Inspire: the confluence of art & design

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INSPIRE: THE CONFLUENCE OF ART & DESIGN

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
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in

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by

John Mark Lawler
B.F.A., Mississippi State University, 2000
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Abstract

Inspire: The Confluence of Art & Design seeks to untangle the inextricable link between graphic design and art. Graphic design has always been seen simply as an informational or sales tool; rarely is it seen as art. The work presented in this show illustrates that works created with typography can, in fact, be one and the same.
The Unanswerable Question

What is art? What is graphic design? What makes graphic design art? These are difficult questions to answer, so much so, that man has been asking the first of the three questions for centuries. As for the latter two, the term “graphic design” has not been around that long, but you get the point. If we are honest with ourselves, we will admit that there really is not an answer to any of them. Each individual has his or her own opinion about what is and is not art. That’s what it comes down to; what each of us finds pleasing and interesting and thought provoking to us personally is what art is.

In Leo Tolstoy’s 1896 essay What is Art?, the author states:

“In order correctly to define art, it is necessary, first of all, to cease to consider it as a means to pleasure and to consider it as one of the conditions of human life. Viewing it in this way we cannot fail to observe that art is one of the means of intercourse between man and man.

Every work of art causes the receiver to enter into a certain kind of relationship both with him who produced, or is producing, the art, and with all those who, simultaneously, previously, or subsequently, receive the same artistic impression.”

This statement may in fact create more questions than it actually answers. Tolstoy seems to be saying that there is a connection and relationship between the artist and all who view and experience the art individually. I’m not sure how there is a connection and relationship between each viewer. That seems a bit indulgent by Tolstoy. Yet, I agree that there is some form of relationship between the artist and viewer even if it is an oversimplification. When I create a piece of art, I am keenly sensitive to how the viewer may perceive it, although it is impossible to predict what my work will mean to all people. Similarly, I cannot speak for all artists but I believe most must feel the same way.
As artists, we all want our work to be viewed and appreciated. Artists create for many different reasons. Some of us create as a form of self-therapy and an expression of what is happening in our lives at that moment, others create to make a social or political statement. Still others create for the simple joy of creating. There are nearly as many reasons why creatives create as there are creatives. But the one commonality, if we are to believe Tolstoy, is that we want our work to be seen and we want to make a lasting impression on the viewers. There is something inspiring about creating something that will impact another human beings life. Even a small connection is more than worth the time and effort used in the creation of a piece. It is this relationship that Tolstoy is referring to.

Tolstoy goes on to say:

“To evoke in oneself a feeling one has once experienced, and having evoked it in oneself, then, by means of movements, lines, colors, sounds, or forms expressed in words, so to transmit that feeling that others may experience the same feeling - this is the activity of art.

Art is a human activity consisting in this, that one man consciously, by means of certain external signs, hands on to others feelings he has lived through, and that other people are infected by these feelings and also experience them.”

By this, Tolstoy is saying that art is more than the viewer experiencing a reaction to a piece, but rather a combination of creator intent and viewer reaction. An individual can experience a significant reaction to an ordinary object but that does not make that object a work of art, nor does it make the creator of that ordinary object an artist. To create a piece of art, the artist must have had an intent and desire to share an experience and evoke a feeling in the viewer. As simplistic as this answer is, we now have basis to begin to answer the question, “What makes graphic design art?”

Graphic design is defined as: the art or profession of using design elements (as typography and images) to convey information or create an effect. Graphic design
is part of our daily lives. Any time you see the combination of type and image, you are viewing a piece of graphic design. Although the definition just given is competent, it fails to encompass the multitude of variables that comprise graphic design. This same dilemma is encountered when trying to define art. For instance, does a piece have to be a combination of type and imagery to be considered graphic design or can it be either? If the answer is that it can be one or the other, does that mean that a hand written letter to Aunt Mildred should be considered graphic design? This could be achieved if special consideration was given to the layout and design of the letter to create an effect or convey a specific emotion in order to evoke a response or feeling. The key is in the visual conceptualization of whatever piece you are creating. When designing a poster to resemble a hand written letter, the poster becomes graphic design rather than simply a letter. The purposeful intention of design distinguishes one from the other. Many great designs use type only with no images to create a desirable effect. In fact, many times the addition of an image to a piece would significantly detract from the meaning of the piece, which is why the designer chose to omit an image originally.

