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Cave Paintings

Continuities and Progress in Graphic Designers' Histories

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It all started with a cave painting. A shining negative of a hand on a darkened cave wall, painted around 15,000 BC in southern France. This simple, yet iconic prehistoric artifact is shown as the first image of Josef Müller-Brockmann's *A History of Visual Communication/Geschichte der visuellen Kommunikation/Histoire de la communication visuelle*.¹ Right next to it, on the same page, is a skillful, naturalistic depiction of a bull from 12,000 BC. The opposite, right-hand page shows a hunting scene from 4,000 BC, equally complex and stylized. This spread [Fig. 1] already reveals the essence of the book. At its core, it is an annotated stream of 567 numbered images, arranged from left to right and from cover to cover in what appears to be chronological order. This linear sequence can be read as an implied continuous, progressive development. And at the pinnacle of it all, Müller-Brockmann positions himself. His chain of artifacts ends with a

constructivist typographic poster for a festival of classical music in Zurich—a contemporary work by the author. [Fig. 2]

First published in 1971 and adapted and re-issued in 1986, *A History of Visual Communication* can be considered the earliest attempt at an all-encompassing history of graphic design.² This assessment is substantiated by the fact that various later historiographies seem to follow its blueprint. Paul Rand's *From Lascaux to Brooklyn* of 1996,³ for example, appears to be an adaptation of the same narrative for an American readership. But more critical, academic works also show a similar approach. Philip B. Meggs's highly successful *A History of Graphic Design* from 1983,⁴ Roxane Jubert's *Typography and Graphic Design: From Antiquity to the Present* from 2006,⁵ and even Johanna Drucker and Emily McVarish's *Graphic Design History: A Critical Guide* from 2009 start their accounts with cave paintings.⁶ The last of these even goes so far as to begin with a full-page image of a stenciled hand from the same Lascaux cave. Nevertheless, many historians deem Müller-Brockmann's work a mere footnote to this more recent serious field of research. Instead, they situate *A History of Visual Communication* within the phenomenon of Swiss Graphic Design. It is seen as part of a wave of manuals that were crucial in the worldwide dissemination of the Swiss Modernists' ideas, their principles of form, and their own practice.⁷

Authored by Karl Gerstner and his business partner Markus Kutter, and pub-

lished in 1959, *Die neue Graphik/The New Graphic Art/Le nouveau art graphique* is widely considered as the movement's earliest significant publication.⁸ Its name and its design resemble the quarterly *Neue Grafik/New Graphic Design/Graphisme actuel* that had been launched a year earlier by the four Zurich designers Richard Paul Lohse, Josef Müller-Brockmann, Hans Neuburg, and Carlo Vivarelli. It is, however, the first book that epitomizes the characteristics associated with the so-called Swiss Style. This trilingual volume (German, English, and French) was produced in a square format, based on a three-column grid, and set in only two weights of a Grotesque typeface of a single size. [Fig. 3] The preface corrects any incorrect assumptions that the short, programmatic title might have prompted, and clarifies that the book does not intend to show new or unseen works. Instead, as is also evident in its descriptive subtitle "*its origins, its evolution, its peculiarities, its tasks, its problems, its manifestations and its future prospect,*"⁹ it is of a historiographic nature. Leafing through its pages reveals an astonishingly familiar format: it too consists of a continuous sequence of annotated images, and it too ends with one of the authors', namely Gerstner's, recent works. [Fig. 4]

This view of history as ongoing progress is, of course, not without precedent. It is a main pillar of modern Western thought. Referring to Reinhart Koselleck's extensive study,¹⁰ Peter Wagner points out that the experiences of the Enlightenment, the

Industrial Revolution, and incipient globalization led to a new conception of time, history, and change.

