



## Why Don't We (Really) Teach the History of Graphic Arts in Our Colleges and Universities Today?

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### Introduction

I am an art historian. Oh, I know, art historians are boring, and they rattle on for ages about boring topics of the bygone past. Generally, at Art History conferences, all of us delight in “drone-reading” about 12 pages of detailed textual notes. However, I know that this is boring and I am not a boring art historian, because I am going to address a topic that might truly interest all of you at this conference on Graphic Design, Animation, and Web Design [1].

As a professor of art history at Eastern Kentucky University, I teach “smack dab” in the center of the United States of America. I have taught there for almost 20 years. In total, I have been teaching art history (and other things) for 38 years I dearly love to teach, and I soooo love art history. (Shhh I have been involved with art history since the age of 4 would you believe!) Before teaching at EKU, I taught at the University of Ballarat in Victoria, Australia, for 10 years, and before that, I was a tutor at the University of Canterbury in New Zealand, and an instructor at NVCC (Northern Virginia Community College, Manassas campus (the second largest community college in the USA), also teaching architectural history. And before that, I was a department manager, senior technical editor, and senior writer for the US government and IBM (concerned with helicopter manuals), not involved in the arts at all but involved with word smithing (editing, writing, and the presentation of statistical information graphically and artistically).

So, one year ago, I volunteered to teach the History of Graphic Arts at my university—a subject that I knew absolutely nothing about, but a lot of art historians seem to

tackle new territory, and I was going to try to be one of them. Little did I know what I was volunteering for? As a note, so that all of you artists and graphic designers can have a laugh as I begin this presentation, my fields of concentration in art history are British colonial architecture and Non-Western art (such as Japanese painting and American Indian architecture and artifacts). However, I created a really, really, really cool course on the History of Graphic Arts at Eastern Kentucky University in 2017.

So, why in the world did I ever (in my right mind) volunteer to teach the History of Graphic Arts? Did I want a challenge or a way to broaden my outlook? Did I expect to fail? No. I simply wanted to try something new. I had no idea what the topic was, so I canvassed some of my colleagues. Guess what, not one of them really knew what the course was to be, but they all had comments, and the course was already on the books, so I spent the summer of 2017 “working my tail off” on a course that no one seemed to understand, but they all offered that the “old” course fell flat. Very simply stated, this course took me three months (non-stop) to plan and research, and it was the most fun academically that I have ever had. In short, the purpose of this presentation is to tell you what I did at my university and to hope that some of you may consider teaching this at your art schools, colleges, and universities also.

Actually, I thought all of the answers would be on the internet so that I could just copy someone else’s plans—they were not. So, I looked up the History of Graphic Arts, and guess what I found—my university was the only one to have this course, and we had no course syllabus or backup information on how it was previously taught or what it

included. However, again I heard faculty comments that the old course was not what anyone wanted and that it used the Meggs' *History of Graphic Design* textbook and nothing else [2]. Let's look more closely at teaching the background of Graphic Arts here, basically in the US. At the tertiary level, many colleges and universities offer degrees in Graphic Design. Thus, they (of course) all teach the History of Graphic Design, primarily using the Meggs' textbook. At the Euro SciCon (conference) in November 2018 in London, I was surprised to find out that professors and instructors in many other countries also only teach the History of Graphic Design. Many of the conference attendees came up to me requesting information on teaching the History of Graphic Arts, rather than just teaching the accepted course on the History of Graphic Design. Their biggest question, of course, was "how can we better prepare our students for careers in the future by teaching the broader curriculum of the Graphic Arts rather than "narrow" topic of just Graphic Design in Art History?"

Not finding any colleges or universities that taught the History of Graphic Arts, I thought that I hit on pay dirt—a few high schools in the US taught courses with that same name "The Graphic Arts." Wow!-I thought that I was in heaven—finally, information that I could use. But, no! Every single one of the high school Graphic Arts courses was actually a hands-on introduction to graphic design arts courses, and they were not art history courses at all. No luck here. I actually hit a brick wall. Sometimes it's sad to be an art historian; I had to start from square one and do all the hard work myself.

What I did next (now in panic mode) was monumental. I went to the dictionary to find out the definition of the "Graphic Arts." Voila—and this was the breakthrough that I needed; I actually had to design a 30-lecture course from the ground up with almost no background at all. Merriam-Webster (a sound source for definitions in America) defines the Graphic Arts as:

"Graphic arts: the fine and applied arts of representation, decoration, and writing or printing on flat surfaces together with the techniques and crafts associated with them [3]."