In the documentary, Helvetica, Erik Spiekermann says:

“I’m obviously a typomaniac—which is an incurable if not mortal disease.”

Although most definitions of graphic design include the combination of type and image, type seems to be the consistent term when attempting to define graphic design, and rightfully so. Few things are as synonymous with graphic design and those who call themselves graphic designers than type. All graphic designers have a continuing love affair with type. Some, like Spiekermann, have a very mechanical approach to typography while others, like David Carson, seem to abuse the type in order to generate an emotional reaction.
In a 2006 interview with Adrian Shaughnessy Erik Spiekermann explains:

“I’m OK when it comes to complex things like grids. I like maths (sic). I like geometry. I like multiples. How things are arranged on the page. I like that because it’s all about discipline. I learnt about type through doing hot-metal type setting. So I know that what is between the black marks is as important as the black marks themselves. With metal typesetting you have to touch it, it’s not just the return key. So that’s my discipline. I’m an art historian by trade; I’m slightly intellectual, maybe too intellectual. When it comes to visualizing things I’m too intellectual, it becomes too obvious. Neville Brody’s the exact opposite of me. We’ve worked together successfully. Neville’s a digital painter. He just throws it on the page and it looks great, but he can’t repeat it. I’m the other way round. I provide the skeleton, I make sure things don’t fall down. And he makes it look good, and I’m very happy with that.”

Neither David Carson’s, Neville Brody’s, nor Erik Spiekermann’s styles are any more graphic design than the other. All three styles are utilized to elicit reaction and emotion. Regardless of style, one thing is certain, for a piece to be considered graphic design, there needs to be a purposeful intent on the part of the designer.

The second aspect of the stated definition of graphic design deals with image or graphics. Just like the question asked about type, one can ask about graphics. Can a piece be considered graphic design without type? Yes, for example, logos around the world that are created by graphic designers communicate without the use of text. Sure, at some point, usually when they are introduced, most logos are seen with the company name associated with the mark, but just as often the mark is seen standing alone. I suppose the question is whether or not the graphic is an illustration or a piece of graphic design. The answer is simply both; the two cannot be separated. Nor is there a need to separate them. Graphic designers must utilize a multitude of skills in the practice of our craft. Illustration, photography, painting, these are all skills necessary to accomplish what we as graphic designers do.
This brings us to our third question; “What makes graphic design art?” Based on Tolstoy’s definition, art is when something is created with the intent to evoke a reaction and, in turn, a reaction is experienced. This is the purpose of graphic design as well. It is the graphic designer’s job to create an advertisement, poster, or Web site that will cause the viewer to act upon the emotions that I have hopefully brought to the surface with my designs and follow a call to action. However, that does not mean that all graphic design is art, far from it. In fact, most design is not art, but as Charles Eames once said, “The design is an expression of the purpose. It may (if it is good design) later be judged as art.” There will always be an argument about what constitutes good design as Eames states.

Not everything that is good design will even be pleasing. What is important is, “Does it move you?” In a 2004 interview with Steven Heller for Voice: AIGA Journal of Design, Stefan Sagmeister said:

“You look at a piece of graphic design and you have a moving experience. All of us were moved at one point or another by a piece of art, struck to the core by a movie, changed by a book, touched by a piece of music. Fewer of us experience this in front of a piece of design - it is possible nevertheless.”