In comparison with any view of improvement held before, the new concept of progress marked a radical break. It connected normative advances in the human condition with a long and linear perspective. And it disconnected these advances from human agency; progress itself came to be endowed with causal agency.¹¹

Nevertheless, progress is seen today as an empty concept. In order for it to be historically significant, it needs to be connected to academic fields. These references to knowledge represent a historical continuity that can be related to the basic structure of modernity. However, the political function of experts has been subject to change, and different scientific disciplines have had a leading function in determining cultural and socio-political self-understanding.¹²

Since the 1980s, these linear, progressive design histories have been fundamentally criticized for their all-encompassing, simplifying narratives, and their canonizing implications.¹³ While this criticism holds true in many respects,¹⁴ at times it seems to disregard the temporality of these publications. As the historiographer Keith Jenkins has noted, works of history are simplifications by nature. They are always by someone and for someone; they are based

on fundamental assumptions and the use of particular methods, and they always have a certain agenda.¹⁵ Revisiting the dissemination of Swiss graphic design and typography, it is exactly the fact that these two popular books cannot be detached from their intended purpose and their contemporary role that is of interest. Rather than expanding a canon, this essay aims to deconstruct their narratives, and analyze their historiographical methods, and their use and portrayal of the key concept of progress. It intends to uncover the needs, goals, and aspirations of these influential authors, and to provide insights into sensemaking processes in a diverse, changing field.

A thoroughly progressive narrative

A closer look at *Die neue Graphik* reveals that the role of progress goes far beyond the linearly constructed visual narrative described above. The book is founded on a deeply progressive world view with implicit and explicit connections to Kantian ethics and positivist philosophy.

Gerstner and Kutter start their accounts by posing, and answering, the question as to whether graphic design should be considered as art. While this seems rather odd, their statement contextualizes their approach and why they have decided to write their own history. Referring to Toulouse-Lautrec, the authors argue that the two fields of art and graphic design are

intrinsically different. Even though his posters and paintings used the same means and showed the same hand, a poster without lettering would not necessarily be a good painting, and vice versa. [Fig. 5] Hence, design had its own set of problems and its own history. However, artistic work was not restricted to art itself. In a constantly changing, modern world, it was characterized by an endless quest for new solutions.

Artistic activity is possibly [sic] only on the frontier of unexplored territory, where the artist knows what achievements lie behind him and sees before him problems which, since time passes and social conditions are in constant flux, call for solutions different from those applied hitherto.¹⁶

Hinting at Kant, the authors deem progress a categorical imperative of modern graphic design, and critical thought the only productive means of fulfilling it. They argue that only based on an awareness for design's own history could ever-changing contemporary problems be addressed appropriately. Their book is therefore conceived to play a double role: it should convince the reader of the possibility of progress in design, and endow him with the historical foundations to contribute to it. Without explicitly referring to Auguste Comte, the authors seem to adapt the sociologist's law of the three stages.¹⁷

The work of laymen always lies outside historical development or in a place fortuitously related to it. Craftsmen create the essential conditions for such a development to take place: they stand at its beginning. But real evolution begins only with the artist, an evolution that is based at every instant on mental decision but seen in retrospect to have been necessary and logical.¹⁸

While the layout of the book implies a continuous progress, its goal is a break: with the coming of the critical professional, graphic design should leave traditions behind, and finally become fully temporalized, truly modern.

These implicit and explicit hints at philosophical theories around the concept of progress demonstrate that Gerstner and Kutter deliberately adapted Enlightenment thinking to formulate their Modernist approach to graphic design. And as Gerstner's widely read classic *Programme entwerfen* from 1964 was also a direct adaptation of the so-called "Morphological Box" established by the Swiss astrophysicist Fritz Zwicky,¹⁹ it becomes evident that the translation and appropriation of models from more prestigious intellectual fields formed the deliberate backbone of their work.

