RESEARCH ARTICLE

The Terminological Development of Graphic Design: Between Office Art and Social Purpose

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Abstract: The origins of the term graphic design are typically framed through reductive, canonical narratives that trace its emergence to a singular event. This paper challenges such accounts by tracing a more complex and layered trajectory. Focusing on the neglected yet significant 476-page handbook *Graphic Design* by W. G. Raffé—the first book to feature the term in its title—it situates this text within a broader history of Anglophone design discourse. A close reading of this 1927 work reveals three key insights. First, Raffé conceived of graphic design as a socially engaged practice with a civic mission, foregrounding its communicative role in mobilizing the public—this orientation contrasts sharply with dominant, aesthetically driven definitions. Second, he articulated print reproduction as the essential enabling technology that distinguished graphic design from fine art and empowered visual communication to reach the masses at an accelerating speed and scale. Third, he attempted to codify graphic design as a professional discipline, using diagrams and schemas to reify the practice and articulate its principles. This was an important intervention prior to more formal attempts to professionalize graphic design in postwar Anglophone contexts. By recovering this overlooked text and locating it within a longer-term trajectory of development, the paper argues that the term graphic design did not emerge from a single moment or figure but evolved through decades of dispersed adoption. Revisiting Raffé's foundational work offers valuable historical perspective on ongoing debates about the discipline's identity and purpose in the post-digital era.

Implications for practice: This examination of disciplinary formation speaks directly to contemporary questions about specialization and expertise. Raffé's 1927 text reveals how professional legitimacy was built through claims about specialized knowledge and social purpose. His emphasis on print as graphic design's essential technology reminds us that disciplinary identity has always been tied to enabling media; today's digital transformation represents continuity rather than rupture. Practitioners should recognize that the term graphic design emerged from specific Anglophone, colonial contexts. This awareness should inform more inclusive, culturally responsive approaches.

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As designers reposition themselves "upstream" into strategic roles or grapple with generative AI's impact, Raffé's core questions remain urgent: What is graphic design's social function? What specialized expertise justifies professional status? How should practitioners relate to enabling technologies? Understanding this contested terminological history empowers designers to participate more consciously in ongoing debates about disciplinary boundaries, professional identity, and graphic design's evolving global relevance.

Keywords: communication; design discourse; graphic design; professionalization; technology

1. Introduction

Despite its ubiquity, *graphic design* remains an underexamined term, with limited scholarship studying its adoption or development. Mainstream surveys posit neat narratives that borrow heavily from one another, eschewing depth and nuance to celebrate recognized milestones. This tendency has resulted in the underdevelopment and oversimplification of research in this area, with generalizations made about the significance of individual heroic figures. The eventual convergence of *graphic* (rooted in inscription and reproduction) and *design* (rooted in intentional form-giving and organization) signaled the crucial integration of artistic composition with purposeful communication; a development whose precise terminological origin remains contested.

The North American W. A. Dwiggins (1922) has been widely credited with coining the term "graphic design" in 1922 (Bierut et al., 1999; Mazur Thomson, 1997; Meggs, 1983), yet few have sought to understand the underlying meaning and relevance of his reference or how it fits into the longer-term adoption of the term. Some claim that Dwiggins' role in the popularization of the term has been overstated when his usage was only inadvertent. For instance, Paul Shaw (2014a, para. 2) uses empirical evidence to argue that while Dwiggins may be a seminal figure in the history of graphic design, he is not responsible for coining the phrase and "never used the term 'graphic designer' in his life."* Others have challenged the relevance of Dwiggins' contribution, albeit indirectly, with British design historians arguing that the term was adopted gradually and came to prominence after World War II (Kinross, 1988, 1992; Stiff, 2009). In the US meanwhile, Gowan (1984) claims the term was only granted regulatory and economic recognition in the late 1970s to early 1980s.

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* Dwiggins' (1922) oft-cited article refers to "graphic design" just once, and only inadvertently. Shaw (2014a: para. 3) explains that Dwiggins was "not consciously coining a description for the 'new design' that he felt was needed" as he had not figured out what to call it yet; instead, he was likely using the words in place of "graphic art" to vary his writing. Dwiggins (1922) referred to "advertising artist" and "printing designer" when describing the new professional.

During the mid-1990s, *Visible Language* published a sequence of three special issues exploring "Critical Histories of Graphic Design." Steve Baker (1994, p. 245) regretted "the restrictiveness and bogus neutrality of design history's conventional linear narratives"; while Victor Margolin (1994, p. 233) called for a narrative approach that "probes more deeply into the way that graphic design has evolved." This paper adopts a strategy to both zoom in and zoom out. Zooming inward, it draws close attention to one understudied British text significant as an early outlier: Walter George Raffé's (1927b) *Graphic Design*, a book released five years after Dwiggins' much-celebrated reference. Zooming outward enables a positioning of Raffé's book within a broader 20th-century context and in relation to subsequent literature and debates.

Through a close reading of Raffé's publication, this paper describes and interprets key characteristics to establish the significance of Raffé's reference to graphic design. It examines his work's role in the reification of graphic design and the later development of the discipline as a profession. The analysis reveals three threads of interest in relation to Raffé's book. The first examines his attempts to position graphic design as a discipline with a wider social purpose and civic function to inform and mobilize the public. The second examines the role of print as an essential enabling technology of graphic design. A third considers Raffé's attempts to frame graphic design as a burgeoning profession with a greater complexity than mere "office art."

This paper examining the terminological development of graphic design is timely given the challenges facing the discipline. Within specialist communities there is an increasing pluralism to the ways that the term *graphic design* is interpreted and deployed. As the practice has evolved with technological advances and social mores it has become slippery to define. Paul Rodgers and Craig Bremner (2016, p. 22) have argued that design disciplines have fragmented and dissolved beyond recognition, with design today being characterized by "fluid, evolving patterns of practice that regularly traverse, transcend and transfigure disciplinary and conceptual boundaries." There has also been much discourse around the democratization of design and innovation (von Hippel, 2005; Manzini, 2015), as well as questions around the relevance of professional status for graphic design more specifically (Rock, 1994). The print trade is no longer the nucleus of the profession that it was a hundred years ago (Bonsiepe, 1994), with educational institutions having adapted to reflect this, downplaying associations with print that the word "graphic" can connote and emphasizing "communication" instead.*

* Several British universities emphasize the communicative intent of the discipline with courses in "Graphic Communication" or "Graphic Communication Design," others emphasize media, with courses in "Graphic and Digital Design," "Graphic and Media Design" or "Graphics for Games."

