

DESIGN HISTORY

HOW GRAPHIC DESIGN CHANGED THE WORLD

DESIGNFOREVER EDITORIAL

How Graphic Design Changed the World

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GRAPHIC

The job is about a hundred years old. The work is not. Before anyone printed “graphic design” on a course catalog, people were already deciding how letters sat on a page, how a picture sold a war, how a mark stood for a company, and how a city told you which train to take.

Our World in Data’s long run on literacy is the blunt measure of that work’s reach. In **1820 about 12% of the world could read and write**. Today the share has reversed: roughly **one in ten remains illiterate**. Schools did that. States did that. So did the designed page — the cheap book, the poster, the label, the sign — that made reading worth having.

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Graphic design is not decoration on history. It is one of the machines history ran on.

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This is a tour of that machine across the categories that still pay the bills: books and type, posters, identity, packaging, the city, and the profession that finally named itself. The 2027 labor-market version is already up as [Graphic Design in 2027](#). This is the longer arc.

The machine, in four numbers

Books in Europe before 1500	~20M
Jikji — metal type	1377
AIGA founded	1914
WWI posters at LOC	~1,900

Type, the book, and who got to read

Printing did not begin in Mainz. Korea's *Jikji* was printed from cast metal type at Heungdeoksa temple in 1377 — the oldest surviving book made that way, now at the Bibliothèque nationale de France. Chinese woodblock printing is older still. What Johannes Gutenberg and his partners built around 1450 in Mainz was a *system*: metal movable type, oil-based ink, a press derived from the wine press, and a business that wanted to sell Bibles.

The Library of Congress puts the 42-line Bible on the market about 1455. Their exhibit text: roughly 180 copies printed (145 paper, 35 vellum); 49 survived into the twentieth century; 21 of those complete. A later LOC FAQ is more cautious on the print run (at least 120 paper, perhaps 40 vellum). Either way: a handful of workshops, a continent's worth of consequence.

By 1500 the press was in about 200 European cities, Jeremiah Dittmar’s city-level census for CEPR. Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin’s classic estimate: about 20 million books printed in Europe before 1500. UNESCO’s *Book revolution* repeated that order of magnitude against a Europe of fewer than 100 million people, most of them still illiterate. Average printings stayed small for centuries — a few hundred, then a thousand, then two or three thousand on a hand press. The explosion was in *titles and towns*, not in airport-novel runs.

The page had to exist before the school filled it

1820 literate



~12%

Today literate



~87%

Our World in Data / OECD long-run estimates: one in ten could read in 1820; today about one in ten cannot. f

Literacy is a school story. It is also a typesetting story. A world that cannot cheaply set type cannot cheaply teach itself.

Dittmar’s result is the urban punchline. Cities that got a press in the late 1400s had no prior growth advantage. From 1500 to 1600 they grew about 21 percentage points more than similar cities without one (mean city growth was 30 points). An instrumental-variables cut, using distance from Mainz, is larger still. That is not “pretty pages.” That is information technology showing up in the tax base.

What the page *looked like* was already a design problem. Scribes had solved it for parchment. Printers inherited columns, rubrics, initials — then had to invent the title page, the page number, the italic (Aldus Manutius’s Venice shop at the end of the 1400s), the cheap octavo you could put in a pocket. Book design is graphic design with a binding. Every later category — poster, pack, sign, identity — is that same problem at a different scale: make meaning travel without the maker in the room.

The poster: the street as a press



From the DesignForever Image Library — poster-scale figures. The street was always a page.

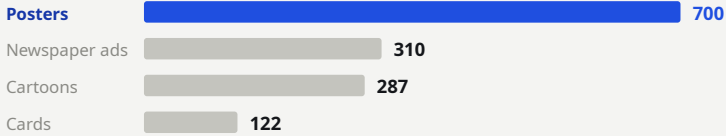
Color lithography in the late nineteenth century turned the wall into a page. Jules Chéret and Henri de Toulouse-Lautrec in Paris treated color as a signal, not as a painted illusion. An international “poster craze” followed. Entertainment, bicycles, biscuits. Then governments noticed.

