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What is Graphic Design?

When people think about graphic design, generally speaking, art is its most common association. This is not incorrect; however, if one only claims that graphic design is just art and nothing else, then there is a misconception over the definition of what the career embodies. Experts in the field of graphic design define their work as an intersection of art and technology. The art aspect encompasses the main idea of the career: the simplistic and/or complex design and creation of imagery and figures. However, the development and furthering of these designs wouldn't be possible in this field without the incorporation of its second main aspect: technology. Technology serves as the backbone to graphic design in that through the use of special tools and programs, a simple piece of artwork could be greatly transformed into something more sophisticated and professional. Graphic design can be understood through an examination of its history and current use, technical aspects, and its differences from similar college majors and careers, namely architecture and illustration. (Poggenpohl, "What is Graphic Design?")

Historically speaking, graphic design has held its relevance for thousands of years. Long before the invention of the alphabet, ancient societies in Mesopotamia and Egypt were using symbols and designs for their writing systems. Hieroglyphics, which was the writing system in Egypt at the time, utilized thousands of symbols and pictograms to represent words and ideas. Mesopotamia also had a writing system called Cuneiform. Like Hieroglyphics, Cuneiform also used symbols and pictograms to depict words but also incorporated the idea of writing neatly on a line for presentation and organization purposes. Additionally, Cuneiform writers used a stylus—a precursor to future blunt writing instruments such as today's pencil. Together, the writing systems of these two ancient societies helped pave the way for (and continue) the legacy of what would be later known as graphic design. ("A Short Introduction to Graphic Design History.")

Fast-forwarding to the era of the Greeks and Phoenicians, the formation of a structured alphabet was a step up from early writings where the only means of interpreting definitions were from visual symbols. Eventually, as written language began to take shape, various regions adopted and

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evolved the Greek/Phoenician alphabet into their own. Centuries later, the Romans would model their letters and writing style into Latin and font forms respectively. Regarding font forms, these would be instrumental in establishing design ideas and usage in wording for commercial appeal. Such appeal would be exemplified in book titles, marquees, documents, and vice versa. Technology that would be introduced during the Renaissance such as the movable type and new techniques including engraving letters further contributed to the evolution of graphic design. The movable type, which enabled writers to quickly and proficiently work on their papers had been invented and provided for the increased exposure of font use. Font types such as serif and sans serif could be used as font blocks to be placed on the movable type, enhancing a written document's look. Letter engraving would prove to be popular as an application of graphic design as it involved the use of etching a significant word or message (permanently) but usually with the mindset of evoking a visual message (either by the font use and/or letter play/puns). ("A Short Introduction to Graphic Design History.")

At the start of the modern era, the applications of graphic design would increase in significance. During the 1800s and 1900s, illustrated posters depicting fashion, propaganda, and later, advertising made use of word play and distinct graphical styles. The latter in particular came into prominence as designers looked to visual appeal based on a poster's motif. For example, posters highlighting women fashion would emphasize background beauty, or even match the activity or posture of a focus model. Advertising, as it would be a booming industry in the twentieth century, was accentuated by graphic design. Perhaps one extreme example illustrating this is the psychological effect an advertising logo has on a consumer. Everyone has been in such a situation; if a consumer chooses between two items, practically the same, only the one with a brand name (visually represented by a logo) will suffice. An article in designhistory.org even points:

"As early as 1896, experimental psychologists began studying the mental processes involved in advertising. The first psychological theory of advertising maintained, in effect, that the consumer was a non-rational, suggestible creature under the hypnotic influence of the advertising copywriter." Today, this practice still continues. Perhaps, the two main technological advances that have evolved graphic design into the career it is today are computers and computer software. Since the advent of computers, the structure of graphic design had shifted from handwork to the screen. As a result from this, a number of perks have made utilizing tools for graphic design easier. Most notably, Microsoft Word and Adobe Photoshop have given graphic designers the ability to universally choose any font

type and design scheme for a product. Photoshop especially helps designers in crafting a sophisticated photo in rearranging color tones, proportions, and often mixing these with themes and decorations. Photoshop remains in use today both professionally and academically for its digitizing use in graphic design. (“A Short Introduction to Graphic Design History.”)

The technical aspects of any sub-discipline within a larger grouping are what essentially differentiates it between varying and related fields. Therefore, graphic design is a sub-discipline of design, a field of work that is traced from art. As the term “design” is a bit too general to properly describe what graphic design is, one has to delve into its technical aspects. Essentially, graphic design is the art of combining text and pictures for a number of products. This simple definition already creates deep contrast from graphic design to just regular design where only the visual aspect is focused on. As already stated, graphic design makes its use in many applications; some wouldn't be possible without the exclusivity of graphic design. The most prominent of these applications regards commercial use. In the filmmaking industry, for example, graphic designers are needed for making film posters. In this case, graphic designers must “combine images and typography to communicate a film's message to the audience.