In a context where the boundaries of graphic design are increasingly contested and expanded, it is important to recognize that the term itself emerged within a specific Anglophone professional and industrial setting. Scholars have highlighted that the ways in which graphic design has been written about historically reflect the professional, institutional, and disciplinary frameworks of their authors (Mazur Thomson, 1993; Triggs, 2011). Visual communication practices have, of course, long existed across cultures, but the label *graphic design* reflects a particular epistemic and institutional lineage. Acknowledging this locality does not resolve the broader problem of Eurocentrism within design history, but it allows this study to clarify how one early British text contributed to the consolidation of a term that would later be applied globally. Its eventual international adoption owed more to the 20th-century dominance of English in commerce and professional discourse than to any inherent conceptual superiority over parallel terminologies. The aim here is not to universalize Raffé's perspective, but to understand how such texts helped form the conceptual vocabulary through which later histories—sometimes uncritically—have narrated the discipline.

2. Approach and Theoretical Basis

This paper employs case study methodology, using close textual analysis to examine Raffé's book as a significant but overlooked artifact in the terminological development of the discipline. The research design centers on systematic primary source analysis, treating the text as both a historical document and a conceptual intervention. The analytical approach combines content examination—analyzing the book's structure, arguments, visual elements, and rhetorical strategies. This is paired with contextual historical inquiry situating the text within broader patterns of professional emergence and terminological evolution.

The close reading methodology involves careful attention to language choices, conceptual approaches, and attempts to codify graphic design knowledge through diagrams and schemas. This analysis is triangulated with secondary sources including contemporary trade publications, educational records, and historical accounts to verify claims and establish broader significance. The historical method traces terminological development, examining how Raffé's 1927 usage relates to earlier commercial art discourse and later graphic design professionalization.

This approach allows both detailed understanding of the text's specific contributions to disciplinary formation and assessment of its significance within the trajectory of graphic design's emergence as a recognized professional field. By combining micro-level textual analysis with macro-level historical contextualization, the study illuminates how individual scholarly and professional interventions contribute to processes of disciplinary legitimation and terminological standardization.

The analysis draws on three theoretical lenses. First, professional sociology (Abbott, 1988) examines how occupational groups establish legitimacy by making knowledge claims and setting boundaries. Raffé's efforts to codify knowledge and distinguish it from "commercial art" are read as attempts to establish jurisdictional claims. Second, the paper engages with media theory. Raffé's positioning of print anticipates insights from McLuhan (1964) on media as extensions of human faculties and Benjamin (1935/2008) on the social implications of mechanical reproduction. Third, discourse analysis (Foucault, 1972) examines how terminological shifts reflect and constitute professional identity. The transition from *commercial art* to *graphic design* represents a discursive formation—a systematic way of organizing knowledge that shapes professional practice. These lenses position Raffé's text not merely as historical artifact, but as a site where professional, technological, and discursive forces converge, producing new forms of cultural authority and disciplinary legitimacy.

3. The Site of Study

3.1. Re-Evaluating Raffé

In his study of "commercial art," "graphic art," and "graphic design," Paul Shaw (2014a) identifies several texts published between 1880 and 1980 that warrant closer scrutiny. Shaw (2014b) shows that "graphic" and "design" appeared together in the 19th century, identifying several examples of incidental usage within US newspapers from 1842, 1856 and 1888. He also reports on early 20th-century usage within education. In 1922, California School of Arts and Crafts publicized a "Graphic Design and Lettering" short course; while in 1926, University of Illinois updated their curriculum from "Advertising Design" to "Graphic Design."

Among the examples Shaw draws attention to it is the entry from 1927—Englishman W. G. Raffé's *Graphic Design*, published by Chapman & Hall in London—that takes central focus here. Shaw notes, "this is the first book to have 'graphic design' in its title" (2014a, para. 60), a significant milestone that distinguishes Raffé's work from the other texts in his survey. While Shaw mistakenly writes off Raffé's book, believing that he never referred to graphic design within his text, Steve Baker (1990) identifies it as a book which has been neglected by design historians. This paper argues that the neglect for Raffé's work is misplaced; for despite being name-checked, it is yet to be scrutinized for its significance in the reification of graphic design as a discipline distinct from what had been called "commercial art."

Walter George Raffé, born in Wigan, England in 1881, was an artist, writer and teacher who followed the Art Nouveau style, working primarily with woodcut (Peppin & Micklethwait, 1984). He lived and worked in the Bradford district, studying at Leeds

College of Art whilst an art teacher at a local school. Gaining a scholarship to the Royal College of Art (RCA), he went on to travel, working in India as a teacher and serving as Principal of the Lucknow School of Art (Neville, n.d.). Raffé's appointment to this senior educational position in colonial India reflects the broader patterns of British imperial influence on design education during this period, demonstrating how Eurocentric ideals about design were transposed to other cultures through institutional channels.

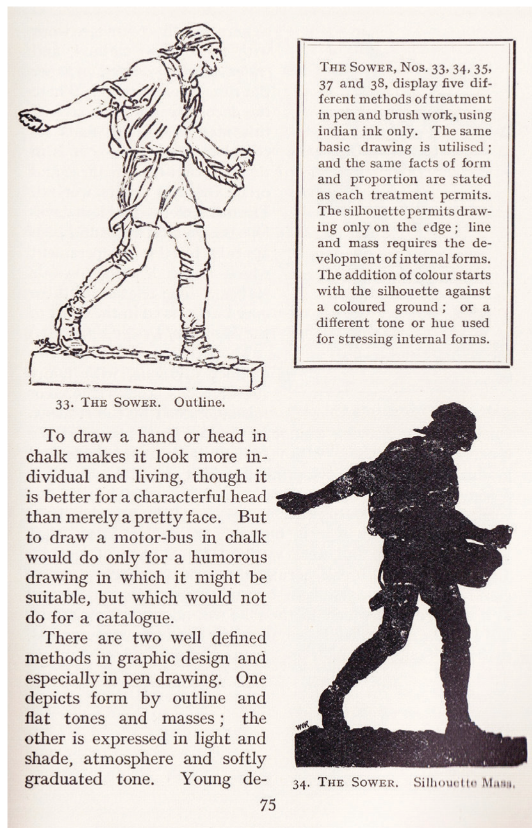
By the end of the 1920s, he was editor of the trade journal *New Publicity* and had published three books on art and design: *Art and Labour* (1927a), *Graphic Design* (1927b), and *Poster Design* (1929). *Art and Labour* is a modest small-format edition of just 84 pages. Written and designed by Raffé, it set out his ideas across six ideological and philosophical essays. Raffé claims that art should not be an amusement but rather should be balanced with labor as part of daily activity—his position reflects his interest in the psychology of art and occultism. *Graphic Design* is highly pragmatic in tone, akin to a handbook, with Raffé's advice applied to professional contexts. It is a tome, with 476 pages and significantly larger in scale. The third book, *Poster Design*, is in a similarly large format, but half the extent, with 224 pages. Images take center stage, with full-page illustrations reproduced in full color—within *Graphic Design* images are predominantly black and white and rarely extend beyond half a page, supporting and illustrating the points made within the text.

