other three areas of need we have discussed: history, theory, and criticism.

We also definitely need to know more about technology. We are getting into a future in which technology is going to play a great part. We need to know technology to take it out of the hands of the technicians who are using it now. When I see typefaces coming out as poor-looking as they are coming out now, I know that I need to know technology to get back to the technicians and tell them, 'You are killing typography by coming out with those phototypes.' Phototype is fine, but it needs a culture behind it. And the culture is not just a person who has been doing photo lettering for all of his or her life. We need Gutenbergs of our times. We need people who have cultural backgrounds, not only fine hands for slashing plastic around a letter.

One of our biggest tasks in doing graphic design history is to reassess the modern movement. Since we're all children of the modern movement, it's very hard to do that. Nevertheless, other professions have been reassessing the modern movement. We have seen that it has been happening in architecture. Of course, the operation of reassessment is something which is very difficult. The high risk of miscarriage is always there. In graphic design the most we have seen lately is little dots and squares floating around the page like decorative tiles. I will not call this reassessment. That is neither communication nor development of graphic design beyond the post-modern movement. The issues and the structures of today are what make the post-modern movement; anything else is just a pretty fad. And when I say fad, I want to convey all the contempt that I have: typographic fads that arrange type on the side and big type here and there with a little dot and lines going all over the place. Would you believe that the Swiss, who have really understood the value of communication and have been doing fabulous graphics, were bound to come up with a new form of graphic design which means nothing beyond prettiness?

I think we have to reassess what the modern movement gave to us. We have to see if it's correct. I see a lot of things, for instance, that have taken years to come out from history. I can see how the beautiful inner structure of the Renaissance took a long time to disengage itself from the shapes in the bodies of the paintings to gradually begin to come out in the last century and finally emerge fully in this century as abstract forms. What we had in the intervening centuries was the structure of the Renaissance liberated from the past. That is one of the interesting things that happened in history. I think we need to look for the valid things the modern movement has given to us in order to develop them. And what was a fad of the moment, or was irrelevant, or merely transitory needs to be weeded out.

As designers we have to continuously sift the past and the present so that the things that remain on the top are the important ones, and the things that sift down are the gravel. We obviously want the golden nuggets at the top.

It seems to me that the most important thing that we have to do is improve the state of education in our schools. We've got to insert some level of culture, some level of history, some level of philosophy. Without that, we will have just a continuous stream of little designers and crafts persons, or paste-up people at best. We need to provide a cultural structure to our profession. That is the premier task of the 1980s for all of us. But we have to do it for ourselves. We all have to help each other. We are the leaders of awareness, and it's up to us really to put the systems and methods together. If we don't do this, we are condemned to a state of ignorance and we will perpetuate it.

As we go about increasing awareness of history, theory, criticism, documentation, technology, and culture, we can't lose sight of the value of meaning over the value of form. It's not true that meaning is more important than form. It's not true that content is more important than form. Still, if for fifty years we have been trained and bombarded everyday with the idea that form is really the greatest thing around, then for the next fifty years we've got to say that meaning is more important than form. Perhaps then, fifty years from now, we might reach a state of balance between form and content.

We desperately need to establish journals where the issues of history, theory, criticism, documentation, technology are brought forward and where investigation is going to go on all the time. I know there is a group in Chicago that will publish the *Design Issues* journal. But where are the contributors? To find them is the most important thing. I'm sure there are people in Nebraska or people in Maine who are doing fantastic studies. We want to know where they are and we want to get in touch with them. We want to get together and investigate these issues. Let's make this step forward because there are no other alternatives. If we don't make this step forward, we are all culturally dead, and if that is the case, Amen.

Massimo Vignelli is President of Vignelli Associates, New York.
First published in *The First Symposium on the History of Graphic Design: Coming of Age*,
Rochester Institute of Technology, 1983.

