

OVERVIEW OF MEXICAN GRAPHIC DESIGN TODAY

Leonel Sagahón*

Design is at a peak worldwide. Today, everything is “designed,” from a house, to an economic policy, to a drug. This is why it is difficult to pin down exactly what design is, where it starts, and where it ends. The same is true of so-called “graphic design,” which seems to be the broad branch dedicated to everything visible. However, there are a host of seemingly unrelated disciplines in which things are graphically designed. There’s medicine and astronomy, in which images are created to study the phenomena of the body and space, without any graphic designers touching them. There are other areas of design, like industrial, architectural, and textile design, which appropriate visual resources initially the exclusive province of graphics, or the specialties that were born under the aegis of graphic design, but have now become independent, like illustration, multi-media design, and typographical design.

Design is so important today that a world without images and designed objects would be unimaginable. Just think about technological devices like cell phones, graphic interfaces like the ones used in automatic teller machines, or publicity. Our surroundings have been conquered by the field of design, a multidisciplinary territory, or rather, an entire ecosystem where it is difficult to establish the borders of what is exclusively graphics.

In this terrain of design, Mexico is an emerging, but relevant, player. More than in other areas like industry or multi-media, where we face technological and economic limitations, graphic design is more vigorous, perhaps because our cultural tradition is deeply rooted in it.

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Gabriel Martínez Meave,
Presidency, 2011
(typography)

Today’s Mexican graphic designers illustrate, do multi-media, edit video, and create new typefaces, all at the same time. They have been trained in schools and universities, and their teachers have also grown up in this environment. They have appropriated foreign technology and use it for local projects. They design for all spheres: cultural, commercial, environmental, and even political. Let’s take a quick look at some of the territories that describe contemporary Mexican graphic design.

PROFESSIONALIZATION OF DESIGN

As recently as the 1980s, much of our country’s graphic design was done by professionals who had not studied design: they were architects, painters, engineers, trained in any other field, or without professional training at all. Graphic design was above all a craft learned by doing. While this gave the first projects a mark of diversity that nourished later develop-



Santiago Solís,
How Right You Were Dad,
 12 x 3.20 m, 2011
 (acrylic).

The poster as a space for expression is still very much alive. Many young designers make posters. They are almost never commissioned by a client; rather, they are inspired by personal concerns.

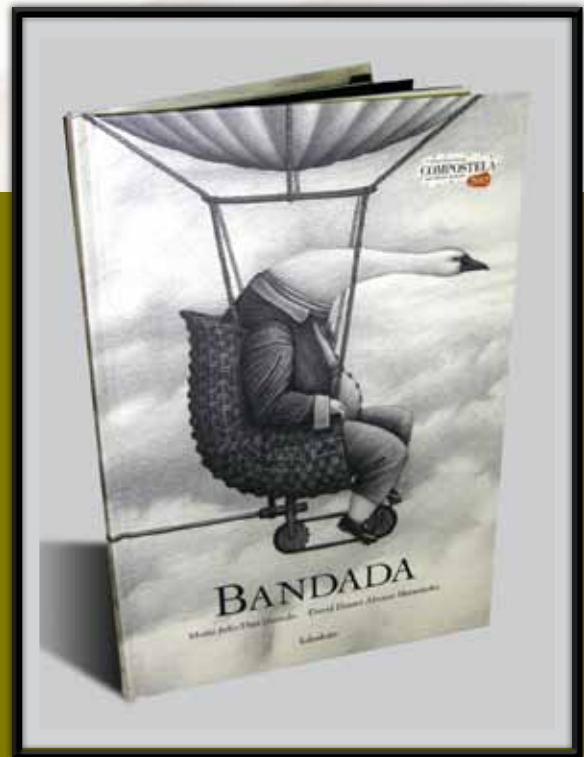
ment, it also made the discipline inconsistent and fragile. In the mid-1960s, the first design schools at the level of higher education were created in Mexico. Today, there are more than 300, from which thousands graduate every year. It is important to add the advantages for the profession of the institutionalization of these schools: education of the faculty, the development of specialized research, expositions, seminars, lectures, associations, publications, and library systems. In this sense, the international exchange efforts by certain universities really stand out: inviting professors, developing research, and, particularly, giving their students' work exposure. Today, for example, products developed by Mexican students can be found in New York's Museum of Modern Art (MoMa) shop and in galleries around the world.