**Huh? What does this definition really say or mean?**

The problem may be solved by the Merriam-Webster definition, except that I have absolutely no idea what that definition really says—do you? However, at this point, I still don't know what I am going to teach, and I am almost in super-panic mode by now. I am so afraid of failing after such a successful lifetime academic career that I am at the point of panicking!

Still in panic mode, I come to find out that the real definition of the History of Graphic Arts (as opposed to just teaching the History of Graphic Design) includes the teaching of the history of 2-D art techniques, with a few extras added in the discussion. Here, the problem was almost solved. Of course, I still had to design the course, but I was in "happy"

mode now. Thus, every single night in the summer of 2017 (for 3 long months), I began to compose 30 lectures on the History of Graphic Arts. On lined paper, I composed an outline concerning the topics that I would cover every day. These are the topics in this presentation that I now present to you to teach. And, the course was a huge success. Of import, the students loved the course; they talked about this course with other students, their studio art professors, and my department chair; and some of my faculty colleagues even told me that they wanted to sit in on my course lectures in future semesters. I cannot tell you how relieved I was finally.

So, how did this earth-shaking course on the History of Graphic Arts differ from those who teach the History of Graphic Design? Let me tell you what I taught, and I sincerely hope that you will consider this too, because the students "ate it up." They absolutely loved this course!!! "Graphic art [is a] traditional category of fine arts, including any form of visual artistic expression (e.g., painting, drawing, photography, printmaking), usually produced on flat surfaces. Design in the graphic arts often includes typography but also encompasses original drawings, plans, and patterns for the decorative arts (e.g., furniture, tapestry, and ceramics), interiors, and architecture [4]."

Thus, in composing a comprehensive syllabus for a course on the History of Graphic Arts, include the following:

Introduction to the Graphic Arts	Photography/Cinematography
Drawing	Computer Graphics
Painting	Bindery (books)
Printmaking	Interior Layout/Architectural Design
Typography	Crafts – Design
Calligraphy	Graphic Design

The last entry in the items above mentions "Graphic Design," and most designers would agree on some basic truths about the field. "Graphic design is the process of visual communication and problem-solving using one or more of typography, photography, and illustration. The field is considered a subset of visual communication and communication design. Graphic designers create and combine symbols, images, and text to form visual representations of ideas and messages [5]." I believe it is extremely important, when considering this quote, to concentrate on the word "process." As a historian, writer, and technical editor, I understand the term "process" fully; for me, there is the process of historical examination, and there is the process of writing. Thus, it is logical to understand that graphic design, of course, involves a number of processes. "Graphic design is art

with a purpose. It involves a creative and systematic plan to solve a problem or achieve certain objectives with the use of images, symbols, or even words. It is visual communication and the aesthetic expression of concepts and ideas using various graphic elements and tools. Of note, Graphic Design differs from the study or teaching of the Graphic Arts [6]. Concerning the course I taught at ECU, it was important to compose the syllabus to concentrate on the Graphic Arts in order to serve all of the students in our department (including liberal arts, general arts, and studio majors) and not only the graphic design majors.

Thus, my introductory lectures, to set the stage for future discussions, were: What are the Graphic Arts? How Do We Think about Art, What is Art? And What Is Visual Literacy? (Meaning how do we think, research, write, and talk about the arts?) After these four introductory classes, we had a lengthy discussion about why these lectures were important in order for us to proceed to other topics. Now, most of those instructors or professors who teach Art Appreciation courses will understand that those lectures are relevant in any introduction to understanding art across college and university campuses.

## What Is Art? Followed by Discussions

- How do we define art?
- Art may be defined as anything man made (discuss this further)
- What does it mean to be creative?
- Why do we create art?
- What is the nature of art? (aesthetics)
- What are the “functions” of art?

## Some Truths about Art

- There is no agreed-upon definition of art.
- Art does not necessarily have to be beautiful.
- Art has been used to placate the gods and to create order and chaos.
- One contemporary artist sold a 2-inch part of his driveway as art.

