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Zoom in to the Layers of Graphic Design

An Honors Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for Honors in
Betty Foy Sanders Department of Art

By
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Under the mentorship of Edward Rushton

ABSTRACT

Graphic design is a lot like languages varying from place to place. It’s a way of communication that retains its own cultural characteristics even though it shares similar design’s aesthetics. Graphic design varies from culture to culture, influenced by a country’s culture, language, traditions, history, and society. Just like art and music, graphic design’s aesthetics differs and expresses different messages across every culture. There are common graphic design’s elements found in one culture that are not found in other cultures and vice versa.

As an international student, this is a topic that has really interested me because I want to show how my culture affects my designs and how designs change according to the place and people. Design elements and guidelines are shared around the world, but the message and the audience vary.

On my honors thesis, I will address a research on the impact of culture in graphic design and identify the patterns, colors, imagery, and common elements found and used in different cultures. I will show the different types of designs and how they reflect their cultural influence. I will discuss and display examples of graphic design from the following cultures: Latin America, United Kingdom, United States, China, Japan, and Middle East.

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Zoom in to the Layers of Graphic Design

It is known that graphic design works a lot like verbal language; it is a visual language that speaks around the world to different types of audiences. Graphic design shares design elements, aesthetics, styles, and ideas around the world, but still retain its own cultural characteristics. When we think of graphic design in different cultures, we picture every design style being differentiated from one another. As stated by David Carlson in his magazine *David Report*, “Design and culture have always been closely interrelated, but in many instances design is flaunted as the true measure of culture, rather than belonging to part of cultural context of the society” (Carlson, 6).

He argues that the designs created in the different cultures belong to the cultural context but do not necessarily illustrate the culture itself. This honors thesis addresses the proposal that cultures play a role in graphic design even though they all share the same aesthetics and design elements. Graphic design is culturally differentiated even though nowadays it shares a similar culture, the globalized contemporary culture.

I. Background

The new wave of contemporary graphic design speaks to the world, not just to the culture in which it was produces, though it may still retain characteristics of its original culture. Even though graphic designers’ works may have influences from other cultures and merge into the globalization of graphic design, their designs still differ from one another in their cultural essence. The connection between culture and graphic design used to be stronger; nowadays through the process of globalization it has been disconnected in response to the emergence of a more universal contemporary culture in the graphic design field. As stated by Inge Economou in his article on *South African Journal of Art History*,
“It is important to note, though not surprising, that a consonant relation seems to exist between contemporary graphic design and contemporary culture” (Economou,19). This means that contemporary culture is what influences contemporary graphic design nowadays and what may be the reason why graphic design from different cultures are emerging into one single culture, the contemporary culture. Contemporary graphic design is based more on the elements and values established by contemporary culture, targeting the world and many different cultures.

Andrew Blauvelt in his article in *Emigre 32* stated that “The values to which they subscribe are precisely those that are used to sustain professional graphic design: originality, innovation, and rationality” (Blauvelt, 1995), meaning that contemporary graphic design is based more in creating an original, innovative, and rational design to connect with the contemporary culture, but doesn’t assure that the design is not going to be influenced by its original culture. Globalization can be a trend affecting cultural influence in graphic design, but cultures still maintain some of their original essence and, in that differ from one another.

II. Role of Culture in Graphic Design

Contemporary designs are being disconnected from specific regional cultures and more greatly connected to this new “universal culture.” David Carlson stated in *David Report*, “In the 21st Century the task to capturing culture has become more and more difficult in terms of expressing culture through the medium of design” (Carlson,16). According to Carlson, 21st century designs are not specifically connected to their culture anymore. Expressing culture through graphic design may not be a “modern” thing anymore since some designers are creating universal pieces to reach a larger
audience or creating pieces for different cultures. Inge Economou in his article in South African Journal of Art History posited his idea that “the modern world is characterized by a modernist search for a “universal” (sameness) to re-establish unity among humankind, in the face of this newfound plurality of cultures” (Economou, 21). His statement relates to the idea of creating a universal contemporary culture to be identified with other another around the world. This statement relates to globalism and how everything and everyone is becoming globalized. Graphic design can still preserve much from its native culture but may also become part of this new trend looking for universal unity and identification.

Multiculturalism is a phenomenon that is taking place in contemporary graphic design. As indicated by Andrew in Emigre 32, “We are, in fact, witnessing a renewed discovery of cultural diversity under the banner of multiculturalism, a phenomenon that is reflected in “progressive” advertising campaigns” (Blauvelt, 1994). This new phenomenon known as multiculturalism is a part of graphic design which takes it to different places, cultures, and audiences which creates a larger audience. This combination of cultures creates what is known as the “universal culture,” the blend of cultures into one unified culture.