Given the reflective nature of *Die neue Graphik*, it might not be too surprising that its authors even anticipated some of the more recent criticism. In the very first paragraph, they explain that they were well

aware of certain problematic aspects of their historiography. Explaining the practitioner's lack of guidance in a wide and undocumented field, they claim there was a need for a simple story line that allowed for better navigation. They state that their book was written from a personal, cultural, and geographical perspective, as represented by its structure and the choice of works presented. Explicitly distancing themselves from any claims of neutrality, they further recount that external circumstances—such as the size of the book, the accessibility of sources, the rights to images, and the accumulated material itself—influenced how theories were formed that in turn had an impact on the selection of works.²⁰ This statement hardly serves to rebut all criticism, though it does reveal a degree of reflection on the part of the authors that is rarely acknowledged.²¹

Backed by the theory they put forward, Gerstner and Kutter not only described their view of the past, but also prospected into the future. The works on display were, of course, of the past. But, as the authors pointed out, they showed characteristics which were to become particularly important in the years to come. This, they argued, was possible because in a world increasingly permeated by technologies and complex systems, certain material and organizational requirements could be identified that went beyond fashion and taste. The selected projects were therefore intended to demonstrate an exemplary exploration of

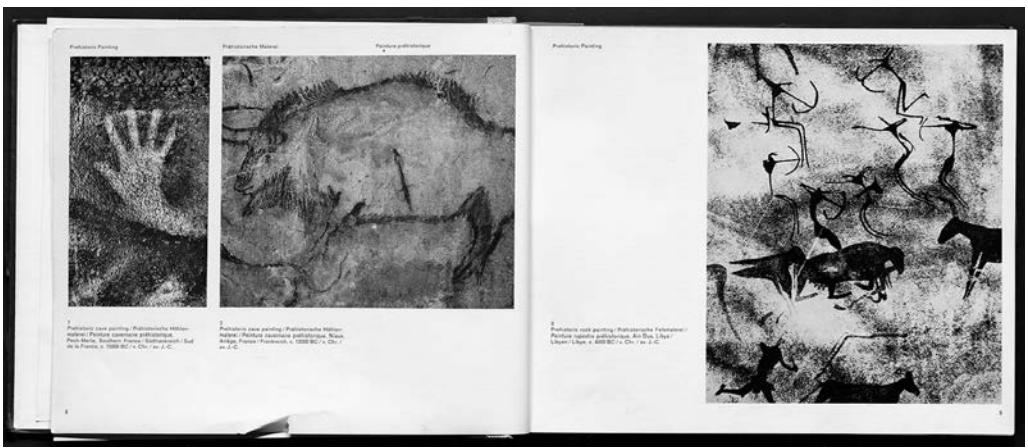


Fig. 1

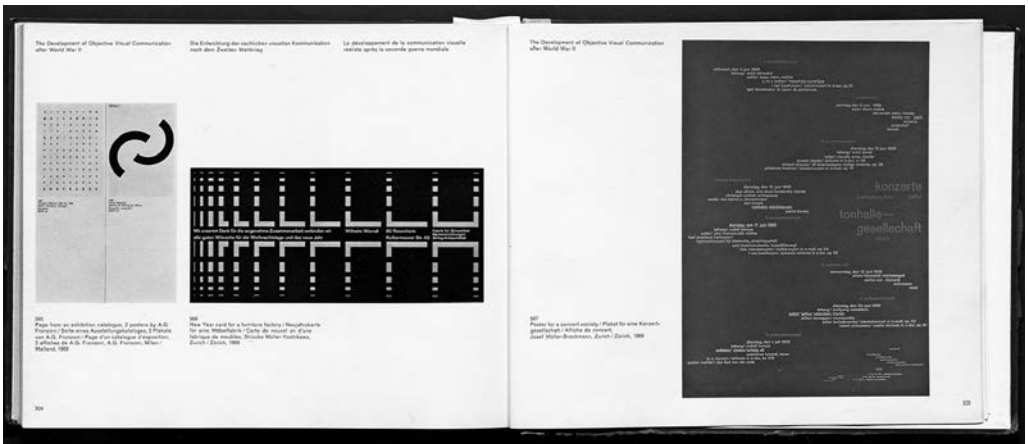


Fig. 2

Fig. 1
 The prehistoric beginning of *A History of Visual Communication* ...