As an educator, author and editor, Raffé was a figure of influence, but neither his work as a designer nor as editor and writer have been recognized beyond a name-check by historians. He was not a preeminent designer, unlike commercial artists like Edward McKnight Kauffer, Tom Purvis, or Austin Cooper, who were regularly celebrated in trade journals and annuals. Nevertheless, as editor of the journal *New Publicity* he brushed shoulders with the most respected practitioners. His key work *Graphic Design* (1927b) was well received in its time, with Chapman & Hall's British edition being supplemented by a US version from Bridgman the following year (Raffé, 1928) and a "Cheap Edition" being released four years later (Raffé, 1932).*

3.2. General Overview of the Book

In *Graphic Design*, Raffé (1927b) presents the discipline as a deeply technical endeavor, devoting large portions of the book to how images are reproduced through stylistic choices, printing methods and production techniques. His command of print's possibilities and limitations is evident throughout the examples he includes. For example, he shows how the same image can be rendered for print using different mark-making techniques such as outline, silhouette, stipple effect, or oblique line (Figure 1).

* These editions were likely identical in content given the closely matched extent of each volume.



The Sower, Nos. 33, 34, 35, 37 and 38, display five different methods of treatment in pen and brush work, using indian ink only. The same basic drawing is utilised; and the same facts of form and proportion are stated as each treatment permits. The silhouette permits drawing only on the edge; line and mass requires the development of internal forms. The addition of colour starts with the silhouette against a coloured ground; or a different tone or hue used for stressing internal forms.

33. The Sower. Outline.

To draw a hand or head in chalk makes it look more individual and living, though it is better for a characterful head than merely a pretty face. But to draw a motor-bus in chalk would do only for a humorous drawing in which it might be suitable, but which would not do for a catalogue.

There are two well defined methods in graphic design and especially in pen drawing. One depicts form by outline and flat tones and masses; the other is expressed in light and shade, atmosphere and softly graduated tone. Young de-

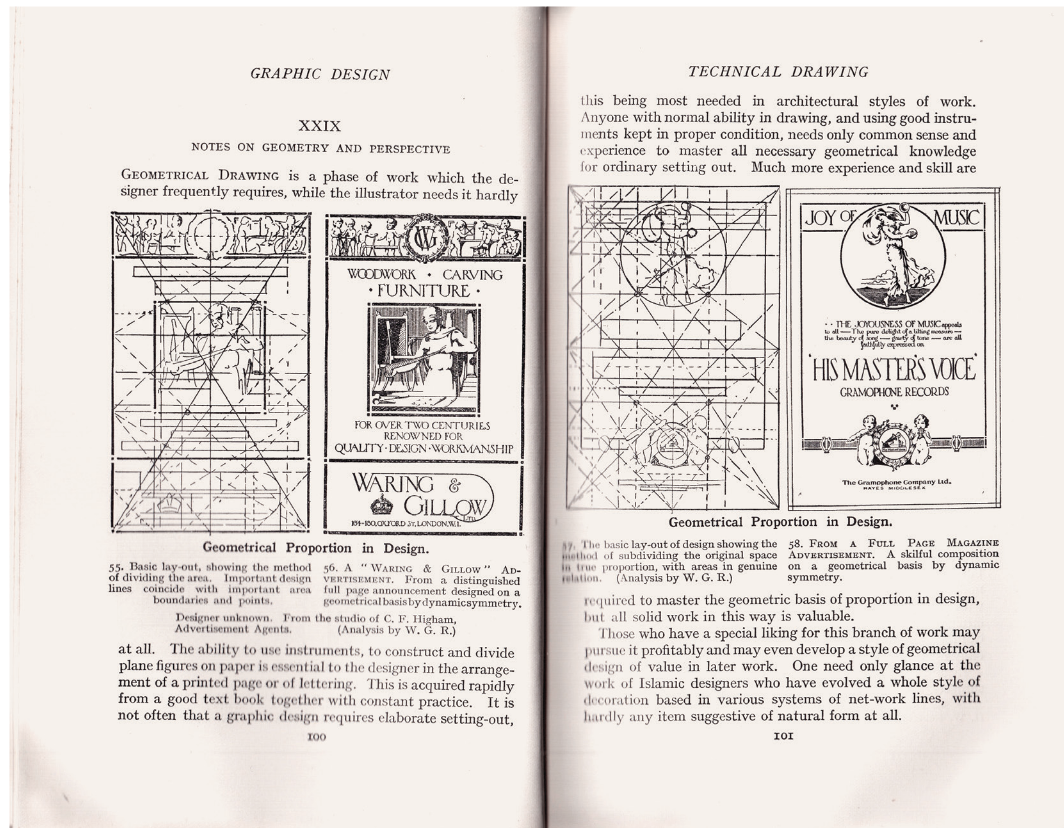
34. The Sower. Silhouette Mass.

75

Figure 1. Sample page showing a sower figure rendered in different ways. The five variations presented in the book are not given as stylistic alternates, but rather as forms suited to different means of reproduction. Image from: Raffé, 1927b, *Graphic Design,* p. 75. Public domain.

Section One on Technical Drawing outlines the purpose of drawing, the processes involved, and the tools that shape its outcomes, with guidance on proportion, composition, and adapting drawings to reproduction methods (Figure 2). Section Two on Technical Design broadens the focus to the psychological appeal of images and the aims of advertising, weaving together topics such as illustration, composition, tone, mood, legibility, scale, style, and typographic decision-making. Raffé uses these themes to show how graphic design operates across books, posters, stamps, labels, trademarks, fashion illustration, and cartoons. Section Three on Technical Methods covers reproduction processes, preparing artwork for print, handling photographs, selecting papers and boards, and the instruments and devices of production. The final section turns to the practicalities of professional life—studio organization, administrative routines, pricing and rights, client relations, agents, publicity, originality and plagiarism, and participation in competitions and exhibitions. The tone throughout is highly practical and professionally oriented, distinguishing this book from Raffé's other publications.

While many British publications focused on national examples, Raffé's text is international in scope, but remains within the Global North. Examples come from North America, Germany, France, Switzerland, Italy and Japan. From North America, the examples favor the direct commercialism of advertising, whereas the continental European references show artistic flair and a more poetic, less direct sales pitch.