THE WORLD OF PUBLISHING

Book design has been one of the most important spheres where the profession has developed. History recognizes the time of Miguel Prieto and Vicente Rojo and their work designing magazines, newspapers, and books as the moment Mexican graphic design was born. To that extent, the vitality of the publishing industry is reflected in the vitality of design itself. After a relative bonanza between the 1960s and 1980s that allowed for the flowering of several publishing houses, the economic crisis and the process of concentration of companies worldwide made many of them disappear, absorbed by foreign publishing concerns. This concentration was accompanied by a conservatism that had negative impacts on design in several



Éramos tantos Studio, cover of the book *Taller de taquimecanografía* (typing workshop), Mexico City, 2011.



David Daniel Álvarez and María Julia Díaz, cover of the book *Bandada* (Flock), Pontevedra, Spain, 2012.

Two great history books recently came onto the market: *Historia del diseño gráfico en México* (History of Graphic Design in Mexico) (2010) by Giovanni Troconi, and *Historias encubiertas, el Fondo de Cultura Económica a través de sus portadas* (Hidden Histories: the Cultural Economic Fund Publishing House through Its Covers) (2011), by Marina Garone. Together, they are the starting point for studying publishing design.



senses: the need to lower production costs reduced the budget earmarked for design; the demand for putting out commercially successful books led publishers to copy foreign styles and formulas; and the concentration of many publishing houses in a single commercial enterprise led to uniform graphic styles. In the case of design, the stimulus for quality that competition was supposed to spur focused on technical and technological spheres. All this acted to the detriment of creative, original work by Mexican designers.

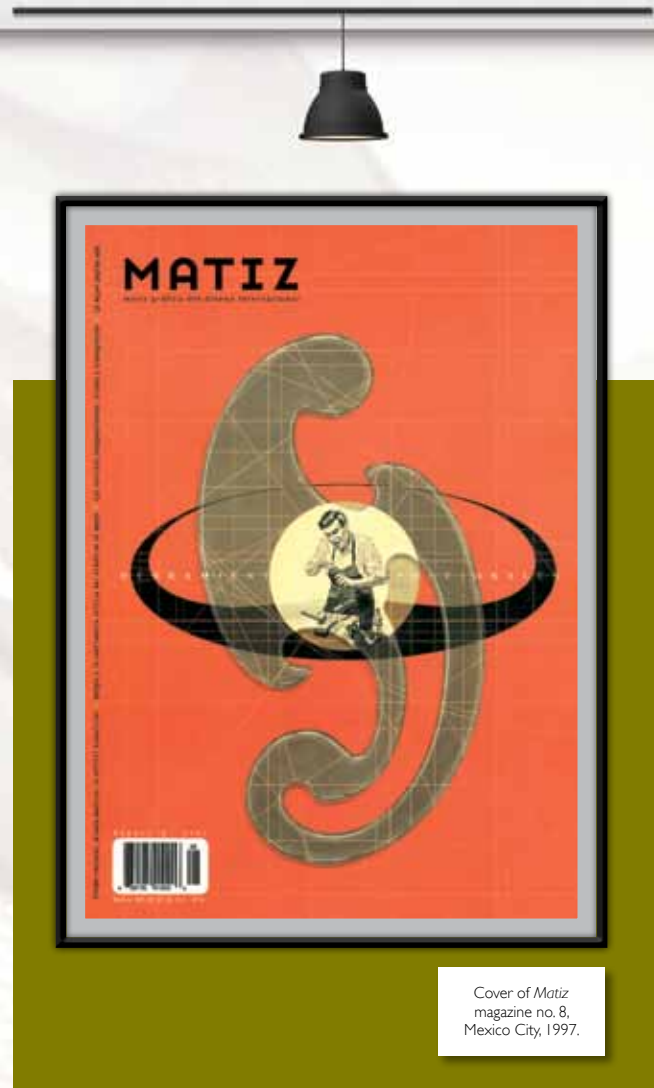
Fortunately, in the middle of the last decade, several independent publishing houses emerged that have revitalized the industry and design itself. Projects like Almadía, Sexto Piso, Tumbona, and Trilce, among others, not only fostered a diversity in publishing that had been lost, but have also placed renewed value on the role of creative design as value added with commercial benefits, so it was no longer seen as an expense that should be eliminated.