## What Are the Purposes of Art? [7]

### After Those Introductory Course Topics to Get The Students Thinking, What Was Next?

One of my colleagues told me that I must teach color; not in one class, but to expand the discussion to another class also. Previously, I taught a university Honors course with a professor of chemistry on “Art and Chemistry.” It is the very

best course that I have even been involved with—team teaching is really great. Boy, did I really learn what color is in chemistry. In Color I, I talked about the history of colors, such as where our prehistoric ancestors found ochre and burnt umber at “paint stores” in the pre-ancient world. We also talked about fun topics, such as Mummy brown (from mummy bodies actually ground up), colors from various crushed bugs, ink from squids, and the ancient Silk Trade Route source of lapis lazuli. In Color II, I talked more about the scientific derivation of color and how specific color palettes were used during various periods by artists, such as prehistoric cave paintings, and vivid works by Giotto, Poussin, and Van Gogh, to name a few, ending with the color experiments by Helen Frankenthaler and Hans Hofmann. Color is such a subjective topic, and everyone has an opinion here. The next class topics involved the Principles of Design, Artistic Theory, and finally, the Style, Form, and Content of a work of art, including iconography and symbolism. The Mannerist artist, Bronzino (in the approximate 30-year period between the Renaissance and the Baroque eras), gives us a plethora of symbolism with his fantastic painting of *Venus, Cupid, Folly, and Time* (also called *An Allegory of Venus and Cupid and A Triumph of Venus*), c.1545. (This is a painting that looks like mythology, but it was actually meant to warn his friends about their bad moral lapses.)

The following classes discussed the regular format of artistic expression, such as Drawing, Painting, and Printmaking. These are in the oeuvre of all academic discussions concerning the arts. (Note the inclusion, finally, of women in drawing classes near the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.) However, the next topics veered off into “in depth” discussions on the origins of writing (worldwide, eastern and western) and the history of paper and writing materials (worldwide, eastern and western). What was the earliest example of writing in history? A cuneiform clay tablet business receipt for hops for beer—nothing inspirational or even romantic—darn! Next, we discussed the history of alphabets, the Asian contribution to graphic arts, and European Illuminated manuscripts (my favorite topic here is marginalia. If I lived in a monastery, I would have raised my hand to do all of the marginalia—it’s fun and very whimsical. For an early example of European marginalia during the Middle Ages, see Geoffrey Chaucer’s *The Canterbury Tales*, 14<sup>th</sup> century).

Importantly, in this discussion, I added a class on printing in Europe and the German illuminated manuscript. Of course, these are accepted topics in most Graphic Design Art History courses today. However, I expanded the class to include as

many external examples as I could find. Then, as a centerpiece for this course, I discussed the Letterpress; this was huge lecture in this series and very, very important on this topic. My former Department Chair at ECU urged that I make the History of the Letterpress a single-class topic because, in his opinion, it is often secondary in courses today.

For the next lectures, I discussed: Renaissance, Baroque, and Rococo Graphic Designs, plus 19<sup>th</sup> century typography. Again, these are accepted norms for topics in most Graphic Design art history courses. Additionally, with concerns from a dear colleague, I also added the history of 19<sup>th</sup>-century photography with an emphasis on the origins of photography. This may seem odd, but most photography majors have no idea at all about the history of photography, beginning in Roman times, through to the Renaissance, and the chemistry involved in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century. I closed this section on 19<sup>th</sup>-century photography with a Youtube on the "Oldest Photographs in the World [8]."

## Topics That Made This Course Very Special

Then came the "game changers" in this course that I was really proud of. In separate lectures each, we explored the topics of early 20<sup>th</sup>-century Graphic Design, the Bauhaus in Germany, and the early history of mid-20<sup>th</sup>-century photography. Concerning those separate lectures that I just mentioned, I want to point out that I did not just make the Bauhaus a 10-minute topic, as is often the case. For an hour and 15 minutes, we explored every element that made the Bauhaus so revolutionary in arts education. To conclude the regular chronological portion of the course, we examined postmodern design and the digital revolution in the arts. Do you know that not one of my students could describe what post-modernism is? After this class, they all understood its content internationally.

In this unique course, now was the fun part for me: this was something special that I had originally planned for this course. I simply could not wait to teach these topics, and I held them up to the students as one would dangle a delicious bone for a pet dog. These are the classes that everyone was waiting for, and I ended the course off with them.

- The History of Paper-Making and Writing Surfaces around the World
- The History of Printing Newspapers around the World (and the politics involved)
- The History of Book Binding (and marbling endpapers and book covers)

(When I worked at the Census Bureau, I attended a week-long course on marbling government documents and proceedings—fantastic eye-opening sessions, marbling papers and books in huge vats of color, and very, very artistic.)

