

Conditions for substantive duration of visual communication

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About the author

Douglas D. May has been a communications design professional for over four decades. He holds undergraduate degrees from the University of North Texas and Art Center College of Design and earned an MFA with Emphasis in Visual Communication from Texas A&M University-Commerce. His professional design services have included assignments from international, national, regional, and local clientele. Doug joined the College of Visual Arts and Design at the University of North Texas in 2017. His recognition as an AIGA Fellow tops 200 professional design awards and career achievements, including the American Advertising Federation Dallas 2020 Educator of the Year. The work has been exhibited internationally by invitation in design exhibits in Seoul, Korea; London, England; Katowice, Poland; St. Gallen, Switzerland; and Jakarta, Indonesia. Doug May is an AIGA Dallas advisory board member and past president of the Dallas Society of Visual Communication.

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And this must be taken notice of: that all these parts together make such an agreeing concord, that in the declaring of the same, they give us satisfaction to know the uniformity of the things, and the good judgment of those who knew to contrive them in such a manner that a thing is brought forth which is delightful and perfect – *'The Iconlogica'* c. 1593 (Ripa 4).

When a friend, a well-known illustrator, passed away, his obituary mentioned that he was one of only 4,500 people to ever enter the cavern at Lascaux, France, and marvel at the six hundred magnificent 15,000-year-old cave paintings. How can it be that so few people have seen these images in person, yet they still have such a lasting impact on humanity? The cave was discovered in 1948, but it was closed to the public in 1963. These early images gained extended viewings through mechanical reproductions in books, magazines, films, and even souvenir postcards. That insight makes one contemplate the conditions that contribute to a substantive duration of relevant visual communication. What qualities manifest in art and design objects their creators that transcend time and cultures to satisfy our global interconnectedness and human understanding? The following is a short, non-exhaustive list to identify such criteria

Characteristics of the art and design process

1. Creative individuals introduce novel ideas by making unlikely connections.

Visual interpretations of humankind's cognitive processes have existed from the very beginning of recorded imagery. The cave paintings at Lascaux have been recognized as being drawn from 'a high level of observation and memory' in the genesis of visual communication (Meggs 7). When we create from our imagination, an artist's subjectivity comes into unconscious play as we take liberties with form. Centuries later, in defining what became the modernist approach, Paul Cezanne broke down the painting process to reveal an underlying world of geometric shapes and prepared us to experience the machine age by 'presenting the viewer with two-dimensional and three-dimensional images simultaneously' (Gardner 380). The significant breakthroughs in graphic design correspond with dramatic philosophical shifts that required unique visual interpretations throughout history. These events are dramatized in inspirational manifestations that impact our societies to experience things differently. For instance, Frank Lloyd Wright's early design influences were as culturally diverse as possible. His North American location in the Midwest United States may have played an essential role in his viewpoint. Physically located equidistant from Europe, Japan, and the furthest sites of ancient Mesoamerican cultures, his ability to synthesize these faraway influences into his unique vision became his hallmark. The interconnection of dispersed ideas, styles, techniques, and technologies fuels innovation by creating something new instead of making something known slightly better.

2. Wit leads the viewer to an unexpected but obvious conclusion.

Design can effectively deliver the wit of unanticipated outcomes. Revealing the unexpected is one way to entice and play with the audience. Revealing surprise conclusions is a familiar technique within many forms of creative expression, including theater, literature, and the

visual arts. When used in comedy, an unexpected punchline gives us insight into a scenario that only makes sense as it is revealed. The aesthetics of humor create ‘a perceptual play, or sleight of hand, in which the audience or viewers are tricked into experiencing more by implication than they would by direct statement.’ (Williams 15). The same effect results when the designer’s often gamesome technique reveals a surprising moment by enticing the viewers’ intellect towards the intended resolution.

3. Ideas strengthen inversely through reductive thinking.

Many prime examples across design history point to a desire of the artist/designer to rely on the reductive method of conceptualization to achieve a base level in their designs. Many schools of thought, including those before and after the twentieth century, consistently refined and simplified complex systems that otherwise restricted widespread use. Examples can be seen in the evolution of language, writing, printing, typography, user experience, and other forms of communication design. Upon a deeper look into individual cultures and design practice, we find entire philosophies of the reductive method are maintained as a core principle. These include not just the mainstays of Modernism, such as Art Nouveau, Art Deco, Dada, The International Style, and within the deconstruction techniques of Post-Modernism theory. Such practice can also be seen in ancient cultures as diverse as the Mesoamerican and Asian civilizations. Islamic cultures (although seeming complex with pattern) also make a similar effort by restricting the human form from religious texts. Clarity of thought through simplified symbolism is a frequent technique, with many examples presented across the historical patchwork of visual communications.