Stefan Sagmeister seems to be channeling Tolstoy with this statement. Just like a simple illustration or a dinner plate or a family photo, graphic design is not always art, but as Sagmeister said, sometimes it can be. When a piece of graphic design is created based on the designer’s past experiences (which it almost always is when it is good) with the intent to evoke and share that feeling and experience with others, even if it is for a commercial purpose, and the viewer is moved then the graphic designer has created art. In fact, many times, graphic designers will create a piece of art for no other reason than to express an emotion or to bring awareness of a subject to others. Perfect examples of this are the
wonderful propaganda posters of the World War I and World War II era. These posters were designed for the specific purpose of touching the patriotism in each individual who viewed the posters. The graphic designers who created these posters were attempting to bring awareness to the public that their government needed their help. Many did this by evoking positive emotions and others did this by evoking fear or mistrust of the enemy. When asked “What is the difference between art and design?” in an interview with Big Think, Milton Glaser said:

There’s this stupid overlap between the two that no one understands. And the lack of distinction between art and design and art and non-art is so puzzling to people. And everybody wants to be an artist because, in terms of status, there’s almost nothing better you can be in almost any culture; basically, [this is] because art is terribly important as a survival mechanism for any culture. As a result, the people in primitive cultures who can create art as such are those who are highly respected. And that basically occurs in sophisticated cultures as well. But the only purpose of art is that it is the most powerful instrument for survival—art is so persistent in all our cultures because it is a means of the culture to survive. And the reason for that, I believe, is that art, at its fullest capacity, makes us attentive.

But if you look at a work of art, you can re-engage reality once again, and you see the distinction between what you thought things were and what they actually are. Because of that, it is a mechanism for the species to survive. And because of that, it is terribly important in human consciousness. I also believe, curiously, that beauty, which is very often something we confuse with art, is merely a mechanism to move us towards attentiveness. You realize we all have a genetic capacity and need to experience beauty, but beauty is not the ultimate justification for art. It is merely the device by which we are led to attentiveness.

Anyhow, this is all very complex. And I’ve been thinking about it most of my life and now I finally feel that I can distinguish between what is art and what is not. And my distinction is if it moves you to attentiveness, it is art. If it doesn’t, it’s something else.5

Regardless of the type of emotion that the graphic designers of the World War I and World War II eras were trying to evoke, the fact is that they moved the viewer to attentiveness.
End Notes

1 Leo Tolstoy (1899). What is Art?
   Retrieved March 5, 2010, from California State University Long Beach website:
   http://www.csulb.edu/~jvancamp/361r14.html


   http://spiekermann.com/en/an-interview-with-erik-spiekermann-by-adrian-shaughnessy%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89%E2%80%89part-2/

4 Steven Heller (2004). Stefan Sagmeister: Style + Fart = Language,
   Retrieved March 7, 2010, from AIGA website:
   http://www.aiga.org/content.cfm/stefan-sagmeister-style-fart-language

5 Big Think (2009). Big Think Interview with Milton Glaser,
   Retrieved March 7, 2010, from Big Think website:
   http://bigthink.com/ideas/16191
The Work

The posters I have designed are not meant to prove or disprove the argument that graphic design is art. As was stated, not all graphic design is art, but these posters are meant to show that it is possible for art to be created using type. There was certainly an attempt on the part of the design to move the viewer to attentiveness. Whether it actually accomplishes this is up to the viewer.

As the title suggests, the subject of the series of posters is inspiration. I used the subject of inspiration to show what inspires an artist to create a piece that will move the viewer to attentiveness. Different things inspire the artist; like many that have come before me, I am, and always have been, inspired by those closest to me whom I love. The majority of the posters deal with this type of inspiration and they attempt to express how each person has inspired me. One exception is a poster that deals with me personally and how I was influenced and inspired by my experiences, many of which also involved someone close to me. The remaining posters are meant to bookend the series with expressions of the word “Inspire” and “Inspiration.” Each poster should be viewed both as a series and singularly.

Along with the nine main posters, there are also twelve supplementary posters of quotes from various painters, designers, and writers. Each quote is meant to reinforce the idea that graphic design can and should at times be considered fine art.
Dad’s Influence

The first poster, titled “Dad’s Influence”, is meant, literally enough, to illustrate the influence that my father had on my life. As the text of the poster states, my father had a major impact on me as an artist and creative professional. I’m not sure if he knows it or not, but he laid the groundwork for me to pursue a creative profession by allowing me to help him with all the creative projects he busied himself with while I was growing up.