GRAPHIC DESIGN

XXIX

NOTES ON GEOMETRY AND PERSPECTIVE

GEOMETRICAL DRAWING is a phase of work which the designer frequently requires, while the illustrator needs it hardly

Geometrical Proportion in Design.

55. Basic lay-out, showing the method of dividing the area. Important design lines coincide with important area boundaries and points.

56. A "WARING & GILLOW" ADVERTISEMENT. From a distinguished full page announcement designed on a geometrical basis by dynamic symmetry.

Designer unknown. From the studio of C. F. Higham, Advertisement Agents. (Analysis by W. G. R.)

at all. The ability to use instruments, to construct and divide plane figures on paper is essential to the designer in the arrangement of a printed page or of lettering. This is acquired rapidly from a good text book together with constant practice. It is not often that a graphic design requires elaborate setting-out,

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TECHNICAL DRAWING

this being most needed in architectural styles of work. Anyone with normal ability in drawing, and using good instruments kept in proper condition, needs only common sense and experience to master all necessary geometrical knowledge for ordinary setting out. Much more experience and skill are

Geometrical Proportion in Design.

57. The basic lay-out of design showing the method of subdividing the original space in true proportion, with areas in genuine relation. (Analysis by W. G. R.)

58. FROM A FULL PAGE MAGAZINE ADVERTISEMENT. A skilful composition on a geometrical basis by dynamic symmetry.

required to master the geometric basis of proportion in design, but all solid work in this way is valuable.

Those who have a special liking for this branch of work may pursue it profitably and may even develop a style of geometrical design of value in later work. One need only glance at the work of Islamic designers who have evolved a whole style of decoration based in various systems of net-work lines, with hardly any item suggestive of natural form at all.

101

Figure 2. Sample spread showing design deconstructions focused on geometrical proportion in layouts that incorporate text and image content in harmony. Image from: Raffé, 1927b, *Graphic Design,* pp. 100–101. Public domain.

The book's front cover (Figure 3) presents a white design on a navy-blue ground. The words "Graphic Design, W. G. Raffé" are set in all capitals, centered across four lines. Surrounding the text is a composite of pictures, including trademarks, design iconography and commercial illustrations. These represent typical "jobbing" work for commercial artists. The tone is traditional, channeling the Arts and Crafts movement, with hand-rendered serif lettering far removed from the perceived modernity of typographers of the era like Jan Tschichold or Eric Gill.

3.3. Training for a Profession

Raffé's book presents itself as a how-to guide, "a good and straightforward book, written with the needs of students in mind" (1927b, p. viii), aiming to "help the young man or woman who desire to master graphic design and to work at it professionally" (p. vii). Several points stand out. Raffé emphasizes that the field is open to both men and women—a seemingly minor detail, yet significant given the era's prevalent sexism. He also signals graphic design's professional status from the outset, framing it as a serious occupation and later sharing his "professional secrets" (p. 422). This is surprising

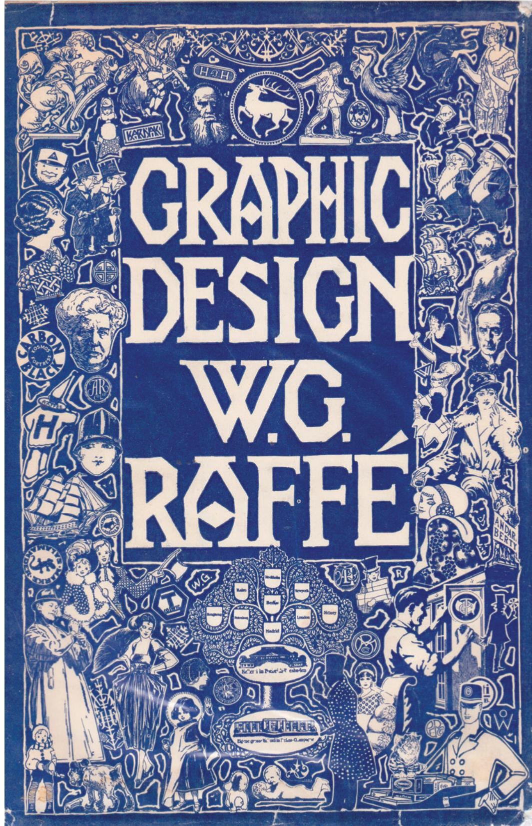


Figure 3. Front cover design of W. G. Raffé's *Graphic Design.* Image from: Raffé, 1927b. Public domain.

considering that graphic design only came to be regarded as a serious professional activity after WWII. The Society of Industrial Artists (SIA) campaigned for design status from 1930 onwards, but limited headway was made until the society regrouped after the war (Armstrong, 2015).*

For entering the profession, Raffé believes that personal interaction between the novice and expert is key. He recommends tuition from an art school or a capable designer, "a weekly visit is often sufficient for the precise personal criticism and corrections" (1927b, p. vii). Raffé has several reservations about art school teaching, but recommends students seek formal education alongside experience on the job. He notes misalignments between the principles eschewed by educational institutions and industry demands, questioning the treatment of drawing within art schools as serving design and not the other way around. This highlights his awareness of disparities between professional methods and pedagogical principles prioritized by educational institutions.