Fig. 2
 ... and its end in Müller-Brockmann's own work.

Fig. 3
 The programmatic beginning of *Neue Graphik* ...

Fig. 4
 ... and its end in programmatic visions of the authors' own systematic designs for the future.

Fig. 5
 Gerstner and Kutter back up their approach by connecting it to art history.

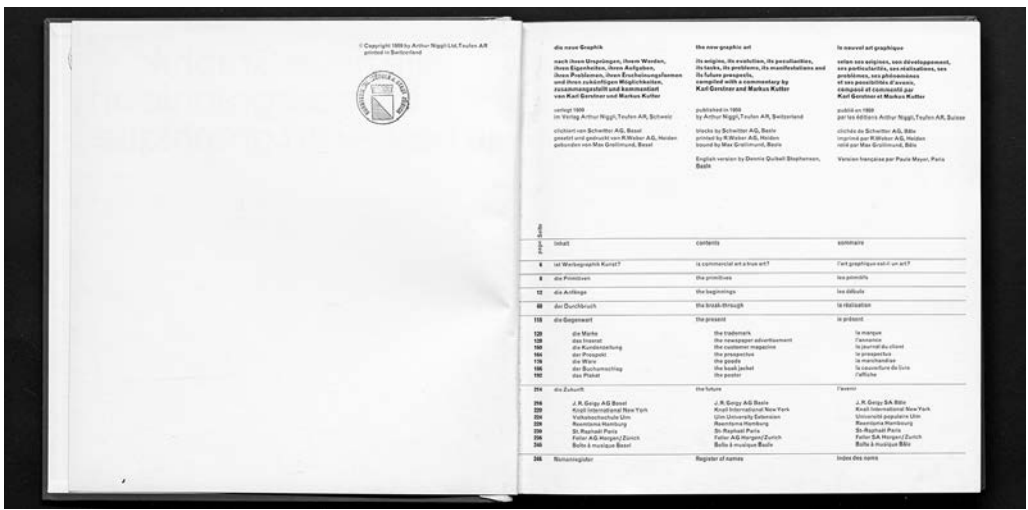


Fig. 3

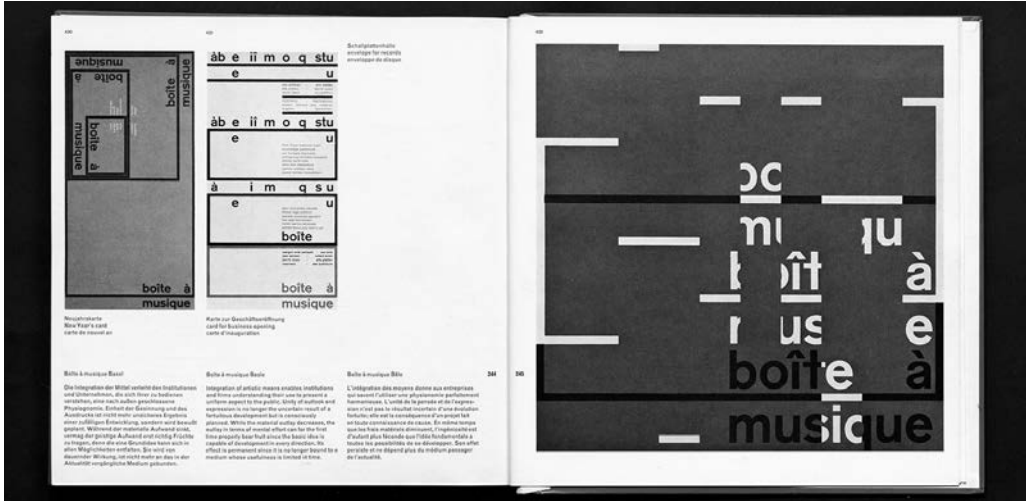
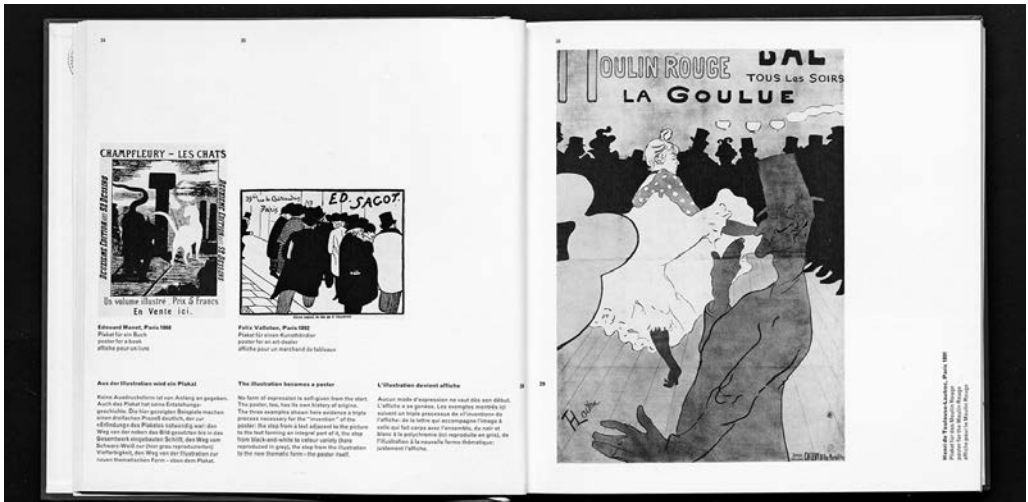