Along with being a creative influence, Dad was also very influential in teaching me to be a problem solver. Graphic designers are inherently problem solvers. It’s this ability to solve problems creatively that I feel is my greatest strength.

The text in this poster is written in a first person, journal style to the point that poor grammar and misspellings were intentionally left in to further enforce the journal-like quality. The text is repeated to create a smooth and even texture, which is accomplished by knocking the letterforms of the body copy out of a photograph of my dad and me when I was a child. In this manner I attempt to imply that what I have eventually become is a direct result of all the positive experiences I had with my father. As I am made of the experiences with my father, so is the text made of those same experiences.
Always the Teacher

My mom was a schoolteacher. But her instruction didn’t stop when she left school. She was instrumental in my development as an artist. She encouraged me every chance she got. Many parents may try to discourage their children when they express an interest in pursuing art as a profession; not my mom. She was very supportive. I expressed an interest in art at a very early age. I remember as early as eight-year’s old, telling my mom that I was going to be an artist one day. Maybe it was only because she was a supportive mother, but she beamed with pride. I remember feeling proud that my mom was proud of my potential career path. Mom continuously encouraged me to practice and develop my skills.

The text that I used in this poster is a passage of scripture from Psalms 32:8, “I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go, I will counsel you and watch over you.” This passage is a perfect description of how my mom has inspired and encouraged me.

The photo that I used is a one of my mother taken around the time that I was eight-year’s old (there’s that formative age again) and first coming to the realization that I wanted to be an artist. I am particularly drawn to the way she is looking over her shoulder at what I imagine is me with sharp eyes, ready to give instruction at any moment.

The texture of the image is meant to give a sense of an aged material as well as hard work. I couldn’t have been the easiest child to raise, and it must have been a lot of work for my mother, but she was always smiling and it was easy to make her laugh. The background colors are meant to imply her joyful personality, even while working to raise three children. As hard as I know it must have been, she never acted like it was anything but her pleasure to do so.
I will instruct you and teach you in the way you should go, I will counsel you and watch over you.
Competition

For as long as I can remember, I have competed with my older brother. Sometimes in friendly competition, other times not so much. I rarely won; maybe sometimes, but not very often. I remember there were times when Davy and I would go at each other for hours deep into the night on our backyard basketball court. The darkness didn’t matter; we would simply turn the car lights on and keep going. I wanted to win so badly, just to prove to him that I could beat him. I wanted to be as good as him, sure, but I wanted him to be proud of me and respect me even more.

This competition between my brother and me has carried over into my adult life. I came to enjoy the competition, to crave it even. I have found that the competition as a creative professional is almost as intense as the competitions I had with my brother growing up. As a creative professional, I have used this desire for competition to fuel my work. I want to be the best. I want my work to be judged, and I want to come out on top. I believe it is important to have a strong sense of competition to be an artist but you must also have a thick skin. I know that not every piece I create or design will be successful, but just like getting beat by my brother over and over again and not letting that stop me from going back at him just as hard next time, I don’t let an unsuccessful design stop me from thinking my next piece will be incredible.

For the design of this piece, I used a mixture of photography and hand-rendered type. The image in the foreground gives a definite sense of the little brother trying to be just like the older brother. The background image is a studio portrait of us as kids. The combination of these images gives the poster a sense of depth while giving the viewer a sense of how close my brother and I were and still are. The text further emphasizes this point, while adding to the sense of depth that has already been established with the photos.
i have said it a hundred times. i wouldn’t trade having a brother for anything.

he’s my hero.

he’s my inspiration.

especially an older brother. he was better than everyone else and i wanted to be just like him.
Little Sister

I became a role model when I was six-year’s old. That is how old I was when my little sister was born. Until then, I was just the little brother looking up to and following my older brother. But then everything changed and I became the one who had to set a good example. You may be surprised to find out how inspiring it is to become someone who another person looks up too. I felt I had to be perfect. It wasn’t that I felt pressured to be perfect, but there was definitely a sense of pride knowing that I was setting a good example. Just like I wanted my older brother to respect me, I wanted my little sister to be proud of me. I wanted to be good at everything I did as to set a good example for her. This desire extended into my creative projects. Whether It was a drawing, a photograph, or a piece of furniture that I had built, I would make sure Jennifer saw how much work and effort I put into it. I later came to realize that it wasn’t me inspiring her but the other way around.