The Library of Congress’s WWI poster collection — about 1,900 pieces online, 1914–1920 — is the public record of that noticing. LOC’s own gloss: during the war, “the impact of the poster as a means of communication was greater than at any other time during history.” Britain used them to fill a volunteer army before conscription in 1916. The United States, entering in 1917, stood up the Committee on Public Information under George Creel. Creel later wrote that people might skip a meeting or a newsreel, “but the billboard was something that caught even the most indifferent eye.”

A tally from CPI records, compiled in later research on the Division of Pictorial Publicity: 700 poster designs among 1,438 pieces of pictorial work (cards,

newspaper ads, cartoons, buttons). Treat the exact split as archival, not audited. The shape is enough. For two years the American state ran a poster shop.

The state as art director



CPI Division of Pictorial Publicity tally in later archival work: 1,438 designs. Buttons/seals: 19. Scale: 700 poste

The poster did not invent propaganda. It industrialized it. After the war the same tools sold soap, cigarettes, and candidates.

The political poster never went home. Soviet photomontage, the Spanish Civil War, China's public campaigns, every election since. The commercial poster never stopped either: entertainment, travel, product. The category's impact is double. It can fill an army. It can also make a city look like itself. That second job is why the Underground posters matter as much as the war ones.

Identity: a company that can be seen from the moon

A trademark is a legal object. An identity is a system: type, color, applications, a twenty-year public. The difference is why Paul Rand still gets cited in boardrooms.

IBM's own history page is the clean timeline. Computing-Tabulating-Recording Company, 1911. Renamed International Business Machines, 1924, with an Art Deco globe. "IBM" in Beton Bold, 1947. Thomas J. Watson Jr. hires Rand in 1956 — "good design is good business" — City Medium letters, square B, asymmetrical M. The 8-bar stripes in 1972, still the mark, sometimes in IBM Blue (Pantone 2718 C). The 1981 eye-bee-M rebus is in MoMA. The 8-bar has been photographed on the moon.

That is not a logo anecdote. It is the template for the postwar corporation: one designed face across machines, letterheads, packaging, and ads. Pentagram,

Landor, Wolff Olins, Chermayeff and Geismar — the studio century we mapped in [Design studios in the age of AI](#) — sold that face as a retainer.

Helvetica is the type that face often wore. Max Miedinger, with Eduard Hoffmann at the Haas foundry, drew Neue Haas Grotesk in 1957; Stempel renamed it Helvetica in 1960. Swiss International Typographic Style — grids, flush left, sans serif, Josef Müller-Brockmann’s *New Graphic Design* from 1959 — made neutrality a product. Linotype later licensed Helvetica into IBM, Xerox, Adobe, Apple. A typeface became infrastructure.

Coca-Cola is the consumer version of the same idea, fifty years earlier. John Pemberton’s drink, 1886. Bookkeeper Frank M. Robinson named it and drew the Spencerian script that is still the mark. The Coca-Cola Company registered name, logo, and trademark in 1892. The contour bottle, 1915–16, was a three-dimensional graphic: a silhouette you could recognize in the dark. Identity escaped the letterhead and sat on the table.

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*A nation learned to read on
designed pages. A company learned
to exist as a designed mark. Those
are the same skill at different scales.*

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Packaging: the silent salesman, and one Möbius strip

The shelf is where most people meet graphic design without calling it that. Color codes a flavor. A lockup says trusted. A warning has to be legal and visible. Fortune's packaging printing line — hundreds of billions of dollars a year in ink on substrate — is the physical proof that this category never dematerialized. We used that number in the 2027 piece. The history underneath it is older: labels on patent medicines, biscuit tins, the supermarket after the war, the barcode, the recycling mark.

In 1970 the Container Corporation of America — then a major box maker, already famous for commissioning serious graphics — ran a student contest for a symbol to mark recycled paper, timed to the first Earth Day. More than 500 entries. Judges included Saul Bass and IBM's Eliot Noyes. Winner: Gary Anderson, 23, architecture student at USC. Three arrows as a Möbius strip. Prize: \$2,500 and a trip to the International Design Conference at Aspen. CCA put the mark in the **public domain**. It is now on bins, packs, and statutes worldwide.