Fig. 4

Fig. 5



these very aspects. Gerstner and Kutter were concerned not only with individual works, but also with the connections between them. They dealt with design issues in a larger context, and showed a systematic approach to advertising and corporate design.²²

Placing these statements in context, it is crucial to recognize that the book was written at a time when Gerstner and Kutter were establishing their practices, and that it was exactly this progressive and systematic attitude that suited the needs of expanding corporations and institutions.²³ The practitioner-historians' accounts are thus clearly linked to their professional goals and aspirations, and to the roles they were fulfilling or were being requested to fulfill. Gerstner and Kutter's work appears to have responded exceptionally well to the socio-political and economic demands of their time.²⁴

A troubled adaptation to changing circumstances

As described in the first paragraph of this essay, *A History of Visual Communication* also suggests an evolution within graphic design. Unlike Gerstner and Kutter's abstract philosophical arguments, however, Müller-Brockmann's account was rooted in specific observations. Recent technological and societal changes had a profound affect on the field of graphic design—from the rise of the new mass media to the

accelerating dematerialization of design processes and products, the growth of industry and consumerism, and the increasing complexity of a globalized and connected world.²⁵

[...] for the designer the problems are many times more exacting and wider in scope. His training, based as it is on traditional programmes and methods, hardly enables him to cope with the practical demands of today. The present calls for designers of intelligence who are alive to social problems and can think themselves into their client's mind and help to make decisions.²⁶

He was certain that adapting to the complicated, changing demands of the time would require more than technical training. Seen from a distance, detached from its technological environment, the profession should be understood as being concerned not merely with technical or formal tasks, but also with meeting intellectual and above all social challenges. Restricted only by its visual nature, the graphic designer's profession was characterized by its two means of communication, namely word and image, and by its intrinsically social function as a mediator of ideas. The profession should therefore better be understood as visual communication.