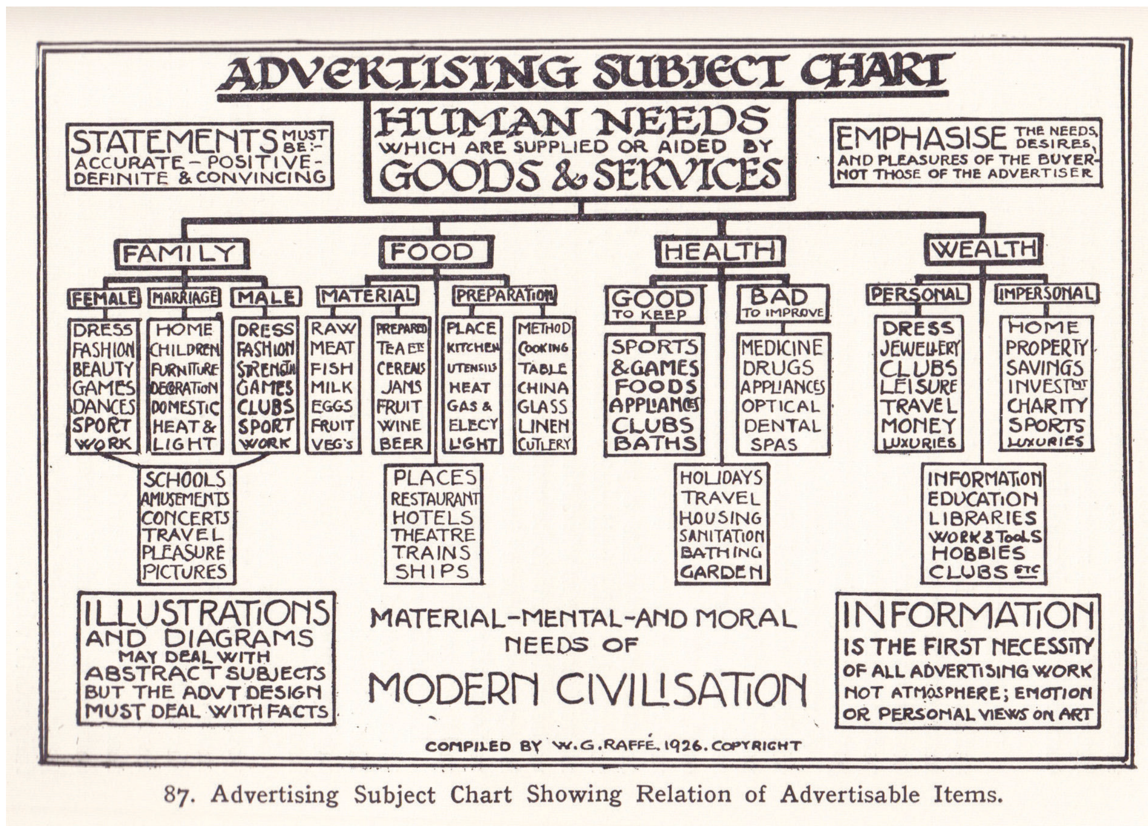
* Outside Britain, relevant organizations include the AIGA (American Institute of Graphic Arts) founded in 1914 and the AGI (Alliance Graphique Internationale) which was incorporated in Paris in 1952.

Raffé's attempts to frame graphic design as a professional activity remain significant, establishing the discipline as distinct from commercial art. Commercial Art Limited distributed their bimonthly periodical from 1922 onwards, while Pitman released Verney Danvers' (1926) handbook, *Training in Commercial Art.* By comparison Raffé's book stood out in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Elsewhere publications flagged their ties with advertising, with Percy Bradshaw's (1925) *Art in Advertising* being key; others emphasized an editorial angle, like Vincent Steer's (1930) *Printing Design and Layout,* or the French printer Alfred Tolmer's (1931) *Mise en Page.*

Raffé (1927b) seeks to bestow integrity upon the discipline through elaborate diagrams and models. These demonstrate a rigorous attempt to codify and professionalize graphic design knowledge. He presents detailed schemas governing both the conceptual and formal aspects of work. These include charts based on human needs ("Advertising subject chart," Figure 4, p. 149) and dissecting images' graphic, dramatic, and decorative values ("Chart of illustration," p. 153). Further diagrams establish a theoretical basis for practice, including the relationship between conceptual and formal characteristics in advertisements, a method moving design beyond naturalistic imitation ("Relation of 'Nature' to Graphic Design," Figure 5, p. 161), and the psychological relations across all phases of the discipline ("The Eternal Triangle," Figure 6, p. 164).

Beyond these theoretical schemas, Raffé includes charts, lists, and itineraries covering printing methods, paper formats, poster standards, and historical printing techniques. Through this technical data, he seeks to codify graphic design into rules and laws following techno-scientific rationality. This establishes graphic design as more than art reframed for business ends, but as a practice with an esoteric knowledge base.

On a surface level, these diagrams appear authoritative, giving the discipline a professional sheen. Closer examination, however, reveals many of these schemas to be far-fetched, imposing artificial systematization onto practices that resist rigid codification. The elaborate frameworks, while visually compelling, attempt to link esoteric concepts in ways that overstate the systematic nature of graphic design. Figure 6, titled "The Eternal Triangle," exemplifies this tendency, presenting what Raffé describes as "the psychological relations recurrent in all phases of graphic design" (1927b, p. 164). Yet the diagram offers little practical guidance, and readers would struggle to apply its abstract schema. Its mystical overtones reflect Raffé's documented interest in occultism, infusing his professionalizing project with esoteric spirituality that sits uneasily alongside his claims to scientific rigor. This tension exposes the challenges faced by early attempts to theorize graphic design as a systematic discipline.



87. Advertising Subject Chart Showing Relation of Advertisable Items.

Figure 4. An example of one of Raffé's many diagrams attempting to codify aspects of graphic design practice. It is notable that he incorporates both advertising and illustration within his conception of professional graphic design. Image from: Raffé, 1927b, *Graphic Design,* p. 149. Public domain.

4. Defining Graphic Design

4.1. Print as an Essential Enabling Technology of Graphic Design

> The triumphant march of the printing press is blasting the trail for the designer, for, wherever there is print, there also graphic design is necessary. (Raffé, 1927b, p. 442)

For Raffé the power of graphic design lies in its potential for multiplicity. As he explains, fine art will no longer be carried from home to home, for images will be fixed all around, with art and design prevalent for the masses. Easel pictures are doomed to extinction, as "the ordinary single picture does not pull its social weight … it represents too often only the hazy idea of one man" (Raffé, 1927b, p. 444). Raffé positions fine art as an inferior pursuit with limited social impact by comparison to graphic communication.

Raffé views print as an essential enabling technology for graphic design, through which the discipline finds its relevance, both socially and economically. Modern graphic design is "specifically designed for duplication by mechanical aid" (Raffe, 1927b, p. 8).

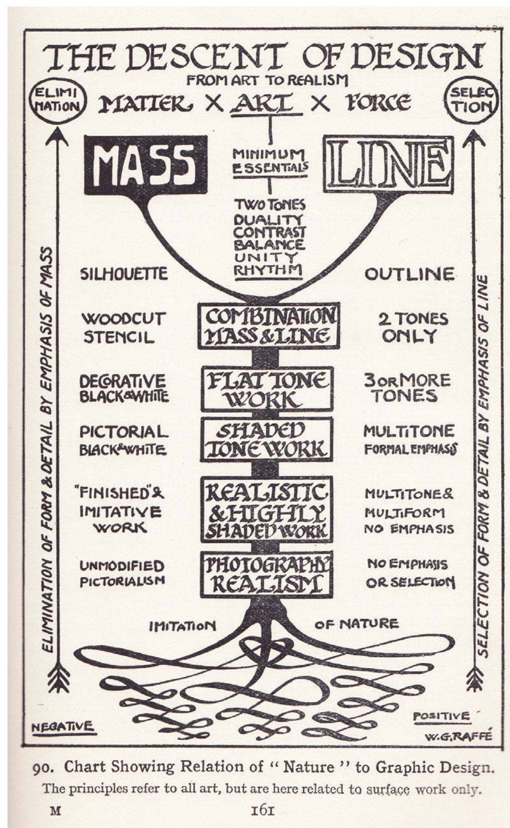


Figure 5. A further example of Raffé's attempts to codify aspects of graphic design practice in diagrammatic form with a focus on the use of mass and line. Image from: Raffé, 1927b, *Graphic Design,* p. 161. Public domain.