MAGAZINES

Magazines are one of the media that generate the greatest dynamism in cultural life. However, in the case of their design, something similar to what happens with books occurs: given the high concentration of magazines published by a single firm, independent magazines are the ones that make the difference. The business of big publishing groups is to sell the most ad pages possible to other companies. So, many magazines end up being what their sponsors want, both in terms of content and of design. Independent magazines fight to put out the content they consider valuable, but few of them survive more than three years. Some understand that beyond being a technique that improves impact and legibility, design is an inseparable part of their content.

POSTERS

Posters have given up their place to other media as a means of dissemination. Bus stop art, ads on city walls, and different kinds of billboards are types of posters, but their language is impacted by publicity; reading time is reduced to the few seconds allowed while passing by in a vehicle; and their images



Cover of *Matiz* magazine no. 8, Mexico City, 1997.

tend to reproduce the aesthetic of the electronic media. The majority are designed by advertising agencies. It is becoming more and more difficult to encounter posters on the streets. The old-fashioned poster, a rectangle of paper that surprised the pedestrian from any wall, has taken refuge in office hallways, become smaller, and stopped being a medium from which designers can make a living.

However, the poster as a space for expression is still very much alive. Many young designers make posters. They are almost never commissioned by a client; rather, they are inspired by personal concerns. The designers print only a few copies; sometimes, they print no copies at all, but just share them on the social media. Designing posters gives the author a freedom very similar to that of the artist, and in this sense,



Moisés Romero,
Empty Ideas, 2012
(poster).

although posters do not fulfill a real mission on the street, they are a kind of gymnasium, an important training ground. International contests for poster design are the main circuit that can give prestige to new talents.

Mexico's International Poster Biennial is one of the most important worldwide. For more than 10 years, Mexican designers have played an outstanding role in events of this kind. Just in 2012, Víctor Santos, Elmer Sosa, and Moisés Romero won prizes at the Mut zur Wut international poster competition held in Heidelberg, Germany, where the young Oaxacan graffiti artist Yescka was part of the jury, seated beside legends like the German Alex Jordan. At one time, winning the first prize at biennials like Warsaw's and Moscow's was the springboard for the careers of designers like Alejandro Magallanes;

now this seems to be the case of Moisés Romero, from Guadajalajara, one of the most outstanding poster artists.

ILLUSTRATION

Something similar is happening with Mexican illustrators. The big difference is that this kind of work is used by publishing houses, and illustrators can make their living at it. Publishing for children is a vital area; both big and small publishing houses put out original illustrated materials for babies, small and medium-aged children, and teens. A large part of this energy has been due to Ministry of Public Education programs that purchase large quantities of books, which in turn means there is enough money to pay professionals.

But, is illustration part of graphic design? Some say yes, and others no. But, what is certain is that most young illustrators have studied graphic design or a similar undergraduate degree, and their day-to-day lives combine this activity with projects that are strictly design. It is only with time that some of them come to focus solely on illustration. In addition, illustrations are never published alone; they always accompany texts in books, packaging, ads, posters, and now also electronic backgrounds. This is why knowledge of design is fundamental for illustrations to work better.

The great variety of topics, styles, techniques, and formats that Mexican illustrators cover is worthy of note, whether for scientific or popular topics or literary and artistic ones. In contrast with poster designers, illustrators are more publically visible and self-organizing; they organize their own events and collectives, like El ilustradero, which groups professionals to create projects and support each other to disseminate them.

Events and publications also promote this work, like the competition for the *Catálogo de ilustradores de publicaciones infantiles y juveniles* (Catalogue of Illustrators of Children and Young People's Publications), organized by the National Council for Culture and the Arts (Conaculta) in the framework of the International Children and Young People's Book Fair. Like in the case of posters, Mexicans have made their mark internationally: Santiago Solís and Santiago Robles won first place for the Ibero-America Illustrates Prize in 2012; David Daniel Álvarez Hernández and María Julia Díaz Garrido's book *Bandada* (Flock), put out by the Spanish publishing



Santiago Solís, *Only the Little Ones Enjoy Themselves*, 26 x 31 cm, 2010 (mixed techniques).