III. Globalism

As stated by Marc Mueller in his essay, “Graphic design is a driving force behind the shaping of culture. While it has long supported the development of a universal, global culture, it has found solutions to reconnect people to their physical environment” (Mueller, 2013). According to Mueller, contemporary graphic designers have been integrating the “universal culture” phenomenon to their work. Since it is considered a
more collective and unified culture, people feel connected to it, but also somehow reconnected to their original culture.

Marc Mueller also wrote that, “In times in which cultural elements are excerpted from their original context, it becomes the designer’s role to help with the translation of these cultural elements into new environments, helping with the adaptation of new practices in ways that are in connection to the cultural systems in which it is placed. This way, graphic design helps counteract the disconnection between cultures and place that was initiated by globalization” (Mueller, 2013). This means that the audience is becoming more familiar with contemporary graphic design and universal culture since they are moving hand in hand. Graphic designers are creating work that fits into this universal culture and translates into different cultures and audiences while still retaining elements of their original cultures.

IV. True to Culture and Identity

“In this sense, whilst the application of design is multiplying exponentially, it is also losing its validity as an authentic cultural icon. It has become synonymous with cloning the face of global culture itself, more often representing the uniformity of mass globalization, rather than reflecting the facets of cultural difference and diversity” (Carlson, 8). Nowadays, graphic design is everywhere; people don’t realize how many times they interact with it every day. The use of graphic design along with global culture is increasing every day along with the loss of cultural difference and diversity in the contemporary designs, yet I believe that culture still plays a role in the universal designs. Andrew Blauvelt emphasizes in *Emigre* 32, “The first principle of advertising: how to be
a unique individual while being like everyone else. It is a particular nature of corporate culture which can speak of difference through the language of sameness” (Blauvelt, 1995). This statement represents the idea of the global culture trying to achieve the goal of being individual and original but collective and ordinary at the same time. Designs are now speaking in the language of sameness to incorporate into the global culture, but are also trying to differentiate themselves by incorporating characteristics from their own cultures. “Authentic culture is gone, if it ever existed, and what is left is the material of invention” (Blauvelt, 1995). According to Blauvelt, the genuine culture has faded when it comes to graphic design; graphic designers are more concerned with creating something innovative rather than something culturally representative. Cultural influence will always be identified in the works of art that represent something culture-specific, while designs that are created for a larger audience will choose the language of sameness, a more universal visual language.

V. Latin America

Latin American graphic design is known for its common themes, such as the Latino’s love for life, dance, and celebration. People relate Latin American graphic design to vibrant aesthetics because this is one of the main characteristics of these cultures. As stated by Rachel Arandilla in 1st Web Designer, “Latin American design is a reflection of the rampant street art scene: colorful, tantalizing, and soulful” (Arandilla, 2010). This clearly expresses what the main theme is in Latin American graphic design. They relate it to fun, extravagance, and vibrance due to the perception they have of their culture, relating everything to a “fiesta.” The works of Jorge Alderete reflect these characteristics. He uses animated colors, wacky typography, and very dynamic shapes and forms.

There is motion and emotion in these Latin American designs with the evident influence of pop art and deco which makes their designs to be perceived as being very dynamic and enjoyable by the audience.
Moreover, these works of art can be easily identified as part of the Latin American cultures not only because of the language employed, but also the shared aesthetics of Latin American culture. Even though Latin American graphic designers also use English in their designs targeting a large audience, they still preserve their cultural style. For example, the works of Juan Camilo Rojas are mainly in English and don’t necessarily reflect his own culture.

From left to right, top to bottom: *One Mistake It’s All It Takes* (2008), *Help* (2008), *Macy's Holiday Window Display*, Miami Beach (2008).
Furthermore, as stated by Rachel Arandilla “Latin American graphic designers teach us to look at design not just visually, but with our six senses” (Arandilla, 2010), Latin American designs do make one feel with all the senses. They are very powerful designs which frequently maintain their own cultural characteristics such as religion, music, and art but also can be exposed to a larger audience with the same effect.

VI. United States

American graphic design is characterized by being very dynamic. The combination of color, typography, and images interact with one another to create this overall chaotic style. The designs consist of “going outside the box” by experimenting with scale proportions and dimensions. David Carson’s work reflects these characteristics in his work. His designs consist of typography in different scale proportions with the combination of image, color, and shapes. Furthermore, he has created designs that don’t only fit within his own culture. His work, Segui Tu Intuicion, reflects the globalization of his designs by showing type in Spanish. He is not just designing for his own culture, but also for a larger audience.

From left to right, top to bottom: Follow Your Intuition (2012), Do Not Be Satisfied (1990s), Little White Lies Magazine Cover (2011).
Paula Scher illustrates the same characteristics as David Carson in her work. She uses a variety of scale proportions and typography orientations to create dynamism and movement. These designs don’t have evident characteristics of her culture other than the language employed. Scher’s designs can be exposed to a larger audience without being identified to be part of a different culture.
VII. United Kingdom

British graphic design characteristics are comparable to those of American graphic design. These designs are very rich in color and dynamic. They experiment with motion and the interaction of typography and image. Typography is very bold and colorful as the focus of the design. For example in Neville Brody’s designs typography and color are one of the most important features of his style. These designs don’t have anything specifically related to their own cultures and can target a larger audience. They may fall under the process of globalization in graphic design and share similar characteristics with American and worldwide designs.