In the design of this piece I used very bright, feminine colors and graphics as a representation of a young female form to show my little sister’s personality and to show that I will always view her as my little sister. The background is made up of textured building blocks to imply the building of a new me as role model and subsequently a new her from learning from me over time.
born a future role model!

I Let Go, but Never Closed My Concerned Eye
Honor Thy Father and Thy Mother

Even more than separate individuals, my parents are two parts of one whole to me. I know it is common to hear that description of a husband and wife, but in this case it is true; maybe even a bit of an understatement. I think their influence on me is apparent (no pun intended). Parents obviously have a major impact on their children, for better or worse, and mine are no exception. Yes, they were huge inspiration individually, but when they were together, it was as if that inspiration was magnified by what they brought out of each other. The combination of my dad showing me how to think creatively and giving me my work ethic and my mom encouraging and motivating me to do what I really love has been the most inspiring experiences of my life.

I wanted to show my parents as a team and how they are truly a part of each other. To achieve this, I used two separate photos. One set in a pattern of circles and the other set in the negative space of that pattern. This causes a sort of hidden image effect but still maintaining the two-dimensional quality of a single photograph. This display of images gives that sense of unity of the two that I was attempting to achieve. By the illegibility and overlapping of the text, the viewer is not sure where one word or sentence stops and the other starts. This serves to reinforce that same feeling of togetherness.
Motivation

Sometimes motivation can be more powerful than inspiration. Sometimes they are one and the same. Motivation comes in many different forms, encouragement, loyalty, belief. This poster is about a friend who embodies all of those qualities and more. Jennifer has encouraged and supported me in my art, as well in almost every other aspect of my life, for many years. This doesn’t mean that she has liked everything thing I have done; far from it actually. What she has done is help me stay focused and ambitious both professionally as well as creatively. Usually it is simply a small, subtle remark to remind me how talented she thinks I am. Other times it is more blatant and obvious. This motivation, encouragement and belief is incredibly inspiring. I am left with a desire and a feeling of responsibility to “live up to the hype” so to speak.

The design of this poster conveys the personality of Jennifer while still expressing the role she has played in inspiring me as an artist. The photo was taken with strong light on the left side of her face and also shining on the background wall. This light subtly represents the beacon that she has been to me for many years now. Also, the photo is intentionally out of focus while the foreground text is very crisp and clear. This is to represent how Jennifer’s motivation, encouragement, and belief in me has helped to keep me focused when things start to get blurry.
That motivation comes in many different forms. Some big, some small. The most inspiring motivation is by those people around us who impact our lives on a daily basis. We all want to be inspired, but first we must be motivated.
Experience

Just as much as from other people, inspiration can come from events and experiences in one’s life as well. Experiences help to give us confidence and belief in our abilities as we mature. I have always been confident, but I don’t think I was simply born brimming with confidence. None of us were. I have always felt that I could do anything that others could do and usually anything others couldn’t do too. I am not sure where this confidence comes from. I assume I must have been successful at some task very early and the next time I was faced with another task, I had the feeling I could handle it. This could have been the snowball that just continued to gather momentum as it rolled down the hill of my life, until eventually the accumulation of all these experiences created the self-confidence that I still have today.

This confidence is most evident in my work. Or, rather, my attitude toward myself as a designer, which I hope can be seen in my work. I used this poster of me holding the fish because it is one of those inspiring experiences in my life where I did what others couldn’t. That day my dad, brother, and a few other friends of my dad went fishing on the Pascagula River. The night before, I stated that I was going to catch more fish than anyone else. I remember that the grown ups were laughing and I wasn’t sure why. Now, looking back, I realize they thought I was over estimating my abilities, but I wasn’t. I was just stating the facts as I saw them. The next day I went out and did just what I said I was going to do. I caught most of the fish on that stringer. That moment has stuck with me my entire life and I use moments like that to inspire me when I am faced with difficult situations.