- The History of Dime Novels (Story papers, five-and-ten-cent weeklies, "thick book" reprints, and sometimes early pulp magazines)
- 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Magazines and Newspapers, such as *Harper's Weekly* and the *London Illustrated News*.

Before printing photographs, the illustrations (drawings) in newspapers and magazines were important; this was the only way that the American Civil War events were experienced by the general public. Mid-19<sup>th</sup>-century newspapers and magazines did not have photographs; the public only saw magazine and newspaper drawings that were descriptive as possible about the events and important people involved.

- The History of Comics in Newspapers "The Yellow Kid," America's first comic, 1895 The Newspaper Wars Pulitzer and Hearst
- The History of Posters

The Early History of Posters (in the 19<sup>th</sup> & early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries) was generally European, such as Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec's posters for the Moulin Rouge (in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century) and Art Nouveau posters, advertising products, such as posters for Pears soap and even spaghetti sauce."

- European Cyrillic and Polish Posters
- Wartime Posters (any country)
- Special Events Topics.

The highlight of the course centered on the History of Designs for Special Events (I examined circus art but this could also center on rock concerts, museum exhibitions, etc.) In my 19<sup>th</sup>-Century Art History course, I taught the history of circuses. For this course on the Graphic Arts, it was a natural for me to further explore graphic designs under the Big Top, and it was fun. All of my 20-year-olds became children again.

## Additional Special Events Topics

As I reflect upon the course's extreme success, I can think of a number of other topics I could have included, such as artworks from Comic-Con, the Dr. Who Festival for Whovians, Dimension Jumps for Fans of *Red Dwarf* (yes, I actually know what *Red Dwarf* was; my Aussie-educated son has all of the season episodes on CDs), Cirque du Soleil, the Pamplona Running of the Bulls, Shakespeare in the Park, the Royal Fairy Picnic (UK) or the Teddy Bear Picnic (NZ), and many, many more sterling opportunities for artistic expression.



**Figure 1:** One of my EKU students researching a Comic-Con event in Lexington, KY (USA) concerning the Graphic Arts presentations of posters and graphic designs (plus a friendly Dalek from *Dr. Who*).

### Film and Media

Lastly, may I suggest closing with the History of Media and Film Arts, etc., such as *Gone with the Wind* or *Casablanca* (you simply cannot go wrong with a few choice clips from these seminal films). Of course, you should also examine film's beginnings with *Gertie the Dinosaur*, 1914, the controversial film *The Birth of a Nation*, 1915; *Nosferatu*, 1922; and *Metropolis*, 1927 (the Art Deco extravaganza). The list is endless here, but you must also include *Fantasia*, 1940/2000, Dali and Disney's *Destino*, 1945/2003, as well as many, many other worthy films of choice (on Youtube), and don't forget *Steamboat Willie*, 1928 (did you know that Walt Disney was afraid of mice?). By the way, the present generation may never have heard of these films, so let them know why these (and other earlier films and actors, such as Charlie Chaplin's *The Tramp*, Harold Lloyd hanging perilously off of a clock for eternity, or W.C. Fields and *The Fatal Glass of Beer*, to name a few of my favorites) are really important (and, please, don't forget Garbo also in "anything"). Include some of these movies in your discussions so that your students can share their own ideas concerning the most important (or controversial) films and actors in the early film history and in the media, or they will be forgotten forever in our mindscape.

### Final Presentations: What Students Liked Best

For our final class together, each student (all 23 of them) told why a particular lecture was their favorite (we actually had 1 hour and 15 minutes to accomplish this final

discussion). So, what did my class select? You can all make your own guesses, but let me give you a hint—it was the history of circus art and circus posters.

### Final Thoughts about Course Organization and Topics

The purpose of this paper and presentation was to relate what I did that turned a regular art history course into a "super course." Just let your mind go wild and think up topics that the students will love, and I promise you that they will learn. Expand your art history courses to go beyond teaching the regularly accepted History of Graphic Design. Of import, you will be giving them something very, very special in their overall arts education that is very gratifying.

"I think what art can do is to make us feel, and I think that in our fractured lives that's just so digitally invaded all of the time; we really have lost touch with our feelings on a fundamental level, and that's what art can do. In short, art is able to get us in touch with our feelings ... to be real ... and to lead us to attain full lives as humans. ... the force of an artist's voice, at the end of the day ... is one of the most important expressions of our humanity and our culture" [9].

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