That is packaging's peculiar power. A student drawing, given away, outlives most corporate identities. The category also absorbs every other one: type, identity, poster-like hierarchy, and now variable data for a hundred language versions of the same can. When AI draws a pretty box, the press check still needs a person. That is the 2027 split in historical costume.

The city: type you walk through

Frank Pick came to London's Underground in 1906. In 1908, as traffic officer, he started the pictorial poster campaign the Art Institute of Chicago still treats as a birth of modern transit graphics: fill off-peak trains, sell new destinations, make the system a civic good. In 1913 he asked Edward Johnston for a typeface. Johnston delivered in 1916. In 1918 he refined the roundel. A city got a voice.

Wayfinding is graphic design with consequences measured in missed trains and emergency exits. Airport pictograms, Olympic wayfinding (Mexico 1968's

radiating identity under Lance Wyman is the textbook case), ISO public-information symbols, the highway shield. You do not have to like Helvetica to live inside it. Road signs, medicine labels, ballot layouts — when those fail, people die or votes vanish. The “impact on the world” is not a metaphor in this category. It is a fatality report.

The Underground lesson is the one identity departments still steal: one type, one mark, applied everywhere, for decades. Pick did not hire a poster for a season. He hired a system.

The profession names itself — late

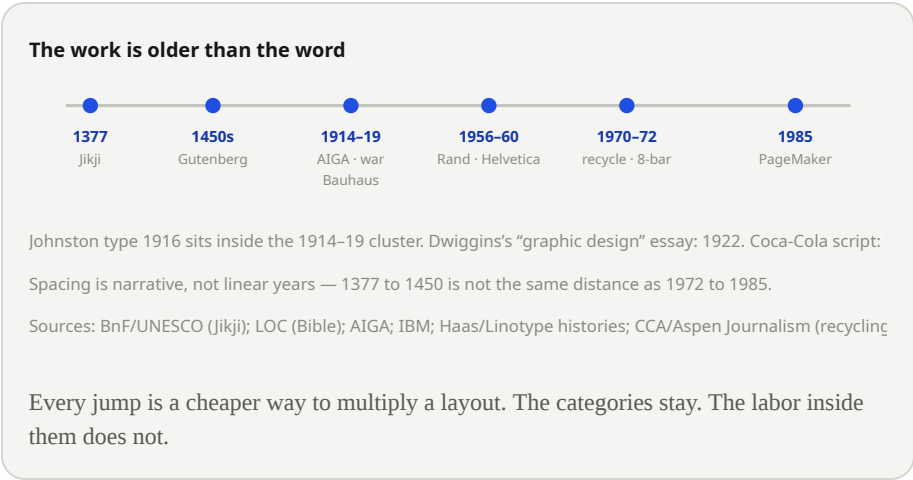
AIGA was founded in New York in **1914**: forty people at the National Arts Club, constitution adopted 17 February. Printers, publishers, illustrators, type men. The American Institute of Graphic Arts — arts, not “designers” yet.

The phrase “graphic design” is older than the Dwiggins legend. Philip Meggs’s textbook credited W. A. Dwiggins with coining “graphic designer” in 1922. Paul Shaw’s archival work killed that story: Dwiggins never used “graphic designer.” He used “graphic design” once, in “New Kind of Printing Calls for New Design” (*Boston Evening Transcript*, 29 August 1922). The California School of Arts and Crafts had already listed a course called Graphic Design and Lettering in its 1917–18 catalog. The job existed. The syllabus caught up. The newspaper essay caught up after that.

Bauhaus, 1919–1933: Walter Gropius in Weimar, then Dessau. The Met’s essay is the short version — unity of the arts, then “Art into Industry,” typography under Moholy-Nagy and Herbert Bayer as communication plus form. The Nazis closed the school. The faculty scattered. American design education is still living off that diaspora.

Then the tools jumped. Apple Macintosh, 1984. Aldus PageMaker for Mac, July 1985 — Paul Brainerd’s shop, the phrase “desktop publishing.” Paste-up boards became a screen. The 1990s web made every company a publisher. Canva made every classroom one. That last step is [What AI did to design templates](#) and the education half of [Graphic Design in 2027](#). History’s rhyme:

every time reproduction gets cheaper, the page multiplies, and the people who only sold the first draft get squeezed.