Calling for a change, however, Müller-Brockmann explained that the fundamental tasks of this emerging field were nothing

new. Through the ages, human beings had always tried to make an impact, to captivate and to convince. And it was from this point of view that he constructed his narrative of a continuity stretching from prehistoric paintings to his own work.²⁷ Explicitly paraphrasing the British art historian Herbert Read, Müller-Brockmann declared that functionalism was a cultural universal:

The primitive mind made no distinction between art and the utilitarian. These people worked with a specific purpose in view and paid no attention to what we call aesthetic characteristics. Even when the purpose of an object was not recognizable, it was not created for its own sake, or for its beauty of form, or its colour. Every work of these primitives originated in an exclusively utilitarian, social, magic or religious intention.²⁸

The fact that even the very oldest artworks could be seen as fulfilling a practical purpose not only provided the new field of visual communication with the longest possible origin story, but also supported functionalist ambitions that the Modernist attributed to his own style and practice. At the same time, he appropriated a past that had usually been seen as part of art history—ironically by quoting an art historian—and thereby laid a claim to expertise far beyond the traditional borders of his profession.

A comparison of Müller-Brockmann's text with Read's original, however, reveals that the designer omitted so much of the art historian's argument that he completely reversed its meaning. In reality, Read wrote that cave paintings showed a concern for beauty and visual characteristics far beyond their practical function, and that it was for this very reason that they should be considered art.²⁹ Müller-Brockmann's main argument—which is also in the only paragraph supported with a direct reference—is thus at best based on a negligent misunderstanding. This book by a practitioner-historian thus seems to have a rather slapdash quality to it, and a further examination of both its structure and its content merely reinforces this impression.

In his preface, Müller-Brockmann states that even though his book is supposed to offer a broad view of visual communication, it should not be seen as complete, but as reflecting his own interests: “factual advertising, experiments which influence our thinking and artistic works which set the stylistic trend.”³⁰ Indeed, with the introduction of the poster in the second part of the book, his account clearly resembles the then well-established graphic design histories focusing on the development of styles and the avant-garde. The first half of his book, however, shows a surprising attention to meaning in everyday life, and to the consumption and societal role of designed artifacts, and barely touches on production processes or form.³¹ A closer

look reveals that this, however, is not the only sudden shift in the book. Despite its rhetoric of continuity, there are not only deliberate divisions into chapters and sub-chapters, but also various ruptures based on methodological and theoretical inconsistencies that—as the extensive bibliography suggests—are simply a reflection of the available sources.³²

In line with this, it seems worth noting that Müller-Brockmann's socio-historical approach appears to match a larger trend. Neither the vast scope of his narrative, rooting his profession at the dawn of mankind, nor his extension of the field into popular mass media, nor even the term “visual communication” itself were completely new. Years before this, graphic designers in the USA and in Germany, especially at Hochschule für Gestaltung Ulm, demanded that their peers should take control of the new media. They formulated an analytical approach to visual culture based on linguistics that was characterized by a search for patterns and systems or universal languages.³³ At the same time, a wealth of popular and scientific literature was dedicated to more anthropological approaches in all kinds of fields—many of them touching on the history of graphic design.³⁴ Interestingly, at about the same time, Marxist cultural theorists developed art education programs that called for more human-centered, social teaching. Referring to technological changes on the one hand, and to the same universals and continuities on the

other, they too emphasized the importance of popular culture and the mass media.³⁵

It seems that Müller-Brockmann struggled to situate himself within this diffuse spectrum of positions. He tried to reconcile his seemingly genuine interest in the social and more recent theories that turned their attention to human beings with his codified aesthetics and their established art historical explanation. But Müller-Brockmann did not include any fundamentally more varied representations of contemporary everyday visual communication, such as its informal or ephemeral aspects, or street culture. Instead, he tried to reinforce the demarcations of what he thought to be good professional practice, while simultaneously extending his field of expertise.³⁶ Müller-Brockmann created this universal ancestry, leading from cave paintings through various cultures to European avant-garde art, in order to culminate in his own practice. This narrative was eerily reminiscent of Hegel's influential model of a “world spirit” moving from East to West that arguably had been significant in European claims to supremacy and, at least in philosophy, had long since been discarded.³⁷

