

MADALENA DALLA MURA GRAPHIC DESIGN IN MUSEUMS: THE EXPANDED FIELD

Graphic design's relationship with museums is an historically complex one. The roots of modern graphic design developed when and where artistic practice moved beyond the four walls of the pure beaux arts to meet and unite with everyday life and with people, namely between the late 19th and the early 20th century when affiches rendered the streets an actual exhibition of modernity and when the avant-garde movements advanced, such as futurism which programmatically rejected the museum and library as the epitome of traditions that had to be superseded. Over time, however, while the practice of design developed into an individualised profession – not least by differentiation from the art world and its institutions – graphic design artifacts made their way variously into those entities that are known today by the acronym GLAM (i.e. galleries, libraries, archives, museums). While, with few exceptions, graphic design as such still suffers a deficiency of dedicated institutional attention, its multiple outputs have in fact come to be acquired by a variety of private and public subjects as either works of art, collectible objects of fetishism, sources of information or archival and documentary materials on a variety of topics. The varied and dispersed presence of graphic design within institutes in charge of cultural heritage has been further complicated in the digital age. First, since the advent of desktop publishing – a span of some thirty years now – most graphic design is born digital and may exist in either analogue, digital or hybrid form, and in static or dynamic media in which different medialities may be mixed and where visuality becomes increasingly temporal and interactive. Yet, while GLAM themselves have gone digital, and have generally begun digitising their collections, so far they have made little investment in the preservation and mediation of born-digital design or digitised materials. In the meantime – and, arguably, as a reaction to the erosion of their skills and field of action caused by the advent of digital technologies and the democratization of communication tools – some graphic designers have expanded their field of action by increasingly engaging in the production of authored and critical works of design intended for circulation as unique pieces or small runs exclusively within the walls of museums and galleries. Graphic design – as a work and a medium of communication, reproducible and ephemeral, although also a fetish, and as an historical document, itself an archive of images and words as well as a repository of stories – makes for a significant case of study with regards to the status of design in museums. This talk aims to frame this multifaceted picture and, through the discussion of several cases, will reflect on the challenges and opportunities open for design in the expanded field of GLAM in the digital age.

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