What the categories did, in one grid

Category	What changed	What it did to the world
Books and type	Movable metal type; title pages; cheap editions	Reformation, science, literacy. Cities with presses grew faster.
Posters	Color lithography; then mass offset	War bonds, enlistment, brands, and the idea that a wall can argue.
Identity	From trade card to system (Rand, Swiss type)	The corporation became recognizable without a product in the room.
Packaging	Label, bottle, barcode, recycling mark	Self-service retail. A student Möbius strip as global law.
The city	Transit type, roundels, pictograms, roads	Strangers can move. Bad ballots and bad exits are design failures.
The job	AIGA 1914; the phrase in school by 1917; desktop 1985	A craft became a profession, then a button in every classroom.

The through-line is reproduction. Scribes multiplied meaning one copy at a time. Presses multiplied pages. Lithography multiplied walls. Offset multiplied packs. The laser printer multiplied offices. The model multiplies pictures of layouts. Each jump widened who could *issue* a design. Each jump made the remaining scarce thing the same: a system that still works when the copy, the

language, and the navy change. That sentence is also the close of the 2027 piece. It was true for Aldus. It is true for a menu template.

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The history of graphic design is the history of cheaper copies. The history of its impact is what those copies were for: God, war, soap, a train, a vote.

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If you want the file-format version of the thing that survived every jump — a layout with rules, not a picture of one — open the [marketplace](#) and replace the dummy copy. The page was always the point.

Sources

- Library of Congress, Gutenberg Bible exhibit — ~180 copies printed c.1455 (145 paper / 35 vellum in exhibit text); 49 survived into the 20th century; 21 complete. FAQ: print run perhaps ≥ 120 paper and ~40 vellum
- Jikji (1377), Heungdeoksa / Cheongju — oldest extant book from metal movable type; surviving volume at the BnF; UNESCO Memory of the World

- Jeremiah Dittmar, CEPR VoxEU, “Information technology and economic change” (2010) — ~200 European cities with a press by 1500; +21 percentage-point population growth advantage 1500–1600 vs non-adopters
- Lucien Febvre and Henri-Jean Martin, *L’Apparition du livre* — ~20 million books in Europe before 1500 (as cited in later UNESCO and survey literature)
- UNESCO, *The Book revolution* — incunabula estimate against Europe of fewer than 100 million people, mostly illiterate; small average print runs into the 18th century
- Our World in Data, Literacy — ~12% of world population literate in 1820; today about one in ten illiterate (~87% literate), long-run OECD/UNESCO compilation
- Library of Congress, WWI posters collection — ~1,900 posters online, 1914–1920; “impact of the poster... greater than at any other time”
- George Creel / CPI; later archival tally of Division of Pictorial Publicity — 700 posters among 1,438 pictorial designs
- Art Institute of Chicago — Frank Pick’s Underground posters from 1908; Johnston commissioned 1913, type 1916; roundel refined 1918
- AIGA — founded New York, 20 January 1914; constitution 17 February 1914; 40 founding members
- Paul Shaw — “graphic design” in California School of Arts and Crafts catalog 1917–18; Dwiggins, *Boston Evening Transcript*, 29 August 1922 (uses the phrase once; never “graphic designer”)
- Metropolitan Museum of Art — Bauhaus 1919–1933, Gropius, “Art into Industry,” Bayer/Moholy-Nagy typography
- IBM, “The IBM logo” — C-T-R 1911; IBM name 1924; Beton Bold 1947; Rand 1956; 8-bar 1972; rebus 1981 / MoMA
- Helvetica — Neue Haas Grotesk, Miedinger with Hoffmann, 1957; renamed Helvetica 1960
- Coca-Cola Company histories — Pemberton 1886; Frank M. Robinson name and Spencerian script; trademark 1892; contour bottle mid-1910s

- Aspen Journalism / Container Corporation of America — Gary Anderson recycling symbol, 1970 student contest, 500+ entries, public domain
- Aldus / Apple — PageMaker for Macintosh, July 1985; “desktop publishing”