The change in the course of graphic design has been more a break than an update for the tradition. This new generation and the ones that come after it are not resigned to the idea that to look like Mexicans we have to look to the past.

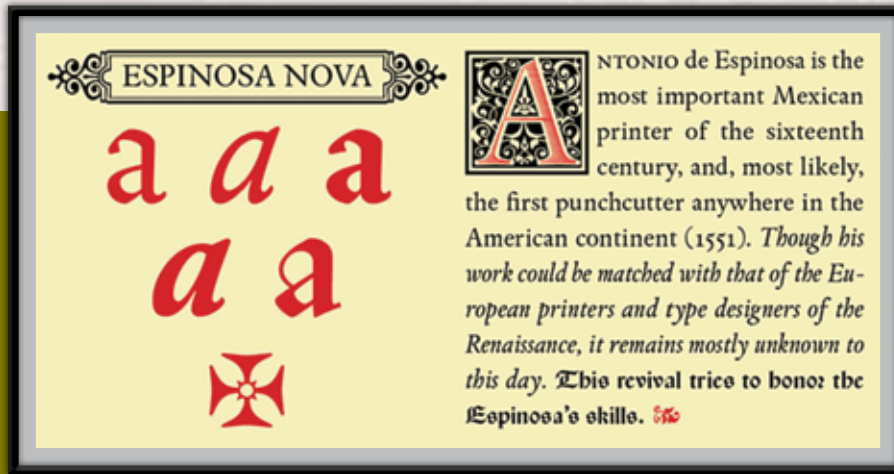
house Kalandraka, won the Compostela International Prize for Illustrated Album; and the book *Migrar* (Migrate), illustrated by Javier Martínez Pedro, won the New Horizons Prize at the Bologna, Italy Book Fair.

TYPOGRAPHIC DESIGN

Graphic designers are specialists in typography. The kind of lettering is important because a large part of communication and how one understands what one reads depends on it. It has been this way since the time of Gutenberg, and over time, every culture has designed alphabets according to their tastes and needs. This means it is possible to study these cultures based on their typefaces.

In Mexico until about 20 years ago, the only typefaces that could be used were made abroad, but today a wide variety has been designed inside the country. More and more companies and institutions hire Mexican designers to develop families of typeface to jibe with their needs, and Mexican typographers shine internationally. This is the case of Gabriel Martínez Meave, who has been honored by New York's Type Directors Club and the International Typographical Association (ATypI).

Mexican typographers began designing their lettering for the pure joy of it, without anyone paying them. They have done formidable research projects on old documents, like the ones by Gonzalo García Barcha, Gabriel Martínez Meave, or Cristóbal Henerstrosa to create the digital fonts *Enrico*, *Lagarto*, and *Espinosa*, respectively. These designers have



Cristóbal Henestrosa,
Espinosa Nova (recovery of
 the type faces used by Antonio
 Espinosa Segundo in 1559).

been hired by publishing houses, commercial firms, and even the government to create specific typefaces to define their identity.