Graphic design is also not strictly limited to creating symbols and posters. Many careers in graphic design range from digital photography to creating attire. Digital photography is a major aspect of graphic design; with the training and use of programs such as Photoshop, this isn't surprising. With Photoshop offering plenty of tools to alter and adjust a photo's color, size and message, seemingly endless results are destined. Even with creating attire, graphic design helps one to forge a line of clothing in a particular style. Because graphic design puts makes use of art and word forms, it is relatively easy to make tee-shirts and sports gear bearing symbols and logos respectively. Even the lack of words alone in designing clothing is still graphic design; a picture is worth a thousand words and the language of today speaks for this. An emoticon, which conveys a particular mood, is commonly used in social networking websites and graphic designers heavily incorporate these into their work, clothing design being an example. Other than digital photography and designing clothing, graphic design careers branch out to desktop publication, production specialization and drafting. (“A Short Introduction to Graphic Design History.”)

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Part of understanding what constitutes graphic design is knowing the differences between it and other but similar careers. It is important to know this distinction in order to avoid confusion since art careers tend to share the same conceptual elements for work purposes (i.e. drawing, presenting and knowing a client's needs). Of course there are a couple of college majors/careers that people may interchange when discussing about what art discipline is the best to go into. The most common of these are graphic design and architecture. Although these two fields are relatively similar in learning and applying knowledge to projects, the main difference highlights what a product will ultimately result from a graphic designer or an architect. One other career that people may interchange with graphic design is illustration. Illustration is commonly associated alongside careers such as writing where upon a writer's request for their book to be represented visually, illustrators are needed. And like graphic design, illustration draws upon creative skills with the use of tools. (Smith, "Similarities Between Graphic Design & Architecture.")

"Graphic designers and architects must be artistic and creative thinkers. Both provide professional design services; one in building design, and the other [in] visual or audio materials like animation, pamphlets, logos and websites" (architecture and graphic design respectively) asserts Ford Smith. In spite of this difference, students of both majors will have similar educational training and will have to acquire similar skills in drawing. Consequently, these students will take courses in the same art department though course study will be different. Background courses in drawing, art history, visual art, computer graphics and digital design will be often shared between the two majors. After college graduation, the job requirements for both fields are similar. Among them, having important traits such as artistic talent and creativity, as well as strong analytical, planning and organizational abilities are a must. Furthermore, job responsibilities call for recruiting and securing a client base; when such client base is present, graphic designers and architects can create products based on each client's needs and specifications. Ultimately, an architect will serve to create designs for buildings and public structures while a graphic designer focuses on smaller projects pertaining to individual use; an important distinction to be made between the two careers. (Smith, "Similarities Between Graphic Design & Architecture.")

Switching gears, the distinction between graphic design and illustration must also be addressed, being that they are closely related fields which sometimes overlap. In short, illustrators

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must be adept in designing visuals to represent the written work they are contributing to whereas graphic designers focus more on communicating visuals in a message. Both fields have an audience to cater to and both have its workers use design to promote or further an idea. The simplest way to differentiate graphic design and illustration is looking at how the former aids a reader (of a book or a perhaps a comic strip) in visualizing written dialogue into imagery while the latter uses written words and builds upon this by changing it into imagery; they're almost opposite. Despite this, there are instances where graphic designers and illustrators work together. In one such, a graphic designer requires an image in which an illustrator must come up with. The illustrator creates a picture and thus, the graphic designer will decide how the picture could be used in a layout. ("Illustrator vs. Graphic Designer.")

In conclusion, when someone asks to define graphic design, one must elaborate upon its details. Details including the history of graphic design (and its evolution from what was then practiced and known as basic art), its current use, and its technical aspects that define the field uniquely from others contribute in defining the field. Askers should also be aware of how graphic design differs from relatable careers, namely architecture. It essentially is important to know all these details for when asking to define graphic design, let alone any other career. A notable case can be made for applying for college and deciding on a major. After all, it is easy to just choose a major based on little knowledge and face-value impressions; likewise, it is hard to stick with a program once committed, barring a lengthy transfer process. Finally, on the same subject, understanding the definition of a career such as graphic design can be equated to taking an introductory class on its background; the catch: it is research done usually independently and without the burden of paying for the information. Even though attending an actual class does help one delve into the career of their choosing, preliminary research is necessary for solidifying a reason why to study in a major. Whatever is necessary, contributing to a definition of a career such as graphic design raises awareness for what is to be expected if one pursues it.

Works Cited

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