Conclusion

The above close reading of *Die neue Graphik* and *A History of Visual Communication* has confirmed the importance of the notion of progress that was commonly attributed to

both books, to Modernist design, and to Modernism in general. These books are clearly structured so as to depict an evolution of graphic design that seems empirically verifiable. Both should be seen as attempts to demonstrate their authors' expertise by claiming a truly modern, forward-looking position linked to prestigious fields of knowledge. Both approaches also seem to have attempted to appropriate the prestige of art and art history. From this point of view, the fact that these publications are commonly discussed in the same vein appears more than warranted. But as stated in the introduction to this essay, a more in-depth analysis nevertheless reveals remarkable differences between them. Their authors' strategies, outlooks, and backgrounds, and their references to academic fields and theories all differ strongly—just as do the rigor, conclusiveness, and reflexivity of their historiography.

Gerstner and Kutter successfully used concepts from Enlightenment philosophy as the backbone of their truly Modernist book. It is evident that this deliberate appropriation of models from prestigious intellectual fields was a well-thought-out strategy. By proclaiming their powers of reflection and self-awareness, Gerstner and Kutter showed much foresight, and already addressed much of the criticism that would later be leveled against them. By listing various historiographical shortcomings, from over-simplification to a biased focus and editorial selection, they ask their reader to

take their narrative with a grain of salt. In stark contrast, Müller-Brockmann's historiography reveals difficulties in establishing a concise narrative. He, too, relativizes his account by explaining that it has simply been devised in line with his own interests. The continuity he constructs, however, displays fundamental breaks, and refers to shifting fields of knowledge that are neither reflected nor addressed in his book. It is evident that Müller-Brockmann struggled to reconcile his clear ideas on graphic design and his successful practice with the newer theoretical framework of the times. His relativizing comments thus come across as preemptive excuses.

From a distance, one might wonder to what extent the distinctions between these two books should be attributed to personal tendencies or to a general paradigm shift. However, it seems that both aspects were intertwined. The fact that these underlying differences seem to have been overlooked might indicate that the historiography of Swiss graphic design and typography, even in its critical instances, has often showed no less of a focus on visual concerns than has the field itself.