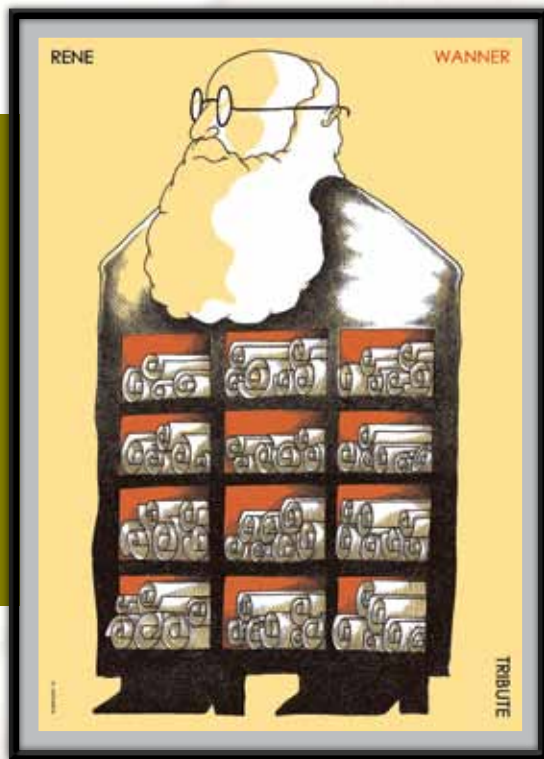
DESIGN WITHOUT BORDERS

After this overview, the question comes to mind about whether we can really talk about Mexican graphic design. Does it have a distinctive, recognizable stamp? No. From the standpoint of the viewer, it would be difficult to differentiate Mexican design from that of other countries, but that's not necessarily a bad thing. Style in design should be a consequence of being Mexican. But, who are we Mexicans? What do we look like?

Mexican design was born with the mark of the Mexican school of painting, headed by muralists Rivera, Orozco, and Siquieros, and by the Mexican school of architecture, headed by Barragán and Ramírez Vázquez. This tradition aimed to deliberately institutionalize a Mexican-ness by exalting values like everything related to the indigenous tradition, the history of independence, and the modern revolution. The colors, the monumental scale, the archaeological borders and

motifs, and the patriotic iconography were inherited by the first generations of designers. The state run by the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI) attempted to generalize this style as though it were the only owner of the country's national heroes and the colors of the flag. At that time, the country was struggling for a place among the other countries, and it seemed desirable to have a Mexican style that would unite us and distinguish us from them. So, we shifted our gaze to folklore, to the picturesque, the archaeological, and the heroic. The iconography was filled with colored strips, landscapes with cacti, pyramids with indigenous borders and idols, eagles devouring serpents, in addition to Our Lady of Guadalupe, Zapata with women soldiers and carbines, and many images of Hidalgo, Juárez, and Morelos. To create an identity, the quest focused on our roots.

The first professional designers identified with the opposition, participated in the 1968 rebellion, fostered the vitality of the left graphics of the 1970s and the popular graphics of the 1980s, fighting against the hegemony of the PRI state and appropriated that same iconography. Mexican style was the result of the will to be Mexican, to look like Mexicans; our commitment was to seem Mexican, whatever that means.



Élmer Sosa
Rene Wanner Tribute,
 Traditional digital illustration,
 2013.

But that tradition has been losing ground in recent years. The most visible mark of today's Mexican graphic design is being made by the generation that graduated from the design schools in the early 1990s and pointed to a change of course from the previous tradition. This generation is the one that today occupies the posts in the institutions that are making decisions about design and carrying out the most visible and influential projects, and, above all, they are the teachers and researchers who are showing the way forward for the next generations.

The change in course has been more a break than an update for the tradition. This new generation and the ones that come after it are not resigned to the idea that to look like Mexicans we have to look to the past. They have a vigorous determination to look to the future and a thirst for transcen-



José Manuel Mateo
 illustrator, *Migrar* (Migrate),
 Mexico City, Tecolote
 publishers, 2011.

dence based on their achievements and not their heritage. This fundamental break is accompanied by important phenomena like the role played by digital technology for design that we imported from abroad, and the dissolution of the social dimension, giving way to a pseudo-artistic personal expressiveness.

In the context of globalization, our gaze alights on everything. For this reason, any image can be picked as a reference point and inspiration, even those chosen by designers from other countries. The feeling of belonging to a nation, which is what allows us to see and recognize our needs, is diluted in the commitment to new virtual homelands with no borders. We give our loyalty to commercial firms and brands; we identify more with the Facebook or Tweeter nation than with this country.

The disappearance of the Mexican style in design is experienced as though something authentic had been lost. But, far from that, that style was the result of a policy that arbitrarily imposed what we Mexicans were like, and ended by being completely alien. On the other extreme, seeing only other homelands and giving up looking at our national needs to be able to satisfy them in design put an end to that identity. Does any other country have one? No, they don't. This is something many people suffer through, but feeling like we're in the same boat with everyone else is a fool's consolation. **MM**