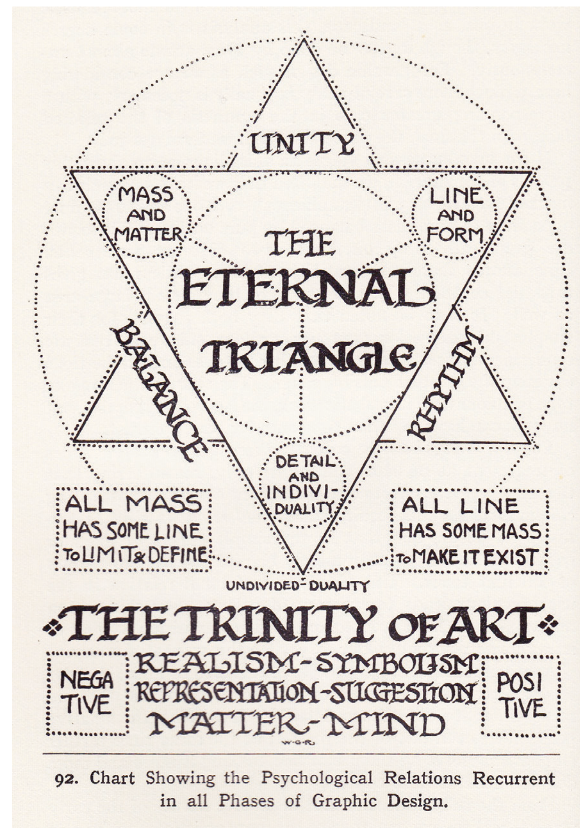


Figure 6. A more holistic diagram on what Raffé calls "The Eternal Triangle" bringing together several of his concerns into one schema. Image from: Raffé, 1927b, *Graphic Design,* p. 164. Public domain.

As such, "the competent designer studies carefully his chosen process of duplication" (p. 9) and should tailor his graphics to the printing method and material in use. Raffé's emphasis on print's democratizing potential anticipates Benjamin's (1935/2008) analysis of mechanical reproduction's revolutionary implications. Where Benjamin (1935/2008, pp. 23–25) sees mechanical reproduction as a threat to art's "aura," Raffé champions multiplicity as graphic design's social strength. This theoretical divergence reveals how professional discourse can oppose critical theory's concerns, with Raffé seeing mechanical reproduction as a democratizing force and conduit for collective existence. This echoes Gitelman's (2014) ideas about the social life of paper, as well as Innis (1951) and McLuhan's (1964) arguments about the history of mass media being central to the history of civilization.

Raffé plays up the role of the graphic designer as a communicator, acknowledging the distinct communicative aspect in graphic design:

> Graphic Design will be required more and more, with increased means of transport, to touch the nations of the world more quickly than even the printed word can do. People move about from city to city; books and papers also move about; between these two modern facts graphic design will achieve its work, as a means of communication. (1927b, p. 444)

The word “communication” is unusual in early 20th-century commercial art—though the terms now commonly conjoin in Communication Design courses.* Communication was not typically associated with design at this time but referred to transportation or transmission, as evident in the history of city planning. Raffé’s idea of communication links to speed and movement as he refers to the transportation of ideas through society. This recalls Schivelbusch’s (2014) concept of the machine ensemble—linking progress to acceleration in the scale, scope and speed of machine integration. Raffé’s emphasis on the communication and transportation of ideas through society provides alternate focus versus the aesthetic and technical connotations of the word “graphic,” or the financial connotations of “commercial”—as in commercial art. This defining focus on what graphic design can do, as opposed to how it looks, or how it is made is unusual in the history of graphic design.

4.2. Office Artists and the Value of Original Design

According to Raffé, the “ordinary commercial man” (1927b, p. 3) is becoming increasingly aware of design, with opportunities emerging for freelancers to take commissions from publishers, advertising agencies and printers. Although enthusiastic about freelance life, he is condescending about in-house designers, claiming that commercial art in Britain is stunted by the limitations upon “office artists” required to churn out “maximum quantity at a known minimum quality” (1927b, p. 12). These artists are inhibited by their work conditions, being “cooped up in a dingy office all day” and unable to roam the streets in search of inspiration (1927b, p. 14). Graphic design is more than simply office art and should not be viewed as a formulaic practice to be conducted by rote.

Raffé (1927b, p. 5) questions the relationship between design and drawing, saying that although drawing is “a means of expression fundamental to graphic design ... it does not properly occupy the premier place so often wrongly claimed for it.” He criticizes how art schools concentrate on routine drawing competence at the expense of purposeful, applied design. As he understands it, students are incorrectly instructed on how to draw, before creating their designs; as in his mind, design is more sophisticated and

* Shaw (2014a) claims “visual communication” came to the fore in the late 1960s, as “graphic design” was on its way to common acceptance within the English-speaking world. He links these developments to the publication of John Cataldo’s (1966) book on the subject.

should be treated as primary. Raffé (1927b, p. 6) argues that "a really good designer can succeed, even if he cannot 'draw'," a surprising claim given that his opening chapter focuses on drawing. He downplays its importance, suggesting that drawing errors are easily corrected, whereas weak design is not. As he notes, drawing is of little significance without "ability in the much higher phase of original design" (1927b, p. 16). This underscores that, for Raffé, the designer's real value lies in strategic judgement rather than technical execution.

Raffé emphasizes design as the critical element of the practice. Design, for him, infers a bridging force linking aesthetics with printing know-how. "The power of design is the synthesizing ability which links together craft knowledge and methods to the end desired" (1927b, p. 5). He understands design to be a purposive and communicative act linked to an audience; a strategic form of image-making allied with prowess in print production. He describes drawing as a "statement of information" or activity of "scientific analysis," while design centers around "the deliberate selection and arrangement of material." Raffé substantiates his views on drawing with various diagrams and talks through three stages of drawing: "preliminary," "drawing," and "design." These diagrams elevate design above its associations with rudimentary drawing processes.