On the other hand, British graphic designer Peter Saville creates more minimal designs. His designs are simpler, but still convey the idea of motion and dynamism.

Another set of works that don’t necessarily appeal to the culture, British graphic designers reflect the worldwide aesthetics of graphic design in their work.

VIII. China

Chinese graphic design is relatively new in comparison to the other cultures. Their designs haven’t been recently shown because of government limitations and restrictions. Chinese designs consist of a wave of creative energy and strong sense of nationalism. Graphic design has mainly been used for self-expression in the Chinese culture. The Chinese designer, Qian Qian work consists of Chinese calligraphy and culturally related symbols or characters. In his works of art he is using culturally related elements that can only be understood by a Chinese. As mentioned by Rachel Arandilla, “Modern graphic design still employs the same design elements found in traditional Chinese art” (Arandilla, 2010). This is very evident in Chinese designs since they used their own calligraphy and Chinese symbols such as the panda in the work of art by Qian Qian. From left to right, top to bottom: 888 (2008), China Shadow (2006), Summer (2009).
Though culturally identifiable, “Some elements in graphic design are copied from other cultures. Chinese is highly influenced by the west, but still shows its own cultural drive and soul,” (Arandilla, 2010). This is shown in Nod Young’s works: he uses Chinese calligraphy and symbols but also English text that can be understood by a larger audience.
For example, Nod Young’s works below show dynamism of colors, shapes, and forms that reflect Chinese culture but can also be visible in other cultures. Chinese calligraphy becomes more like decorative forms which makes the design very interesting and active. As mentioned before, Chinese graphic designers are influenced by the West but still retain their own culture within their designs. Since Chinese culture is relatively new in the graphic design industry, globalization hasn’t really affected their designs and Chinese culture remains very evident.

IX. Japan

Japanese graphic design shows a more variety by combining tradition and modern designs. Their style is more sleek and futuristic with the use of neon colors and very minimal representations. Masuteru Aoba’s work reflects how Japanese aesthetics in design are very minimal and simple.

Koichi Sato’s designs show the urban and offbeat side of the Japanese culture. As stated by Rachel Arandilla “They show the affinity for neon colors, simulating the lights in downtown Tokyo” (Arandilla, 2010). This is visually clear in Sato’s work; they have the neon colors and lights effect which reflect the idea of downtown Tokyo, but also the general futuristic and minimal view of this culture.

According to Rachel Arandilla, “It is radically different from what we are used to in the West” (Arandilla, 2010). These Japanese designs differ from the usual ones encountered in the West; they are a new style non-specific to a culture or place.
X. Middle East

Meanwhile in the Middle East, graphic design is alluring yet mystifying. The Middle Eastern designs remain true to their culture with the strong influence of old calligraphy and arabesque design. Moreover, the repetition of forms and patterns is very consistent in the designs. Middle Eastern designs are very rich in color and culture. For example, Fayez Al Harthi’s designs show repetition and incorporate arabesque symbols to reflect their origin. His culture still remains very identifiable in his designs.

From left to right, top to bottom: Dyrup Advertising (2010), Me (2009), Hotel Flyers (2010).
Khawar Bilal’s work also utilizes arabesque symbols and calligraphy in his designs. Also, color plays a very important role by emphasizing the culturally related symbols and true to their culture.

According to Rachel Arandilla, “They have adopted many Western ideas on design, but retain the identity that makes them distinct” (Arandilla, 2010). Middle Eastern graphic design can be influenced by the Western ideas, but still reflect their identity and culture.

The combination of many different cultures is what makes contemporary graphic design to fit into our contemporary culture. In contemporary graphic design, cultures are not isolated from one another but instead complement and work together into this new era of universal culture even though some designs remain true to their own cultures.
Contemporary graphic design is defined by universal culture, characterized by the comprehension of all the parts of cultures as intimately interconnected. It is all about borrowing and sharing to create the unity of this universal culture. Culture definitely plays a role in graphic design. Graphic design is culturally differentiated, but still shares the same culture, the globalized contemporary culture.

Eileen Kane stated, “Graphic design serves as a filter through which much of our communication is disseminated. Graphic designers find themselves in the unique position of being gatekeepers of information as well as providing a mirror that reflects contemporary culture” (Kane, 32). In order to understand graphic design today one doesn’t necessarily have to understand the culture of origin. Culture still has an effect on graphic design, but it is not prevented from moving into the globalization of it. Some of the new graphic design still remains true to its culture even though they are exposed to a larger audience. Even though graphic design is moving towards globalization, the different cultures around the world manifest their own culture and characteristics in their designs and will always preserve an essence of their origin.
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