The design is meant to be very simple and very bold to mimic the statement that I made the night before we went fishing. I used cyan as a subtle reference to myself as a
print designer and black as the color for the simplified image of me. The text is set in bold Helvetica, knocked out of the cyan. The contrast helps to reinforce the bold nature of the poster. I only wanted to use two colors to continue to imply the simplicity.
**Inspiration/Inspire**

The Inspiration and Inspire posters are meant to bookend the exhibition. The “Inspiration” poster is meant to be the first piece seen and the “Inspire” poster to be the last.

The “Inspiration” poster is created by using the letters I-N-S-P-I-R-A-T-I-O-N and the numbers 1 through 9. The letters obviously spell inspiration but the numbers are significant because that is the number of pieces in the exhibition. I used a mixture of light blue, dark blue, yellow, and orange for the letters and numbers. When they overlap they create the green colors that can be seen. This poster is a statement about what the viewer is about to see, that being what I see as inspiration.

The “Inspire” poster, very simply, spells the word inspire over an illustration of an iris. All flowers have specific meanings and the iris is noted to be the flower of inspiration. I want this to be the last piece to be seen as sort of a call to action for the viewer to seek his or her own inspiration in life.
Quotations

To enhance the argument that graphic design can be art and that art can be created using type, I have included a series of twelve posters displaying quotes from famous artists, designers, and writers. These posters should give the viewer a sense of what to consider while viewing the exhibition.

Each quotation poster is laid out very logically and all text is legible. I wanted to make it easy and inviting for the viewer to read these quotations. I have also highlighted certain key words in an attempt to draw the viewer into the poster to further encourage them to stop, read the quotations, and ponder the relationship between the quotations and the primary posters in the exhibition.
There is always a heavy demand for fresh mediocrity. In every generation the least cultivated taste has the largest appetite.

Paul Gauguin
The design is an expression of the purpose. It may (if it is good design) later be judged as art.

Charles Eames
It wasn’t an architect or a designer who invented objects, but an artisan.

Giorgetto Giugiaro
This is more pertinent in graphic design than in the industrial or architectural fields, because graphic design is more open to aesthetic than to functional preferences.

Paul Rand
The life of a designer is a life of fight. Fight against the ugliness.

Massimo Vignelli
There are three responses to a piece of design – yes, no, and **WOW!** Wow is the one to aim for.

Milton Glaser
It doesn’t make much difference how the paint is put on as long as something has been said. Technique is just a means of arriving at a statement.

Jackson Pollock
It’s not what you look at that matters, it’s what you see.

Henry David Thoreau
Sometimes you have to compromise legibility to achieve impact.

Herb Lubalin
Don’t mistake legibility for communication.

David Carson
Design can be art.

Design can be aesthetics. Design is so simple, that’s why it is so complicated.

Paul Rand
The big problem is most contemporary design practiced today is not really graphic design, but graphic decoration.

Art Chantry
Conclusion

No one will ever be able to truly define art or answer the question as to what art is. It is too ambiguous and means many different things to many different people. However, over time, if enough works of graphic design make their ways into galleries and begin to garner the respect of traditional fine artists, certain types of graphic design will begin to be considered fine art.

The works Exhibited in my thesis show, Inspire: The Confluence of Art & Design, is not meant to prove or disprove the argument that graphic design is art. It does, instead, provide an example that graphic design and works created using typography can, in fact, be considered fine art if created with the expectation of moving the viewer to attentiveness. After that, as in all aspects of artistic endeavor, it’s up for the viewer to decide.
Vita

John Mark Lawler was born and raised in Hattiesburg, Mississippi, and returns as often as possible. After high school, John Mark attended Mississippi State University and earned a Bachelor of Fine Arts in graphic design in 2000. His first job after graduating from MSU was with the creative services department at Baylor University. In the summer of 2006 he accepted a position with University Relations at Louisiana State University as a web designer. John Mark then began working toward his Master of Fine Arts in the summer of 2007 and expects to complete all requirements in May 2010.