Graphic design is often conceptualized as a synthesis of text and image, with this becoming a defining characteristic of the discipline. For Raffé typography receives less attention than the pictorial or technical components. He identifies lettering as one of the three main areas of printed work: "lettering by type or hand," "illustration" and "decoration." Yet he sets aside just 31 pages for the subject, versus 127 for technical drawing. This reflects the technical conditions of the era, with commercial artists producing images on posters, handbills or books, but not typically being responsible for setting movable type. Although they may have rendered the lettering or titling on their artworks, body text would have been set by specialist typesetters for whom other handbooks were available.*

Raffé's examples favor the pictorial expression and aesthetic flair of commercial art image-makers over modern typography. Jan Tschichold's (1925, 1928) ideas on modern design began to spread through the continent from the '20s, but decades passed before they became commonplace in British culture and education through the work of Herbert Spencer (1952), Anthony Froshaug and others. Raffé's framing of graphic design can be seen to differ from the conception which became entrenched in the 1960s, where text and image were regarded as equal partners in a fully integrated relationship. For

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* Many poster artists of the era relied on print specialists to prepare artworks for press and tidy up their cursory attempts at lettering.

Kinross (1992) the increasing prevalence of photographic technology helped to enable this pairing of text and image to prosper as the century progressed.

5. Raffé's Book in the Context of Broader Terminological Developments

5.1. Commercial Art and Graphic Design (1920–1960)

For Raffé, graphic design is largely interchangeable with commercial art, switching between the terms as he claims his book will not immediately make you a "successful commercial artist" (1927b, p. viii). Falling back on the established terminology implies a lack of confidence to commit, demonstrating how new ideas are often framed using recognizable concepts. These two terms he refers to frequently, but there is no clear pattern of usage, suggesting that he varied his language to stimulate the reader and avoid repetition. He also mentions "graphic art," "commercial design," "commercial graphic design," "commercial graphic art" and "artistic publicity."

Given the entanglement between graphic design and commercial art, it is essential to trace the historical development of these terms to explain how graphic design achieved prominence. Commercial art had been prevalent during the inter-war period, with a journal of the same name published between 1922 and 1936.* Richard Guyatt (1963, p. 21) claims:

> The term 'Graphic Design' was unknown before the war. Those were the days of 'Commercial Art,' of the 'Poster Artist,' when art applied itself to commerce while still wearing a beard and beret as a reminder of noble origins.

According to Kinross (1988), "graphic design" only began to be established in Britain after 1948 when the RCA introduced the first course in the subject under Richard Guyatt. Frayling (2013, p. 468) claims that Guyatt had been "the first to use the phrase publicly in Britain"—but Raffé had published his text two decades earlier. The choice of course name is curious, with Guyatt explaining that they didn't know what else to call it. During the restructuring of 1948, "School of Publicity Design" had been proposed, but this led to a backlash in *The Times*, with critics resistant to the vulgarity of the word "publicity." As Guyatt (1963, pp. 21–22) recalls, "with a certain sense of relief, but not much conviction, the name 'Graphic Design' was chosen. No one was quite sure what it meant, but it had a purposeful ring."

In the United States, Leon Friend and Joseph Hefter's (1936) *Graphic Design: A Library of Old and New Masters in the Graphic Arts* is considered significant, being broadly similar

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* *Commercial Art* became *Commercial Art and Industry* in 1932, then later *Art and Industry* in 1937.

in scope with Raffé's book. As previously discussed, short courses in graphic design had existed in the US in the 1920s, but Rob Roy Kelly (2001) argues that the period from 1950 to 1955 was most significant for the discipline's development. It was during this period that Yale established their influential graphic arts program under Department Chair Josef Albers. Notably, the events at Yale loosely echo developments at the RCA; however, it was not until the late 1950s, when Guyatt visited Yale with RCA Director Robin Darwin, that program head Alvin Eisenman was encouraged to change the course name from "graphic arts" to "graphic design"—a change that was implemented soon after (Kelly, 2001).

At Yale the importance of continental European ideas is clear, with the influential Albers having trained and taught at the Bauhaus. The lineage of influence at the RCA is less clear, as they were known to disregard continental modernism, virtually ignoring foreign developments until much later when designers such as Anthony Froshaug joined (Seago, 1995). While the RCA remained traditional, emphasizing steel and woodblock gravure, fine typography, and bookbinding, London's Central School embraced a progressive, avant-garde approach, drawing on continental modernism and prioritizing experimental typographic design over mere letter formation. By 1953 the Central School updated their Department of Book Production, reflecting developments at the RCA, renaming it the School of Book Production and Graphic Design (Johnstone, 1953).

It took decades for the term graphic design to supplant commercial art in Britain. Another milestone was the publication of John Lewis and John Brinkley's (1954) *Graphic Design with Special Reference to Lettering, Typography and Illustration.* Lewis and Brinkley were tutors at the RCA, with Department Head Guyatt responsible for the dust-jacket and introduction. The book reflects the tendencies of the department in which they taught, with illustrated examples focusing on British traditionalism and nostalgia. Photography is notably absent, and they prefer to focus on craft over the commercial or conceptual bases of the discipline. By separating the book into the fields of "typographic design" and "illustration design," they go against the conception of graphic design as a conjunction of text and image.

Together, these examples show the term *graphic design* coming into public consciousness through gradual usage, rather than a "big bang" moment. Despite the precedent for the term established by Raffé, commercial art remained dominant during the first half of the century in Britain. After WWII, the status and opportunities for design in Britain shifted significantly, as reconstruction efforts were guided by utopian ideals of social betterment (Maguire & Woodham, 1997). As such, design was seen as a tool which could contribute to the envisioning of a new and better world. From this context of social and economic reconstruction, a new generation of graphic designers emerged

from art school determined to make their mark and distinguish themselves from their predecessors.

5.2. Graphic Design from 1960

While the educational initiatives of the 1950s laid the foundations for graphic design to flourish, the ’60s saw it become fully legitimized as a professional activity. By this time graduates from newly established courses at the RCA, Central and Yale could develop their careers, applying what they learnt to their own professional practices. In 1959 the Association of Graphic Designers London (AGDL) was formed by Derek Birdsall, with an exhibition occurring the following year under the title “Graphic design: London” (Braybon, 2018). This led in turn to the publication of *17 Graphic Designers London* (Commander, 1963a), a book showcasing the work of 11 design practices, including a trio of groups (Fletcher/Forbes/Gill, BDMW, and Kinnear Calvert). Others worked independently within publishing, art direction or editorial design. Of those featured, most were young and had graduated from London art schools after the war, many studying together. This collective positioned themselves as the doyens of a new age of graphic design in Britain.

Art Director of printing firm Balding + Mansell, John Commander was a key figure, serving as editor on *17 Graphic Designers London*, Chairman for the Designers & Art Directors’ Association (D&AD), and helping to organize the first D&AD exhibition and annual (Commander, 1963b). The strong overlap between these events is significant, with many of those featured in *17 Graphic Designers London* serving as jury members for the D&AD show. Those involved competed with the established SIA, representing a more specialized and progressive vision for the discipline. They associated commercial art with the older generations and understood it to be fusty and unsophisticated. As Paul Stiff (2009) explains, commercial art was seen as merely picture making for business, whereas graphic design was to be viewed as sophisticated and rational. Collectively, the events of 1963 mark a distinct break from the painterly whimsy of British commercial art. Continental ideas came to the fore, with sans-serif typefaces increasingly ubiquitous. The commercial wit of the American approach combined confidently with the structural flamboyance of European typographic principles and ideas.