Outcomes of artistic and design interventions

1. Unanticipated outcomes benefit from moderating group interactions.

Whether supported by a tribe, king, conqueror, religious council, aristocrat, publisher, politician, nation, institution, or a multinational corporation, an endorsement from an influential patron can lead to interconnectedness. Stewardship from such a recognized power not only validates through its authority or association but sparks additional support from other non-specialized interests, including end-users. This phenomenon has been coined ‘The Medici effect’ and is defined as ‘what happens when you step into an intersection of different disciplines and cultures and bring the ideas you find there to life’ (Johansson 3).

The primary nature of design is to be a multi-disciplinary (perhaps trans-disciplinary) activity. In communication design, content is informed by the interaction between diverse areas of specialization. These areas may include academic domains such as sociology, psychology, anthropology, linguistics, economics, technology, and engineering to promote understanding to external audiences. Communication Design as a discipline is an interface between independent and often unrelated systems where they meet and act on or communicate with one another and is facilitated by transcoding (converting language or information from one form of coded representation to another to enable ease of understanding.) This principle used in practice guides communication design to explore beyond the limitations of cultural tradition and political constraints.

2. Timely ideas shape emerging technologies.

From handmade tools, symbols, writing, paper, printing, photography – to broadcast and digital media, each era has demanded that technologies be created for the benefit and exchange of all

humankind. Despite all attempts to protect secrets that might benefit a single power, important ideas spread like wildfire. Artists and designers can be early adopters of emerging technologies and can push the boundaries of usefulness to unforeseen outcomes. There is a great misconception regarding technology that ‘technology changes society’ when, more likely, ‘society develops technology to address the changes that are taking place within it’ (Kurlansky xiv). This autonomous proverb confirms that ‘Necessity is the mother of invention.’ (unknown).

Effects of culture on art and design

1. The catalyst for big ideas often starts with curiosity from a small audience.

Major philosophical or artistic breakthroughs can incubate for years in small groups of like-minded people. In Paris over one hundred years ago, early cubist painters Braque and Picasso exchanged ideas among only a few people: ‘Their work had no role in public speaking, and so there was no public pressure on it to confirm. This was fortunate since they were engaged in a project which would presently seem, from the point of view of normal description, quite crazy’ (Hughes 20).

Many examples of such small groups struggle, refine, adapt, and perfect their approaches before becoming influential movements. An excellent design example of this is The Glasgow School. This group worked in relative isolation in a remote location. Yet within a few years, they profoundly influenced the Art Nouveau design movement as far away as France, and Austria, with an impact on the United States. The ripples of this small group influenced the counterculture poster movement in San Francisco some six decades later.

2. The most noted creators reflect an emerging zeitgeist.

The German word *Zeitgeist* is ‘the defining spirit or mood of a particular period of history as shown by the ideas and beliefs of the time’ (*Zeitgeist*). Educator and author Virginia Smith noted in her book *The Funny Little Man* that: ‘especially in graphic design, the events in a life may be less important than other forces acting upon the designer’s work’ (Smith vi). The recording of history requires us to chronicle cultural milestones to understand the progress of the human species. Graphic design is a conduit of knowledge to these critical moments due to its effective arresting and emotional delivery. Inscriptions in stone, printed books, posters, and digital output continue to influence human history. Interestingly enough, the power behind many influential ideas has been frequent repetition as they are copied forms of traditional, bureaucratic, or charismatic authority. The frequency and dissemination of this messaging, intensified by digital delivery speed, have subsequently aggravated our information overload.

3. Will the future be less real?

If knowledge is an artifact, innovation is the result of interaction on the web, then the way for us to better manage change is to become acquainted with the interactive process (Burke 6).

New ways of generating artificial imagery are upon us, yet a consensus for truth and authenticity is as critical as any previous time in history. Today, interconnectedness can happen in milliseconds as communications are exchanged across the Internet. Will electronic media’s less physical and fleeting nature become as vital to us as the tangible image has been in the past? Our human fallibility in remembering yesterday’s cultural meme may not be as crucial to our survival as a physical record of how to hunt and kill a wild beast. Only time will tell if design

scholars and professionals can keep pace with the emerging requirements to meet new challenges and sustain the societal benefits visual communication offers.

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