| historiography | origins | Modernism | canonization | publications | 24 |
|----------------|---|-----------|---|--------------|--|
| 1 | Müller-Brockmann 1971. | | Dilnot argues similarly that early design history has to be seen as a response to a particular problem, and that an analysis of these continuities should cast new light on their view of their present, past, and future. See Dilnot 1984a: 218. | | |
| 2 | See Scotford 2012 (1991): 38. | | | | |
| 3 | Rand 1996. In Switzerland, a German translation of the book was published by Niggli under the title <i>Von Lascaux bis Brooklyn</i> . | | | | |
| 4 | Meggs 1983. | | | | |
| 5 | Jubert 2006. | | | 22 | Gerstner & Kutter 1959: 214–215. |
| 6 | Drucker & McVarish 2013 (2009). | | | 23 | See Gerstner & Kröplien 2001: 14–15. |
| 7 | See Dilnot 1984a: 219; Drucker 2009: 56; Hollis 2006: 244–250. | | | 24 | For example, the historian Anselm Doering-Manteuffel explains that the 1950s and 1960s in the West were characterized by an understanding of scientific and rational planning as a prerequisite for overall growth and progress. This vision made the community as a whole the object of governmental influence, and the state used a new elite of professional experts (Doering-Manteuffel 2007: 566). For historiographical positions on the concept and role of experts, see <i>Traverse</i> 2001, and particularly Busset & Schumacher 2001: 9–10. |
| 8 | Gerstner & Kutter 1959. | 16 | Gerstner & Kutter 1959: 12. | | |
| 9 | Gerstner & Kutter 1959: 1. | 17 | Enlightenment philosophers appear to have agreed that art and culture always underwent a development similar to human beings and thus contained the phases of childhood, adolescence, and maturity (Pfisterer 2007: 24). Comte’s law of the three stages states that humans in the first stage explain phenomena through supernatural agents and in the second through abstract entities. In the third stage, however, they replace absolute notions by relative ones, and look for governing laws (Hamilton 1992: 53). | | |
| 10 | See Koselleck 1975. | | | | |
| 11 | Wagner 2016: 7. | | | | |
| 12 | Speich Chassé 2012: 9–10. | | | | |
| 13 | For criticism regarding: an undiscerning adoption of art-historical approaches, see Scotford 2012 (1991): 42; oversimplification, see Meer 2015: 9–23; selection based on mostly visual grounds, see Lzicar & Unger 2016; exclusion of anonymous work, see Scotford 2012 (1991): 44; Mermoz 2012 (1994): 107; exclusion of the public reception, Aynsley 2012 (1987): 23; their focus on masters or masterpieces and its canonizing implications, see Scotford 2012 (1991): 42; Baker 2012 (1994): 87; and for hijacking history for the benefit of entrepreneurial design activities, see Dilnot 1984a: 218. Outside the field of design history, of course, criticism of such linear narratives had been voiced much earlier. | 18 | Gerstner & Kutter 1959: 12. | 25 | Müller-Brockmann 1971: 6. For an in-depth analysis of the dematerialization of typesetting technology, see Marshall 2003; for a study closer to the time focusing on technological, economic, and social aspects and their effects on people active in the fields of typography and printing, see Marshall 1983. For a recent discussion from the perspective of history of science and with a particular focus on gender, see Dommann 2016. |
| 14 | For a discussion of the negative aftermath of these linear stories on the perception of other writing systems and cultures, see “Unfamiliar Writing Forms,” in the present volume. | 19 | See Gerstner 2007 (1963): 8–13; Zwicky 1953. Zwicky suggested addressing problems and tasks by dividing them into individual parameters and recombining them programmatically. Doing so would lead to an overview of all possible solutions, from which a selection could be made, according to the needs of each case. | | |
| | | 20 | Gerstner & Kutter 1959: 4. | | |
| | | 21 | Their contemporaries appear not to have picked up on these relativizing comments either. A review by Czech art historian Josef Paul Hodin published in <i>Art Journal</i> in 1960 went as far as | 26 | Müller-Brockmann 1971: 281. |
| | | | | 27 | Müller-Brockmann 1971: 6. |
| | | | | 28 | Müller-Brockmann 1971: 7. |
| | | | | 29 | Read 1956 (1937): 8–12. |
| 15 | See Jenkins 2004 (1991); Munslow 2004: xiii. Design historian Clive | | | 30 | Müller-Brockmann 1971: 6. |
| | | | | 31 | Fittingly, his examples are far |

from canonized pieces of typographic history.

- 32 His bibliography lists several works on art from various cultures, a few books on the origins of art and painting, several publications on visual communication, graphic design handbooks, printing histories, and histories of everyday culture, trades, and the economy. A relatively large portion, however, is devoted to the history of Western art, particularly to the avant-garde.
- 33 Çelik Alexander 2017: 198.
- 34 See Müller-Brockmann 1971: 330–332.
- 35 Grütter 2019: 44–45. The author, Georges Bataille, for example, wrote the texts for a book on the Lascaux cave paintings entitled *Die vorgeschichtliche Malerei: Lascaux oder die Geburt der Kunst*. See Bataille 1955.
- 36 Victor Margolin noted that the conflation of graphic design and visual communication, of a specific professional practice and a fundamental human activity, was a common problem in design history. He explained that historiographers needed to be aware of the fact that while the former was exclusive by definition, the latter was inherently inclusive (regarding practices, place, and time), and therefore needed to be sociological in nature. See Margolin 2012 (1994): 98.
- 37 Mignolo 2011: 21. For example, the philosopher and political theorist Hermann Lübbe of the University of Zürich pointed out that the concept of *Weltgeist* had been historically significant, but would now reveal the ridiculousness of anyone claiming

to be its “owner.” See Lübbe 1973: 232. For a discussion of some Eurocentric biases in designers’ publications with regards to the portrayal of other writing systems and cultures, see “Unfamiliar Writing Forms,” in the present volume.