6. Conclusion

This research has demonstrated that the emergence of *graphic design* as a disciplinary term was more complex and geographically distributed than previously understood. Rather than originating with a single figure, or emerging suddenly, the term’s development involved multiple practitioners across different national contexts working incrementally to establish new professional categories. Adoption should thus be

understood as involving several generations of practitioners spread across time periods and multinational terrain.

This paper examined W. G. Raffé's 1927 text *Graphic Design* as a significant but overlooked contribution to this terminological development. At a time when "commercial art" dominated professional discourse, Raffé's use of "graphic design" in his book title represented an anomalous outlier. Though the book received popular recognition in its time, it has been neglected by design historians, despite some recognizing its significance as the first book to carry the title.

6.1. Raffé's Foundational Contributions

Three core findings arise, challenging conventional narratives about graphic design's historical emergence and offering insights into the discipline's foundational concepts. Most significantly, Raffé positioned graphic design as a practice with vital social function, emphasizing its communicative capacity to mobilize public consciousness. He articulated how the multiplicity afforded by print processes empowered graphic design to transport ideas through society and generate collective awareness. Prioritizing graphic design's social benefits over its formal attributes or creative dimensions, Raffé articulated the discipline's wider purpose and value—contrasting sharply with typical aesthetic-focused conceptualizations. In linking the discipline to technological advancement and positioning speed, scale, and movement as markers of its future value, he anticipates later arguments by media scholars like Innis, McLuhan, and Gitelman regarding the transformative social power of visual culture.

Raffé's second major contribution was articulating graphic design as more than commercial picture-making. He positioned print reproduction as graphic design's essential enabling technology. Not merely a tool, but the fundamental basis for the discipline's social relevance and professional distinction from fine art. For Raffé, original design represented a "much higher phase" (1927b, p. 16) than drawing alone, requiring designers to move beyond personal expression toward a deep technical knowledge of print production techniques which informed how they designed. This understanding of the medium as deterministic foreshadowed McLuhan's (1964) thinking, anticipating actor-network theorists (Latour, 2005) insights about technology's agency in social formation.

Finally, Raffé's efforts to codify graphic design knowledge through extensive diagrams, schemas, and analytical frameworks represented an early attempt at disciplinary professionalization. By treating picture-making as a techno-science requiring specialized esoteric knowledge, he aimed to establish concrete foundations for professional legitimacy, paralleling developments in established professions like medicine and law. This was particularly significant as design was not widely regarded as a legitimate profession

in Britain until the post-war period, and art schools did not teach the subject until the late 1940s and ’50s. His focus on education–industry relationships and practical career guidance for aspiring designers helped build momentum for the professionalization project, claiming jurisdiction (Abbott, 1988) over competing domains like advertising.

6.2. Contemporary Challenges

Revisiting Raffé’s attempt to reify “graphic design” is relevant when considering challenges facing the discipline’s identity a century later. While print was graphic design’s essential enabling technology for Raffé, digital media has replaced it as the dominant communication platform. This shift has reshaped the professional frameworks associated with early 20th-century design practice.

The ideal of the professional designer has also been unsettled by the democratization of design tools and the rise of “design thinking” as a general problem-solving approach. Professional bodies such as Britain’s Chartered Society of Designers have struggled to maintain relevance, while some practitioners have repositioned themselves “upstream” into strategic roles beyond project delivery and material craft. The emerging emphasis on issue-based rather than discipline-based practice raises fundamental questions about where specialized expertise sits in relation to generic, cross-sector design capabilities.

As Afonso Matos (2022) observes, definitions of graphic design have been broadening and diffusing, with technical proficiency overshadowed by notions of design as a mode of thinking or attitude. The development of generative artificial intelligence has added further pressure to creative labor markets, even as graphic design continues to shape visual culture. Image carousels and short-form videos have become central communication channels for younger audiences in the post-digital era, extending the accelerated visual communication dynamics that Raffé identified in the 1920s—though now screens have replaced printed pages.

Raffé’s 1927 intervention articulated a professional and technical jurisdiction for graphic design, distinguishing it from “commercial art.” Yet in grounding this jurisdiction in the technical and organizational conditions of Western print culture, his account also reflects the particular cultural and institutional setting from which the discipline emerged. Raffé’s own career, including his time as Principal of the Lucknow School of Art, underscores how pedagogical and professional models developed in one context were transplanted to others, sometimes with limited sensitivity to local traditions. Recognizing this does not diminish his contribution; rather, it situates graphic design as a historically contingent construct shaped by the global conditions and assumptions of its time.

As graphic design grapples with questions of inclusivity and global relevance, these historical foundations become important for understanding how disciplinary

concepts have developed and what they may have obscured. The terminological shift from “commercial art” to “graphic design” involved claims to professional legitimacy that inevitably reflected the cultural contexts in which such claims were made. This process helped consolidate an Anglophone canon, often at the expense of broader histories of visual communication across Africa, Asia, and the Americas. Attending to these coexisting traditions—rooted in diverse materials, symbolic systems, and social functions—does not replace the history Raffé represents but expands the frame through which the field’s development can be understood.

Raffé’s contribution must also be understood within its linguistic and geographic particularity. While this study has traced how “graphic design” became established within Anglo-American professional discourse, the term’s subsequent global adoption reflected the geopolitical ascendancy of English in international professional spheres as much as any conceptual consensus. Other linguistic traditions maintained parallel terminologies—such as the German *Gebrauchsgraphik* (Aynsley, 1992), the Japanese *Shōgyō Bijutsu* (Weisenfeld, 2000), or the French and Spanish *Arts Graphiques* and *Artes Gráficas*—each embedding different emphases and cultural priorities within their professional frameworks.

By revisiting figures such as Raffé and tracing their influence, this study opens a pathway toward a more plural understanding of how graphic design emerged as a recognized field of practice and knowledge. This perspective supports a more informed engagement with contemporary debates about the discipline’s future direction and global relevance. As graphic design approaches its second century as a named form of labor, it remains unclear which technologies and forms of practice will define its next phase. Yet the questions Raffé engaged—regarding design’s social function, its relationship to enabling technologies, and its claims to professional jurisdiction—continue to resonate as the field navigates ongoing technological change, increasing cultural diversity, and evolving professional identities.

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